

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism: demarcating a new approach to women's communication strategies

Medjedoub Rima*

Centre University of Mila (Algeria). Rima.medjedoub@centre-univ-mila.dz

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Abstract

Feminist rhetorical criticism has emerged recently as an area of study thanks to attempts of integrating rhetorical and feminist perspectives. Being a novel domain, students and researchers may remain bewildered regarding its essence, means and ends. Hence, the present article pulls in various directions by trying to answer the following questions: how did feminist rhetorical criticism develop? what methods and methodologies are being employed in this new field? what kind of research topics can be tackled in this discipline? and what are its constraints? It is valuable to wrap up our talk by mentioning the implications of the insights gained from the feminist rhetorical enquiries in education and research.

Keywords: feminist rhetorical criticism, development, methodology, critique, implications

Introduction

Only in the 1970's and 1980's that rhetoric started to be combined with feminist currents after that scholars had noticed the absence of women in the rhetorical canon and tried to alleviate the disparity between men and women by setting at discovering works authored by females in different periods in history. This first step was followed by several others that altogether marked the development of feminist rhetorical criticism. For convenience of presentation, however, the major developments of feminist rhetoric are divided, here, into phases—although they did not arise as separate successive stages but as overlapping ones. Despite the fact that feminist rhetorical theory has gained some attention, it is critiqued on the grounds that it is like a newly born baby which does not know which direction to take, how, and for what purpose? This criticism appears to be constructive, though.

1. Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

As feminism is brought into the rhetorical theory, it has altered the initial objective of studying rhetoric from learning how to persuade others to one of understanding how women construct the worlds in which they live, and how those worlds make sense to them. Feminist rhetorical criticism is also an approach to explain

* The sender author.

how communication is used to change the dominant patriarchal structures, facilitate women empowerment, and create nonrepressive identities (Griffin, 2009). Clearly, then, the feminist perspective attempts to validate values and experiences associated with women; give voice to females who are marginalized; and establish a value system that privileges mutuality, respect, caring, power-with, interconnection and immanent value (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Feminist rhetorical criticism is, besides, a tool to understand and theorize about communicative differences based on sex. The latter are rooted in the assumption that men and women often have varied positions of power and this differential access to power can affect communication styles and strategies used by women (Griffin, 2009).

2. The Development of Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

Mostly, it is feminist scholars who have begun and continued to introduce feminist perspectives into rhetorical criticism. The initial efforts were embodied in the feminist historiographical attempts to write about women in the history of rhetoric and analyse their discourse so as to recover their forgotten forms of communication. Like any new-fangled domain, feminist rhetorical analysis faced difficulties vis-à-vis its methods and methodologies of research. In order to survive, it has applied methodologies from other fields. Besides, its area of investigation was obscure at first; thus, the topics to be tackled in this discipline were to be delineated.

2.1. Recovering Feminist Rhetorical Tradition

By re-examining the rhetorical tradition, more theoretical practices have been recovered which enlarged the traditional boundaries of rhetoric. Put explicitly, the plethora of the rhetorical forms, strategies and goals which had not previously considered in rhetoric, started to be accounted for in order to develop new judgement criteria—this is because the old criteria are male-based and will always be unfair to women. This whole endeavour seeks to theorize feminist rhetoric and elaborate a new broadened rhetorical theory. Kare Ronald attests that feminist scholars have “recovered an amazing amount of rhetoric by women, reimagined our rhetorical heritage, and redefined rhetorical theory, creating a wholly new tradition, complete with new theories and ...” (2008, p.140 as cited in Schell, 2010, p.2).

Foss and Griffin (1992) noted that scholars working from a feminist perspective suggest that most theories of rhetoric are inadequate and misleading because they contain a patriarchal bias in that they embody the experiences and concerns of the white male standards. Hence, they distort or omit the experiences and concerns of women. Foss and Griffin (1992) contended that a primary goal of feminist scholarship is to discover whatever existing rhetorical theories accounting for women's experiences and perspectives and construct alternative theories that acknowledge and explain women's discourse practices.

