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## A Reflection of French Feminism in Mallika Sengupta's poetry

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### Abstract

Feminist writings have been one of the modes of challenging patriarchal dominance over the female body and subjectivity. Woman has been constantly reacting to the phallogocentric politics and willing to replenish the existing dominant version of "woman". The poetry written by Mallika Sengupta is a straight forward reaction to the Freudian argument of woman being lack. My endeavour here will be to demystify the feminism through the understating of French feminism.

**Key words:** French feminism, Mallika Sengupta

### Article

Mallika Sengupta is one of the figures in feminist poetry who not only maintains the aesthetics of a poem but also embeds the ideology in it so well that the two become the supplement of each other. She is a Bengali poet, feminist, and reader of Sociology from Kolkata, known for her "unapologetically political poetry". In one of her interview she affirms: "Ideology ruins poetry, but not always. Rather every poet has to face this challenge at some period of her life... I think a good poet can always insert ideology into poetry without destroying aesthetic conditions." Apart from writing poetry, she has been actively involved with the cause of gender justice and other social issues. Along with other poets and artists, she has initiated Aloprihivi, a forum committed to raising consciousness among marginalized women and children through poetry, music and drama.

Poetry has been one of the most sought after genre to express ones sentiments, emotions, and experiences and when it comes to a female who is known for emotional and consequently "irrational" creature then feminist poetry is one of the tools to express one's inner self. In this paper, my endeavor will be to focus on female body and the social treatment that she receives in a phallogocentric system which subjugates her not only biologically but also encroaches upon her place of subjectivity, in context to Mallika Sengupta's feminist poetry.

The poem "Open letter to Freud" by Sengupta directly hits upon the inferior position of the women in the patriarchy and her role to be predestined by the men in the disguise of nature. Woman has been defined as inferior and lack for her role assigned in this men made world. This poem, as the title suggests, is a reaction of a woman to the Freudian argument of woman being destined to be incomplete biologically for lack of male sexual organ:

*In man's body an extra limb  
Invested with eternal power, earth's ownership  
According to Mr. Freud for lack of it woman is inferior  
As an underling she envies man's virility*

Sengupta and other feminists took from Freud the idea that identity is formed by social influence and therefore, there can be no essential self. It meant that no single factor-being born a boy rather than a girl, for example-could predetermine an individual's identity. Freud argued that in the first couple of months, the child has no real sense of self. It is not capable even to distinguish where it ends and the mother begins since it feels so attached to mother's body, and certainly has no concept of its own gender. During this period, the child whether girl or boy, is encapsulated in an intense satisfying love relationships with the mother. Gender

identification is achieved through the Oedipus complex.<sup>1</sup> This is the crisis in child's life when he learns that he must reject his mother and accept the authority of his father. "*The father is the representative of social law and order and once the patriarchal law is accepted the mother's body becomes a taboo.*"<sup>2</sup> Sengupta seems to have struggled with this patriarchal narrative and argues to reestablish the whole idea of womanhood. Sengupta, in her poetry, gives an account of gender division, throughout history questioning biological, psychological, historical and cultural criticism for the reduction of woman to a second and inferior sex. These opening lines of the poem stress upon the power men hold in this world due to an "*extra limb invested with eternal power*". Sengupta is also active in a number of protest and gender activism groups. Her fiery, combative tone can be seen in many poems, e.g. "While teaching My Son History":

*"Man alone was both God and Goddess  
Man was both father and mother  
Both tune and flute  
Both penis and vagina  
As we have learnt from history."*

Sengupta has described herself 'an admirably alert, ardent and articulate person' for whom feminism 'is not just an academic issue' but 'a conviction and a challenge'. In her poetry, womanhood does not remain an interiorized awareness,' as she explains. 'It becomes an energetic protest against marginalization, interrogating womens' position in society as the oppressed other. Often dealing with womens' marginalized role in history:

*"after the battle said chenghis khan  
The greatest pleasure of life,  
Is in front of the vanquished enemy  
To sleep with his favourite wife"*

A female when talks about her political position in the society, is seen as the feminist standpoint. The history of feminism is divided into waves, with a first wave, dating from 1830 to 1920 and best recalled for the suffragette movement and second wave, organized around womens, liberation, and dating from 1960 to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

