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Can Feminism Make A Difference Or Does It Offer
More Of The 'Same'?

By

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism and postmodernism are the most influential discourses that address the question of representation in contemporary western society. In this thesis I will discuss the relationship of feminism with the broad range of theoretical discourses including Enlightenment thinking, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and deconstructionism, all of which contemporary mainstream discourse engages with in the process of establishing its postmodern identity. I will discuss how a feminist perspective on these discourses which relates to 'women's reality' exposes the gender/sexed bias of mainstream theoretical discourses in contemporary postmodern society.

The significance of theoretical discourse for feminism is its influence on the socio-economic structures that dictate the status of women in society. By engaging in theoretical discourse feminists enter the field of sexual politics when they dispute the marginal status of women and argue against the category 'universal woman' which purports to represent all women in theoretical discourse. While recognizing the multiplicity of women's lived experience and the significance that historical conditions along with race, creed and other cultural factors have on representations of women, feminist theoretical discourse seeks to expose the 'universal particularity' that perpetuates the subjugated status of women in society. By using the tools of

mainstream theoretical discourse, as in the case of Kristeva with psychoanalysis, feminists question the basis on which these theories are formulated. Kristeva's writings have become a seminal part of feminist theoretical discourse and as such are referenced by feminists in the on-going discourses on sexual politics.

In considering mainstream theoretical theory the influence of Foucault's writings on contemporary discourses of both power and sexuality are recognized as forming many of the paradigms for what is termed postmodern theoretical discourse and which appears to allow for a more inclusive and democratic attitude towards women and other marginalised groups in society. From its space within this more democratic climate I ask the question "what difference can feminism make"?

Throughout the thesis I reference Rosi Braidotti's book Patterns Of Dissonance which I have found particularly useful in its analysis of contemporary theoretical discourses and with whose feminist interpretations and analysis I frequently concur. Braidotti argues, (from her background in the discipline of philosophy), that theoretical discourses are informed and empowered by philosophical thought. Philosophical thought is supported by various scientific and empirical data. When I refer to philosophy in this thesis I refer to the ideological thinking that encompasses this data and permeates social and cultural discourses in society. This definition of philosophy therefore is not confined

to the notion of a philosophy which represents a unified and singular 'truth'.

In the first chapter of the thesis I discuss the difficulty encountered by feminists seeking to effectively represent the position of women in society. I look at feminist engagement with the structures and social practices that support male dominated mainstream theoretical discourses with a view to ascertaining the contingent 'particularity' that accounts for the subjugated position of women in society. I discuss the relevance to women of the gendered subject of theoretical discourse and the discursive benefits of focusing on the body as the site where lived experience is monitored.

In chapter two I discuss the gender bias of male mainstream theoretical theory which has to a great extent been influenced by Foucault's late works that propose an androgynous and empowered subject which on the one hand allows women a space within mainstream discourse but at the same time discounts the proliferation of feminist theoretical discourses that dispute subject positions within mainstream theory. I ask the question why mainstream theoretical discourse has inscribed this so called androgynous subject and what means are used to prevent its deconstruction.

The third chapter deals with the identification of the 'particularity' evident throughout theoretical discourse that perpetuates the subjugated position of women in society. The erroneous nature of the philosophical discourses that necessitate the perpetuation of this

'particularity' is I propose identified when feminism stresses the empirical difference that women experience in relation to their encounters with mainstream theoretical discourse.

By following the agendas proposed in my synopsis of the forthcoming three chapters I will argue that feminism in seeking to identify the "particularity" which enforces the universal subjugation of women can undermine the basis on which the perpetuation of this subjugation occurs, and in so doing, can effectively make a difference to representations of women and of all subjects within society.

I myself have never been able to find
out precisely what feminism is ; I only
know that people call me a feminist
whenever I express sentiments that
differentiate me from a doormat.
(Rebecca West, (1892-1983) in
Exley, 1993, p.39)

It is difficult at times as a woman, to reconcile oneself with the term 'feminist' given the way it is bandied about in the media. The problem of course stems from the age old strategy of categorising, of universalising, and the subsequent facility to demonize, that the use and abuse of collective naming can generate.

The 'universal woman' as the 'other' of mainstream discourse is something that feminism conjures with in order to establish a space and an identity for women denied to them by male dominated discourse and ideologies. As feminist theory has evolved however, it has become clear that theory based on the 'universality' of women is problematic in that it can be read as disregarding the numerous differences such as age, religion, race, and class that influence a woman's

perception of herself and other women. If, as Braidotti says, "there is no feminism beyond the lived experience of women" (Braidotti, 1991, p.170), then feminism must rely for its identity and political relevance on the multiplicity of experiences which manifest themselves in the material reality of women's lives. Our material reality is constituted by our experience as embodied subjects. Our awareness of ourselves as embodied subjects must therefore be at the heart of what it is to be a feminist. However, our material reality situates us within ideological structures that are philosophically empowered and in order to be aware of our subject formation and confinement within these structures an awareness of the infrastructures that support them is necessary before any possibility of changing our situation can take place.

"Is it a boy or a girl?", the question is usually asked after someone gives birth. It may be preceded by "is it alright?", meaning healthy, but the question "is it a boy or a girl?" is asked so that the 'it' may become a "she" or a "he". The ground work is set for the formation of 'its' identity and from birth (even before birth with modern technology) the identity is gendered and those that care for and rear the child are aware that s/he is a gendered subject. Other factors such as race, class, and religion will influence the development of the child's identity but the child's 'experience' of these other factors "will be radically different according to

whether" they are male or female, (Grimshaw in Bordo, 1990, pp.149-150).

In order to arrive at an understanding of 'woman's' position in the world feminist theory has examined the questions of the construction of gender and the formation of the subject. The purpose of this engagement has been to premise a universal factor that would explain women's subordinate position in society so that their reality as women may be represented as subjects in their own right as distinct from their role as the 'other' of the male subject in mainstream ideology.

