

**Beyond Semiotics:
A Re/Conceptualization of Literary Theories for Critical Gender**

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Abstract

This research attempts to re-examine specific linguistic and literary theories and relate them to the understanding of the question of gender and feminism with concrete allusion to semantics, semiotics, and interpretations as hermeneutics. The essence of this is to underscore feminist

critical discourses and criticism so that the trajectory of gender and social themes in post-colonial Africa could be further re-evaluated. Feminist literary criticism is significant because it is rooted in the 1960's women's movement although women's struggle was in existence prior to this time. The women's movement – which began as a western phenomenon - also wanted to redefine the role of women in society and to create conditions for equality in both the public and the private spheres. Lawler (2014: 18) views feminism and identity as contemporary concepts that are very important in society and aligns herself with Barry (1995) when she indicates that the women's movement cannot be said to be the start of feminism; rather, it renews an old tradition of thought and actions which were imminent in the classic books which explain the inequality in society. She continues that the way people self-identify reveals a lot about human society and challenges the concepts of gender and identity suggesting, like Butler, that they are socially constructed, potentially mobile, and not essential. The article suggests that since they are socially constructed conceptions, they emerge and are formulated within the cogent framework of social relationships in literature.

Keywords: Literary Theories, Linguistics, Gender, Identity Representation, Feminism and African Literature

Introduction

This article valorises the exploration of trends in feminism and gender discourse in two segments. The first segment is divided into five movements. The first movement focuses on Ferdinand de Saussure's work in *Course in General Linguistics* and examines how language and elements of signs contribute to the configuration of feminist theory and interpretation. The second movement encapsulates how Foucault delineates the concept of suppressed sexuality, illusion, and the subject of individuality in the understanding of feminism. The third movement reviews Kristeva's paradigm shift from materialist assumptions to the human sciences of the sign and how semiotics helps in the understanding of feminism. The fourth movement looks at Derrida's deconstruction and the implication of the metaphysics of presence for the understanding of feminism. It is very important to note that, though feminism has many dimensions which would be critically analysed in the light of equality of the sexes in literature and society. The fifth movement, which is the last movement, is an evaluation of Butler's

challenges to the sex/gender classification with various analyses in the application of the theory of gender performativity in feminism. Related works of critics further explain the projections of these movements in the understanding of feminism and the question of gender. The second segment examines sexuality and feminism in literature with special focus on Black feminism, African feminism, womanism and motherism, with the application of Butler's theory of performativity. Saussure and the Relationships of the Signs in critical analysis.

Language, Saussure, and Critical Inter/relationships.

Language is very cogent in the understanding of societal teleology. Saussure delineates a 'synchronic' study and 'diachronic' study of language: the former pays attention to the underlying system of language; it studies it as at a particular time of its existence, while the latter underscores the importance of studying language over a period. From both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, The interrelation here according to Cobley emphasises the importance of the interpretant because there is now an agreed concept to be followed in the inter-relationship of all these. In addition, whenever any speech community increases its collective and conventional semiotic application, the interactions within these three signs could help in the understanding of feminist theory and its interpretation. To Saussure and Pierce, these representamen, semiotic object and interpretant depend on the relationship which exists between the signified and the signifier and the motivation or interrelation which bring them together. To Saussure, signs have no intrinsic or positive value that is, meaning is derived through relationships with other signs. There are two types of significations which Saussure tries to explain: the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. Syntagmatic relationship occurs at the horizontal level when meaning unfolds in a linear manner (Saussure 1959: 9). For paradigmatic approach, there is a vertical expression that expresses a set of signs which could be substituted for a particular sign that is absent and other signs in the same category (p. 74). Related examples are seen in the similarities of meanings in any given situation.