The French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her 1949 book *The Second Sex* one of the most famous sentence "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" She proposed an argument which would make feminist thinkers to think beyond pre-established feminist definitions., Because her book *The Second Sex* appeared in the interim between these two periods of feminist activity, de Beauvoir can be difficult to place within this feminist history, She can be considered perhaps as a bridge between the two waves: Combining the progressive social vision of the first, and beginning to articulate some of the suspicions about femininity and gender that would come to concern proponents of the second.<sup>4</sup> She poses a very substantial question in this arena which is quite complex to be answered, and in the quest of answering this question, feminists have fallen apart and have become contradictory as it directly points out not only female sexuality but also the overall concept of female itself.

<sup>1</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Literary theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 2006, P. 334

<sup>2</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Literary theory and Criticism*, Oxford university press, 2006, p. 334

<sup>3</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Literary theory and criticism*, oxford University press, P. 319

<sup>4</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Literary theory and criticism*, Oxford University press, P. 319

Structuralist school of thought has always been a problem not only in term of marginalizing the issues but also placing them hierarchically and putting them in a relation of superior and inferior. Man and woman is one the most debated subject which adds to social hierarchies and is one of the ways to put male and female as superior and inferior respectively. According to Freud, the psychoanalyst, there is only one sex and that is Man and the woman is not a woman but a deficient man who lacks the power symbol proclaimed by Freud himself.

*“As Freud admits , the beginging of the sexual life of a girl child are so “obscure” so “faded with time” that one would have to dig down very deep indeed to discovee beneath the traces of this civilization, of this history, the vestiges of a more archaic civilization that might give some clue to woman’s sexuality. That extremely ancient civilization would undoubtly have a different alphabet, a different language ... Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the west since the time of the Greeks”<sup>5</sup>*

The poet Mallika Sengupta emphatically criticizes the very Freudian notion that woman is a lack, Woman is nothing and a woman is inferior. Man is the owner of this world because he has the power symbol “penis”. In this phallogentric structure it is a matter of discourse if the woman really envies of the socially constructed Gender identification or the biological sexual organ of a man. The phallogentric world seems to have decided the role of a woman and a man and what about “other” the third gender? Woman has always been a second sex and hence already been treated as an object. Man is the self and woman is the other. Frued has created this binary opposition of penis/nothing. Words like “nothing” “other” “object” don’t have a right over any subjectivity since there is only one sex and that is Penis. Moreover, nature has been so uncaring for the second sex that it has made the woman equivalent to nothing.

*“Penis-envy” is a term  
Introduced by Mr. Freud  
That extra which only man possesses  
That's what diminishes woman  
So she is uncertain in childhood  
Decorates the Shivalinga with flowers at girlhood  
Her playroom is full of dolls and utensils  
For it's said that she is her mother's replica”*

Penis-envy is the term used by Mr. Freud. As if a woman has no other thing to envy of. Freud’s concept of penis envy was criticized in his own time, most notably by psychoanalyst Karen Horney. She suggested that it is men who are adversely affected by their inability to bear children, which she referred to as "womb envy." Woman is a born Lack because she doesn’t have this symbol of power but I really wonder as to what/which power woman lacks a power which is biologically there or a power which is snatched away from the woman in the disguise of socially constructed “woman”. A female’s sexuality has been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. As Freud mentions in his work that during the phallic stage (3-5 years) as soon as the girl realizes that she lacks a penis she gets detached from her mother and gets attracted to her father.<sup>6</sup> However, she continues to be a woman obliged by the societal norms which demands her to perform like her mother. This societal obligation constrains her sexual passivity and her submission to man in a man-woman sexual encounter. As per Karen Horney

“Indeed, it is no longer “Penis Envy” which distances the girl from her mother, who does not have one, and attracts her to her father, who might give her one; rather it is because the girl child is frustrated in her essentialist feminine desire for incestuous

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<sup>5</sup> Irigary, Luce, *“This sex which is not one”*, Cornel university press, New York, 1985. p. 25

