Volume 2 Issue 3
December 2015

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES ISSN 2356-5926

Dissociation of Women from Their Selves: Speech Designated as Sophrosyne

Arsev Ayşen Arslanoğlu Yıldıran
Artvin Çoruh University, Artvin, Turkey

Abstract

Since the ancient Greeks, sound production has been considered to be associated with the quality of voice and the use of voice under a general rubric of gender. Female voice has often been thought as an example of deviance from self-control; therefore, a pseudo need for putting a "door on the female mouth" has been constructed by the patriarchal culture. Masculinity in this culture defines itself by its different use of sound, namely the masculine virtue of sophrosyne or self-control. In this understanding, female virtue is coextensive with female obedience to male and the dissociation of women from their own emotions. Silence is seen to be the realm of women, which results in the construction of "otherness" of women's language, since they are considered to lack the ability to control their speech. Under this condition, female words become some kind of lack of words and require to be channeled into rational discourse that belongs to men. In her essay "The Gender of Sound", Anne Carson examines how our presumptions about gender affect the way we hear sounds and raises the question if "there might not be another idea of human order than repression. Related to and as an extension of this question, it will be questioned if it may become possible to construct narrative in the feminine in this paper. For this purpose, it will be focused on Carson's "The Glass Essay" and the question if there is another human essence of self within the context of her views on this subject.

Keywords: gender, gender identity, gendered sounds, musculinity, femininity, Sophrosyne.

Since the ancient Greeks, sound production is evaluated through two elements: use of voice and quality of voice. Interestingly, these elements have also been considered sufficient to distinguish rational from irrational, logos from feeling. These two elements have a determining role in assigning reason to male and feeling to female because female voice and all that belong to female are seen to be deviance that should be kept under control. This stance requires two sides: one to control and the other to be controlled. Since it is male who has the capacity of self-control, he is the one to control female. Accepted as a being unable to control what she says, female may cause some leakages by saying things that should not exist or should not be expressed even if they exist; hence, it becomes a necessity to put a door on the female mouth in patriarchal society: "Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death (Carson "The Gender of Sound, 121). As an extension of this argumentation, the dichotomies such as male/female, rational discourse/irrational discourse, subject/object, active/passive just to name a few are constructed. My aim is to discuss the impasses of this approach and to argue that there may be another idea of human order which is not based on binary thought and which does not privilege either male or female. For this purpose, I will examine Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay" within the framework of her another essay "The Gender of Sound" with a look at contemporary discussions which attempt at avoiding the shortcomings of binary thought specifically within the psychoanalytic field.

The conception of the feminine as the negative of the masculine lies behind the binary thought. The basic misunderstanding stemming from such a conception is the equation of the feminine to otherness. The feminine, who is supposed to belong to the category of absence, void and negativity, lacks the right for speech, which is a presence in itself. If the feminine is in the realm of absence and silence, them how can we conceptualize it? Besides this major question, how can we formulate female subjectivity if such a formulation is possible? Then, if we can avoid the dichotomies that dominate the culture of the masculine and the feminine, how can we construct another understanding or is it really necessary to replace one thought by another? If silence is the cosmos [good order] of women, how can we place women in the cosmos of the masculine or of logos considered to belong to the masculine?

At this point, I suggest using the theory of complexity the paradigm of which is defined by Edgar Morin (1986). What is stunning about the theory of complexity is that it provides new methods of searching for knowledge which can involve the complexity of the real. It is neither absolute nor totalizing; thus, it always includes uncertainty. Being multi-centered and plural, it rejects one focal explanation and existing binary thought. In her book Deconstructing the Feminine: Psychoanalysis, Gender and Complexity, Glocer Leticia explains the basic logic behind the theory of complexity:

> The logic of complexity is not the simple, indifferent acceptance of a multiplicity of elements, but the way to make them work together, in collaboration and conflict at the same time. It means sustaining critical judgment as a way of maintaining the tensions and contradictions without eliminating any of their terms. (8)

Leticia continues her argument by taking attention to the points that "this logic is different from the coexistence of thing representations in the unconscious, where opposites are treated as identical, and representations coexist acritically (Freud, 1938)" (8). Depending on this idea, I will discuss if it may be possible to apply it to the psychoanalytic theories.

