

## FRENCH FEMINISM: J. KRISTEVA'S INTELLECTUAL AGENCY

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article I will point out the intellectual agency of Julia Kristeva as a very important voice in the realm of French Feminist Studies and beyond (Feminist Theory, Critique of Identity, Psychoanalysis, Socialist Realism). At this point I will provide an exposé of her contribution in the conceptualization of Écriture féminine proposing the concept of intertextuality to explain the interconnectedness of all aspects of communication synthesizing a new methodology bestowed to us as semanalysis. It was out of this analysis that she produced and developed the concept of chora, which in itself remains a pre-linguistic and pre-subjective realm of psychosexual development. Further more, I intent to transmit that J. Kristeva's logic approaches a product built - up as identity and as such to reason out the identity conceptualization we unquestionably proceed with its connotative evaluation in its meaningful totality. In addition, I will also explore how her concepts find room in Socialist Realism developed in the Communist Albania.*

**Keywords:** *Écriture féminine; founding separation; self-identity; New Man; individuation*

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism in France has its origin in the French revolution and the term French feminism in its own refers to a branch of feminist theories and philosophies, which indeed emerged in the 1970s to the 1990s. Of course, French feminist theory differed from Anglophone feminism in the sense that it was more philosophical and literary. Their writings were focused on the theories of the body. And not only French voices<sup>1</sup>, but also those voices, which have worked

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<sup>1</sup>*Simone de Beauvoir* is a prominent native French voice, who has written novels, monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues including also essays, biographies, and an autobiography. She is now best known for her metaphysical novels, including *She Came to Stay* and for *The Mandarins*. In *The Second Sex* she provides the reader with a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational exposure of contemporary feminism, which sets out a feminist existentialism that turns out in itself to stand for a moral revolution. According to her "one is not born woman, but becomes one", we perceive the message she intends to transmit. Further more, in her analysis she focuses on the social construction of Woman as the *Other* and she argues that right in this *Other* we identify the women's oppression, although historically women are considered as deviant and abnormal. Although apparently she seems to satisfy Mary Wollstonecraft's assumption that men are to be the ideal toward which the women should inspire, she proceeds with her argument that for feminism to moveforward, this attitude must be set aside (Beauvoir, de S. (1997) *The Second Sex* London: Vintage.)

substantially in the French context, such as Julia Kristeva and Bracha Ettinger<sup>ii</sup>, certainly are considered its prominent voices worth discussing about; nevertheless my interest encompasses only Julia Kristeva and as you will see later the texture of this research will revolve round *understanding her (un) sacrificial logic*.

To proceed with the general overview towards the French feminism, I could add that in the 1970s the French feminists approached feminism within the concept of *Écriture féminine* and Helen Cixous argues that writing and philosophy are *phallogentric* and along with other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray both emphasize “*writing from the body*” as a subversive exercise. And in this venue, of course, Julia Kristeva has influenced tremendously feminist theory in general and feminist literary criticism in particular, but as Elizabeth Wright has pointed out in her *Lacan and Postfeminism* (2000):

“...none of these French feminists align themselves with the feminist movement as it appeared in the Anglophone world.”

Right now turning back to my essential concern I think that it is worth starting with a few words on Julia Kristeva.

### A CONDENSED PRESENTATION OF JULIA KRISTEVA

Julia Kristeva born in Bulgaria in 1941 and Paris is described as a based linguist, philosopher and psychoanalyst who yet remains one of the most important feminist authors in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Analyzing closely her career, I could expose it categorized as follows: in poststructuralist linguistics; in psychoanalysis; and in critical biography. Each of the categories, she has filtered herself in, stands for three distinct periods, and which indeed display various specific interest she has worked on prominently. And her shifts of interest certainly do not make up departures but rather build up hallmarks towards even more sophisticated theorization of language, desire and the unconscious. Because of her efforts and contributions and achievements as well she was awarded the prestigious Holberg prize in 2004.

When she came to Paris to study in 1965 she enrolled in Roland Barthe's seminars. And although she was well acquainted with efficient background in Eastern European linguistics and philosophy with particular reflective development towards the work of the Russian formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin in particular, she conducted seminar presentations that helped introduce this work in France. In this course, she worked out the limits of structuralism as a methodology by using Bakhtin's works to endow it with a sense of dynamism and history, elements, which are not encountered in his productions. In 1966 in an essay for the French Journal *Communication*, partially translated as *Desire in Language*, she proposed the concept of intertextuality to explain the interconnectedness of all aspects of communication. She found inspiration for her theory in modernist

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<sup>ii</sup>Bracha Ettinger one of the most influential contemporary French feminists since 1980s is an author of several books and more than eighty psychoanalytical essays elaborating different aesthetical, ethical, psychoanalytical and artistic aspects of the matrixial. She has influenced tremendously literary criticism, art history and film theory.

writers James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida adapted her concept on intertextuality.