The tactic of formulating a common factor can be aligned with Enlightenment philosophy which postulates a singular truth and designates subject positions in relation to that truth. Enlightenment philosophy promotes the practice of substantiating the basis of its 'truth' through scientific investigations and proofs in order to interpret the 'natural order'. In the process of endorsing Enlightenment philosophies much credence has been placed in the authority of medical science. As a consequence of the Enlightenment's valorization of medical science mainstream discourse has been influenced by the 'scientific' approach of psychoanalysis in its efforts to explain the 'truth' of our 'natural gendered' positions in society, and psychoanalytic theory has had a major influence in defining and validating patriarchal ideological definitions of gendered subjects. Because of the entrenched feminine position assigned to women by Freud's psychoanalytical theories many feminists are

dubious about the relevance of psychoanalysis to feminism. Juliet Mitchell argues however, that psychoanalysis provides feminism with "a crucial science for understanding ideological and psychological aspects of oppression..." (Mitchell, 1974, pp.301-302). In a later work Mitchell credits Lacanian psychoanalysis with establishing the link between language formation and gender identification in the child and states that in the process of developing our identity awareness we can concur with the tenet that within language "the relevant signifying terms then, are: masculinity, femininity and the mark of difference: the phallus", (Mitchell, 1984, pp.241 - 245). By identifying the formative influence of language in the development of the subject the question "Is it a boy or a girl?" loses some of its biological relevance and the significance of naming 'it' boy or girl inducts 'it' into a significant infrastructural realm that reinforces the dominant ideology of patriarchy.

Within feminism Kristeva has been to the fore in her analysis of the formation of the subject through the symbolic order of language which she refers to as semiology and identifies as the marginal region where women must reside given their lack of a temporal identity. She does not posit a theory of "femininity" or "femaleness" but rather a "theory of marginality, subversion and dissidence," (Moi, 1985, p.164). Her theory of the marginality of women is based on the position of the feminine within the symbolic order which

cites masculinity (the phallus) as the governing symbol which dictates and references identity on the basis of having or lacking the phallus. Kristeva's work shows that by establishing the symbolic order in which all men are masculine and all women are feminine, "patriarchal powers" define "not femininity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and to society", (Moi, 1985, p.166).

How does the recognition of our marginality help us? The answer Kristeva gives is that by recognizing our, albeit, marginal position within the symbolic we must learn to speak from within that order otherwise we have no way of being heard. Kristeva's writings emphasise that it is not enough to merely identify the significance of the symbolic order to women, but awareness is also necessary of the facility within that order to transform new structures if and when they occur by inculcating them in the symbolic order, (Kristeva, 1986, p.72).

Braidotti states that what Kristeva terms the "semiotic" positions women in a "strong relationship with the unconscious" because of the link between semiotics and the "pre-Oedipal processes". It is from this position within the symbolic order that Kristeva argues that women "can be transformed into revolutionary subjects", (Braidotti, 1991, pp.229-238). In this respect Kristeva is urging the acceptance of a universal identification of woman within the symbolic as a vantage point for the subversion of that order. By analysing the

identification of 'woman' with the semiotic as prescribed in psychoanalysis feminism has the political potential to subvert the symbolic order by exposing it to the material reality of women's lives and revealing the inappropriate confinement of all women to the marginal realm of the semiotic.

By linking 'woman' with the pre-Oedipal and the unconscious Kristeva illustrates how 'woman' is disassociated with the conscious and the rational which are identified as the masculine realm and the social order. In this way all women are associated with the maternal and the maternal is silenced by confining it to the semiotic. This negation of the maternal within the social order conceptualizes "the patriarchal appropriation of motherhood". Because the semiotic is not recognized within the social order, experience of the maternal is subjugated, and this subjugation results in that which separates the law of the father from the influence of the mother or maternal. It is on the premise that the maternal is silenced within the symbolic order that the "phallic system erects itself", (Braidotti, 1991, p.230).

If this line of thinking is followed then the survival of the symbolic order depends on ignorance of and the inarticulation of the semiotic. The problem is how does the maternal speak if the only language available depends on the phallus for its reference point. If the maternal sets up her own reference point or system

it would of necessity negate the phallic system, which depends for its power on her silence.

Within the symbolic order motherhood is ideologically sanctified and sanitized and identifies with a male ideal of motherhood rather than the reality experienced by women. Historically in western societies 'Mary, the Mother of God' symbolised the ideal of motherhood - her 'virtues' as the self effacing, sex effacing, non questioning model of obedience to her master and the needs of her child were promoted as the exemplary model of motherhood and the legacy of this idealised model is still in evidence in contemporary society. In historic representations of the 'crib' the scene depicting where Mary gave birth, there are no signs of the birth process in evidence. No sign of the umbilical cord, no sign of afterbirth, no blood stained straw or clothes, no evidence of the pain of childbirth: all are hidden away, not spoken of, abjected. Only the idealised and acceptable face of motherhood is represented and the reality of the woman's lived experience is consigned to the abject.

These representations of motherhood resonate in the attitudes of contemporary society to motherhood. The desire for motherhood experienced by many women and their subjugated status within society when they do succumb to that desire demonstrates the abject position of those involved in the messy business of motherhood. Graphic accounts of births rarely make headline news; the emotional trauma, the pain, the blood and gore, the agony

and the ecstasy of childbirth is seldom if ever reported as an heroic feat in sharp contrast to the endless pages of print and airwave space given to reporting the heroic feats performed in unending repetitions of football matches, boxing matches, ascensions of Everest and all the other sporting activities dominated by men, not to mention the life and death exploits associated with war.

The reality of childbirth is sanitized in our society and society does not want to hear of the gory details because it might have to acknowledge the strength and tenacity of women thus undermining its ideological view of the feminine as the fragile weak sex. If we consider that the majority of women in the world become mothers then the attitude of society towards motherhood would influence its attitude to all women as potential mothers.

Historically the bodily functions and fluids associated with motherhood have been taboo subjects in society and their connotations of abjection resonate in the misogynistic fear of contamination by female bodily fluids, (Warner, 1987, pp.241 -266). The legacy of these fears was highlighted in the Summer of 1995 in Ireland when a woman was publicly accused by a priest of contaminating several men with the Aids virus. The accusations were reported nationally and internationally and little cognizance was made of the fact that it is the male bodily fluid semen that is the chief perpetrator of this disease. One wonders on a political level whether the urgency and high profile publicity given to fund

raising for research into finding a cure for aids is symptomatic of paranoia regarding the purity of male bodily fluids. If funding for research were prioritized and allocated in order to save the greater number of lives then more publicity and funding would go to research into cot deaths which kills more people every year than aids. The thought of associating the male powers of reproduction with the abject undermines centuries of ideological discourse which confined the abject to the female feminine role. In Kristevian terms the semiotic is infiltrating the symbolic.