When Freudian theory is reviewed, it is seen that there is no primary femininity and the sexual theories are based on the opposition between the phallic and the castrated. Freudian theory argues that children conceive of one genital—phallus—so it sees the girls sexuality as primarily masculine (Freud "The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality, 141-145). When one turns her attention to another prominent figure, Jacques Lacan, she sees the claim that Freud could not make a formulation on the issue for historical reasons, but there is a cohesive framework and also development can be achieved by linguistic science. In the Freud that Lacan uses, neither the unconscious nor the sexuality can be pre-given facts, they are constructions. Juliet Mitchell summarizes how Lacan sees the project of psychoanalysis in her "Introduction" to Feminine Sexuality: "… psychoanalysis should not subscribe to ideas about how men or women do or should live as sexually differentiated beings, but instead it should analyze how they come to be such beings" (Lacan 3). Such an analysis requires that psychoanalysis traces the history of human subject in its generality (human history) and its particularity (specific human life). In her "Introduction" to *Feminine Sexuality*, Jacqueline Rose explains how and why Lacan's account of subjectivity is always developed by reference to the idea of fiction and construction: "For Lacan, the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic processes and history, and simultaneously reveals the fictional nature of the sexual category to which every human subject is none the less assigned" (30).

Here, what is significant for us is the idea of fiction since it supports the claim that femininity and masculinity are indeed constructions that can be used to create a mental space of uncertainty to be explored. The exploration of uncertainty requires working through pre-historic, forgotten and wordless. Then comes the question: How can women explore the construction of femininity if they are prohibited from speech? The construction of femininity is made possible by language but it has been believed since the ancient Greeks that silence is the cosmos [good order] of women because what should be avoided is the female voice but why is it so bad to hear? Anne Carson takes attention to that female voice expresses nothing other than its own sound: "These words [a particular kind of shriek] do not signify anything except their own sound. To utter such cries is a specialized female function" ("The Gender of Sound" 125). This shows us that females are incapable of hiding what should be kept secret; in other words, their speech is far from rational discourse or logos (rationally articulated speech which differentiates male from female. Anne Carson's description on the issue shows how effective and determining this condition is in the patriarchal society: "Woman is that creature who puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females expose and expand what should be kept in. Females blurt out a direct translation of what should be formulated indirectly" ("The Gender of Sound" 129).

It is an expected but interesting situation how the axioms of ancient medical theories comform to this point of view. According to these axioms, a woman has two mouths—upper mouth

that utters inarticulated speech and lower mouth which is incapable of controlling ejaculation. As it is seen, both mouths are considered to lack continence or self-control (sophrosyne). It is the major task of the patriarchal culture to remove woman's incontinence. Not only ancient medical theories undertook this task; psychoanalysis, at the beginning, tried to achieve the same task through hypnosis:

> Freud and Breud find themselves able to drain off this pollution by inducing the women under hypnosis to speak unspeakable things. Hypnotized women produce some remarkable sounds. […] But all are eventually channeled by the psychoanalyst into connected narrative and rational exegesis of their hysteric symptoms. Whereupon, both Freud and Breur claim, their symptoms disappear—cleansed by the simple kathartic ritual of draining off the bad sound of unspeakable things. ("The Gender of Sound" 134)

Anne Carson resembles the patriarchal society to a well-intentioned psychoanalyst to conceive its responsibility as the channeling of unspeakable things into appropriate containers. The patriarchal society takes up this responsibility to such a degree that even women themselves spend effort to provide the continuity of the system. In "The Glass Essay", the narrator's observation on her mother shows the reader the interiorized patriarchal view: "She never liked Law much/ but she liked the idea of me having a man and getting on with life" (3). Now it can be asked how feminine position can be defined when even women seem to accept the present order? Can it be talked about female subjectivity in collision? Another significant passage shows the power of this collision. Here what collide and the narrator's and her mother's views:

> You are saying women deserve to get raped
> because Sears bathing suit ads
> have high-cut legs? Ma, are you serious.
> Well someone has to be responsible.
> Why should women be responsible for male desire? My voice is high.
> Oh, I see you are one of Them
> One of Whom? My voice is very high. Mother vaults it. (22-23)

