

**Engendering the subject : gender and
self-representation in contemporary
women's fiction**

ENGENDERING THE SUBJECT

Gender and Self-Representation in
Contemporary Women's Fiction

Sally Robinson

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Introduction

Engendering the Subject

Feminist Theory and Identity Politics

Most feminist theorists and critics would agree with Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but becomes a woman." There is considerably less agreement, however, about how that "becoming" proceeds, and, indeed, about what constitutes the category "woman." The question of how one becomes a woman has been complicated by recent critiques of the "subject" and "identity" as ideological fictions necessary for the smooth workings of humanist systems of thought and social regulation. At the same time, these critiques, especially as articulated by feminist theorists, have enabled us to think about how any subject, or any identity, is marked by gender, race, class, and other cultural differences. The mechanisms of that marking are the means by which one becomes a woman: bodies sexed female are produced as "women" by their placement in systems of signification and social practices.¹ Gender, thus, can be conceived as a system of meaning, rather than a quality "owned" by individuals. And, as in all systems of meaning, the effects of gender are not always predictable, stable, or unitary. The processes by which one becomes a woman are multiple and sometimes contradictory, and the category of "women" itself is, thus, a category marked by differences and instabilities. With the fracturing of identity and the deconstruction of the "essence" of gender, feminist theorists have questioned some of the founding principles of feminist study: the authority of experience, the unity of sisterhood, the cross-cultural oppression of all women by a monolithic patriarchy. This questioning has led toward what Linda Alcoff calls the "identity crisis in feminist theory," a crisis both over the identity of feminist theory, and the identity in feminist theory.² For, in the wake of poststructuralist theory, both feminist and

nonfeminist, it is no longer self-evident what feminist theory is (or should be), and for whom it does (or should) speak.

The question of the intersections between feminism and poststructuralism (and postmodernism) has elicited vigorous and sometimes hostile debate. Feminists have chided post-structuralists with being apolitical, while (nonfeminist) post-structuralists have accused feminists of being atheoretical and naively humanist. Yet these debates have ultimately yielded productive results, particularly around the issues of identity and politics.³ As Elizabeth Weed suggests, the contradictions between feminisms' liberal humanist aims and post-structuralisms' anti-humanist critiques have resulted, not in a stalemate, but rather, in new directions for feminist theory:

[T]here is something distinctive about the meeting of U.S. feminism and poststructuralist theory, and that seems to be the intense challenge both pose to the very grounds of liberalism, that is, to the nature and status of the individual. Indeed, what makes that meeting so interesting is that while post-structuralism is squarely "against" the liberal individual, feminism is in no simple way for such an abstraction. Feminism's interrogation of the history of Western Man as the economy of the One and the same, forges a connection between feminism and post-structuralism that further twists the knot of contradictions. At the same time, while the liberal rights discourse and the poststructuralist critique of it are imbricated within feminism in complex ways, it is not a question of somehow reconciling the two. On the contrary, it is that imbrication which produces the ideological contradictions that make feminism such a productive site for cultural criticism. (xi)

While the designation "liberal humanist" has become something of a theoretical liability—connoting, as it does, the whole masculinist Western tradition against which feminism has always worked—⁴the fact remains that any political discourse which attempts to speak for a class of subjects, such as women, must be rooted, at least provisionally, in some

notion of rights. Or, to put the problem in different and less loaded terms, feminisms' projects must always be *positive* as well as negative; that is, even the most poststructuralist of feminists recognizes that the displacement of Woman as Man's other must "continue to supplement the collective and substantive work of 'restoring' woman's history and literature" (Spivak, "Displacement," 186). With the poststructuralist injunction to deconstruct all categories—and to scrupulously avoid constructing new categories—feminist theory and politics risks floundering in negativity.⁵ It is important to remember that relations of domination and subordination do not simply go away when they are deconstructed. Rather, as R. Radhakrishnan notes, the positions from which one speaks demand different strategies, depending on the relative power that inheres in those positions. Thus, "whereas the dominant position requires acts of self-deconstruction, the subordinate position entails collective self-construction."⁶ It is my contention, however, that it is possible to operate in both directions at once, and that this is precisely how recent feminist attempts to theorize identity politics for women are operating. In other words, feminist theory must negotiate between positive politics and negative critique.⁷

For feminist theory, the deconstruction of unitary identity has meant dismantling the humanist fiction of Western Man as universal subject and of Woman as the negative term which guarantees his identity. Much feminist work in the last decade has been concerned with demystifying a metaphysical and essentialist notion of Woman, signified by the capital "W," and replacing it with a plural and differentially marked category of women.⁸ Whereas Woman identifies a singular, often metaphorical, conceptualization of feminine difference, women, as a plural and heterogeneous category fractures that singularity. Thinking women as a multiple, and internally contradictory, category has made it possible for feminist theory to extricate itself from a narrowly conceived, and static, notion of sexual difference: that is, Woman's difference from Man. As Teresa de Lauretis suggests, the time has come to turn attention away from *the* sexual difference, and toward differences between and within women.⁹ Such an

emphasis on plural differences links feminist theory with poststructuralist theory.

