

Topic Page: [Kristeva, Julia \(1941 - \)](#)

Definition: **Kristeva, Julia** from *Key Terms in Literary Theory*

Bulgarian-born psychoanalytic feminist theorist (1941-) who trained with Jacques Lacan; her works synthesize elements of Marxist and psychoanalytic theories in exploring relations between language and the self. Major works translated into English include *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), *The Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), *Tales of Love* (1987), *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy* (1989), *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993), *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative* (2001), and *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010).

Summary Article: **Kristeva, Julia**

From *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*

One of few women working in modern Continental philosophy, Julia Kristeva is a significant contributor to poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, and feminist thought. Born in Bulgaria in 1941, Kristeva completed her doctoral thesis in Paris and established a career as an eminent writer, theorist, and literary critic in France and abroad. Her doctoral thesis was published as *The Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974 and secured her a chair in linguistics at Paris Diderot University. She is married to the French novelist and critic Philippe Sollers, and was a contributor to *Tel Quel*, a journal for avant-garde literary-philosophical thought, published by Editions du Seuil in Paris between 1960 and 1982. Fellow contributors included Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Kristeva's early work for the journal indicates her particular interests in semiotics, language, and linguistics, and demonstrate the strong psychoanalytical influences that later prompted her to train as an analyst. She was made a Chevalière de la légion d'honneur in 1997. Kristeva's writing is notable for yielding terms that have since been absorbed into the collective vocabulary of critical theory, such as "abjection." Her work is characterized by an ability to adopt and revise psychoanalytical terms in the service of structural and linguistic analysis. This analysis has extended from literature and language to issues of racial and sexual difference. Kristeva's early work sought to restore the body and psychic life to structuralist theories of language.

Revising Lacanian terms of analysis, Kristeva posited an idea of "semiotic" experience prior to Lacan's "symbolic" order of language, referring to the extralinguistic bodily desires and psychic drives which emerge in language through indicators like rhythm, tone, metaphor, and figure. For Kristeva, as for Lacan, collective social life is conducted through the symbolic order of language, which is rigid, strictly coherent, and authoritative. Kristeva notes that while language asserts the law of the father and is thereby coded as masculine, the semiotic is resolutely feminine and associated with maternal attachment. Infant induction into the symbolic realm of language is dependent on the suppression of the semiotic and entails a rejection of the mother. In her later work, Kristeva explores how the linguistically coherent subject is constituted by the "abjection" of this original maternal relationship, theorizing that the subsequent sexual discrimination and oppression of women both derives from and repeats this original abjection.

Kristeva observes that structuralist theories of language operate in a realm of signs without bodies, and she seeks to rectify this by positing an embodied subject that is prior to language and capable of infiltrating it. The preverbal semiotic is an attempt to reconnect the body and its drives with language, thereby disrupting the symbolic system of orderly referential signs. If symbolic language gives coherent

expression to consciousness, the semiotic might, by contrast, betray the unconscious, through more unruly or illogical expression. Here, Kristeva fuses Lacanian terms with Freudian drives. The semiotic offers the articulation of unconscious processes and unspoken desires, threatening to throw the orderly logic of the symbolic into disarray. Importantly, the body that is coextensive with language is capable of penetrating the illusion of authority that the symbolic maintains, and so retains the possibility of expressing radical dissent. In recalling the corporeality of speech, Kristeva observes how symbolic identifications are derived from the body. In *Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Black Sun* (1989) she explores the particular implications for the female body and its maternal identifications.

Maternity and infancy are topics to which Kristeva returns and which reveal her psychoanalytical debt to Melanie Klein. Infant echolalia she cites as an example of a semiotic, preverbal expression of demands and drives that are subsequently repressed with the development of formal language. Kristeva draws a parallel between the language acquisition of children and the prosodic forms of poetry, since both present language forms that are infused by psychic drives and bodily desires. For Kristeva, both the preverbal child and the poet offer semiotic expressions that derail symbolic order, engaging in imaginative and radical practices that contest the coherent authority of language. Poetry is particularly capable of semiotic signification, insofar as the creative manipulations of tone, pitch, cadence, rhythm, and metaphor express the unconscious. Poetry that is capable of subtle ambiguities, obscurities, and illogicality emblemizes the radically disruptive and transformative possibilities of the semiotic which challenges the rule-governed and syntaxed realm of symbolic language. Kristeva recognizes literature as a privileged place for the elaboration and disruption of meaning, and avant-garde art as a site of radical critique. Kristeva aligns semiotic expression to anti-authoritarianism, pitching a creative femininity against the rigid masculinity of the symbolic. She notes that in language the desirous semiotic is not separable from the orderly symbolic, and so discourse is neither purely masculine nor feminine but combined in complex identifications.