Kristeva's calling for an analysis of the desire for motherhood, within the realm of the symbolic order, could entail an analysis of sexual desire if we accept that within that order, sexual desire is a prerequisite of procreation and the survival of the species. An analysis of the whole concept of the abjection of motherhood based on the lived experience of mothers would not only undermine the validity of that abjection but would also highlight the fallacy of the concept that a woman's sexual desire is synonymous with the desire for motherhood. If the full potential of Kristeva's call for an analysis of the desire for motherhood is realized the binary roles of both fathers and mothers would be challenged.

Braidotti criticises Kristeva's fidelity to psychoanalysis because of its conservative attitudes to the binary relationships between men and women. She cites Kristeva's more recent statements which denounce

the "decline of role of the father" and the "danger of a triumph of female homosexuality" with reliance on artificial means of reproduction as being "extremely conservative" and more sympathetic towards the theories of psychoanalysis than feminism, (Braidotti, 1991, p.238). It seems harsh to question Kristeva's feminist credentials on the basis that she would prefer a world where children would have a father as well as a mother. It is reasonable to assume that her view is representative of many committed feminists, however if in expressing her view she is advocating inculcation within the symbolic order because of a fear of anarchy, instead of championing the possibility of a new order, then Braidotti's criticism of Kristeva's conservatism from the point of view of sexual political strategies is understandable.

In her assessment of Kristeva's contribution to the feminist debate on sexual difference Braidotti questions how Kristeva can reconcile her "orthodox Lacanian" stance in advocating the acceptance of the socio-symbolic contract on the one hand and the call for a "feminist symbolic revolution" on the other. She states that whereas Kristeva's work valorizes the feminine for its subversive potential within the symbolic order "Woman" is used as a sign for the feminine, but at no stage does Kristeva translate this sign to encompass empirical experience of women. This would entail representing their sexual difference which in Braidotti's opinion is "the difference that women make." She makes the point

that because of this Kristeva shies away from pursuing a critical feminist theory and settles rather for the role of "dutiful Lacanian daughter", (Braidotti, 1991, pp.229-238). The implications of this criticism are that if feminist discourse restricts itself to working within the parameters of psychoanalysis as Kristeva would seem to encourage them to do, then their revolutionary potential which she has also advocated will be lost.

The divergent attitudes among feminists is a sign that feminism is not a static theory reluctant to question itself and its modes of theorization. For feminist theory to have any political relevance it is important that it does not foreclose on theories that may be difficult. It is a valid point that theories which are grounded in psychoanalysis are somewhat abstracted in their theorizations on the formation of the subject and consequently are removed from the lived experience of women. They are relevant in their function of interpreting the philosophical criteria that influence our lived experience but are inadequate, though not yet redundant, when it comes to correlating the rudimentary experiences of embodied subjects.

In her essay "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" Jane Flax, arguing from the belief in the importance of the analysis of gender relations to feminist theory, states that an important barrier in our understanding of gender relations is the confusion over the "relationship between gender and sex", (Flax, 1990, p.49). This barrier manifests itself in the difficulty

feminists have in linking "theoretical work with political activism" (Moore, 1994, p.9) in order to represent the lived experience and reality of women's lives.

Henrietta Moore addresses the question of "sex, gender and sexual difference" from her background in anthropology but also from a feminist perspective, (Moore, 1994, pp.8 - 27). Her experience as a working anthropologist has made her mindful of the problems inherent in representing or speaking for others. To demonstrate this difficulty she opts for the use of the personal pronoun which she hopes will "convey a sense of particularity" and she also notes the effect of the use of the pronoun "we" as "highly politicized" but which she uses in this instance to demonstrate how it can operate "as a mark of interrogation," by illustrating "lines of fragmentation" when claiming unity. This interesting ploy, as well as illustrating the fragmentation of feminist theoretical discourse also highlights the role of language in any form of representation.

On the question of gender she remarks on the role of anthropology in providing "cross-cultural data" based on the lived experiences of people which informed "the feminist position that gender was socially constructed and biologically determined." In order to account for the universal subordination of women anthropology developed the theories that associated women with nature based on their "reproductive functions" and also the

theory associating women with the private sphere and men with the hierarchical superior public sphere. Although the limitations of these theories were exposed when applied cross-culturally it was their very limitations that helped bring to light the inappropriateness of a pan-cultural definition of 'woman'. The significant outcome was that it instigated a "simultaneous move towards pluralism and specificity". The consequences of this move would be that in order for theory to provide any authentic form of representation it would have to demonstrate its awareness of the multiplicity of experience that constitutes the fragmented and often contradictory nature of feminist theoretical discourse.

Moore points out that recent feminist anthropological studies have demonstrated the ethnocentric nature of the relationship between gender and sex which "assume that binary biological sex" is universally formulated in the "cultural categories 'male' and 'female'". Having asserted the untenability of the theory that gender is socially constructed due to the cultural variability of "these constructs" she further asserts that so too "are the categories of sexual difference". The existing research on "hermaphroditism and androgeny" can also be called on in support of this argument. Not only are these theories untenable cross-culturally it is also the case that, within cultures themselves, individuals do not fit the ideologically prescribed picture of the gendered/sexed subject, (Moore, 1994, pp.8 - 27).