In 1965 she joined the *Tel Quel* group, which consisted of philosophers and thinkers including Klossowski and Barthes and Derrida; and because of her alignment to this group, she joined in the 1974 study trip to China - a time that coincided with Cultural Revolution as a sign of flourishing of Maoism a derivate color of Communism there. Inspired from what she experienced in Communist/Maoist China in 1986 she wrote an account titled *About Chinese Women*. However, she undertook psychoanalytical training and eventually she obtained the title of psychoanalyst in 1979. Also she attempted to whisk her interests in politics, semiotics, and psychoanalysis by synthesizing a new methodology bestowed to us as *semanalysis*. It was out of this analysis that she produced and developed the concept of *chora*, which in itself remains a pre-linguistic and pre-subjective realm of psychosexual development.

In 1970s she divorced herself from *Tel Quel* group and began to focus more on psychoanalysis and thus she wrote *Powers of Horror* (1982), *Tales of Love* (1983) and *Black Sun* (1987) in which she discusses abjection, love and depression, whereas in her critical biographies of *Hannah Arendt*, *Collette* and *Melanie Klein*, she discusses female genius. In addition, she has written a number of semi-autobiographical works starting with *Les Samurais* (1990), which oscillates signals for the poststructuralist generation. More productions are: *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010) and *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (2011).

As you can see her contributions rendered above certainly encourage at the utmost the development of feminist theory in general and feminist literary criticism in particular, however in the following section I will attempt to decipher her logic as a substantial contribution in feminist theory and the critique of identity.

### UNDERSTANDING OF HER LOGIC APPROACHES

At this point, according to Julia Kristeva, the logic approaches a product built - up as identity and as such to reason out the identity conceptualization we unquestionably proceed with its connotative evaluation in its meaningful totality:

“- any concept of self-identity represses fragmentation or multiplicity of the self, or the connectedness or relationality of the self to others;

-any claim to a universal social identity or equality among men and women provides a repression of women’s difference;

- any claim to women’s difference, or an identity of women, provides a repression of differences among women;” (Weir, A. 1996:3)

Further more acknowledging and receiving these connotative evaluations of logic, we pose a sort of sacrifice, which certainly assumes that we recognize the meanings coming out of identity, but nevertheless according to Julia Kristeva identity of the self is not conceived as a product of repression or dominance, but as a capacity for participation in the social world.

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Reading carefully *Women's Time*, Julia Kristeva argues that there are two directions of European feminism: on one hand, there is a demand for equality which implies the inclusion within social and economic and political structures on an equal basis with men – a direction unquestionably addressed also by the Communism in Albania; and on the other hand, the direction which encourages a refusal of the given socio-symbolic order on the grounds that it is based on sacrificial logic and precisely on the sacrifice of women – a phenomenon frequently observed in European countries in general if we refer to the literature of non-Communist European countries the female characters' agency is brushed up as such. Although she poses clearly two directions, she asserts the importance of concrete politics to encourage women's movement, whose effects definitely should be revolutionary. At this point, she affirms the necessity to produce alternatives and expose critical attitudes towards both directions as she notices sidedness in terms of identity. If the first direction presents the logic of identification due to the ontological and logical values of a rationality dominant in context - such as the case of Communist rationality in Albania and other countries in Europe and China as well - and the idea of necessary identification between male and female sexes as the only unique instrument for liberating the second sex otherwise defined as opposite sex (the females) – a term preferred in Albanian text, it is paving the path to apprehend the nonidentity men and women altogether and also defining the latter (women) to have irreducible identity - Communism produced *New Man*.