Yet problems remain in the effort to theorize "women." While it might seem that use of the plural gets us off the hook of generalization, universalism and essentialism, such is not necessarily the case. For example, when white feminists speak of "women," are we actually speaking of white women, heterosexual women, middle class academic women? Critiques of liberal (mainstream) feminism as susceptible to racism, classism, and heterosexism have made such categorical statements problematic.¹⁰ It is important to avoid a falsely generic sense of "women," but at the same time, some category is necessary if feminism is to do its political work. The problem with which feminist theory is grappling at this particular historical juncture is how to theorize "identity" (of women and of feminism) without falling into exclusionary practices and falsely universal—or "global"—generalizations.¹¹ In the face of poststructuralist critiques of "totalizing narratives," as initiated by Jean-Francois Lyotard and others, feminists have become wary of theorizing on the grand scale. Thus, concepts such as "patriarchy," "sexual difference," "Woman/women," and even "gender" have been put into question under the rubric of detotalization. Yet, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson point out, in their influential essay "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism," the impulse to detotalization threatens to de-politicize feminism by failing to leave a place for "the critique of pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race, and class" (23). Such critiques are necessary to feminism's projects if they are to be politically efficacious.

A new binary seems to have become entrenched in critical and feminist theory: the local and specific is being privileged over the cross-cultural and systematic. This new hierarchy has resulted in what Susan Bordo calls "gender-scepticism," the fear that any theorizing about gender will inevitably lead us to new totalizations and new metanarratives.¹² Within the terms of poststructuralist theory, all

attempts to speak for a constituency risk falling into the traps of unity and sameness. Yet, as Christine Di Stefano points out, scepticism about subject-centered inquiry threatens to plunge feminism into an impossible politics: "To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency" (76). The task, then, becomes a rearticulation of that constituency, a rethinking of the category "women" for which feminism desires to speak. How, then, are we to think "identity" as local and contingent, while simultaneously recognizing that identities are structured by larger systems of power and signification, such as patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and international capitalism?

Denise Riley suggests that we think of "identities" as "temporary" and strategic, for "identities *can* only be held for a time, both individually and collectively, and both the history of feminism and the semantic logic of 'women' bear witness to this founding temporality" (136). The category "women" has meaning in relation to other categories, and these relations change throughout history. Categorization works through processes of inclusion and exclusion, and "membership" in any category is secured through the exclusion of "outsiders." In this sense, any "identity" must necessarily exclude differences: the One is not, nor can it be, the Other. Yet, in another sense, identity is dependent on difference: the One is only the One in opposition to the Other. For example, woman has meaning in relation to man, and the history of Western thought has conditioned us to think of woman as not-man. But as Riley suggests, "woman" has not always carried the same meaning and, further, the identity of "women" as a collectivity is put into question as soon as we divorce the category from its oppositional relation to "men." That is, the differences within the category "women" disrupt *the* singular and essential difference between man and woman. Rather than seek a consolidation of "women" and identity, then, it is important to operate a continual dispersal

or displacement of identity, to theorize the identity of "women" in specific and local historical contexts.¹³

The feminist desire to de-essentialize Woman and women is coterminous with the desire to wrench apart the binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine, and to deconstruct the singularity and unity of the categories "men" and "women." This does not necessarily entail giving up these categories, but rather, entails an approach to gender differences that does not rely on the dubious proposition of an unchanging and "natural" masculinity or femininity. Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, productively intervenes into the critical discourse that has polarized the terms "essentialism" and "constructivism," effectively deconstructing this opposition. In the process, she suggests that even if we think of identity as a construct and as positional, feminist theorists must, nevertheless, "risk" some kind of "essentialism" if we are to think of "women" as a political category. She argues for a use of the category of "women" "as a *linguistic* rather than a natural kind." Making use of Locke's theory of "nominal essence," Fuss claims that such a category is "useful for anti-essentialist feminists who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is 'nature' which categorizes them as such" (5). And, while Fuss warns that nominal essence can easily slip into "real essence," she believes that the risk is worth taking, as long as we are clear about the strategies we are using. Those (poststructuralists) who wish to deconstruct Woman, or even "women," to get rid of "essence" at all costs, must be reminded, Fuss tells us, that "the political investments of the sign 'essence' are predicated on the subject's complex positioning in a particular social field, and that the appraisal of this investment depends not on any interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it" (20). In other words, there is no essence of the sign "essence," for, like the sign "woman," it has meaning only in specific contexts. This argument leads Fuss to speculate, daringly, that historically oppressed cultural groups have a stronger investment in

essence than those who have oppressed them (98). Conversely, we could say that those who want to deconstruct any category of “women,” and thus de-mobilize collective action and agency, are those whose power is threatened by that collectivity.¹⁴