The divergence in approach of feminists to the question of representing 'women' illustrates the fragmented entity 'woman' which defies endeavours to contain women within a unitary gendered subject position. This situation leads Judith Butler to question the wisdom of any move to formulate a political or linguistic subject to represent 'woman' because she asserts that by defining a representation of woman feminists set limits on those that can be represented and the "feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipations", (Butler, 1990, pp.1 - 2). Butler's argument is aligned with Foucault's argument that by setting up limits of representation through discourse we set up "juridical systems of power" which in turn "produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent", (Butler, 1990, p.1 - 2). This point takes into consideration Foucault's philosophy on the ubiquitous nature of power as distinct from a unitary power source which I will refer to in the next chapter and which feminists have engaged with in their deconstruction of the gendered representations of 'woman' espoused in the meta narratives. By acknowledging the ubiquitous nature of power feminists also acknowledge the presence of the Foucauldian term 'agency' which I would associate with the theological concept of 'free will' where the individual is empowered to accept or reject given 'truths'. The problem for feminists with the acknowledgement of agency is that on the one hand it

accounts for their non unitary identity in society but on the other hand it undermines their ability to account for the universal particularity which constitutes the pan cultural and pan historical subjugated position of women in society. By arguing in support of the empowering concept of agency where the individual has control over their subject position it should then transpire that we would inhabit an androgynous world where gender along with other marks of difference were not factors which influence our lived experience as women. Feminism however refutes the concept of a society where gender is not a factor that influences women's lives and whereas the numerous abstract arguments that disprove the legitimacy or 'truth' of the gender binary categories are useful in political negotiations regarding equality of the sexes they fail to explain the source of women's subjugation. It is unrealistic to assume that all women with a universal access to agency would choose to take up a subjugated subject position in society but empirical experience reflects that this is the position they occupy. If access to agency fails to eradicate the subjugation of women then there is a case for identifying and pin-pointing the site of both the physical and psychological subjugation of women and that site is where subjects experience their reality - the body.

In focusing on the body as the site of subjugation contemporary feminism is not concerned with discovering a biological essence which forms the identity woman as this would implicate them in setting limits (which is Butler's

argument above) on what constitutes an 'authentic' woman's body. They are concerned rather with identifying the 'particularity' that relegates women to a subjugated position in society the experience of which is correlated and verified by "women's grassroots organizations", (Moore, 1994, pp.8 - 27). Mindful of the diversity in representations of the body, by focusing their theoretical discourse on the body as the site that instigates women's subjugation, contemporary feminism casts suspicion on the underlying philosophies of mainstream theoretical discourses which perpetuate women's subjugation in society.

Nobody objects to a woman being a
good writer or sculptor or geneticist
if at the same time she manages to be
a good wife, good mother, good looking,
good tempered, well groomed and
unaggressive.

(Pauline Frederick, (1882-1938) in
Exley, 1993, p,35)

Many contemporary feminists live in what is identified as the postmodern world where the institutions that hold power and govern our society are influenced by postmodern theoretical discourse which is predominantly presided over by men. Power relations in the context of discourses on knowledge, history, ideology and social relations, "is an obsession of postmodernism", (Bertens, 1995, p.78). These areas have been of particular interest to Foucault, and his theories relating to them have been significant in forming many of the paradigms within contemporary discourses.

Foucault's analysis of the discourse of power mentioned earlier, is of relevance to feminists in that it seeks to determine the position of the 'subject' within society and his/her relationships with the

institutions that govern society. The significance of Foucault's theories is that he recognizes the ubiquitous nature of power and refutes the Marxist and Weberian views that power is a unitary force residing in the state: at the same time he explores how the subject is objectified according to the ruling interests of his or her society. Foucault identifies how the ruling interests of society are articulated through the various philosophical discourses and in so doing he analyses the mechanisms of power which are integral to "the human and social sciences"; the way in which the subject experiences "domination" and "exclusion"; the means by which the subject internalizes attitudes "especially in relation to sexuality," (Braidotti, 1991, p.48).

In The History of Sexuality Foucault examines the way in which the subject is constituted by discourses on sexuality, and how this is made manifest in legislation, religious and moral teachings, and scientific and medical truths (including psychoanalysis). Braidotti notes that through his critique of the institutions that perpetuate these truths, Foucault was "confronted by the discursive and material institution of sexuality" which he sees as "the most powerful means to control and discipline the embodied subject, (Braidotti, 1991, p.82).

It is through genealogical analysis in The History of Sexuality that Foucault traces the discourses that participated in the formation of a sexual identity. In the process of examining the historical contexts relating to religious doctrines/truths on sexuality and the

subsequent changes brought about by altering these contexts he not only demonstrates the power of discourse to adapt and to change, but also illustrates his hypothesis that the history of sexuality does not develop gradually by a natural process but is determined by the relationship of particular truths to particular times in history. The citing of the discursive interactions involved in the formation of a sexual identity refutes the validity of the representation of the unified subject of history proffered by Enlightenment thinking and in this respect there is much in Foucault's theories that feminism can engage with.

It is interesting to look at Foucault's relationship with psychoanalysis given its influence on theoretical understandings of the 'subject' and feminists engagement with it which I referred to in the previous chapter. By way of his genealogical analysis of the discourse on sexuality he assesses the role played by the institution of psychoanalysis in normalizing subject positions. According to Braidotti (Braidotti, 1991, pp.82 - 97), his study of sexuality is focused on "the analysis of the internal devices of subjectivity" which are reflected in the image a subject has of her /himself. Foucault relates the methodologies employed by psychoanalysis to the religious practices of "confession" and "avowal". This facilitates the exercise of power in that the subject internalizes the norms or "truths" espoused by the institution and experiences the trauma of exclusion when he deviates from the norm. The

confessional nature of psychoanalysis is then seen as "liberating" in that the repression of the subject's deviations are alleviated by 'the talking cure'. Foucault is not concerned so much with the position held by the unconscious (the area associated with repressed sexuality) in psychoanalysis in that he does not see the practice of articulating the unconscious as liberating the subject, but "paradoxically" as further implicating him/her in the "technology of knowledge and power".

Foucault's methods in analysing the means by which a subject acquires a sexual identity differs fundamentally from psychoanalysis. He posits a sexuality constituted by the interactions of discourses on an embodied subject. Psychoanalysis on the other hand posits the role of the unconscious as the site where through its relationship with the norm (in psychoanalytical terms "the phallus") the subject forms a sexual identity. Foucault rejects this theory on the grounds that it involves the repression of sexuality which would require the acknowledgement of a unified power as distinct from his belief in the ubiquitous nature of power.