Levi Strauss uses Saussure's linguistic structuralism to delineate the understanding of feminism, gender, and identity through linguistic principles as principle of polarity and homology used by Levi-Strauss could demonstrate that the notion of thoughts emerging from the sign were

universally accepted as a rule of signification. Sawicki opines that these principles, according to Barthes, are necessary in the appreciation and in the interpretation of human culture (Sawicki 2012: 10). In the context, sexual repression is referred to as 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault 1976: 13). Foucault uses his hypothesis to contradict the notion that society is repressed sexually and restricts discussions and actions on it. To him, this is an illusion though experts have started examining the scientific application of sexuality to the contemporary society; they classify different types of sexuality and encourage them to begin to confess their sexual feelings and actions to bring the 'truth' and 'sex' to the limelight (p.14).

In addition, *The History of Sexuality* presents Foucault's positions about individuality, identity, and sexuality. Among the things which suppressed sexuality were capitalism and industrialisation which allowed for the emergence and growth of the bourgeois class who controls the means of distribution and production in a state. Although Foucault bases the will on the functionality of sexuality in the last two centuries, other phenomena is based on *the role of sex in Greek and Roman* periods of civilization. The other works of Foucault depict the application of 'technology' and 'hypomnema' as a note or a copy in establishing 'a permanent relationship to' technology and oneself (Foucault 1976: 33, Hartsock 1990: 11, Papadelos 2006: 17). In furtherance to the repressed society, Foucault notes that the 1970's had been an explosion in the discussion of sex with an exploration of 'authorized vocabulary' that defines how someone could talk about the issue of sex, with whom discussions are structured (Foucault 1976: 36). To Foucault (1986) the body and sexuality are embodiments of social constructs.

Sexuality as a vehicle of human expression.

Foucault's perception on the body and sexuality directs further enquiry into the knowledge of 'sexuality and sexualised bodies' (Foucault 1986: 23). Sexuality to him is the means through which power is enhanced, focused, channelled and power on the other hand is a creative force which explains the fundamental relationship between the state, institutions, organisations and the people. Likewise, the bourgeois society predominantly controlled by the male extends their power control over the body and the mind. To Foucault, power is neither 'repressive nor regressive' (1986: 17). It is a means by which the power broker enforces propaganda and

survival in the state. Even when the bourgeois represses sexual instincts, it is done to further the cause of exploitation and sexual health (p.18). In modern dimension, Olliver et al (2024: 2-6) propounded the notion that postpartum period in women is excessively informed by the conflagration of power relations in contemporary society. The analysis here further culminated in their submission that the image of women's body is critiqued in relations to sexuality, identity and semiotic discoveries of interpretations.

According to Bartky (1988: 12) and Samuels (2014: 11) Foucault identifies 'four centres of power to sex'. These centres denote 'hysterization of the woman's bodies' which leads to the notion that the female bodies are highly sexual, a means of reproduction and a legitimate subject of state control. The next is the projection of children as sexual creatures which he refers to as 'the pedagogization of children's sex' (Foucault, 1990: 144). Consequently, there is a need to monitor and control the sexuality of the children. The third one is that of 'socialization of procreative behaviour' which conceptualises production as a significant and important factor entailing the need for non 'procreative sex' (p.146). The fourth submission centres on the need to study sex as a medical and psychological phenomenon.

The debate is precisely about what comes first essence or existence, what women might be essentially (some feminists do argue for 'a kind of' essentialism) or what they become through their existence. The latter feminists 'fall into the' social constructivist camp (p.148). Foucault's analysis of the relations between power and the body has been embraced by some feminists; however, for other feminists, though the analysis promotes women's political autonomy it has limitations in terms of women's agency. These critics draw attention to Foucault's reductionism which reduces 'social agents' to mere 'docile bodies'(p.149).

The Depiction of Sex and 'Sexualities'

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's description of the issues of sex and sexuality becomes significant political concepts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because he connects 'the spread of bio-power' (Foucault 1980: 96) to the social science which examines discourses on sex and sexuality which were at the centre of discussions. His discussions attempt to understand sex as a biological and psychic drive with reference to identity and to the sexual and social behaviour

of the people. It has a psychological effect on the individual and the behaviour of such persons. Consequently, Foucault argues that the behaviour of individuals in a modern society is controlled by the 'standard of normalcy' (p. 97) which is brought about when critically assessed by psychology and other factors. He did not see the individual as a 'nucleus' or as isolated entity but as integral or part of the discourses. What this means is that the individual?