In *The New Generation of Women*, Julia Kristeva argues that socio-symbolic contract is a sacrificial contract and she acknowledges the difficulty and not the impossibility for women of identifying with a socio-symbolic order, which indicates the sacrifice of women. While she discusses about the sacrificial logic and encourages women to analyze their own desires, histories and experiences, she warns attacks against *Language* and *Sign* frequently described to be self-destructive. And in this manner she proceeds with the assumption that socio-symbolic contract constitutes a threat to the very principle of sociality. This is the reason why she launches warns to the conditions of a social community, and of language, and the pathological conditions of domination. Keeping this track of reasoning, we perceive how she leads the argument to the latter direction and asserts that under such dangers an alternative is a fantasy of a female society which is made up of alter ego of the official society, in which all real or fantasized possibilities for *jouissance* take refuge (Weir, A. 1996: 148). Probably the Communist inspirations and ideals could suffice this stream of state and so the literature of then in Albania (*Socialist Realism* literature) was addressed to the creation of *New Man* (with reference to females also as noted before). To proceed with this alignment, I could expose this society described as 'utopia' as it is non-sacrificial and non-frustrating, but free and fulfilling – a mere place outside the law – idealized context, which used to echo Communism in theory and aimed to construct it in practice, although *social class struggle* developed as a punitive instrument of the ideology and philosophy in power, the Communism in this case – reference to Albania and other European countries of Communist camp. However,

Julia Kristeva believes that this fantasy has its roots in the repetition of the myth of the archaic mother so she writes:

*"If the archetype of the beliefs in a good and pure substance, that of utopias, is the belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total, englobing mother with frustration, no separation, with no break – producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words), then it becomes evident that we will never be able to defuse the violences mobilized through the counter-investment necessary to carrying out this phantasm, unless one challenges precisely this myth of the archaic mother."* (Weir, A. 1996:29)

Through this we understand that Julia Kristeva centers the fantasy of gratification in archaic mother as a fantasy of patriarchy. The emancipation another alternative she provides us with remains against patriarchal order as the archaic mother represents our cultural imaginary not only in ratification and pleasure, but also in a power against which we are helpless and against which we are supposed to struggle in order to defend ourselves against the desire for power - terror of power and definitely terrorism.

Julia Kristeva envisages a society in which the sacrificial basis of social relations and institutions is replaced by an *"interiorization of the founding separation of the socio-symbolic contract, an introduction of its cutting edge into the very interior of every identity whether subjective, sexual, ideological."* (Weir, A. 1996:24) To proceed with this idea, I could add that the non – patriarchal, non – dominating social order not based on sacrifice of women or any social group or individual by another - if we refer to the meanings of identity conceptualization we will recall what makes up a logic of identity – would have to be based on a form of self- identity, and of social identity characterized by an acceptance of a *"founding separation"*. And for Julia Kristeva this acceptance commences with a social and individual recognition and acceptance of violence. In this light she throws signals to accept the struggle implied in the whole process, which aims at an impossibility of reconciliation with an order of dominance, but rather to an eradication of dominance and this, according to Julia Kristeva, justifies *"the violence to be conceived in the very place where it operates with the maximum intransigence, in other words, in personal and sexual identity itself, so as to make it disintegrate in its very nucleus."* (Weir, A. 1996: 34)

Certainly she calls for differentiation between the violence of separation, which is unavoidable, and the violence of domination, which can be overcome. In this experience we encounter *loss and pain* bonds, as this is a differentiating process, which leads to the process of becoming an individual in a social world. In this course of loss and pain experiences, Julia Kristeva notices the violence of dominance of one group to another, one person by another; she explores out a very sensitive conflict in terms of identity construction. Further more, she makes out a difference between these two categories of violence, she argues that the interiorization of the *founding of separation* means the development of a different form of identity - an identity founded not on a defensive opposition to the other, but on the acceptance of internal differentiation – an acceptance of the otherness within the self. And this development corresponds to the development of other forms of identity, such as gender identities, social collectivities – for instance, if you

allow me to refer to the Communist social collectivity or *Socialist Realism* civilization in Albania, which sought for *New Man* identity as individuation from Capitalist and Imperialist dominance in world, which indeed Communism developed for almost 50 years in Eastern Europe, you will see that this reference at best illustrates this viewpoint of Julia Kristeva.