In Foucauldian terms psychoanalysis is associated with the meta narratives of history that are premised on the notion of a universal truth which is the seat of all power. Because Foucault argues that power needs to be detached from truth, Braidotti as a feminist argues in line with Foucault, that the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis are irreducible to one another. She

refers to Felman's summation of their "irreducibility" which defines psychoanalysis as attempting to logically explain the "discontinuous functioning of the unconscious", while on the other hand it is philosophy's duty "to express the radical nature of the discontinuity". In accordance with this philosophical duty Foucault's "technology of the subject" proposes the ability of discourses of power to normalize the production of the "real" which is then institutionalized as truth. In this scenario Braidotti states that Foucault bases "his political analysis on the critique of the political status of truth."

It is worth noting Foucault's encounter with the 'other' who in psychoanalysis is assigned to the realm of the 'real' because of its pertinence in representations of women in the discourses of contemporary postmodernism. It is remarkable that a philosopher engaged in a critique of the status of truth in discourses on sexuality has so little to say on the status of women. The impact of feminist theory and practice is ignored as a force in its own right, but gets a 'nodding' recognition as part of a "more global revolutionary movement". While analysing the role of medicine in discourses on sexuality he omitted any references to "pregnancy and birth-control" which play a rudimentary part in female sexuality. Despite the availability of feminist critiques on lesbianism and the family, these critiques were disregarded. Braidotti notes the irony of these

omissions in the light of his attention to "the campaign against little boys' masturbation."

Foucault's relegation of feminism to the marginal status along with "prisoners, drafted soldiers, the hospitalized sick, and homosexuals," desexualizes the terms of the feminist struggle. He sees the value of their revolt as commensurate with the on-going "radical transformation of the order of knowledge in our society". In defining the "strength of the women's liberation movements" Foucault says it rests not on their "claim to the specificity of their sexuality" but rather that they have highlighted the "apparatuses" in which discourses on sexuality are conducted. This is synonymous with his thinking on the power of interactions between discourses to create new or revised discourses and is relevant to the contemporary feminist's strategy of focusing on the body as an 'apparatus' that is used in the subjugation of women.

In rejecting "Marxist-Freudian" use of the "notion of repression" as a source of knowledge which might liberate "'authentic or real sexuality'" he sees the new role of the philosopher as a "'struggle against forms of power'" that construct discursive practices. Braidotti points out that in his genealogical analysis of sexuality Foucault's thinking evolves through the "discursive practices of philosophy" and consequently he encounters the "masculine nature of the subject of philosophy". Despite the fact that this allows for a pluralistic approach to philosophical thinking Foucault does not

engage with a "critique of the masculine bias of philosophical discourse". She suggests that Foucault acknowledges this bias but links it "to the alleged universalism" of phallogocentrism "which he opposes". This enables him to transcend the notion of a "sexuation" in favour of "de-sexualization of discursive practices" and in doing so Foucault applies the same tactic as he suggested that feminists adopt. He proposes that the subject does not need to refer for "legitimation" to "Law" thus effectively rejecting the gendered "other" proposed by psychoanalysis, but instead recommends that a more positive image of "the self" be elaborated through a self-conscious relationship with philosophical discourses, (Braidotti, 1991, pp.82 - 97).

The self-conscious relationship of the subject with the alterity of pluralistic philosophical discourses can be read as symptomatic of the ambiguous nature of representation associated with postmodernism as it provides for the everchanging relationship of the subject with her/his image of 'self' and corresponds to the fragmented identity experience of feminism identified in the previous chapter. In mainstream postmodernism the Foucauldian term 'agency' is seen as the facility through which the subject is empowered to adopt or resist the pressures brought to bear on them in their interactions with society thus influencing their perceived image within society. Susan Bordo gives an empirical example of how agency can operate in creating the image of self, which she argues, with reference to Jean Baudrillard,

capitulates with the "disappearance of the distinction between reality and appearance" which as a trait, is a "key characteristic" of "postmodern culture". The example she uses refers to the transformations in the physical appearance of the film star, Cher. Bordo identifies in the transformation of Cher's ethnic/middle-aged appearance to a more youthful and 'beautiful' image with the Foucauldian concept of 'normalisation' and notes that the promotion of the idea of 'choice' disguises the predominance of the 'norm' in society, (Bordo in Ramazanoglu, 1993, pp.194 - 199). What force dictates the 'norm' ?

The postmodern concept of agency has political implications for the broad spectrum of subject representations within society. If individuals are empowered through agency so also are minority groups which consequently undermines a unitary authority and precipitates what Hans Bertens identifies as the "end of macropolitics", (Bertens, 1995, pp.187 - 189). Through its espousal of "agency" postmodern politics is characterized by its support of a pluralist society resulting in the championing of "single-issue movements" with a "perceived loss of faith in party politics" traditionally the fundamental component of "western democracy". The emergence of "single issue movements" has led to what Heller and Feher identify as the "reappearance of the 'ethnicity component' of politics". Bertens notes "the disasters in Bosnia and elsewhere" as evidence of this turning to "fanatical ethnic 'identity'

politics". In challenging the power structures of macropolitics postmodernism has scuttled the possibilities of "legitimation" and certainty that the meta narratives gave to politics; the consequences of this are "paradoxical". By exposing the groundless nature of "our representations - epistemological, moral, political", Bertens proposes that it can be assumed that they are the products of "power structures" and are therefore "political", (Bertens, 1995, pp.187 - 189).

On the face of it, this revelation can be empowering for those who are marginalised within society. Theoretically it gives a voice to groups whereby differences in beliefs and experiences, whether they be ethnical, religious or sexual can be represented. By giving a voice to a multiplicity of groups, power then becomes decentered and is available through discourse. The consequences of the proliferation of micro-political agendas is that it leaves no space for an agenda involving political interventions in matters concerning the ecological preservation of the planet or in instances where abuses of human rights occur. On a world-wide basis the paradox of this political philosophy is exposed in times of crisis when what is seen as the common good is threatened by some marginalised or minority group. What force decides what the common good is? To date, what has happened, as recent histories will verify, the most powerful groups or states will resort to force as in the case of the Gulf War, or ethnic groups will continue to kill one another as in the case of former Yugoslavia.

