

# A Gendered Substructure of Language and Writing: “Phallogocentricism”

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**Abstract –** The following paper is a trial to throw light on the retrospective analysis of language formation. It attempts to propagate a formal anatomy of how common words, their relational clauses and general linguistic connotations that have become normalised across generations, are affected by, or still affect the subconscious of society being differential in the aspect of gendering members. It implicitly supports the title neologism that Jacques Derrida coined to refer to the capacitating of the masculine in the construction of meaning. The same is supported by Helen Cixous’ essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

**Keywords:** Phallus, Phallogocentricism, Meaning, Linguist, Sign, Structure, Female, Male, Gender, Signification, Logocentrism, Phallogocentrism, Writing

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## INTRODUCTION

“You are a loud-mouthed shrewish, turbulent woman... you are a virago.” One of the most renowned English vocabulary books that Indian learners use to increase their vocabulary contains one striking word in its verbose, virago. Norman Lewis describes the word later in his book as a ‘masculine’ woman. It creates a significant doubt in a reader who’s well aware of the questionable status of gender. One may inquire about where masculine and feminine differ. One may also inquire about what traits a feminine is ‘supposed’ to have and why, likewise, what traits are ‘expected’ out of a masculine personality. If a man is emotionally sensitive, he might be considered feminine. Similarly, if a woman is physically muscular, she might be compared to a man’s physique. Where exactly were all the ‘expectations’ gendered? To exist like a female or a male requires one to adapt to certain fixed characteristics, more or less pertaining to the weak traits being related to the female. Shakespeare aptly describes this existential doubt in Hamlet.

To be or not to be. That is the question.  
(Shakespeare)

In a trial to go back in time, in order to track the origin of the aforementioned set of expectations in society, one would probably reach a point where society began to form. Significantly, the initial stages of the society formation had an obvious catalyst to communicate, language. Who formed language? How did it get transferred across generations and groups? Communication. Language. Linguistics. Words. Sentences. Structures. It requires one to be

accustomed to Saussure’s linguistic theory of signification.

The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other. This fact, which seems to embody a contradiction, might be called colloquially “the stacked deck.” We say to language: “Choose!” but we add: “It must be this sign and no other.” No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what is more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language. No longer can language be identified with a contract pure and simple, and it is precisely from this viewpoint that the linguistic sign is a particularly interesting object of study; for language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent. (Saussure)

The above extract from Saussure’s theory of language propagation finishes with an interesting phrase, “not a rule to which all freely consent.” Who formed the rules? The following quote might help one reach there.

The idea here is that language was created to help humans survive. Why? One, humans needed to communicate with each other in order to hunt, farm and defend themselves successfully from the surrounding harsh environment. Being able to

communicate using language gave the human species a distinct survival advantage. And two, language was needed for social interaction, according to those who subscribe to the adaptation theory.

Naturally, the ones who were primarily responsible for hunting were the male members of the society. They took the out-of-the-house chores so that the women could take care of children at home. This led to more social interaction at the hands of this part of the society. Eventually, language evolved.

Phallogocentrism as a term is attributable to the contribution of Jacques Derrida. The phallogocentric argument is premised on the claim that language has been, and continues to be, both culturally and intellectually subjugated by "logocentrism" and "phallogocentrism". Logocentrism is the term Derrida uses to refer to the philosophy of determinateness, while phallogocentrism is the term he uses to describe the way logocentrism itself has been genderized by a "masculinist (phallic)" and "patriarchal" agenda. Hence, Derrida intentionally merges the two terms phallogocentrism and logocentrism as "phallogocentrism".

The French feminist thinkers of the school of *écriture féminine* also share Derrida's phallogocentric reading of 'all of Western metaphysics' where they interpret woman as "colonized" by phallogocentric thinking. According to Helen Cixous and Clément, the 'crumbling' of this way of thinking will take place through a Derridean-inspired, anti-phallo/logocentric philosophy of indeterminateness.

