

# A Brief Analysis of Monique Wittig's Claim "Lesbians Are Not Women"

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*"This is a very well-written paper that is closely tied with the theme of the current issue, namely identity. The paper works on feminist identity, with a specific focus on lesbian feminist, drawing on the prominent scholar Monique Wittig and her seminal essay/argument, "The Straight Mind"/"lesbians are not women". The writer demonstrates an excellent understanding of Wittig's viewpoint; whilst Wittig is sometimes criticized as being too radical, the paper manages to maintain a critical yet analytical stance in evaluating the arguments in question. This includes a very clear demarcation of the point of view between straight and lesbian feminists, and a convincing explanation why Wittig envisions a "sexless society". I also appreciate the writer's effort in providing a counterargument against Wittig, that totally discarding heterosexuality may not only be unfeasible and unrealistic, but will also possibly bring us back to the deadlock of gender and sexuality studies. Overall speaking, this paper is written in good English, and has provided some interesting and in-depth insight regarding identity issues and politics. I highly appreciate the efforts the writer has put in—good job!"*

-- Dr. Jason Ho

The second-wave feminism of the 1960s and the 1970s was featured with the idea that "the personal is the political" and the consciousness of recognizing what used to be considered as "natural" about women to be ideological (Hollows, 4). One influential concepts of this wave is Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman", which reveals the definition of the category "woman" as kind of social formation determined by patriarchal ideology (301). In the 1980s when the lesbian and gay liberation movements developed, the entire discourse of heterosexuality and the established gender/sex system, according to which there are only two genders and one's gender is invariant and determined by one's genitals, were further upended by lesbian feminists' radical antagonism against the social constitution of "women" as a seemingly natural group.

Monique Wittig, one of the lesbian feminists, goes even further to argue that "lesbians are not women" ("The Straight Mind", 32), which not only clashes with the patriarchal ideology but also overthrows "the straight mind", the type of mindset bolstering the deep-rooted heterosexual system. For Wittig, the so-called biological predisposition in differentiating "men" and "women" functions as a mask to conceal and rationalize the tacit approval of the obligatory social relationship of men over women, which she calls "heterosexual contract" ("The Straight Mind", 32). In fact, her radical claim that "lesbians are not women"

contains three layers of implication. First, through the testimony of lesbians, it re-acknowledges Beauvoir's argument that the category of "women" is socially constructed. Second, transcending the argument, it declares the unfixity and instability of the sexual/gender identities of lesbians, extending the battlefield to the heterosexual norm of the distinction between "men" and "women". Third, it thoroughly negates the heterosexual discourse, striving for the abolition of gender categories and the liberation of individual's gender expression.

Compared with the straight feminists, lesbians are doubly marginalized by patriarchy and heterosexism. The radical gesture of Wittig's claim manifests that the discourses of heterosexuality are so universal and ineluctable that only an earthquake-like rebellion can shake its solid foundation. As Wittig describes, the straight mind develops a totalizing interpretation of history, social reality, culture and all the other subjective phenomenon, which weaves an interlocking network of the "symbolic order" through language ("The Straight Mind", 23). These discourses engender, interpenetrate into, and reinforce one another, leading to the impossibility for lesbians and gay men to communicate in the heterosexual society "unless they speak in their (heterosexual) terms" (Wittig, "The Straight Mind", 25). With the stigma of abnormality and aberration, lesbians fall into the objects of psychoanalysis, being treated as pathological cases and differentiated from "the normal".

Moreover, the heterosexual categories of sex subject lesbians to double accusation: not being "real" women and failing to be men. With the unconventional sexual orientation and zero dependence on men, lesbians pose a severe threat to the claim of biological determinism and the male authority. Hence, in order to maintain the dominant control over "women", the straight mind excludes lesbians from the class of "women" which are characterized by traits of passivity, docility, and "virtue" (Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman", 1908). However, lesbians cannot be "men" either, regardless of their willingness. Despite their appetite for women, they fail to possess the phallus, which is the sole symbolic source of the sexual, economic, ideological, and political power of men. Marginalized by both men and straight women, lesbians are exiled into a space beyond sex and gender, a 'queer' space. Therefore, "a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man" (Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman", 1908). This double alienation forces

