

## Subverting Gender and Language: A Study of Monique Wittig's *Les Guerilleres*

- Marie Josephine Aruna

*Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body  
stamping it and violently shaping it – Monique Wittig*

Monique Wittig, a radical feminist in the French women's liberation movement, greatly influenced the Western feminists with her revolutionary and subversive writings. This paper seeks to analyze how Wittig explores language as an oppressive tool in the hands of patriarchy in her text *Les Guerilleres* (1969), asserting the need for a womanist culture by reworking androcentric myths. *Les Guerilleres*, though basically categorized as a work of Science fiction, has tremendously contributed to feminist literature, in the sense that Wittig uses the 'text' as a literary "war machine", the term adopted by Wittig in her book, *The Straight Mind and other Essays*. The goal of such a war machine is to "pulverize the old form and formal conventions". (89) It is but appropriate, then, that Wittig has delineated women characters who are 'warriors' and who are out to destroy and kill men, but most importantly transform prevalent notions of subject identity through deconstruction of language. Since Wittig draws on the myth of the Amazon, the text is symbolic of war field where an eternal battle between the sexes is going on.

In her works, *Lesbian Peoples* (1978), *The Lesbian Body* (1973), *The Opoanax* (1964), Monique Wittig has deployed the post modernist narrative technique to explore the role of language in the social construction of sexuality and femininity. She seeks to dislocate 'the myth of woman' through a lesbian subjectivity. In *Les Guerilleres*, for instance, Wittig tries to eliminate the masculine pronoun 'il' and to make the feminine pronoun 'Elles', universal. In her non-fiction book, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992) she debates the concept of gender, the role of language in culture and the role of women in the social contract and political theory. Wittig rightly argues that,

Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general. (qtd in Butler 20)Quote goes here like this

By attributing particular traits to the female body which are otherwise essential biological differences, man tends to suppress women politically,

socially and economically. In *Les Guerilliers*, Wittig systematically destroys the heroic male epic, myths and legends. She reverses the value of the masculine through the introduction of (lesbian / warrior) soldiers. There are only feminine characters and objects, which work to deconstruct and displace “heterosexual binary thinking” (Winston 233). Wittig, in a series of prose poems, powerfully presents a war like situation where women warriors proclaim the destruction of patriarchal institutions,

They say, I shall be the Universal Vengeance . . . . They say,  
War, rally . . . . They say that once they have the arms in  
their hands they will not yield them. They say that they will  
shake the world like thunder and lightning. (LG 120)

They sing about the fate of a young girl which is brilliant as the sun, when in the house of her mother, whereas after marriage, “the woman under the roof of her husband is like a chained dog. The slave rarely tastes the delights of love, the woman never” (LG 108). As the women move forward in great armies they narrate stories to one another of ancient myths – as that of the quests for the Grail, the Round Table which symbolize the circle, the zero, the sphere representing the Vulva. For Wittig these “quests for the Grail were not successful, that they remained of the nature of the Legend” (LG 45). This could probably mean that men were not successful in defining the ‘nature’ of women because they existed only as legends or ideas. Men have failed to decipher them as humans, as individuals. Rather they have sought to categorize women in terms of an essential difference that is only a ‘biological variation’. Wittig alludes to the Tree of knowledge saying that the woman who eats the fruit from the tree would become knowledgeable as they say “the circle is your symbol / you exist from all eternity / you will exist for all eternity” (52 – 53). Man had reduced woman to a ‘zero’, confirming her to the circle, but these warrior women adopt the very symbol of the sphere as a weapon against men, “the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them” (114). Jane Winston’s article “Gender and Sexual Identity” discusses how Wittig’s oeuvre sought to,

destroy the signifying system structured around the phallus, and create a new one around the O. Of the many alchemical symbols in Wittig’s work, the O, symbol of transformation is most prevalent . . . at different times, it stands for the vulva, water, the island of lesbos, a mirror, the female breast Wittig’s O is a site of transformation, the place and means by which the mark of O’s enslavement . . . is transubstantiated into the epic of female power and emancipation. (Winston 233)