Female subjectivity is generally categorized as impossible to represent or is excluded from the symbolic. If one does not avoid the tautological understanding of the feminine, then it becomes a must to de-center and de-construct it. But this is not an easy task because the problem of avoiding the reduction that feminine can be represented by one certain dichotomy should be solved. What should first be taken into consideration is the relation among female, language and desire: "Language always "belongs" to another person. The human subject is created by a general law that comes to it from outside itself and through the speech of other people, though this speech in its turn must relate to the general Law" (Mitchell 5). It is worth mentioning here that the narrator's lover in "The Glass Essay" is called Law. The essay as Anne Carson names it or the prose-poem as we may categorize not only shows the narrator's relation with Law, which is about to end, but also her relation with the-general-law since woman's relation to patriarchal society is paradoxical: On the one hand, she wants to set free; on the other hand, she does not want to leave the safe shore. The narrator's evaluation of her relation which is over can well be used to exemplify this paradox: "When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die/This is not uncommon" (The Glass Essay 8).

These lines can also be examined from a Lacanian perspective since Lacan states desire and sexual desire can only exist by virtue of its alienation within language.
Jacqueline Rose mentions that "[t]he "I" with which we speak stands for our identity as subjects in language" (31) so the subject is indeed the subject of speech. When it is considered from this point of view, it is seen that there is a symbolic universe determined long ago. The major problem is how the subject can insert herself into this universe to become a subject. Since the beginning, pre-discourse and an incipient core of symbolization are said to coexist. The presence of one symbolic law in the framework of processes which produce subjectivity has long been examined. While Juliet Mitchell focuses on Sigmund Freud's views on this issue ("To Freud, if psychoanalysis is phallocentric, it is because human order is patrocentric", 25), Jacqueline Rose takes one step further and shows how all are related to language ("Language can only operate by designating an object in its absence. Lacan takes this further, and states that symbolization turns on the object as absence", 32). I will relate Anne Carson's exploration of female passivity to the concept of desire, which is closely associated with the binary opposition, presence vs. absence. So far I have attempted at developing my discussion in a way that will explain the relation among feminine, language and desire within the patriarchal society; from this point on, I will specifically focus on the Lacanian concept of desire.

As I have already mentioned, the subject is the subject of speech and thus subject to that order in the Lacanian thought. Language can only designate an object in its absence; that is, the signifier refers to an object but we do not know what it refers is actually present or not because the object itself is not there. Therefore, symbolization turns on the object as absence. Lacan claims that "language speaks the loss which lay behind that first moment of symbolization" (32). Before relating it to the problem of representing female desire, I would like to focus on what Lacan means by "desire". Jacqueline Rose gives us a brief definition in her introduction to Feminine Sexualiy:
Demand always "bears on something other than the satisfaction which it calls for" (MP, p.80), and each time the demand of the child is answered by the satisfaction of its needs, so "this something other" is relegated to the place of original impossibility. Lacan terms this "desire". It can be defined as the "remainder" of the subject, something which is left over, but which has no content as such. Desire functions much as the zero unit in the numerical chain—its place is both constitutive and empty. (32) When we review what we have said so far, we see that female, who is identified with silence, absence and passivity may well be evaluated as the object of desire because she is the one left over but is there really anything left over or does the feminine offer, like an oxymoron, representation of something that cannot be represented?

Here the key point is that feminine is always considered as a problem of the limits, which "dissemble and deconstruct unifying concepts by questioning certainties, absolute knowledge, rejection of diversity" (Leticia 50). Limits also involve the speech of the excluded and the inexpressible. Other is rooted in a configuration of the social discourse where "other" is women; on the other hand, the other is the archaic in the construction of subjectivity and the subject becomes identical to a "woman", thus "other" when he loses sophrosyne. In "The Glass Essay", the narrator's father suffers from a kind of dementia, which has no known cause or cure. The tall, proud father, who was a second world war navigator, has turned into a person who uses "a language known only to himself made of snarls and syllables and wild appeals" (26). His condition reminds

us the position of female whose speech lacks sophrosyne or self-control. He is "degraded" to the position of a woman in other terms. The hospital wing where he stays is for chronic patients. While the hospital workers call it "the golden wing", the narrator's mother calls it "the last trap". It is worth noting that what becomes the last trap for men when they lose sophrosyne is a chronic trap for women in the man's world.

