

# MONIQUE AND MARX: A TROUBLED SYMBIOSIS OF GENDER AND MATERIALISM

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***Abstract:** The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Like Pascal's circle whose center is everywhere but circumference is nowhere. All minority writers enter into literature obliquely and the text works through fracturing. The movement back and forth between the levels of reality, the conceptual reality and material reality of oppression, which are both social realities, is accomplished through language. It is necessary to comprehend philosophically the concepts of 'subject' and class-consciousness and how they splice in tandem with history. An exploratory paper that critiques the symbiosis of Monique Wittig's 'The Straight Mind' and Karl Marx's, 'The German Ideology'.*

***Keywords:** Materialism, epistemology, gender, language, Ideology*

## 1. Materialising Gender

Linguistics engenders semiology and structural linguistics; structural linguistics engenders structuralism, which engenders the Structural Unconscious. The ensemble of these discourses produces a confusing static for the oppressed, which makes them lose sight of the material cause of their oppression and plunges them into a kind of ahistoric vacuum.

Monique Wittig  
The Straight Mind

An Ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things, which must not be spoken of.

Pierre Machery  
Mapping Ideology

Contradictions always belong to a material order. At the outbreak of a struggle, the intense reality of the oppositions and differences manifest themselves. Formation of a two-pronged dialectic transpires at the breakdown of the so-called 'natural' convictions. Marx and Engels in 'The German Ideology' second this notion of Monique Wittig, as put forth in 'The Straight Mind'. Marx's epochal statements that the overriding material force of the society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force sounds a warning alarm. Placing the concept of materialism with gender leads to troublesome and yet meaningful connections. Heterosexual society breeds on the 'heterosexualised' women like animals. A materialist feminist approach to women's oppression disavows this naturalization, which is biological as well as historical.

Delving into the etymology, feminist is formed with the word '*femme*' meaning a woman: someone who fights for women. One chooses to use this word although it retains least ambiguity to affirm that the feminist movement had a history and to emphasize the political link with the old feminist movement. In conjunction to define oppression in materialist terms is the evidence that women are a class, a political and economic category, not eternal ones. As mentioned the

opposing strand of the philosophy of materialism, which believes that nothing exists except matter, shall be intertwined as it shares an unsettled relative.

### 1.1 Queer Cognitive Subjectivity

Moving on from feminism to those that exist beyond the heterosexual society limits. Lesbians (and nuns) escape the norms of the society because of their minimal inter-connectedness with it and are able to move forward laterally. One feature of lesbian oppression consists of women being out of reach as they are supposed to belong to men. Thus a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society. However as Andrea Dworkin emphasizes, many lesbians recently “have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential” (Jeffreys, 1993). For lesbian and gay avant-garde theory, resistance is a matter of claiming an eroticized, desiring, ambivalent identity as queer; Wittig however, understands resistance as “cognitive subjectivity”. One becomes a cognitive subject by reevaluating the social world from the point of view of the oppressed, a way of understanding reality that has to be undertaken by everyone of us. Wittig’s concept of “subjective cognitive practice” is not a counter-discourse, a stance of refusal or of acting up. It is a disidentifying consciousness that works on the subject in language as it is shaped by multiple forces—the appropriation of one’s labour, for instance, or domination by more powerful others. Wittig calls this disidentifying subject “lesbian”. Although Wittig’s comments on the lesbian are often ambiguous, her thinking does consistently reiterate that “lesbian” is not a transcendental subject, a subject of same-sex desire or erotic pleasures. “Lesbian”, she writes, is “the only concept I know of that is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically or ideologically”. To be lesbian, then, is to refuse these aforementioned privileges.