To turn back to the issue of matter, Julia Kristeva points out that the above process can only be achieved through analysis and through a development of understanding of the sacrificial logic and of the need to replace it with a logic of inclusion. Further more, she argues convincingly that the development of self – identity is a *pleasurable process* as the pleasure of differentiation, the pleasure of signification, the pleasure of identification and interaction with others, the pleasure of learning to participate in a social world are essential to the formation of self – identity and this variety makes the whole process filled up with challenges and differences. However, she insists that the development of a separate self cannot be viewed from inter-subjective relation to isolation, but as a move from sociality basis on primary drives and effective bonds into a capacity from social relations perceived indeed through symbolic interaction acknowledging the differences within the self and differences within the others. Further more, she envisages the development of self - identity not as a sacrifice of nonidentity or particularity or difference in order to achieve conformity to a certain socio-symbolic order, but as a capacity, which leads to realization and expression of nonidentity. Alongside this she implies the capacity of realization and expression of one's own uniqueness and differences through acquisition of the capacity for signification and in course of this she acquaints us with symbolic interaction.

In order to understand all this, I have explored so far, Julia Kristeva points out she has been oriented to the labyrinths of demystification of social identity and of socio-symbolic order and of language and in this continuum she precisely furthers to us that they both have *“to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore, the community of language as a universal and unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes. In order to bring out – along with the singularity of each person, and, even more, along with the singularity of each person, and, even more, along with the multiplicity of every person's identifications ... the relativity of his/ her symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variation in his/her specific symbolic capacities.”* (Weir, A. 1996: 35)

She has conceptualized language as a totalizing force and the universality preserved through language and social identity preserved through social identifications surely represses difference or singularity. In this light, I could add that in understanding the differentiation between a social - order based on *sacrifice of women*, and a social - order based on the acceptance of separation, difference, and non-identity; in understanding the differentiation between the separation – specific for any symbolic order, and the sacrifice of *woman/ body/ pleasure* – specific for patriarchy, Julia Kristeva provides the basis of *differentiating* between the structure of the language and of the socio-symbolic *per se*, and the historical structures, and institutions of patriarchal domination. In the question of changes, she argues that feminism preserves a specific central force for social order change - *“feminism will be able to break free of its belief in Woman, her power,*

her writing, so as to channel this demand for difference into each and every element of the female whole, and, finally, to bring out the singularity of each woman, and beyond this, her multiplicities, her plural languages." (Weir, A. 1996: 33)

In proceeding with her assumptions I could express out the model of self-identity inhales from Julia Kristeva's theory of language a dialectic between structure and the practice of subjects. And she criticizes the structuralist understanding of language in terms of structure or system or code and she argues *a discursive practice of subjects* instead. She does not see the subject as more than a reflection or function of the law of language. On the contrary, she challenges the concept of language as a fixed, unchanging structure and also rejects the concept of subject as a "*Cartesian subject*". According to her "*the subject must be understood not as a transcendental ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history*". (Weir, A. 1996: 28)

Reading Derrida's concept of *différance* in psychoanalytical terms we perceive how Derrida attempts to remain in the "*semiotic chora*" in terms to deferring or dissolving identity, whereas Julia Kristeva prioritizes the differentiation of the self as a separate identity. Forwarding her assumption from *Revolution in Poetic Language* where she acknowledges the Derrida's "Grammatology", and precisely in the excerpt: "*The trace that includes its effacement, and writing that inscribes only while under protection and by delaying – both can be thought of as metaphors for a movement that retreats before thethetic but, sheltered by it, unfolds only within the stases of the semiotic chora.*" (Weir, A. 1996: 141-142), I believe you comprehend the meaning and significance between Derrida's radical anti-essentialism postulated by Kristeva's critique. This stand resonates also her critique of essentialist Woman-identified feminism in "*Women's Time*", which certainly becomes a commodity in all her products. Herein she argues for recognition and acceptance of a "*violence*" which is essential for the development of self-identity, to the recognition of others as subjects and to the attribution of an identity to objects. If we encounter refusal in terms to what is described above, according to Julia Kristeva we have to do with trapping ourselves in a dream to return to the "*archaic mother*" which is a state and space before law, with no separation, no identity, and therefore no differences at all. Rather unlikely Freud and Lacan, who both tend to align the acceptance of the violence of separation for identity with the acceptance of the violence of civilization or of repressed and unavoidable domination, Julia Kristeva argues explicitly enough the fact that it becomes a prerequisite the acceptance of the violence of identity to resisting the "*violence of civilization*", resisting repression and domination at last. However, since Freud persists on a tenet of romanticism, that all desire is for unity, for wholeness, for a return to a stage of non-differentiation and / or mastery, and that socialization encompasses a sacrifice of the pleasure principle for the reality principle, we envisage the manner how Julia Kristeva argues on the positioning of the identity of the self through involvement with the socio-symbolic order in the act of linguistic signification by explaining it as a separation which is not a lack but a discharge, and which arouses pleasure. This stand is perfectly theorized in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, which directly resonates Freud's anal and death drives as well.