What happens to 'agency' and the empowerment of minority groups?

In defence of what is termed "this mostly Foucauldian postmodernism" (Bertens, 1995, p.8) it can be argued, that its philosophical scepticism has influenced relationships between cultural institutions which have resulted in a more democratic approach within these institutions. It has created a climate which allows for engagement with feminism and "multiculturalism" and allows for ambiguous representations of the embodied subject. This ambiguity identified with postmodernism is attributed to its promotion of the untenability of the unified subject associated with the meta narratives and has resulted in the 'men' of postmodernism experiencing a sense of loss and fragmentation which has led them to recognize the political potential of feminism, (Suleiman, 1992, p.321 - 322).

The sense of loss attributed to the fragmented state of postmodernism is identified as the loss of the unified subject. Suleiman quotes Hal Foster from an essay he wrote in 1984 regarding this loss which she finds very impressive. It is worth quoting here to illustrate its seductiveness to feminists:

Here, then we begin to see what is at stake in (the) so-called dispersal of the subject. For what is this subject that, threatened by loss, is so bemoaned? For some, for many, this may indeed be a great loss, a loss which leads to narcissistic laments and hysterical disavowals of the end of art, of culture, of the west. But for others, precisely for Others, it is no great loss at all. (Foster in Suleiman, 1993, p.322)

It is easy to see from this synopsis of the ambiguous nature of representations of the subject within postmodernism the attraction it holds for feminists. The idea of being acknowledged by an influential theoretical discourse that has rejected the omnipotent subject of patriarchy would indeed seem attractive. The allure of the "new men" of postmodernism may have a certain appeal in that they are not the "old men" of modernism and all that has gone before. The question is what is their identity and are they still looking to women to supply them with one? Feminism must judge whether in fact the 'subject' is lost or just hiding; it should remember Kristeva's warning mentioned earlier of the ability of the social order to inculcate change within that order.

One of the factors noted by Alice Jardine in her essay, "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo Or Compagnons de Route?", was that when contemporary male critical theorists, even those with a strong affinity with feminism such as Paul Smith, Stephen Heath and Andrew Ross, speak or write in theoretical contexts their bodies or bodily experiences are absent. These theorists she refers to, are men who would have studied a large part of feminist theory in their roles as academics, (Jardine, 1987, pp.54 - 61). The point of this observation is to emphasise the lack of influence that feminist theory has had on these theorists. When they write on issues relating men's

uncertainty in matters of representation, they do so from the perspective of trying to accommodate women within the existing regimes, of acknowledging women's rights, of giving their stamp of approval to aspects of feminist theory or else enlightening them on points of theory, but they stop short of applying contemporary feminist theory on gender and the body to the masculine gendered body. This would involve recognizing that there is still life in "the subject" referred to above by Foster; despite embodiment, the proposed androgynous subjects of postmodernism show definite characteristics of the 'lost subject'.

These characteristics manifest themselves in several ways but stem from the male patriarchal characteristic which sees ambiguity and fragmentation as threatening and seeks to identify and name subjects in order to cope with and control them. In the case of feminism within postmodernism these characteristics are exposed when even the men who are supportive of feminism endeavour to accommodate feminists within the system without trying to accommodate feminist philosophies born out of feminist theoretical discourse. In the past the binary relationship between men and women was the cornerstone on which male identity was premised, and contemporary mainstream theorists are looking to feminist theory for a solution to their identity problems instead of, as Jardine suggests, listening to feminist theoretical discourse and looking to themselves. Rather than trying to appropriate feminist theory in order to

justify their hierarchical position in philosophy. Jardine suggests that there is a whole realm of uncharted territory concerning men's relationship with the 'male gaze', the predilection to "technology, weapons, and war", the obsessions with sport as evidenced by the amount of media coverage both in the press and television taken up by these predominantly male pursuits. She asks "what is going on in the male psyche with these bats and balls and nets", (Jardine, 1987, p.61). Feminists can surmise what is going on in these 'male pursuits' where men enact their representations of masculinity, but by doing so they are merely swapping position with the patriarchal ideological practice of presuming to know what constitutes the psyche of the 'other'.

The bodies under discussion in postmodernism are female bodies, or other marginalised bodies as referred to by Kaja Silverman in Male Subjectivity at the Margins, whose common denominator is lack of phallus. When Jardine suggests that the phallic category namely men need to confront their relationship to their own bodies, it might be more accurate to identify this category as men who prescribe to the male 'norm' in society because as homosexual discourse illustrates some gay men are confronting their relationship with their masculine bodies and with masculinity. Because of the ambiguous relationship of some gay men with masculinity their position in society is marginalised and feminist theory has relevance for them. If feminism is to be relevant to men for whom their identity as masculine males is

threatened by the political ambiguities of postmodernism then a discourse on the lived experience of men's bodies is necessary. In order to critique the lived experience of the male body in society men would have to initiate this discourse themselves. In carrying on this discourse, the myth of universalism would be undermined, establishing as feminism has established for women the multiplicity of the embodied subject; in this case it would show the multiplicity of the embodied male subject and confirm the dispersal of the unitary subject of philosophical ideologies.

Within academia, the site of origin of much of the theories that influence philosophically informed discourses, Jardine suggests some pragmatic steps which male colleagues interested in the potential of feminist theory, might adopt. Her suggestions recognize the powers of inclusion and exclusion that these institutions still exercise which belie the disappearance of 'the subject'. She suggests that male colleagues could "stop the killing of women's books in reviews" or merely "leaving them out", or she suggests that "women's writings be thought in these institutions and the "debts to feminism" be recognized, (Jardine, 1987, p.61). Similar action across other socio-economic institutions, including art institutions would not go amiss. The question "what's in it for men"? is a question of " what do they see as being the potential in feminism"?

Historically, as Susan Bordo points out male institutional patronage of feminism has led to the

submission of feminism to the phallo/logcentric denial of sexual difference within discourse. She recounts how in the 1920's and 1930's when women experienced the benefits of early feminist social struggles, the inducement of access to places in powerful institutions caused the "professional women" of the time to think that the need to emphasise the gendered nature of power was redundant believing that they had achieved an equal status within those institutions. By declaring "We're interested in people now - not men and women" Bordo states feminism was cut off from "the source of feminism's transformative possibilities" which it has taken four decades to reconstitute, (Bordo, 1991, pp.151-153). By implicating feminism in the androgynous discourses of postmodernism, 'men' can negotiate a consolidation of the status quo, thus ensuring their privileged positions of power.