Susan Jarratt (2002, p. 11 as cited in Schell, 2010, p.10) classified the works of feminist historiographers into two sections: “recovery of female rhetors ... and

gendered analysis of both traditional and newly discovered sources.” The works under investigation included publications, speeches, autobiographies, letters, essays, treatises, articles, fragments of classical texts, lectures, syllabuses and other teaching materials. The criterion for a text’s selection lies in its potential to reflect the communication styles utilized by or about women. In 1990’s, feminist rhetorical criticism began to expand to comprise media and television studies as well as critical theory (Campbell, 2001).

The intensive recovery efforts do not only attend to an identification of the rhetorical strategies employed by women to achieve persuasive purposes at particular moments and periods of time, but also a recognition of the strategies used to become visible and heard and perpetuate their roles in public life. Common rhetorical strategies identified in women’s rhetoric across time and cultures incorporate: breaking silence, truth telling, valuing collaboration, self-expression, articulation of fears, promotion of action, conversation, empowerment of self and audience (Campbell, 2001). Campbell (2001) noticed that feminist style, although not excluded to women, emerges out of women’s experiences and is characterized by impersonal and inductive structures.

2.2. Methodology

Questions about method and methodology have been a core part of the feminist approach to the analysis of discourse since the rise of feminist rhetorical criticism as a distinct field of study. Rich and varied discussions among feminist scholars have been held over the past four decades about how to create new or modify existing research methods that would support feminist aims. Mainly, the feminist canon has been guided by two primary methodologies: historiography and gender criticism.

Feminist historiography is a reference to the historical studies aiming at regaining women’s communicative practices (Skinner, Hester & Malos, 2013). For Lippincott (2003), this methodology “recovers examples of who had the recognized authority and experience to write, and contextualizes the discourse communities that have shaped rhetorical strategies” (p. 10). In fact, historiography implies writing a feminist history of rhetoric with the aim of shaking the established rhetorical tradition by discovering female historical figures and re-examining canonical texts and practices. A consideration should be made of the kind of contribution these figures and discourse bring to the rhetorical field and to the feminist project at large, how feminist rhetoricians performed tasks.

On the one part, gender criticism examines how sexual identity, shared by socio-cultural and psychological factors, influence the creation and reception of texts because one reads texts through the prism of his/her own examination of the social forces responsible for gender inequality. On the other part, gender criticism analyses how an author’s gender impacts ideas. Enoch said that she “understand[s] the rhetorical process of gendering as an extension of and elaboration on gender analysis.” (2013, p.60)

Of particular interest is the question whether feminist rhetorical criticism is an approach, a perspective, a method on its own, or a method associated with other critical approaches. When used alone, the analyst takes inductive approach to answer questions such as: how is gender symbolically constructed in this text? what is the negative and demeaning context of females? and where is the positive and powerful control of males? The critic searches for examples about how women as well as men are constructed in a text or series of texts and what these constructs tell us about symbol use and women's oppression. The critic proceeds by identifying and explaining the various examples of the construction. Critics also, in more sophisticated analyses, illustrate how gender interlocks with race, ethnicity and socio-economic status and the like as they all influence communication.

When feminist rhetorical criticism is combined with other critical methodologies, the critic might ask more focused questions of the type: how does a woman's subaltern status affect her ability to communicate in the text under analysis? Feminist perspective can be used in connection with Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse the way gender relations are hierarchically constructed through language in context and how language use constructs particular ideologies about gender and power relations. Feminist rhetorical criticism also requires the availability of a wide range of texts to guarantee deep valid studies of women's communication. Smith (2001) spoke of the engagement of postmodern critique of subjectivity in feminist rhetoric. On her part, Felski (1989, p. 33) pointed to the connections of 'the term "post-modern" as an analytical category' to feminism. Some rhetorical analyses combine both feminist and critical rhetorical theories to explore the meanings of the independent woman and investigate how women are presented in a discourse.

It is preferably, according to feminist scholars, that feminist rhetorical analyses are undertaken by females who would base their work on their own experiences as women or as men who are becoming conscious of women's experiences. This is because approaching a text from the perspective of a man and whose interests are served by the text may bias the sought results as he might view the unparalleled power relations as normal and fail to uncover them.