Julia Kristeva argues on bodily drives and she attempts to describe the understanding of human pleasure and violence into an understanding of language and self-identity. Her assumption seems rather persuasive and more productive than Butler's argument that in order to "*cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law*" we need to turn to a vision of the world in which "*the law*" determines all. Butler also considers right to object to an appeal to "*body beyond law*" as a source or goal of emancipation. And as long as the vision to return to original pleasures is inadequate as a goal of emancipation, the vision is totally an open future to bodies, be them with no nature, no past or no memory of pleasure and/or suffering. It becomes in this manner totally unrealistic and probably more disturbing. What Julia Kristeva postulates jumps beyond the opposition between law and body. She understands language and identity not in terms of law, which produces bodies and subjects, but rather in terms of dialectical interaction between a structure of language and practice of subjects and the practice in itself includes psychosomatic processes.

Under the spectrum of "*pleasure in sociality*" into the development of self – identity, which certainly overcomes the borders of Benjamin's viewpoint on the same issue, Julia Kristeva considers sociality as a goal of the development of self-identity. If Benjamin poses the importance of a theory of a positive motivation for self – identity and she does so by theorizing the development of self – identity as a process of identification with another subject, Julia Kristeva discusses about pleasure and places it in the motivation and the development of self-identity and in this manner she locates it in the development of a capacity to signify, which is conceived as a precondition of symbolic interaction. And in continuum to this, we see how Julia Kristeva elaborates her assumption by adding that this *pleasure* in signification is aligned with the desire for sociality – a desire to become part of the world, which initially is represented by parents.

Nevertheless, Benjamin figures out also the goal of self-identity remains within the achievement of isolation and separation from the community as well. At this point, Julia Kristeva culls for the highlights that the meaning of the development of self - identity is seen as the achievement of a capacity for symbolic interaction with others – a capacity for participation in a larger social world/ context beyond the confines of relations between parent – child. And regarding the concept of "*capacity*", Julia Kristeva also re-evaluates it as: the ability to understand the world and also essential ingredient to demonstrate skills to change the world. And this makes up the reason that differentiation of self is a process, which entails recognition of and identification with the mother's investment in world and which certainly facilitates the capacity to participate in a social world and in this course to ask for changes as the society remains flexibly open to identity improvement (positive motivation and negative motivation) and consolidation as well.

## CONCLUSION

Elucidating the remarkable contribution of Julia Kristeva to *Feminist theory* and the *Critique of identity* specifically focusing on the manner she has conceptualized and developed her viewpoint toward a theory of self and social



identity, although she has been regarded as a theorist of dissolution of identities and on the other hand has been criticized as a defender of *Lacanianphallus*, of the need to maintain the identity of a given patriarchal socio-symbolic order against the encroachment of negativity, you perceive and enjoy her significance and importance. Although there are displayed parts of her intellectual thought and critique, I have the impression that we can comprehend her uniqueness and iconicity.

Also, you digest remarkably how she has been criticized as an essentialist, as a defender of *libidinal* drives and of maternal space of semiotic *chora* outside language and as a structuralist, as a defender of a linguistic determinism, which excludes human practice. In addition, I will expose she has been criticized for her idealization of maternity and for the rejection of any claim to an essential women's identity to end up with the 'sin' that as she is too focused on agency at the expense of *différance*, as she rejects any concept of individual or collective agency and bourgeois establishing in this manner approach of the critiques to call her anti-political. Pointing out what oppositions exist in relation to her work so far, you are oriented on ambivalences established by her and based on ambivalence between a sacrificial model of identity and a theory of identity, which includes as difference as openness to change, you envisage the iconicity of Julia Kristeva in this area of expertise. And most of her works can be seen as an attempt to understand the "*signifying practice*" of subjects in terms other than the terms of *phallogentrism* of submission of law of identity. She proceeds with the assumption that construction of subjectivity through language has to be understood not more as a castration, a renunciation of phallus, but as a development of a capacity for social interaction.

And in this light, dubious at best in comparison to J. Butler and others, she remains important as she lays stress on the existential and ethical dimensions of affirming and living an identity of self, theorizing in this manner the development of this self and through reanalyzing the psychoanalytical concepts in the context of a theory of a language as the basis of a social identity, which certainly is not only purely repressive, but also 'violent'.

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