<sup>6</sup> Irigary, Luce, *This sex which is not one*, Cornell University press, p. 23

relations with the father that she reaches the point, secondarily, of coveting the penis as a substitute for the father. Thus the girl, the woman, no longer desires to be a man and to have a penis in order to be like a man. If she reaches the point of post-Oedipal longing to appropriate the penis for herself, it is to compensate for her disappointment at having been deprived of the penis-object-and or/to defend herself both against the guilt accruing to incestuous desires and against a future sadistic penetration by the father, which she fears as much as she desires it.<sup>7</sup>

As Simone de Beauvoir mentions in her book *The Second Sex*, that woman as a result of social construction is a myth and now the question that arises to be explored is as to what relation this myth bears to reality. Now this myth has become a reality and what actually should be the reality has become a myth and this myth substitutes transcendental idea, timeless, unchangeable, and necessary.<sup>8</sup> A woman is a motherly figure, emotional, delicate, irrational creature, and constrained to the household chores and this is the absolute truth which can't be questioned and overruled. Any dissent to this axiom will lead to an irrational presumption. In case the definition provided for this concept is argued by the behavior of biological woman, the socially constructed gender will prove to be a real identity and the biological woman will not be a female anymore. Therefore, any disassociation from the superficially constructed qualities will take away the very essence of feminine from the female. A phallogocentric construction pays no attention to her tears, her sufferings, and takes privileges on the pretext of nature and her lot intended by the God. She has been deprived of any sexual pleasure in the name of purity, chastity and the "God's gift" Virginité. This phallogocentric structure doesn't allow any space to the different thought process. When a woman is born isn't she born with a lot of expectations of being mother, sister, wife and many other submissive roles to be played in this constructed reality? This reality forces her to carry out herself with a subjugated self-esteem and only to function under the phallogocentric ideas of Mr. Freud and people alike.

Kate Millett in her book *Sexual politics* (1969) emphasizes on the idea that women were subjected to an artificially constructed idea of the feminine. Women's oppression was achieved by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. All aspects of society and culture functioned according to a sexual politics that encouraged women to internalize their own inferiority until it became psychologically rooted. Phallogocentric Literature was a tool of political ideology because it re-created sexual inequalities and cemented the patriarchal values of the society.<sup>9</sup>

What actually makes a man superior? Is it the visibility of his sexual organ? And what makes a woman inferior? Is it because her sexual organ cannot be seen? And hence invisibility is equivalent to nothing. Therefore, a woman doesn't exist. What exists is a phallus or a lack of phallus.

The machinery of phallogocentrism cannot accept sexual differences and the existence of a different female subjectivity. Therefore, the problem is that since there is no existence of the woman there is no question of subjectivity of the same. The question that arises here is that is there any quest of woman to reach the level of man, to perform like a man and to be like one. Many feminists have rejected this notion of being like a man and have emphasized on the different identity of the woman.

French feminist Luce Irigaray, who is a strong believer of sexual difference affirms that Sexual difference is one of the important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue.<sup>10</sup> Woman altogether is a separate identity which does not fit into the

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Horney, "On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women," in *Feminine Psychology: Papers*, ed. Harold Kelman, New York, 1967

<sup>8</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone, *The second sex*, London:Vintage, 1997 p. 282

<sup>9</sup> Waugh, Patricia, *Literary theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, P. 326

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, Luce, *Sexual Difference*, In *revolution of the Word*, 1977, P. 170-3

machinery of phallogocentrism. However, the same has been imposed on her biologically and psychologically. Through the philosophy of *Différance*<sup>11</sup> she looks forward to the ultimate salvation on an intellectual level.