Lesbian is the only society to have abolished ‘sexage’; the oppression of women and it is from this perspective that Wittig writes. Hence the terms ‘lesbian writing’ and ‘political writing’ describe Wittig’s practice, since they express a consciousness of the subversion inherent in a culture that abolishes the androcentric structure of sexual difference. While insisting that ‘woman’ is a political class rather than a biological entity, Wittig is conscious of the importance of the female body in the development of feminist awareness. Unlike proponents of ‘woman’s writing’, she never uses the body as a metaphor for the act of writing. Indeed one of the primary tasks of ‘lesbian writing’ is to strip the female body of its heavy burden of metaphor and imagery imposed by male culture and to trace the steps necessary to restore the body intact to women. Wittig’s negation that “Lesbians are not women” has had a mixed bag of reactions and welcomed more so from the non-academic circles. As is the case with any thought that shakes the notions of pre-existing compartmentalization and here, in this case those formed by a heterosexual society. Her comments have been considered incendiary as sex wars have been equally wars for identity and it is necessary to ‘*Reason Before Identity*’ the way enumerated by Amartya Sen in his landmark essay (Sen, 1998). Despite the threats Wittig’s view poses, it resonates with the dreams, hopes, longings and visions of those lesbians who have resisted the heterosexualising, feminizing and womanizing pressures of the dominant culture and of some feminist subcultures as well. The more holistic view of this entire gamut of arguments would be that gender ought to be consensual and ‘performative’ as is insinuated in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990). We would do well to have both the strategies of gender proliferation and feminist redefinition and revaluation of womanhood operating at the same time. It is essential to take into consideration their writings as it represents their essence and sometimes subverts it.

## 2. Writing the Minority

Feminine writing amounts to say (in a heterosexual society) that women are an outcast to history and their writing does not produce any material results. It is docketed with analogous worth as household arts and cooking. Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Nathalie Sarraute (Barbour, 1993) says that she cannot use the feminine gender when she wants to generalize what she is writing about. Wittig employs the universal to deconstruct the feminine. Instead, to quote Luce Irigaray from *'Speculum of the Other Woman'*, that the "feminine" is the "hole in men's signifying economy," the "lack" that "might cause the ultimate destruction, the splintering, the break in their systems of 'presence', 're-presentation' and 'representation' (Irigaray, 1985). Many French feminists such as Colette Guillaumin, Monique Plaza, Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig have been neglected and their critical concern is to point out how political questions of social and economic inequality are eclipsed in French feminist discourse by the overriding obsession with writing the feminine which is incorporated in minority writings.

The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space is described as being like Pascal's circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere (Shea, 2003). This explains with ease the work of Djuna Barnes (Warren, 2008). For her the text works through fracturing, also called an out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye-perception. Each word shares a relationship of estrangement with each other. This becomes the reason why all minority writers who are conscious of their identity enter into literature obliquely. Gender works upon the ontological fact of equal access to subjectivity through language to annul it as far as women are concerned and corresponds to a constant attempt to strip them of their subjectivity. Gender is not a grammatical but a sociological, political and material category of language.

### 2.1 Language as Consciousness

Language exists as the commonplace where one can revel freely. Language exists as a paradise made of visible, audible, palpable, palatable words.

*When the clash of words colliding with one another downs their meaning...when, rubbed together, they produce a shower of sparks which conceals it...when the meaning of each word is reduced to a tiny kernel surrounded by vast, misty spaces...when it is hidden under the play of reflections, of reverberations, of scintillations...when words are surrounded by a halo and seem to float, suspended at a distance from one another...when they settle into us one by one, embed themselves, slowly imbibe our most obscure substance, fill our every nook and cranny, dilate, spread to our measure, beyond our measure, beyond all measure?*  
(Witting, 1992: 94)

Wittig's critique of heterosexuality is formulated out of her critical engagement with both Marxism and feminism. She appropriates Marxism's materialist problematic in order to recast liberal feminism's individualist politics, but at the same time she pressures Marxism's inability to address the formation of subjectivities and women's oppression. For Wittig, because orthodox Marxism was unable to treat the problem of the subject, it actually helped to prevent all categories of the oppressed, including women, from constituting themselves as agents of social struggle. Raymond Williams challenges such formulations of Marx's system (Williams, 1977). He does so by claiming, and rightly so, that 'culture' should always be understood through its own necessary materiality; literary products in all their variety are to be understood as productions, rather than as expressions. Furthermore, and fundamentally, language, the medium through which 'literature' is produced, is also the chief means through which people understand and interpret for themselves

the world they have made through production; it is through language that people make themselves as conscious of themselves. Therefore, language is not a given structure as seen in Saussure (Holdcroft, 1991) and is not determining, and is not a mere reflection of material production. Language is an activity, a series of acts of production, practical consciousness as in Marx and Volosinov (Volosinov, 1973). Accordingly Williams says, language and its productions, as literature ought properly to be placed within the forces of production, within the mode of production, within the base. Then, because literature is produced, the arena in which it is produced within the mode of production must be deemed to be just as determining as any other arena. Clearly such a location for literary production cuts across the dualism base/superstructure. The conclusion is equally transparent; literary production, literature as well as language must be thought of as determining the society.