They (lesbian soldiers) constantly remind themselves of the 'cause' they are gathered for and tell tales about great warrior women, invoking and beseeching the blessings of Minerva – the goddess of war, Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. They hate being compared to the earth and the sea, they rather prefer to be compared to the planets, the stars, the suns, “that which burns those who struggle bravely those who do not surrender” (80). They also allude to Asian myths where men are equaled to black dragons which are killed by women warriors belonging to those cities. Wittig presents the whole saga in an epic manner, a battle being waged in all the directions, the women rise like an ocean against the men, consuming them in their violence and outrage. They encourage each other by saying, “remain united like the characters in a book. Do not abandon the collectivity” (58). The concept of sisterhood was another important feature of second wave feminism that feminists adopted it as a central strategy to forge political, emotional and erotic bonds among women. At times of losing courage they (elles) tell tales of courageous women from myths of different countries and peoples. They are all dressed in military uniforms, carrying rifles and other weaponry, sometimes walking, and sometimes on horseback. They stamp in a rhythm, they dance and cry and hold hands together. They say they are guided by a single principle, that of the celebration of the body as a single whole, (another highlight of second wave feminism):

They say henceforward what they are, is not subject to compromise. They say they must now stop exalting the vulva. They say that they must break the last bond that binds them to a dead culture. They say that any symbol that exalts the fragmented body is transient, must disappear. They, the women say the integrity of the body their first principle, advance marching together into another world. (LG 72)

As part of the revolution, they set out to break those symbols of patriarchy which chain them in the name of gender or feminine duties. They set fire to sewing machines, type-writers, plates, stones, pans, brooms, washing -machines, vacuum cleaners etc. Those which do not burn, they cover them with blue / red / green paint; reassemble them in a distorted manner giving them new names. They had every reason to cause destruction and spread anarchy because man had treated them as inferior who said that “negroes and women do not have a heart spleen liver in the same place as their own, that difference of sex . . . signify inferiority, their own right to domination and appropriation . . .” (102). He has used the heterosexual institutions that regulate gender in order to oppress women with specific reference to reproduction and Motherhood, culturally thrust upon them. In attempting to subvert the existing culture and the urgency to break away from the binary

dimension of compulsory heterosexuality Wittig and Russ express their anger through the reconstruction of a “a separate space for women and to find a distinct women’s ‘counter- culture’” (Cortiel 8). This ‘counter culture’ rejects the patriarchal ‘symbolic- order’ which is inherently oppressive, at the same time creates an Amazonian Utopia in which lesbians lead a revolution against the concepts of gender. The warrior women in *Les Guerilleres* laugh it off when they say, “it is to fall between Scylla and Charybdis, to avoid one religious ideology only to adopt another, they say that both one and the other have this in common, that they are no longer valid” (80). By rejecting the patriarchal ‘symbolic order’ Wittig rejects not only the masculine, but also the feminine. Her job is to displace the binary category of sex / gender, to deconstruct these heterosexual ‘constructs’, in turn providing a *raison-d’être* for other possibilities of identity for the body. As Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argues that “for Wittig, the task is not to prefer the feminine side of the binary to the masculine, but to displace the binary as such through a specifically lesbian disintegration of its constitutive categories” (126). The lesbian warriors representative of the Amazons are violent in their process of destruction of patriarchal institutions. Their one motto is to destroy the old order, which they repeatedly sing as a kind of refrain. They ‘affirm in triumph that all action is overthrow’, (LG 5). Sometimes they wear identical costumes, sometimes they are bare breasted – a method of manifesting their aggressiveness. They often laugh violently, utter cries which are terrifying, they fire thousands of arrows at their enemies. As a result,

The men all begin to run in the greatest confusion, some go towards the exit they jostle and collide with each other . . . they stumble over bodies of the dead . . . cries of despair panic shrieks of pain are heard . . . Some climb on the hills making signs of surrender, they are slaughtered. (LG 103)

The women then brandish their swords singing songs of death Wittig, similarly, employs the French pronouns ‘elles’ and ‘ils’ extensively to linguistically disrupt gender. While *elles* refers to ‘women’ (plural) i.e., a collective pronoun, ‘ils’ refers to the masculine (collective pronoun for ‘men’). Just as ‘Mankind’ is universal and includes ‘womankind’, the particular, even when there are more women than men so does ‘ils’ stand for the universal and is inclusive of the particular ‘elles’. As the women (*elles*) in *Les Guerilleres* say,

Men have expelled you from the world of symbols and yet they have given you names . . . . They write, of their authority to accord names, that it goes back so far that the origin of language itself may be considered an act of authority emanating from those who dominate . . . they have attached a particular word to an object or a fact . . . . They

say the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated. (112, 114).