We need to take revolutionary steps to break away with these shackles of patriarchy and we must reinterpret the whole relationship between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world...<sup>12</sup> it is the man who has been the subject of discourse, whether in the field of theory, morality or politics.<sup>13</sup> In her reply to Freud, the poet Sengupta writes in her poem:

*This is primal man's sexual politics  
Freud, because you belong to the extra-limb group  
You assume women are inferior and hence envious!  
During my childhood I felt no penis-envy  
My identity was complete  
Even today I'm a confident, complete woman,  
A sensitive dark girl of the Third World  
Shall stand against you from today  
Who is inferior, who superior, which is more or less –  
Who has given you the duty of solving  
Such a political debate Mr Freud!!*

By saying “My identity was complete” in the above lines Sengupta refers to the different identity of the woman and the comparison to the extra-limb community makes her identity no inferior to the man. Cixous, for example, worked to undermine the deeply held idea that a man is masculine and a woman feminine by arguing that masculinity and femininity were characteristics that held no real relationship to the biological sex and with this she was being consciously anti-essentialist. This has been the politics of gender superiority since ages; the poet has referred to Bhishma in the context of Mahabharata where Bhishma surrenders to a woman since he pledged not to take up arms against woman. Man is prepared for wars and woman for handling the household chores. And this stereotype seems to be totally inseparable from the biological sex to socially constructed woman. And for the woman being envious of the extra limb of the man, Irigary in her essay “This Sex which is not one” argues that woman in no way is envious of man as she has autoeroticism with her two vaginal lips rubbing her clitoris and giving her sexual pleasure. However, it’s the man who looks for woman’s company to accommodate his sexual organ. By saying autoeroticism Irigary also implicitly stresses on that woman is self sufficient and complete in herself. “woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's. In order to touch himself, man needs an instrument: his hand, a woman's body, language ... And this self-caressing requires at least a minimum of activity. As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two but not divisible into one(s)-that caress each other.”

Sengupta confronts Freud not only in terms of biological hierarchy established by him but also attacks the phallogocentric narrative with her feminist poetry writing. Like Freud, Lacan was accused of chauvinism and biological essentialism. Yet he was

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<sup>11</sup> The economy of this writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess." (Derrida, J., 1978. *Cogito and the History of Madness*. From *Writing and Différance*. Trans. A. Bass. London & New York: Routledge. p. 75.) Schultz and Fried in their vast bibliography of Derrida's work cite this sentence as where “JD introduces *différance*” for the first time. (Schultz, W.R. & Fried, L.B., 1992. *Jacques Derrida Bibliography*. London & New York: Garland. p. 12.)

<sup>12</sup> Irigary, Luce, *Sexual Difference, In revolution of the Word* (1977) p. 170-3

<sup>13</sup> Irigary, Luce, *Sexual Difference, In revolution of the Word* (1977) p. 170-3

instrumental in opening up Freudian theory to ideas about language that proved incredibly fruitful for feminism. For Lacan, sexual difference is found in language. Starting from Lacan's position the symbolic (social order) is conceived through language, then it follows that language is masculine, articulating a male ideology and a male view of the world. Kristeva argued that western philosophy is founded on the repression of difference: anything that deviates from the prescribed norm is labeled as criminality, perversion, or madness and is prohibited. Thus in language female difference was suppressed until only the male norm remained as the sole voice. Because the subjective woman does not exist in the male view-she is other, different, lacking-This is why French feminists say that even in language woman is mute because even if she speaks she refers to the phallogocentric ideas.

In order to summarize the whole argument, I would like to stress upon the fact that the tussle is not about toppling the established order and replenishing it with new one because that will also amount to the same thing in the end. Therefore the whole idea is to modify it radically and exempting it from the patriarchy so that the ultimate salvation can be achieved. Sengupta's poetry challenges the phallogocentric and Freudian norms and strives hard to redefine the feminism that begins with liberalism when woman demand equality with men and then she rejects patriarchy in favor of a separatist matriarchy and at the same time she tries to establish a relation of difference between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. Sengupta also seems to criticize the patriarchal version of the history in which the heterosexuality has imposed artificial gender division in order to define the position of the two sexes. Since Sengupta bears no relation with the hierarchical nature of the patriarchal system she deconstructs the whole phallogocentric structure and refuses the characteristics socially assigned to a particular biological sex, and she emphasizes on the idea that binary gender categories could be deconstructed and a multitude of possible gender positions would then become available. In light of the above arguments, it's next to impossible to draw a conclusion on the woman's sexuality and nothing can be seen through the prism of essentialism but to understand the politics by which woman as other has been created and the means by which this otherness has been created are to be exposed so that the woman can grow in her full potential.

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