Regarding detailed models for analysing female rhetorical practices, they have not been provided except for those of Royster and Kirsch (2012) who proposed a "polylogical analytical mode, an inquiry framework, for understanding interpreting and assessing feminist practices in rhetorical composition, and literary studies" (p. 14). This new paradigm composed a matrix of four methodological strategies: critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization.

To start with, critical imagination is "a critical skill in questioning a viewpoint, an experience, an event, and so on, and in remaking frameworks based on the questioning" (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 19). It permits the re-thinking of early unknown rhetors and overlooked practices and genres (Royster & Kirsch, 2012). When studying women of the past whose works have not been studied by rhetorical analysts, how do we render their works and lives meaningful? It is by imagining ourselves

travelling to their time and context with a possibility to see things from their vantage point.

Strategic contemplation prioritizes reflective process research which requires time “to think about, through and around work as an important meditative dimension of scholarly productivity” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 21) and research process passes by two parts. The first is a journey in real time, real-space, which involves going into a feeling to see where the research subject (i.e. the rhetorician) lived. In second part, the researcher engages in a process of internalised reflexive meditation in which he/she uses his/her own experiences to reimagine the rhetorical situation. Thus the sociocultural contemplation finds the cultural traditions and the lived experiences of both the research subject and the researcher. Strategic contemplation offers the possibility to ask and answer questions such as what do we notice when we stand back and observe the artefact? How does that discourse speak to our minds, our hearts or our ethos? What can our live experience contribute to our understanding of the text? How do we respond to and represent historical subjects when we discover that we may not share their values or beliefs.

As for social circulation, it is a concept which is grounded on “connections among the past, present and future in the sense that the social circles in which women travel, live and work are ... modified [over time] and can lead to changed rhetorical practices” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 23). This methodological concept helps indicate the social networks in which women interact with others and use language ignoring the traditional idea that rhetoric is the public domain of only men.

Last but not least, globalization is a concept distinct from the other methodologies. Royster and Kirsch (2012) argue that feminist rhetorical scholars are to be actively involved in a “better-informed perspectives of rhetoric and writing as global enterprise” because it seeks “rescuing, recovering, and (re)inscribing women rhetors both distinctively in locations around the world and across national boundaries; and participating in the effort to recast perspectives of rhetoric as a transnational, global phenomenon rather than a Western one” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 25). Interest is directed not only towards local rhetoric in restricted places but also to global feminist rhetorical studies, feminist rhetoric from more geopolitical locations is to be accounted for so that to reflect presence but not dominance. As such, an adjusted new image of rhetoric is to be formed to portray it as a “transnational, global phenomenon rather than a Western one” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 25). This concept presents new opportunities for inquiry: How do we explore the experiences of others within the encumbrances of our own cultural and linguistic prisms? How do we create linkages between local and global points of view, knowledge, experience, and achievement?

2.3. Women-related topics

The inclusion of subject matters significant to women into rhetorical studies form a third major development in terms of women perspectives in rhetorical studies. Topics of particular relevance to women include: sexist language issues, linguistic

gender differences (Campbell, 1989), the abortion debate (Foss & Griffin, 1992), motherhood, pregnancy, sexual harassment, caring, attachment, to name but these. Dow (1997, p.104) contended that “Feminist rhetoric frequently occurs away from the platform and statehouses of government,” and that feminist scholarship studies “must turn its attention to the varieties of context in which feminist struggle occurs.” The afore-mentioned topics are found, thanks to historical research, across a multiplicity of genres, discourses, communities, disciplines, movements, professions, rhetors, situations and events.