Foucault makes a differentiation between the 'natural sex' and gender that is culturally constructed. Some feminist critics have constructively argued these positions raised by Foucault. These critics include Elizabeth Grosz, Kate Soper, McNay, Sandra Bartky and a host of others who show various explanations with regards to power, femininity, and gender and his anti-naturalistic views. To Elizabeth Grosz, Foucault's 'corporeal reality of the body' (Foucault, 2013: 513) is because of the social and historical fundamentals. This means that Foucault fails to explain the sexual differences but capitalizes his views on the relationship between sexuality of the body and the social power, though his contributions facilitate the feminist debate, and it advances the question of gender and the attendant reactions from critics (Grosz 1994: 2). She sees Foucault's position as anti-naturalistic because it abandons the place of the natural body which has some effects on the cultural construction in society. To McNay (1994) Foucault tries to relate the body to power and sexuality so that it could be liberated from the control of power (1994: 9). She observes that Foucault's perspective on feminism explores a certain social control over women's experience in contemporary society (p. 12).

However, Bartky appropriates the subject of the women's body practices, such as body regimes, exercise, and dieting. To her, this is a stereotype developed by a chauvinist desire to reduce women and relegate them to a mere practice. However, this situation promotes a drastic disempowerment of women in contemporary society, and she summarily calls it a 'patriarchal construction of the female body' (Bartky, 1988: 76). Likewise, Bardo views Foucault as linking the fundamentals 'of power to' the social control of women. This linkage to her is referred to as 'a stark illustration'. She further opines that disciplinary technology is naturally the main form of social control because it controls the body and gesture activities which make individuals responsible for their own actions (p. 77). Accordingly, Hartsock (1990) traces Foucault's reductionism and his inability to develop a resistance that is adequate. For her She criticises Foucault's feminist perspectives as those that encourage gender-based politics, Butler (1990)

views Foucault's feminist perception as providing for a more detailed understanding of feminism.

The Feminist Vision, Masculinities, and Identities

To Butler, Foucault's feminist vision probes beyond the angles of politics and identity. According to her, 'Foucault's Thus, Butler sees Foucault's feminist's perception as a source of strength in the advanced exploration of the feminist debate because his submissions provide new possibilities in the presentation of the issue of identity and the heterosexual restrictions. Foucault's depiction of identity about the individual helps feminism in the prioritization of the political processes by showing various forms of stereotyping of sexes. The characterization of identity by Foucault does not mean that such is artificial and arbitrary. To Butler, the Foucauldian perspective on the categorization of identity and the construction of power promotes the configuration of diversities which will shed light on the diverse 'understanding of the place of' the individual in the contemporary society.

For Kristeva (2013) there is a paradigm shift in the understanding of feminism, identity and 'genderization' because she visualises a clearer understanding from the perspective of the semiotics coupled with psychoanalysis and a renewal of interest in the maternal body. To her, the adoption of the sign is the parametre of analysis of semiotic activity for the feminist, to the psychoanalyst, and for other post structural study. Though the western world adopts the stoic signs which are basically metaphysical, they are symbols which are transcendental for those signified that are present. She perceives the stoic assumptions as materialistic because it teaches that virtue and the highest good is based on knowledge. This school of thought is developed by Zeno of Citium and Platonic idealism as a doctrine of ideas which argue that truth is an abstraction which is divorced from the cultural world.