Linda Alcoff comes to a similar conclusion in her critique of cultural feminism and poststructuralism as both limiting the way we can think of the category “women.” She proposes a *positional* definition of “woman” that seeks to avoid an essentialist—that is, timeless and unchanging—notion of female identity and experience:

When the concept ‘woman’ is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the *external context within which that person is situated*.... The essentialist definition of woman makes her identity independent of her external situation.... The positional definition, on the other hand, makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on. If it is possible to identify women by their positions within this network of relations, then it becomes possible to *ground* a feminist argument for women, not on a claim that their innate capacities are being stunted, but that their position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change. (433–34, my emphasis)¹⁵

What is valuable in Alcoff’s positional definition of “woman” is that it negotiates between the local and the systemic, between the subjective and the institutional. It enables us to theorize how individual subjects occupy positions of relative power as these positions are constructed within and by institutions and social practices. And, while Alcoff stresses the “external” rather than the “internal,” her definition does not exclude one in favor of the other; rather, she makes room for a conceptualization of “woman” that recognizes how

women's placement in cultural and political systems is produced both internally and externally. She is quick to point out that her "view should not imply that the concept of 'woman' is determined solely by external elements and the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather, she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context to which she has access" (434). In short, Alcoff reinstalls "women" as agents of historical process, as subject to normative representation, as well as subject of self-representation.

The fact that women remain subject to normative representations—of Woman, the feminine, the biologically female—reminds us that such representations continue to exert a great deal of pressure on any attempt to represent women as the subjects of feminism, or, indeed, as the subjects of any discourse or social practice. As Naomi Schor points out, "whether or not the 'feminine' is a male construct, a product of a phallogentric culture destined to disappear, in the present order of things we cannot afford not to press its claims even as we dismantle the conceptual systems which support it" (*Reading in Detail*, 97). Historically specific representations of Woman, and the prevailing gender ideologies they inscribe and reproduce, have effects on women's self-representation. It is in this sense that Teresa de Lauretis speaks of the "*real* contradiction" enabling feminist analysis of culture's texts: "women continue to become woman" (*Alice Doesn't*, 186). By *real* contradiction, she means to say that the slippages between Woman—a discursive figure most often constructed and mobilized according to the logic of male desire—and women—actual female persons engendered by, and engendering, social and discursive practices—cannot be explained away as an illusion or paradox of discourse. Rather, this contradiction is *real* precisely to the extent that it describes the seemingly impossible position women occupy in relation to the history of Western thought and its representations of history. She writes: "only by knowingly enacting and re-presenting [these contradictions], by knowing us to be both woman and women, does a woman today become a subject" (186).

It is my view that the differences between Woman and women get at the heart of the contradictions that feminist theory is grappling with at the present moment: the general and systematic versus the specific and local; the negativity of critique versus the positivity of transformative politics; unified identity versus situational identities; the sexual difference versus multiplicitous gender differences. Rather than resolve these contradictions, it is necessary to keep them in suspension, to negotiate between their terms in order to theorize how it is that women become subjects. We can now rejoin Simone de Beauvoir's claim, having complicated the subject of becoming woman, and make some claims about the nature of that becoming. Judith Butler suggests that "becoming' a gender is a laborious process of becoming *naturalized*" (70), yet it is more than that. On the one hand, becoming Woman, in de Lauretis's sense, does, indeed, entail becoming naturalized. To become Woman means to place oneself in a position that is sanctioned by, and guarantees, masculinist structures of representation. It also means to accept the prohibition against female subjectivity within these structures, to give up access to the place of enunciation. Woman is *spoken by* discursive and social practices; she does not speak. On the other hand, to become a woman means to de-naturalize gender and its representations. If gender is a "doing," rather than a "being," as Butler elsewhere suggests, then becoming a woman is a process that can resist naturalization, because performances always threaten to exceed representations. To think of gender as "performative" rather than substantive means that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 25). Neither identity nor gender, then, exist prior to their articulation in historically specific, and situational, discursive contexts.

"Women's Writing" and Self-Representation

Thus far, my remarks have concerned feminist theory in general, without reference to the uses to which this theory