### **3. Inter-relatedness of Society and Economy**

According to Althusser, the ‘epistemological break’ (Badiou, 2007) was established in *The German Ideology* and marked the introduction of Marxist science proper. In one stroke, Marx founded a new science, historical materialism and in his text employs an analysis of the impersonal relations between the structures of economy and society. From the two apparently distinct languages that exist in the text first are of individuals and consciousness and the second language is of established economic and social structures. The end of dependence upon productive forces, social forms are opened for human definition, the individual is free to complete the dialectic of self-identity in a practical manner. It is self-activity and not the division of labour that allows the individual to develop in any way and in as many forms as he or she desires.

Broadly speaking according to Himani Bannerji’s article ‘Building from Marx: Reflections on Class and Race’ (Bannerji, 2005) class becomes an overarching economic category, gender/patriarchy a social one, while race, caste or ethnicity are categories of the cultural. The actual realization process of capital cannot be given a social and cultural form or mode. There is no capital that is a universal abstraction. Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations and a cultural one at that. Thus race, gender and patriarchy are inseparable from class, as any social organization rests on inter-subjective relations of bodies and minds marked with socially constructed difference on the terrain of private property and capital.

The mode of production as Marx puts it in *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1972) is not “linearly, causally organized.” By employing the notion of mediation, between social relations and forms of consciousness, both practical and ideological, he shows how an entire communicative and expressive social ensemble must obtain for any specific economy and polity to operate and be effective. Seen thus socially, class cannot be genderless or cultureless, or culture genderless and classless. We can identify race and gender/patriarchy with the so-called extra-economic or cultural/discursive, but nonetheless social, moments of the overall mode of capitalist production that has its own social ontology. Therefore, as modes of mediation, gender or race help to produce the constant devaluation of certain social groups’ embodiment and labour power, and create a ‘colour coded’ cultural commonsense for the state and the society as a whole.

### **4. Ideological Imperative**

Ideological forms masquerade as knowledge. They simply produce discursivities, incorporating bits of decontextualized ideas, events, or experiences with material consciousness of a practical kind. The modus operandi of this ruling knowledge relies on epistemologies that create essentialization, homogenization and an aspatial and atemporal universalization. Since the most

powerful trick of ideology is to sever a concept from its originating and mediating social relations, used in such a way even critical and resisting concepts, such as class or the feminist category of woman, can become occlusive and serve the interest of ruling relations through exclusion and invisibility of power in relations of difference. Struggles that have riven the world of feminist theory reveal that the category of women in its desocialised(class/race) and dehistoricized (colonialism/imperialism) deployment has helped to smuggle in the political agenda of middle-class, white women and hidden the relationship of dominance that some social groups of women hold with regard with others. Thus the issue of gender has become mainly identified with liberal politics, with those of rights and citizenship, not of socialist struggles. According to Bannerji, identitarian politics is not to be feared by the Marxists as Marx' works can create social movements that need not choose between culture, economy and society or race, class and gender to organize politics of social revolution. Marxists have recourse to a non-fragmentary understanding of the social that could change the World, as we know it.

The task at hand remains to be historically defining the individual subject in materialist terms although they are both mutually exclusive. It is true that individual problems are social and class problems at large and that the subjectivity of each woman shall be under scrutiny. Wittig suggests that we destroy all the categories of sex. Lesbianism according to her provides the only social form in which one can live freely, as women on the contrary occupy a position of servitude to men in a heterosexual society. Settling the matter politically and economically would lead to multidirectional arrows. Philosophically one can take recourse to the process of abstraction. In the abstract, mankind, man is everybody- the Other, whatever its kind is included. For abstractly, in the order of reasoning, in the order of potentiality and possibility, in philosophy, the Other cannot essentially be different from the One, it is the Same, along the lines of what Voltaire calls the sameness (Kenshur, 1993). Rebuffing the Thought of the Other or Thought of Difference should be possible. All that should matter should be, about being 'Different' and proud of being so.

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