In Irigaray's opinion, when women demand that egalitarian measures be implemented at a social level, "they disrupt the entire order of dominant values, economic, social, moral and sexual", (Irigaray, 1985, p.165). By demanding a revision of the empirical role of the female embodied subject, this has the effect of questioning the patriarchal philosophies that support the existing order which in turn undermines the image that the male embodied subject has of himself. Instead of appropriating female sexuality in an effort to safeguard their identity, a feminist approach to a theory of sexual difference which is proposed in the next chapter with reference to Irigaray, might enable men to cope

with their uncertainties regarding their roles in society both on a personal and political level. If men do as Jardine suggests and adopt the theories of feminism analysing their relationships with their bodies, the insights gained would lead to a redefinition of their roles in society. The question is however, whether a corollary of this redefinition of masculinity would be the relinquishing of the underlying facility to subjugate which is inscribed within mainstream theoretical discourse and which is cited in chapter one with reference to the experience of women's grassroots movements and again in chapter two with reference to the Gulf War and the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia.

Why we oppose votes for men...
because men are too emotional
to vote. Their conduct at
baseball games and political
conventions shows this, while
their innate tendency to appeal
to force renders them particularly
unfit for the task of government.
(Alice Duer Miller, (1874-1942) in
Exley, 1993, p.22)

For feminism, the uncertainties and ambiguities of postmodernism associated with the deconstruction of the meta narratives and the dispersal of the subject do not constitute a dilemma, on the contrary, it demonstrates the inability of postmodernism to construct an effective mode of representation. Feminism's strength lies in its identification of the gendered nature of the philosophies that inform theoretical discourse, and in the realization that recognition of sexual difference experienced through our bodies, is a positive rather than negative force which rejects the subordination of difference within the hierarchical structures which postmodernism seems reluctant to relinquish. It is not a naive substitution of 'phallo- gocentrism' with 'gynecocentrism' (Irigaray, 1987, p.162) which would

perpetuate a system of exclusion due to an intolerance of difference.

By relating theoretical discourse on the body to lived experience of women feminism subverts the abstract concepts that support existing theories on sexuality and gender. The question whether feminism valorizes lived experience must be asked? Lived experience is certainly not value free, but as Grosz points out with reference to Merleau-Ponty, lived experience has a formative role in the production of knowledge, and it is also important as a measure by which we assess theory. Merleau-Ponty as an exponent of the importance of lived experience links it "to the privileged locus of consciousness" but also espouses the fact that it is "corporeally constituted, between mind and body - or across them- in their lived conjunction". Grosz believes that this exposé is of relevance to feminist theory and would be in line with Irigaray's thinking, (Grosz, 1994, pp.94-95).

By interpreting lived experience in this way it becomes possible for feminists to infiltrate the phallogentric philosophies which are founded on the silencing of female feminine and maternal experience as illustrated in the first chapter. Braidotti demonstrates that when Irigaray asks the question, referring to the position of woman within psychoanalysis "What if this matter began to speak", she undermines the authority which erects its symbols on its image of woman as the materiality of the female body, and the non-subject or 'other' of discourse, (Braidotti, 1991, pp. 248 - 263).

The whole prospect of an embodied voice that does not refer to the phallus for its meaning is an anathema to the logocentricism of philosophies that are premised on a non gendered unified subject. If the 'other' can speak, its materiality and sexuality can be articulated, it becomes an embodied subject. By speaking their sexual difference feminists can subvert the very rationality of logocentric philosophies which are premised on the "power to reduce all others to the economy of the Same", (Ibid., 1991, 248 - 263).

The recurring question 'where does the force / power come from' that reduces all others to the Same which in psychoanalytical terms can be referred to as the 'phallus' and in Foucauldian terms the 'norm'? Is it related to the "universal particularity" experienced by women; the universal subjugation endured by women across cultures and history referred to earlier by Moore?

Braidotti identifies the 'particularity' as violence and argues that violence comes in many guises and is "a constant of power determined in function of three variables: the monetary, the military and the masculine", (Braidotti, 1991, p.279). This argument would explain the ubiquitous nature of violence and how it infiltrates everyday life establishing a power structure that is reflected in the masculine orientation of the philosophical reasoning which informs theoretical discourse. It exposes the insidious ideological identity of mainstream theoretical discourse. The masquerade of violence as reason is made possible in discourse by the

ability of reason to make abstract that which it does not want to hear. Braidotti states that by using its logocentric philosophies to push abstraction into violence, "and thus diffusing" violence, mainstream theoretical discourse has provided a ubiquitous criterion that supports the hegemony of "thought and human consciousness that is applied to many other theoretical disciplines", (Braidotti, 1991, p.278). Violent reason manifests itself through abstract thought.

The most potent realization and experience of the potential of abstract thought is its prediction to war. To sustain its power reason must silence that which threatens to expose its masquerade. If 'others' are allowed to have a voice how can reason prevail? Either the 'other' voice is appropriated by reason, and thus rendered inarticulate or it is annihilated. The end result is the subjugation of 'rhyme' by 'reason'.

Society experiences the consequences of this power in that its laws and economic structures are founded on an ideological reasoning which is expounded by the philosophies that inform theoretical discourse and in this way access to agency is controlled. Dominant power in the world is threatened by the alterity inherent in marginal races, religions, and sexes that disrupt the universalism of its founding subject which is the unified subject or truth of the Enlightenment. To prevent any dilution of its power it resorts to violence. Referring to Kate Millet's observations, Braidotti remarks that the resort to violence is based on the presumption of a "them

and us", (Braidotti, 1991, p.280). The resort to the use of reason premised on violence facilitates the appropriation of sexual difference, disguising the reality of "them and us".