"And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it." (Cixous)

Cixous states in her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa* that the history of writing has been one of "phallogocentric tradition" which has hampered women's thinking, creativity and innovation. She urges women to shatter masculine oppressing discourse that has governed literature for ages and to create a new genre of writing called *l'écriture féminine* or feminine writing by using their bodies as ways of communication. That Initiative in itself will originate as a means to assure themselves into the text, world and history. In other words, Cixous convinces women to write about their bodily experimentation which stands for a supplier of sexual urge and drive for creativity. She believes that as women write, they'll be able to overcome and apparently destroy the past oppressive foundations of language, meanings and their gendered connotations.

For ages, masculine language has been the dominant precursor of human communication. As a result, women could not group together and realise the power of female unity. For the same purpose, Cixous proposes that women must write in order to

stand tall and equal to all other members of the society. Cixous believes that women are closer to imagination and fantasies, therefore, women would express themselves through poetry better than prose containing ordinary and coded language. This is because she recommends the language of poetry being nearer to the unconscious as it has the potency to manifest double meanings, symbolising the women sexuality.

Derrida's deconstruction and psychoanalytical theory have an imperative impact on Cixous' writing. On that account, she deconstructs the chains that keep women unseen by breaking down gender differences in the language. She motivates women to develop a new signifying order that shouldn't be limited by binaries of woman and man.

As per the Greek myth, Medusa was damned by the goddess Minerva, turning her into a repulsive figure with snake like hair and a gaze that could turn anyone into stone. Cixous develops on this myth of Medusa's annihilation as man's attempt to mute women, to break off women's expressions. Additionally, Medusa's metaphor is associated with the modern psychoanalytic analysis of Freud who correlates Medusa's head with male castration. Cixous takes Medusa's head as an evident aspect of demonstrating how the men showcase their fear of castration that they could become women. At this point, Cixous confutes the concept of defining women through what she lacks. She discourages the women who idolise masculinity, calling them "woman of yesterday". Cixous instead encourages women to write and pace beyond the setting of the binaries of the Symbolic Order, by utilizing their bodies and crushing the suppressive structures of the male developed society.

Medusa laughs, hence is contemptuous towards the barriers of the masculine discourse. It is a discovery of her own feminine writing that represents woman's body as a way toward a sovereign thought. The thought would demolish the root of male centric paradigms running across generations of communication. It would raise her voice granting her the opportunity to illuminate her unconscious latent self and the erogenous pleasures. Thereby, more political accomplishments at the hands of women can be seen in the civilisations thereon.

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you'll see with what ease she will spring forth from that "within" - the "within" where

once she so drowsily crouched - to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam.

In an interview published in *Le Monde de l'éducation* (September, 2000), Jacques Derrida gave the practice of deconstruction of phallogocentrism a factual justification. Antoine Spire calls Jacques Derrida's attention to the fact that the feminine cause occupied his work early on, that sexual difference is present in many of his texts. He responds, "I speak mostly, and have for a long time, about sexual differences, rather than about one difference only — twofold and oppositional — which is indeed, with phallogocentrism, with what I also nickname 'phallogocentrism,' a structural feature of philosophical discourse that will have prevailed in the tradition. Deconstruction goes down that road in the first place. Everything comes back that way. Before any feminist politicalization, it is important to recognize this strong phallogocentric underpinning that conditions just about all of our cultural heritage. As for the properly philosophical tradition of this phallogocentric heritage, it is represented, certainly in different but equal ways, in Plato as well as in Freud or Lacan, in Kant as well as in Hegel, Heidegger, or Lévinas. In any case I've gone to some length to show as much." One inference follows from this that the deconstruction of phallogocentrism is not entirely a feminist or political stance. As an instance of phallogocentricism nevertheless, Jacques Derrida remarks during a filmed interview that philosophy always has been linked to a masculine figure: "the philosopher" is a man, he also can be a father, but more rarely will be a woman or a mother.

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