3. Criticism

Royster and Kirsch (2012) argue that studies of feminist rhetorical practices have already begun to transform the rhetorical “landscape and [expand] the scope and range of factors that we now perceive as significant in determining the highest quality of excellence in both performance and professional practice” (p.13). The work of feminist rhetoricians also brought about changes in who the subjects of rhetorical study can be and how their practices can be critiqued (Royster & Kirsch, 2012). This is true. Nonetheless, no one denies the fact that feminist rhetorical theory is still in its infancy (Campbell, 2001). Perhaps, it is this state of affairs which lies behind the lack of a satisfactory effective methodology to undertake a feminist rhetorical analysis. There exist no specific criteria about how feminist researchers make decisions about what to study. Clearly, there is a need to create a topology for feminist rhetorical practices and to develop analytical frameworks whereby feminist rhetorical analyses could be conducted. Moreover, specialists in the field should bear in mind such issues as “How does feminist rhetorical research persuade or fail to persuade a given audience?” (Bizzell, 2003, p.203-4 as cited in Schell, 2010, p. 15). That is to say, will the larger research community outside this specialized subfield find feminist research to be persuasive, readable and useful? Indeed, before meditating about these matters, feminist scholars must consider larger questions as: what does feminist rhetoric do? and what form does it take?

The fledgling feminist rhetorical theory is still in its early stages. Campbell (2001) maintained that the most promising source for a theory is, simply, the practices of women. Among the attempts to elaborate a sound theory grounded on this assumption is that of Foss and Griffin (1992). They argued for a feminine style of rhetoric to replace the contentious style traditionally associated with males. Campbell (2001) contended that this approach emphasizes differences based on sex and relying on the conception that women's ways of communicating are somehow distinctive and preferable. Therefore, Campbell (1989) called rather for considering women's rhetoric on its own terms rather than in relation to a male dominated rhetorical tradition. Put differently, if feminist rhetoricians rely on the canonized patriarchal systems that excluded women in the first place, feminist rhetorical research efforts can become problematic and biased.

As a final note in this line of thought, whilst feminist academics are working within the sphere of the rhetorical tradition, they are also embracing “radically new methods as well, methods which violate some of the most cherished conventions of academic research, most particularly in bringing the person of the research, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul into the work” (Bizzell, 2003, p. 204 as cited in Schell, 2010, p. 4) Feminist methods of research in the history of rhetoric: what difference do they take?. Does this new direction, which invades the woman and her personal space, pose an ethical issue that must be brought to light? To which extent are an analyst’s emotions and ethics engaged when dealing with the research participants and when selecting one’s own methods and methodologies?

4. Implications

It seems that feminist critiques have major implications for the rhetorical theory; the former can enlarge the scope of the latter. A feminist rhetorical theory is sought for specifiable reasons. It offers a route of research to be undertaken by institutions and intellectuals to depict feminist rhetorical routines and strategies. Perhaps, feminist rhetorical studies can give rise to more generative springboards since new questions are being posed, varied data are being collected, novel methodologies are being opted for. Female rhetors and their narratives are to be integrated in the history of rhetoric and bring to the fore the marginalized voices. One chief implication of these studies is to bring them to the pedagogy of rhetoric (Adams, 1999) with the ultimate aim of influencing the writing instruction at secondary schools and higher levels. In terms of research, scholars attempt to merge feminism and rhetoric so that to undertake rhetorical analyses and criticisms from feminist veins (Glenn, 1997). Another objective of feminist rhetorical analysis is to formulate a rhetorical theory of writing as a reverse to a social theory (Micciche, 2010). It is worthy to note, at the end, that feminist rhetoric may enable political action (Fraser, 1995) and expose patriarchal practices.

Conclusion

By way of concluding, feminist rhetorical criticism is perceived as the analysis of feminist discourse. It is an emerging domain that lies at the borders of rhetoric, composition and feminism. This field began by regaining women’s communicative practices. In reality, the recovery scholarship was and is significant in that it serves as a foundational basis for subsequent work. Like any other new research areas, feminist rhetorical criticism faces the problem of which research projects are to be conducted under its umbrella? Which methods and methodologies are best suitable? Should they be enlarged, borrowed, coined? As a starting point and in order to solve these problems, it has allowed itself to borrow and combine methodologies from neighbouring fields. As such, it relies on historiography, gender criticism, Critical Discourse Analysis and polylogical analytical mode. It is in the areas of research and pedagogy that feminist rhetorical criticism seeks applications.

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