CONCLUDING REMARKS

As feminism has evolved, theorizing has taken many different directions and forms. Feminist theory constantly reflects and recogititates on its own frameworks, its own ideas, changing its stances in response to the debates and challenges from other feminists and develops new concerns. Feminist theory, therefore cannot be totalizing or complete it is always open to challenges of women’s oppressed conditions which shape their lives. Feminist theory has moved away from universalizing statements towards the more particular and individual. It might be better characterized as a process of theorizing rather than a static and privileged body of knowledge. Feminist theory in a way implies that thinking is fluid and requires continuous modification.

Burdened with the weight of the western intellectual tradition that has been overwhelmingly masculine, structured around a sex/gender system, confined to the interests of men feminist philosophers found it necessary to deal with it critically. Beginning from the Greeks, through Kant’s and Rousseau’s overt misogyny, Locke’s defense of slavery to an almost universal presumption of European superiority, all force woman philosophers, to look beyond this attitudinal inclination. But the future can be equally treatening without a past to hold on to, a past that has been submitted to a thorough perusal with the purpose of avoiding any danger of repeating the mistakes planted on account of masculinist inclination.

Mary Wollstonecraft holds financial dependence and lack of education responsible for the despairing situation of women. John Stuart Mill in agreement with Wollstonecraft’s analysis committed himself to the cause of women’s emancipation. Feminist theory at this juncture sought to analyse the social and political conditions which shape women’s lives and to explore
philosophical understanding of what it means to be a woman. Feminists refuse to accept that inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned. In this context we have discussed Simone de-Beauvoir’s account. The Second Sex is a rich and complex work which draws upon literature, myth and religion, theories of biology, accounts of social and economic development, Marxism, psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy. De Beauvoir’s aim is to address the question ‘what is women?’ Her rigorous analysis uncovers and addresses the nature of the oppression and exclusion of women. She is responsible for promoting the idea that sexuality is not just ‘added on’ to human beings but plays a fundamental role in the meaning of an individual’s existence: that we are ‘embodied’.

De Beauvoir, rejects the accounts of sexual difference which subscribe to an ‘essential’ notion of identity, whether this is found in the biological differentiation of the sexes (male / female) or in the ‘eternal feminism’, an ideal ‘essence’ of feminine qualities. She rejects these accounts first because she sees individuals as dynamic, engaged in struggles towards freedom, and second because she fears that to suggest an ‘essential’ nature of woman will force women to be imprisoned back into the problematic identity of the oppressed. This identity is unacceptable for the ideals of existential freedom, and for feminist claims that women should have equal opportunities to engage freely in their projects in the world. Her overwhelming historical evidence points to the fact that, in general men possess such freedom and women do not.

De Beauvoir dissociated herself from the ‘biology is destiny’ position, and often comes close to rejecting biology altogether. If women are restrictively defined as ‘mere’ bodies or as mothers then such restrictions must be overcome, to ensure that women are able to realize their choices.
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Consciously. But de-Beauvoir does not always consider the extent to which she may be echoing a mesogynistic distaste for the female body in trying to overturn such determinations. ‘It has been well said that women have infirmity in the abdomen, and it is true that they have within them a hostile element – it is the species gnawing at their vitals’ (De Beauvoir, 1978: 62).

The complex accounts of ‘otherness’ that feminist in France have developed are indebted to de-Beauvoir’s analysis of woman as other. Feminists like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have sought to combine the forceful philosophical critique provided by drawing attention to poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory. With such an analysis French feminists draw attention to the self’s pursuit to displace the socially and culturally constructed nature of identity, implicating systems of language (symbolic and semiotike) in such a critique.

Rather than situating projects for change and emancipation within existing philosophical and cultural practices, Irigaray and Kristeva have subjected such practices to a sustained critique, asking questions about the very constitution of meaning and the nodal concepts of phallocentric discourse. Whereas de Beauvoir pressed women to exercise freedom and make choices to gain equality and access to the world of men. Irigaray warns that such equality would mean genocide for women. She held that women need an identity as women (and not as man) and that there should be womankind as well as mankind, Irigaray therefore suggests the creation of difference: ‘sexual difference’.

Irigaray, criticizes Beauvoir’s ‘other’, pointing that de-Beauvoir’s other is the ‘other of the same’, the necessary negative of the male subject all that he has repressed and disavowed (Irigaray, 1996: 54). Irigaray proposed an ‘other’
which would not simply be the ‘other of the same’, but a self-defined woman who would not be satisfied with sameness but whose otherness and difference would be given social and symbolic representation. Each sex would thus be ‘other’ for the other sex. Irigaray alleges that with such equality women can become subjects if they assimilate into male subjectivity for a separate subject position for woman does not exist. Irigaray’s goal is to uncover the absence of a female subject position, the relegation of all things feminine to nature or matter, and ultimately the absence of true sexual difference in Western culture. Irigaray’s philosophy of difference challenge philosophical assumptions that ultimately work against supporting difference. Irigaray for example, searches for a language of the female sex, repressed or censored by the hegemony of powerful men. Yet, if Irigaray’s intention is to find a language for the female sex, then she herself is subjecting the plurality of female voices and experiences to the hegemony of powerful women in culture. Le Doeuff argues that, by subscribing to the insights of Lacan and other masculinist writers, Irigaray fails to exercise many of the malignant effects of patriarchal thought. For Le Doeuff, if opening up discourse to allow for a plurality of viewpoints is the goal, then characterizing this as “allowing’ the repressed female voice to speak” is not the answer, for then we will only hear the speaking of a female voice that was created by men.