lesbians into such an identity vacuum that those, refusing to endure oppression and “being-defined-ness”, have no choice but to completely overturn the hegemony of heterosexuality and create their own identities. As studies of language and semiology penetrated into anthropology, psychoanalysis, structuralism and other modern theoretical systems, language and discourses became more consciously analyzed and applied in the political discussion of the lesbian and women’s liberation movements (Wittig, “The Straight Mind”, 21). It is obvious that “lesbians are not women” is not only radical, but also a discourse accomplished through heterosexual language, though with the opposite and destructive meaning. In Wittig’s analysis, the discourses of the straight mind are based on the constitution of differences, not only of gender roles, but also of races, classes and other identities. As a political semiology, the differences function to mask the oppression on the dominated by constituting them as “others” (“The Straight Mind”, 29). In order to expose the oppression of the “heterosexual contract” from within, Wittig takes advantage of its language as an important political stake to deconstruct its ideology, and rearrange it into another dimension of knowledge. For many straight feminists, the most useful concept in explaining the oppression on women is the patriarchy, a system of male domination. This concept of patriarchy “implies a universal form of oppression based on biological differences between men and women” (Hollows, 7). Adopting the Darwinist theory of evolution, they believe that the social relationship between men and women at large is a reflection of the natural division between male and female physiological features in the course of evolutionary development (Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman”, 1907). With this belief, they strive to empower women by redefining their biological potentials and emphasizing women’s uniqueness and superiority, such as their capacity to give birth and motherhood. However, this way of thinking once again falls in the trap of tracing the origin of women’s oppression within themselves, failing to be conscious that all these differences, in fact, are political and social formation (Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman”, 1910). In lesbian feminists’ perspectives, “matriarchy and patriarchy are equally oppressive because equally heterosexist”, since they both subscribe to the categories of men and women as being somehow natural or innate and reinforce the binary opposition of woman and man (Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman”, 1905).

Therefore, Wittig’s stances differ from those of straight feminists majorly in their consciousness and ultimate goals. For straight feminists, their goal is to wrest the world from the death grip of patriarchy and

transform the unequal power relations between men and women. Nevertheless, as a lesbian feminist, Wittig aims further to destroy the whole heterosexual system and fight for “a sexless society” (“One Is Not Born a Woman”, 1909). She seeks for the realization for everyone to exist as purely an individual, by destroying sex categorization and rejecting all theories based on it. Compared with the second-wave feminism that emphasized “sisterhood”, a collective strength accomplished through the solidarity of women and their common experiences of oppression (Hollows, 5), Wittig’s discourse attempts to make women singular by constituting them as individual subjects of their history (“One Is Not Born a Woman”, 1912). In her opinion, the internal motivation of lesbian feminists’ fighting is not for the victory of the abstract and imagined category of “women”; instead, they fight for themselves as individuals, which cannot be reduced to any class, social relation or other differentiating means.

However, what needs to be re-examined is whether Wittig’s claim, with the gesture of a radical disavowal of the heterosexual discourses, can really deconstruct the heterosexual ideology. At the end of “The Straight Mind”, Wittig argues that “What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians are associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual, economic systems. Lesbians are not women” (32). According to this argument, in Wittig’s opinion, woman is a social relation to man defined only in heterosexual system. Since lesbians are not heterosexual, they are not women. Nevertheless, as Jacob Hale points out, the concept “women” has multiple characteristics in the dominant culture, including “absence of a penis, presence of reproductive organs, having a gender identity as a woman” and so on (54). The thirteen defining characteristics of the category woman listed by Hale suggest that “woman” have meaning on plural levels, not only on social, cultural, economic and political ones, but also on biological and psychological ones. For example, in the case of transsexual experiences, the subject’s own gender identification is weighted more heavily than sexual orientation in deciding his/her gender role. Limiting “woman” only to a heterosexual category, Wittig simplifies the variety of ways in which people are gendered and neglect the subject’s internal motivation. The claim that lesbians are not women serves as a strategic discourse declaring

the rejection and deconstruction of sexual labels, but it provides little inspiration to articulate the intricate relationship between being a woman and being a lesbian.

As Wittig herself argues, the constitution of differences is an act of power of heterosexuality to “mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones” (“The Straight Mind”, 29). Similarly, her claim that “lesbians are not women” constructs lesbians as a monolithic category in opposition to “the straight mind” but offers little scope for giving consideration to the complexities and tensions within the lesbian group. When answering the question: “Are lesbians women?”, Hale states that “Some are, some are not, and in many cases there is no fact of the matter. There are many differences among lesbians as to which of the defining characteristics of women they satisfy” (56). Although the differentiation of butch and femme within the lesbian group is another form of the hetero normative frame, from another perspective, at least it manifests that lesbians also have different characteristics and cannot be reduced to one prescriptive definition. In Wittig’s claim that lesbians are not women, all lesbians are excluded from femininity and womanhood valued by patriarchy and heterosexuality, which marginalizes those that are willing to embrace their identity both as a lesbian and a woman. Hence, Wittig’s discourse tends to be another essentialist and exclusionary construction of the lesbian identity, and thus is once again entrapped in the mode of binary thinking of heterosexuality.

To conclude, in the overarching and ineluctable discourses of heterosexuality, Wittig’s radical claim denaturalizes the artificiality of the ruling sex/gender system and reveals the doctrine of differences which conceals the oppression of women by men. In contrast with the straight feminists, she aims further at the abolition of gender/sex categorization and the advent of individual subjectivity by virtue of reinterpreting the heterosexual language that “lesbians are not women”. However, her radical departure from heterosexuality risks simplifying the meaning of being a woman and constructing lesbians as a holistic category, which recalls the utopia and binary thinking that she herself criticizes. Furthermore, the impossibility to transcend the biologically “hetero-sexualized” body once again brings about the deadlock of gender liberation: is the deconstruction of gender/sex system another kind of construction and is it really possible to transcend gender roles?

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