Wittig deliberately avoids the use of terms like 'men', and 'women', at the same time using the pronoun 'elles' (English 'They') as universal, thereby attempting a linguistic assault on the masculine collective pronoun 'ils'. Elles is empowered with supreme authority over the world as well as the word. As David Glover in his book *Genders* points out that,

By installing a basic division at the core of our being, the heterosexual imagination denies women the capacity to act as subjects, something that can only be achieved by taking control over the ways in which language is used. (XXX)

In other words, within Language women are marked by 'gender' while within society they are marked by 'sex' (masculine / male, feminine / female). Thus through the manipulation of language patriarchy has appropriated the subject position, while assigning women an identity that is inferior (object position) when compared to men. Wittig's establishment of a new subject identity, describes, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* "is not a figure of the androgyne nor some hypothetical "third gender" . . . it is an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense" (127).

Since domination occurs through language which creates an illusion, an hierarchy which in turn becomes a social reality, denying the primary unity of all beings in a pre-linguistic state (118), Wittig's goal is to first deconstruct that language. As the warrior women in *Les Guerilleres* propose,

They say, we must disregard the statements we have been compelled to deliver contrary to our opinion and in conformity with the codes and conventions of the cultures that have domesticated us. They say that all books must be burned and only those preserved that can present them to advantage in a future age. They say there is no reality before it has been given shape by words rules regulations. They say that everything has to be remade starting from basic principles. They say that in the first place the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down, that every word must be screened. (134)

By 'fixing' the patriarchal language Wittig aims at fixing 'patriarchy'. For this purpose she has adopted or appropriated the male literary genres.

Wittig has chosen the heroic male epic while, revolutionizing the genre of male bastion and transforming it into 'feminist Utopian thinking and cultural criticism' (Cortiel 7) Wittig's 'elles' is *Les Guerilleres* almost a *levy en masse*, take courage in the 'force of their unity', believe that only a new language can change the world and create a new one (85). For this, violence is a must and their conjoint power has threatened 'hierarchies systems of government authorities. Together they unleash violence, shrieking, roaring, clenching their fists and slaughtering men mercilessly. They envisage a female state where men will be servile members. They have with great determination broken away from the "museums the show-cases the pedestals where they have been installed" (126). They also manage to convince the young men who have surrendered that their foremost duty is to transform the world and put an end to the most murderous war that history has ever witnessed. They march hand in hand with the people and when men have stopped being enemies, "They say, take your time consider this new species that seeks a new language" (131). Wittig also envisages a world where women will be "capable of seizing power and devoting themselves to the exercise of arms and letters, in which they will doubtless soon excel (135). The women declare the end of war, "moved by a common impulse, we all stood to seek gropingly the even flow, the exultant unity of the international . . . . The war is over, the war is over" (144). Wittig introduces a new pronoun 'nous' (English 'we') which represents "the new collectivity in an epic struggle" (Glover XXX), who together sound the funeral march for those brave women soldiers who have died in the great battle, though melancholic yet triumphant. At the end of the war 'elles' establishes itself as a sovereign subject, thereby universalizing the particular and giving it a new subject identity. This new subject tends to emerge from the linguistic fabric that she demolishes. As language is considered to determine subjectivity and simultaneously gender our identity, Wittig uses the literary text as the battleground to create an alternative 'non-phallogocentric' discourse, thereby re-appropriating patriarchal language that serves to universalize the particular, reclaiming the lost ground that patriarchy monopolizes. Writing becomes a political action that critiques the heterosexual institutions that regulate gender. She achieves this through the exploration of alternative subject-object relations which undermines the tools of conventional narrative coherence. She also seeks to,

efface genre boundaries, use subject or object pronouns in plurivocal, inconsistent or otherwise confusing ways and reject narrative linearity, often in favor of seemingly endless digression. They use fragmentation, repetition, non-traditional syntax and punctuation, and elliptical or parenthetical phrases. They accentuate textual gaps and

silences. They stress to varying degrees the political power of writing. (Winston 235)

Through such experimental writing therefore, Wittig makes a deliberate and conscious effort to envisage an all female space, the lesbian, outside the 'symbolic' thereby representing a privileged site of separation from the heterosexual matrix that signifies the possibility of overcoming patriarchal control at the material and ideological level. For this purpose, she rejects the prevailing concepts of gender / sexual identity and consequently the myth of woman in her revolutionary work of art.

### **Works Cited**

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Cortiel, Jeanne. *Demand my Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, and Science Fiction*.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999. Print.

Glover, David and Kaplan, Cora. *Genders*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Winston, Jane. "Gender and sexual identity in the modern French novel". *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel*. Ed. Timothy Unwin. U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 223-240. Print.

Wittig, Monique. *Les Guerilleres*. 1971. Trans. Le Vay. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. Print.

---. *The Straight Mind and other Essays*. USA: Beacon Press, 1992. Print.

Marie Josephine Aruna  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Tagore Arts College  
(Affiliated to Pondicherry Central University)  
Pondicherry, India