Furthermore, the linguistic sign shifts from the materialist assumption to the human sciences, that is, the science of signs which Kristeva views as more relevant in the works of Pierce and Saussure. The science of signs should not be analysed using the core analogues of mathematics and logic; rather there is need for a domestication of signs in the cultural, social, psychological and the political. Saussure shares a similar view in his social application of language to the

contemporary society as opposed to the exploration of language as an abstract phenomenon that has no recourse to human sensibility (Kristeva 2013: 62). Kristeva enforces the diachronic application of the concept to the historical situations giving its dynamic nature which will further explain the social themes, feminine concepts, individual views and the construction of women and relations of sexes in literature. Kristeva's application of concepts and her criticism of Freudian and Lacanian theories indicates the significance of women's literature (p. 62). She challenges Lacan's notion of the sign-system because it does not include a notion of the semiotic which she reads as connected to the maternal body and is operative before the entry into the symbolic order which the patriarchal order does not acknowledge. In addition, she challenges the Saussurean notion that one-to-one meaning is embedded in the signified and in the signifier because meanings associated with some maternal body could be more expanded to constitute more meanings different from the original one.

Kristeva further identifies three types of semiotic approaches which are an 'attempt to logically unify all knowledge, an attempt to find the core codes that drive all systems; and an interrogation of the entire history of the metaphysical concept of the sign' (Kristeva, 2013: 60). The first two approaches transcend the metaphysical, so she calls them 'metasemiology'. Her third approach examines the history of the metaphysical concept of the sign and she calls it 'analytical semiotics or 'semanalysis' (p. 61). These were the three factors which later became the basis of the post-structuralist and the deconstructionist notion of semiotics which feminist writers now weave into their writings representing various contemporary experiences. The semiotic application of various interpretations constitutes a variety of themes in the post-colonial feminist study and in the evaluation of various trends in women's study which include how semiotic realities produce effects in the culture, social, economic and in the political realities of any society. Such realities are embedded in the collective memory of the semiotic signs in our contemporary society rather than in knowledge as an ordinary norm of metaphysics.

While Barthes applies the sign to cultural analysis, Levi-Strauss visualises it within the framework of myths. The configuration of myths as cultural phenomena has proven to the feminist that values are important components of culture in the appreciation of the importance of women and identity studies. In addition, Kristeva attempts to explain the relationship of the sign to the feminist debates by using 'From Women's Time' to asks an interesting question which becomes a major issue. She asks, 'if modernity is the first epoch in human history in which

human beings attempt to live without religion, therefore its present form, is not feminism in the process of becoming one?' (Kristeva, 1981: 223-224). She poses some questions to show that feminism is not in danger of becoming a restricting force that delivers a definite definition of who a 'woman is, what constitutes her level of power, and how she uses her writings as fundamental exposure to channel this demand for difference are always the totality of her experience (p. 222-223). The implication of this is the idea that more information and more development concerning women will be achieved with the use of the sign and semiotics in interpreting events and actions that revolve around the individual.

She continues to explore the ominously religious feminism in Europe and western feminism in Europe by speaking of a third generation of feminist thought. She is not particular about their generational shift but their mental state and interactions which exist in parallel to previous generations. According to her, this third generation of feminists uses the insights found in semiotics to challenge the long-held perception of male superiority (Kristeva, 1981: 222). By doing so, women create their own language and explain their own views thereby creating a new image and identity to explain the instrumental forces of the society the way she perceives it. She proposes a 'socio-symbolic contract' (p. 223) which is an internalised and clear understanding of every person in society. This is what she calls 'demassification' period, this form of internalized analysis of individual will explicitly acknowledge the inherent features in different binaries by which contemporary society overtly functions. By this process, she feels that everybody will be aware of the individual's knowledge and the communal effects of language which forms an acceptable way in society.

Kristeva further conceptualises feminism in the domain of 'the anthropomorphic identity which currently blocks the horizon of the discursive and scientific adventure of our species' (1981: 225); and she views feminism as a drastic shift from 'an ethics that opposes conflict, confusion, and unresolved difference to the concept of aesthetic practices' (p. 226) when new ideas are culturally examined and not biologically examined as also pronounced by Butler (1990: 9 and 2013: 205).

