

A Western Feminist Speaks on the need for a Feminine Culture⁽¹⁾

"The new feminism says that culture was male, that it did not express women but denied them." Women were excluded from culture until compulsory education was established at the beginning of the 20th century. Up till now, men alone monopolize power, the knowledge that they offer to the world is neither neutral nor innocent, it lacks objectivity because it is one-sided.

What do the feminist critics of culture propose? Among them there are the radicals who practice separatism. There are those who accept the two cultures, male and female, as complementary. Still others, perhaps a minority, would like to make of the historical experience of women a principle with which to attack the whole culture of the dominant class and sex.

We shall try to examine these varied points of view. First, what do we mean by separatism?

Women, though they form half of the world, are dominated by the other half and reduced into a subordinate group, hence they are treated as a minority. If they rebel against the ruling culture they tend to close in on themselves, hating the other culture without trying to subvert it. This attitude usually leads them to a slow extinction because their own offspring will choose to drown their culture in the dominant one rather than keeping an isolation which kills them.

Is it possible to speak of a feminine culture? Does it exist? According to the author of the article on feminine culture, this culture exists as an experience. It is neither spoken nor written, nor formulated as thought. Women's fear of the "logos", their rebellion against the Greek rational which forms the basis of male authority, made them choose silence or resort to mysticism instead of reason. Their realm is one of feeling, of affectivity, which they oppose to man's realm of reason and inactivity. The critique of reason as rationalism is not peculiar to feminism alone. It is a characteristic trend of recent years and may not be considered as part of the feminine heritage.

In the Middle Ages, the practice of witchcraft by women constituted a form of rebellion against reason and an instrument of power manipulated by women, but witches were feared and burned without leaving any worthwhile legacy.

In our time, woman's faith in feeling has become obsolete. Her true power lies in passion, not in feeling. As a reproducer, a keeper of the race, she holds power which is feared by men, as it symbolizes Ishtar, the powerful and mysterious goddess of fertility. Her theoretical ownership of home, husband, children, represents to her a compensation for the authentic ownership enjoyed by men. What is considered by men as inherited diversity in women has become in itself a

value: the value of the difference. While men's power lies in reason, women's power lies in guile and cunning. Men have created for her an identity derived from their own fantasy. This identity consists in being seductive, sentimental, emotive, timid, delicate, narcissistic and retrograde, negative and fleeting, attentive above all to her own body. Women are now conscious that their present identity has been codified by men, so they are seeking an identity of their own. Where is that identity to be found? In the remains of an experience that has neither been taught nor spoken? "The life of a woman is too limited or too secret", says Marguerite Yourcenar, member of the French Academy. Women disappear without leaving a trace of their existence or of their thoughts concerning the world. What they think or write depends entirely on rules, ideas and methods created by men. There is no women culture, there are women, without space, without rights, save their unknown past. Do they have to be forever followers and transmitters?

Profile of a feminine culture

Women, though they have no culture of their own, still exist, just as other natural creatures like trees and flowers. But they differ in the fact that they have become conscious of their dispossession and they refuse to exist in silence, weariness and resentment. Emancipation as imitation of male mode is rejected, feminine culture as codified by men is equally unacceptable.

Rossana Rossanda proposes the creation of a feminine culture based on a new relationship of woman with nature, with her body, with society and language: a profile of culture which is not complementary to the existing culture but deriving from an empirical knowledge first with nature through cooking, chemistry and botany, a kind of knowledge which non-empirical knowledge is ready to accept without waste. Second, with the body, organ of reproduction, seduction and commodity, a specific knowledge of psychotherapy and female subconscious. Third, with service works like faithfulness, love, piety, the wisdom of suffering, tolerance for what is poor in the oppressor. Fourth, with language which has been taken from women, now used to denounce the limitations and defects of the patriarchal world.

Starting from a deeper understanding of their own dispossession, and affirmation of the "I am I" as a potential identity, which is demanding and yet uncertain in its direction, women are nearing a sort of new emancipation without illusions. The experience of women by making itself total will also be made a culture.

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Source: *Women of the Mediterranean*. op. cit, pp.182-196.

(1) Abstract of an article by Rossana Rossanda who was a PCI member of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and is now a columnist for the Daily Newspaper "II Manifesto".