Le Doeuff accepts Beauvoir’s belief that women belong to a ‘group’ that cannot call itself a ‘we’, for it has no shared traditions, history, or even experiences of oppression. If woman cannot speak as a ‘we’, then how do we begin to theorize who women are, in their plurality? Le Doeuff responds that through collective work, collective projects, women might establish a community in which they support each other’s different needs and experiences.
All that is required of this group, forged through a shared desire to articulate and specify what women are outside of their relationship to men, is a ‘minimal consensus’.

Le Doeuff envisions feminists moving beyond either the ideological commitments of ‘equality feminism’ or ‘difference feminism’, for both subscribe to a particular model of politics. Perhaps women philosophers would revision philosophy not as synonymous with the viewpoint of famous male philosophers, but treat it as an ongoing endeavour that is open to different interpretations.

Julia Kristeva is the one to present the most sustained and powerful critique of the masculinist discourse. Through a complex intersection of theoretical perspectives, Kristeva develops her account of the material/linguistic forces which constantly disrupt identity, but are still located within the corporeal body. She suggests that identity is forged in a precarious and dynamic relation between various possibilities which can be accepted by the social and cultural meanings in the symbolic, and a force of negativity which is persistently engaged. First Kristeva emphasizes the critique of identity as a fixed or essential notion. Second, she identifies the constructed nature of meaning and sexuality, and the determining or restructure effect which existing definitions, stereotypes, and cultural roles can have in shaping identity. Third, she identifies a transgressive force which, if activated, can have a disruptive or revolutionizing effect on the social / cultural context in question. Her account of ‘the subject-in-process’ analyses the expense involved in subject formation, but it also hints at ways of subverting the dominant forms of understanding sexual difference. Kristeva negotiates essentialism by suggesting that subject ‘positions’ are being created and destroyed in the ongoing dialectic of
signification, and yet she refuses to diffuse subjectivity into merely an effect of language.

Regarding the question of the ‘other’ Kristeva argues that the overcoming of this ‘other’ realm can never be wholly successful, and it will continue to break through or corrupt into the symbolic order, where its effects will be felt bodily as pleasurable disturbances. Symbolically, such disruptions will resonate the pre-oeidipal and the feminine.

Kristeva is explicitly critical of Lacan for making the repression of the mother the condition of subjectivity. As she draws attention to symbolic connection of the chora with feminine or maternal notions, she is taking up pre-figured connections which identify the notion of an origin with a primordial mother: ‘this palce which has no thesis and no position, the process by which significance is constituted. Plato himself leads us to such a process when he call this receptacle or chora nourishing or maternal’ (Kristeva 1996: 64). However, the semiotic is in one important sense opposed to the symbolic: it is a site of resistance and disruption against which the organizaiton of the symbolic is to be compared. Kristeva takes up the equation of otherness with the feminine or maternal, in order to demonstrate the sacrificial process involved in identity construciton, and to suggest how the inherent violence might be made less painful or channelled in more creative ways.

Despite the alignment of otherness and the feminine for Kristeva, it does not constitute an alternative identity for women, nor does it allow a specifically female or feminine language. However, there are ways of maximizing its disruptive effects in order to combat the restrictive impact of the symbolic. She considers women as potential disruptive figures.
Despite Kristeva’s characterization of the subject as an open system, she did not commit to the denial of sexual difference or the ‘erasure’ of the subject. However, she does argue that the positionality which may lead to a metaphysical hypostatization of identity is to be found in femininist discourse too. This is perhaps what leads her to be harsh on the variety of feminist positions which do not coincide with her own; a fear of the reintroduction of the essentialist subject which has led women to ‘sacrifice or violence’. If this is a challenge to feminist theory, it is the kind of critique which feminist theory requires.

As of now Julia Kristeva is perceived to be a thinker who manages to negotiate the phallocentric discourse and sustain the tentions with acuity, a position which itself invites further responses and engagements with her writings.

It may however be suggested that feminist philosophy should not limit itself to one system or model, always leaving questions half answered or explored, awaiting contributions and opinions. Analysing the condition of women is not the subject matter of a particular group of thinkers, neither is it an object of study created by purely subjective concerns. It is an object of study that extends through history and across cultures. The truth of women’s oppression, however as Le Doeuff claims cannot be summed up in an abstract, general claim, but emerges through a plurality of voices that cannot be unified into a coherent logos.

Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to close with an observation made by Morwenna Griffiths:

Trying to reduce all our complexities of self-identity to relatively simple designs and simple stories, of the kind that mainstream philosophy tells, has resulted in inapproprait
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stories about ways in which to deal with our personal and collective dilemma. It is a simplicity which has contributed to sameness and oppression. Infinitely preferable is the variety, confusion, colour, hotchpotch, kaleidoscope, medley, motley and harlequin of patchwork selves. (Griffiths 1995: 19).