Irigaray in writing on sexual difference celebrates the reality of the erogenous zones of female sexuality and in so doing, exposes the erroneous zone on which the universal subject of reason is erected. She points out that it is in woman's interest never to be "simply one" because in doing so woman represses her sexuality and inculcates herself in the system that designates her identity in relation to male sexuality. By recognition of her plurality woman prevents her appropriation by patriarchal discourse. Irigaray asserts that while it is important for women to "forge a social status that demands recognition" it is not enough for them to "reverse the existing order" because this would lead inevitably to a "return to phallocratism", (Irigaray, 1985, pp.25-33). A discourse on sexual difference provides a space in which feminism can represent the particularity and diversity of women's lived experiences and as such is relevant in the on-going process of formulating representations of the diversity of embodied subjects in society.

The issue of sexual difference is located in the space that Irigaray identifies as being "outside" of our "cultural imaginary" which up to now has been masculine. This space exists where women exceed the limits of culturally defined demarcation lines, where they experience

the joy, pleasure and desire of sexual relationships as beings in their own right, and not as objects propping up the omnipotence of masculine sexuality. When women speak of their sexual pleasure or communicate it through visual representations they uncover the "prohibition on woman's pleasure, and thus on sexual relation". They highlight the phallogentric appropriation of sexual desire which depends on the silencing of the sexual desire of 'others'. The "philosophical order" is thus "disturbed, inasmuch as it covers over sexual difference". (Irigaray, 1987, pp.159-165).

This is of political significance for feminism with regard to postmodernism, because it exposes the political impotency of postmodernism in the light of the breakdown of meta narratives and the subsequent breakdown of meta-politics. By denying the existence of 'sexual difference' or the gendered subject, and opting for an androgynous subject, postmodernism has arrived at a political stalemate. By adhering to the phallogentric reasoning of philosophies which resort to violence when confronted with the demands of 'difference' whether it be race, religious or sexual, it prohibits any potential for social change.

Hutcheon proposes that feminism will "resist incorporation into postmodernism" mainly because of its motivation for "real social change". Echoing Chris Weedon's assertion that "'Feminism is a politics' - Postmodernism is not" she attributes postmodernism's lack of political agency to its ambivalence in, on the

one hand its "critique" of the unified subject of traditional philosophy, and on the other hand its "complicity" in valorizing the underlying logic of its 'pluralistic' philosophies, (Hutcheon, 1989, p.168).

While making use of postmodern tactics to expose the ideological significance of representation within our cultures, feminism unlike postmodernism, does so in order to initiate social changes and not as an exercise in theoretical gamesmanship aimed at perpetuating the status quo. By focusing on the repercussions of theoretical discourse in the lived experiences of women, feminism can defuse the postmodern infusion of abstraction which promulgates the notion of freedom of choice for the individual through agency, and at the same time supports ideological structures that prevent or inhibit the individual in making those choices.

Feminism is astute enough to realise that its theories do not provide a panacea for all our social ills. It recognizes the dynamic potential of discourse to facilitate a multiplicity of discursive spaces, which allows the embodied subject a degree of agency, and it relies on this facility in order to penetrate the existing social order. By setting in motion a discourse of sexual difference made manifest through the lived experience of our bodies it does not arrive at a solution but rather initiates a process of discursive interactions premised on the celebration of difference which has the potential to obliterate the necessity for a them and us situation, and opposes the valorization of the gendered

identity of the same universal signifier of theoretical discourse. By insisting on the articulation of the lived experience of sexual difference of those who inhabit women's bodies feminism makes a difference to the way in which women can be represented in theoretical discourse. Irigaray highlights the consequences of feminists and others not articulating their difference from the 'norm':

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. Don't you think so? Listen; all around us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connection. The same...Same... Always the same.
(Irigaray, 1985, p.205)

CONCLUSION

In the light of the apparent egalitarian status of women and other minority groups in sectors of western society this thesis discusses how contemporary mainstream theoretical discourse participates in the perpetuation of the subjugation of women in society at large. These incidents of equal status are hard won concessions extracted by feminists from the social order that governs society through their engagement in theoretical discourse and political activism. Based on historical precedent I am suspicious that the philosophically informed ideological grounds on which these concessions are granted or withheld involves inculcating feminism in the perpetuation of the "same" social order as distinct from a new order influenced by pluralistic philosophies based on the multiplicity of lived experiences.

Theoretical discourse is recognized as the means by which the social order is informed and structured and by engaging in these discourses feminists have challenged the authority that marginalises women within the social order. In challenging this authority it recognizes the intolerance of difference that for women stems from how they as women experience difference with relation to

their sexuality. Within the social order female sexuality is negated by being represented only in relation to male sexuality and not as an independent entity; maternal desire is seen as a corollary of this order. Through this process both female sexual desire and maternal desire are silenced and 'woman' is subjugated.

Feminism investigates the source of the power which maintains this subjugation. Through engagement with contemporary theoretical discourses and aligning them with their knowledge of the lived experiences of women feminism unearths both the gendered and violent nature of the philosophical reasoning at the root of this power. The ubiquitous nature of power is seen to infiltrate theoretical discourse by means of abstract concepts which negate credence in lived experience and safeguard the gendered identity of the source of power which even postmodernism with its professed pluralism is reluctant to relinquish. This reluctance is illustrated by the reluctance of seemingly sympathetic male theorists to initiate a discourse based on feminist theoretical discourse relating to their bodies, the site where they experience their lived experience as men.

Feminism through theoretical and empirically informed strategies has made a difference in the lives of many women; this difference has affected society's perception of women through social and political interactions as it destabilizes the concepts that endeavour to restrict feminist discourse within the boundaries of

masculine orientated philosophical discourses. By persisting with a discourse of sexual difference which focuses on our experience of our bodies feminist discourse does not immediately release women from their subjugated position but rather usurps representations of both men and women and thereby transforms the relationships that men and women have with sexual/gendered identities. A theoretical discourse of sexual difference keeps in motion a process that has the potential to subvert representations of 'reasonable violence' which masquerade as reason and retard the possibility of progress both in sexual and social politics. The difference that feminism can make is that through a feminist theoretical discourse aligned with the lived experience of women which represents both their difference to and the untenability of a unified subject, changes can be instigated in society that work to accommodate 'real' difference.

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