As "other", feminine is a dark continent; by othering feminine, a realm of mystery is created and strengthened by arguments on otherness. While considered something to avoid, feminine is paradoxically the object of desire. Yet, the field of desire results in woman's encounter with certain pitfalls due to its transgressive character: it is based on lack and presence at the same time. The only conversation between the narrator and Law, which is given to us, seems to reflect this paradox:

> I don't want to be sexual with you, he said. Everything gets crazy.
> But now he was looking at me.
> Yes, I said as I began to remove my clothes.
> Everything gets crazy. When nude
> I turned my back because he likes the back
> He moved onto me. (11)

This is the last time they meet and it is a black September night. The night is like a dark continent where presence and absence, wish and refusal conflict each other. At a first glance, the concept of desire is considered negative because it is based on absence, lack and refusal. However, at a deeper analysis, a generative understanding may be developed if desire is seen productive. This may help us express singularities in the field of subjectivity without being restricted by strict gender assignments. In her book Eros the Bittersweet, Anne Carson points to the contradictory character of desire: "All our desires are contradictory, like the desire for food I want the person I love to love me. If he is, however, totally devoted to me he does not exist any longer and I cease to love him. And as long as he is not totally devoted to me he does not love me enough" (10). Maya Linden observes that "for Carson's women, sexual desire and self-destruction are presented akin to an addiction of 'pure contradiction'. As in almost all of her texts, "the woman is emotionally wounded by the man upon whose beauty and sexual intensity she is masochistically fixated" (230). The narrator's relation with Law is no exception. Her fantasies after the ended relation are female nudes in disturbing states of annihilation. It is as if war and love, annihilation and presence are side by side not only in these fantasies but in actual people as well. At the end of "The Glass Essay", the narrator sees a human body:

> It was not my body, it was the body of us all.
> It walked out of light. (38)

And we can rewrite the same lines as "it was not one specific female subjectivity in collision; it is the subjectivities of us all—be it female or male". These lines can either be read in a reductive or in a generative way. For a generative reading, we should redefine how desire is understood: "Absence must be constituted. This means that the relation with the object is complex: it is invested and lost at the same time. […] There is a disparity between an infinite demand and its necessarily and temporary satisfaction" (Leticia 103). How can we reach a positive result in such a complex

condition? What will help us is the fact that the conception of desire, which is not based on lack, does not exclude the existing dichotomies but offers new perspectives on the issue; and this is exactly the point that gives us chance to apply the theory of complexity.

As the theory of complexity "sustains non-synthesizing connections between two contradictory terms and thus proposes to sustain contradictions rather than overcome them" (Leticia 8), we can get complex and plural constructions out of these dichotomies. The critical question is how to relate these constructions to the symbolic thought or whether access to a symbolic universe becomes synonymous with access to universal subjection to phallic order if we do so. In order to avoid such an equality, we should reexamine and go beyond the description and justification of the relation between the symbolic order and the phallic order. If we cannot achieve doing so, the-general-law-of-the-father becomes universal and women are placed outside the symbolic. Glocer Leticia mentions "desire in production, with its potential for generating difference, functions in relations of liasion and opposition with the equating conception of desire. And it enables us to think other ways to develop this concept in the field of the feminine" (106). What I question is whether desire in production may sustain a universal conception of women and if the process of access to subjectivity requires thinking through singularities and diversities. My thought exercise still continues since the contradictory character of the the conception of desire makes it hard to answer them all at once. But my conclusion for now is that we do not have to choose one pattern and privilege it over the others to get quick answers. Let the questions float over the water and let us continue thinking on them!

References

-Carson, Anne. Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

___."The Gender of Sound". Glass, Irony and God. New York: New Directions, 1995. 119-139.

___. "The Glass Essay". Glass, Irony and God. New York: New Directions, 1995, 1-38.

-Freud, Sigmund. "The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality". London: Standard Edition, 19, 141– 145.

-Lacan, Jacques. Feminine Sexuality. Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. Tr. Jacqueline Rose. New York: W.W.Norton and Pantheon Books, 1985.

-Leticia, Glocer. Deconstructing the Feminine : Psychoanalysis, Gender and Theories of Complexity. London, GBR: Karnac Books, 2007

-Linden, Maya. "Metaphors of War: Desire, Danger and Ambivalence in Anne Carson's Poetic Form". Women's Studies. 2014:43, 230-245.