It is expedient to note that Kristeva, being a key figure of French feminism (along with others, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous who have made laudable contributions to the feminist debate) proposes the idea of multiple sexual identities which is contrary to the heterosexual identity that is the precondition for patriarchy and the accepted norm in many

societies. However, she has constantly been misunderstood by some American feminists who argue that she dissects the structure of language to discover hidden meaning. She reacts against that arguing that language should also be examined from the perspective of history, the individual's sexual experiences and his or her psychological disposition as well. Some sources of oppression can still be traced based on the type of language used in the depiction of society. Similarly, Kristeva frowns on the elevation of collective identity over the individual. Hence her submission creates a space of recognition for individualism which preoccupies western feminism today. Consequently, Kristeva poses questions about the place of women, identity, and the individual which have been directed to 'both readers and listeners' who have contributed to the depiction and interpretation in the work of art (Kristeva, 1980: 16).

The Place of Women in Contemporary Society

To better understand the place of women in some contemporary African cultures, the projection of women as second-class citizens has been rejected in extant literatures, societal projections and in masculine misogyny. In *Julius Malema's Thematization (2023)*, South African society is obsessed in creating new metaphors to replace the stereotypic portrayal of women as second fiddle in society (Ogunyemi, 171). The same illusion is exemplified in Zimbabwean locale. In *Representing Gender Violence and Structural Inequalities (2023)*, the dynamics of gender is emphasised to demonstrate the divergence of elaborating discourses on historical and cultural contexts of African women showcasing women's relevance in society (Ogunyemi, 577-578). Similar clarifications were made in *The Instrumentality of Social Media (2023)* when the issues of gender, identity and sexuality in Nigeria unpacks psychological influences, masculinity, and femininity to explain the divergent behavioural dispositions both men and women put up contextually (Ogunyemi, 4). Apparently, to further understand women's reactions, Kristeva goes on to examine similar roles and the place of women in some selected Muslim worlds of Asia and the developing Global South economies. Her *About Chinese Women (1977)* reflects some interactions with Chinese women and how Islam limits women emancipation in Asia. For this work she has been attacked by Ian Almond who refers to her as an 'ethnocentric' feminist scholar who lacks the heave and sophistication in discussing freely an alien culture of which she is not a part. According to Almond, Kristeva's inability to understand the way Islamic women

handle their cultural experience and her writing of *About Chinese Woman* points to two thousand years of culture she is not familiar with (2007: 15). It is obvious that Kristeva dismisses the Muslim or Islamic world as 'reactionary and persecutory' (Almond, 2007: 17) which further elicits an attack from Almond that Kristeva is not aware of the complex debates that are going on in the Islamic world about the place of Islamic woman in contemporary society. More so in Africa, such persecutory reactions have been recorded in songs, movies and in literature.

Similarly, he concludes that while debates are ongoing in the Islamic world about the place of women in society, there are myriads of opportunities and developments which women enjoy in these Islamic worlds as compared to their western counterparts in Europe and America. However, one must not underestimate the fact that Kristeva has underscored the inter-relationships that exist in the application of semiotics to other literary theories by using the sign to bring out more meanings which are relevant to contemporary discourse (p.17).

Kristeva's understanding of the application of the semiotic to interpretation lends credence to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction as a literary theory which questions the philosophical claims to reflexive self-identity in literature.

As he says, deconstruction is not intended to surpass oppositions but is used to produce the necessary values because these oppositions produce values which are logical and axiological in their discourses of the text. This means that deconstruction helps in the proper understanding of texts because it explains the composition and the significance of other structures in the text. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida argues that language is better understood as writing rather than appreciated as mere speech because writing involves words that have contrast effects with one another which produce diverse and contradictory meaning possibilities. To fully substantiate this, Derrida argues that although people sometimes view speech as the main mode of language and the writing as a mere derivation of speech, in fact writing precedes and takes precedence over speech. The configuration of language as a system of signs and the idea that every text embodies a multiplicity of often irreconcilable meanings which produce contradiction makes deconstruction an epistemologically and politically challenging field of study (p.18).

Grosz observes that Derrida's deconstruction is a discipline which is independent of language. It is deeply rooted in history, materiality and textuality and as such, is not affected or influenced by a linguistic framework (Grosz, 2005: 72-73). In fact, he uses the language of philosophy such as 'Being', 'Truth' and 'Reason' to conceptualise his reliance on 'the transcendental signified' in

conjunction with a multiplicity of meanings which pertains to the societal structure which the feminist critics sometimes examine in their works. Benhabib, a feminist critic, argues that Derrida's metaphysics of presence is devoid of evidence (p. 74). This lack of evidence according to her is seen in his application of the Saussurean sign when he argues that such signs have been devaluated because there was no clear dichotomy between writing and speech. Derrida rather views the philosophical implication of the Saussurean metaphysics of presence as that which denotes and devaluates the materiality of the mind and the body (Saussure 2013: 75).

Furthermore, speech has been viewed as the cardinal way of representing truth in contemporary time. Writing defers speech which means that there is a delay between the thought and the inscription of the words which represents the thought (p. 43). Consequently, writing, is not present, is not as "true" as speech that is present. Thus, it is a perception derived from western metaphysics and hence Christian culture. The ostensible truth in the notion of origins, presence as the speaking between people occupying the same space and time, evaporate when we consider that all speech is dependent upon writing. Derrida further explains other aspects of speech that lends credence to authority and priority. It is historically observed that spoken language emerges before writing. A critical example is the fact that a child learns to speak before s/he learns to write (p. 44). This depicts the notion that writing is tangibly external because it requires putting marks on a material surface to be seen. Speech, therefore, is internal because it is produced inside the mouth and the throat. The word is a pure thought and a presence which tries to suppress the signified over the signified (p. 45). What Derrida wants to make of this is that ostensibly truth is connected to the notion of origins.

However, the way Derrida's thinking places the term 'woman' has generated a lot of debate among feminist critics. Some feminist critics believe that Derrida's deconstruction does not appreciate the place of woman in his various assumptions. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, argues that deconstruction erases the 'embodied subjects' of women by not appropriating a proper place for her in her space (de Lauretis, 1984: 4). Rawlinson observes that Derrida creates the image of 'neutralised sexual difference' (p. 5) when he fails to explain the proper classification of woman with reference to deconstruction. What both feminist critics are saying is that Derrida's failure to address sexual difference makes women inferior objects of no significance (Papadelos, 2006: 76).

Similarly, Kristeva in a paper entitled 'Women's Time' observes that while women vie for equality with men, Derrida's metaphysics of presence is a relegation of women and attempt to weaken women's struggle (Kristeva 1986: 14). She continues that many things fall under the binary thinking whether an attempt by women to strive for equality or their attempts to claim their inalienable rights from their male counterparts. She restates a re-adoption of dichotomies such as identities/difference, masculine/feminine to substantiate binary replacement which will favour the woman and restructure her being in the hierarchical placement (p. 17). However, Kristeva's submission is not new to Derrida as he recognises the binary representation in feminism but nevertheless projects woman as undecidable; this has generated a lot of criticism from feminists who all feel that this statement is a relegation of the image and status of the woman. Although Derrida believes that feminism works in opposition to deconstruction, he does not outrightly condemn feminism because he believes that though feminism is necessary, the feminist activities were basically a recurring repetition of the past (Derrida, 1985: 29-30). Some feminists, such as Kristeva, accept the position that they should attempt to rethink their premises so as not to go on repeating the past endlessly; however, critics like Drucilla Cornell and Elisabeth Gross hold a contrary view arguing that when the infrastructure is displaced there will not be anything like repeating the past which Derrida holds fastidiously to and this new development will prepare the woman for a challenging future (2006: 87).

Conclusion

This article is a re-definition of different linguistic and literary theories and models them to the application of feminist interpretation in Africa. Beyond Semiotic and semantic, the paper explores the trajectory of theories in the articulation of societal paradigms. It explains the significance of the Saussurean signs to the understanding of womanism, feminism and gender balancing in art. The work explains the deconstructive manner works could be appreciated and it maintained the position of Judith Butler and her performative application to the work of art in literature. The re-interpretation of feminist gap is the hermeneutic approach this paper attempts to valorise to explain various roles assigned women in some societies.

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