In her examination of female identification in particular, Kristeva interrogates the limited symbolic understanding of women and their sexual identities, observing how the discourse of maternity in the West elides women with their biological function. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva focuses on the complex mother-infant relationship, modifying the program of infant development delineated by Lacan where the mother-child mirror stage of ego identification ends with the child's severance from the mother and a lasting experience of lack. Breaking with Lacan, Kristeva depicts a pre-mirror stage and considers the implications of the infant's rejection from the mother's perspective. This "abjection," which refers to the negative reaction by which a subject severs themselves from an object with which they were in contact, is critical in the formation of infant identity. It entails an affective repulsion registered bodily; Kristeva offers as a memorable likeness the example of the skin of milk that is distasteful to contact with lips. Where Lacan specifies that the child's entry into language constitutes an accession to the law of the father, Kristeva notes that this moment is prefaced by the rejection of the mother. This abject mother, positioned as the inverse of the ideal father, is subject to a violently felt severance. Pregnancy itself, in which mother and child are bound and then severed, prefigures this abjection and preempts the symbolic interruption of a pre-Oedipal unity. Although, the mother's breast continues to exercise temporary maternal regulation, the pre-Oedipal child is en route to language and the law of the father which necessarily entails the supplanting of the mother. Kristeva observes that the primary identification engendered by a child's fantasy of a father initiates an ongoing symbolic logic of identity that requires the suppression of the semiotic order of body and drives, and the abjection of the maternal body.

The child struggling in its transition from dependence on a maternal body to independence finds the mother endangering the boundaries it seeks to delineate. The maternal separation they initiate leads either to hatred or withdrawal, and the maternal function never recovers from this abjection.

Although the maternal function leaves women abject, Kristeva notes that it also endows them with the radical potential of the semiotic body. The reproductive mother is the guarantor of social order in her generative capacity, and also presents its challenge as an affective and psychic body beyond the constraints of symbolic inscription. Although the child's original maternal-semiotic identification is supplanted by its entrance into a paternal-symbolic order of language, it is the maternal body which generates and continues to challenge that symbolic order. In *Black Sun* Kristeva connects female depression with the subjection of female sexuality which is reduced to maternity and permitted only a minimal position in the discourse of a limited symbolic order. The development from mother-child identification to father identification enjoins the child to accede to the laws of the father, which includes normative heterosexuality, and female sexuality is reduced to an especially limited register. Observing how the experience of maternal abjection limits and prescribes female identity to what is normative to sociocultural contexts and often contrary to desire, Kristeva explores whether female sexuality might be represented differently. In the limited register of a symbolic order, women are marginalized and unrepresented, but Kristeva notes that this marginality might itself offer resources for new imaginative identifications.

Kristeva discovers a creatively radical semiotic promise in marginalized female identity, but feminist thinkers rebuke her analysis since it connects femininity to transgression. They accuse her of reinscribing biological specifications of femininity in her analysis of maternity. While Kristeva sees the semiotic and symbolic orders of language as promisingly dialectical, to others her analysis is limitedly dualist. Kristeva herself is critical of feminism that pursues imitative phallic power, arguing instead for representations of difference that might transform the logic of the symbolic. Her feminism seeks to question the existing terms of analysis and to devise new terms that might bring to language the desire and drives of a semiotic body. Reflexively, she considers how women's contribution to the humanities in the twentieth century might itself pose a challenge to their identification in a symbolic order in which they are secondary. Her conception of a political imagination enabled by its excluded femininity indicates her optimism for critical work that takes place in a linguistic order that might also be capable of proliferating heterogeneity.

Kristeva's conception of heterogeneity broadens in her work on national and racial difference. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1994) she observes that both woman and foreigner are compelled to identify within the linguistic terms of the culture in which they exist, but neither can overcome the estrangement of their inalienable difference. Kristeva registers this twofold estrangement (gender and nationality) personally as a Bulgarian-born academic, French and female, owing to another mother tongue in the masculine order of a "master" discipline. She suggests that hostility to otherness derives from a refusal to recognize one's own strangeness, and is symptomatic of a compulsive commitment to a coherent symbolic order that is resistant to difference. Accepting the strange other enjoins one to recognize and integrate the strangeness one might find in oneself, just as an acknowledgment of this individual otherness might exercise a capacity to relate to different others. The "foreigner" who neither wishes for nor is capable of integration offers a new form of individualism, asserting an exilic logic beyond the limits of symbolic identification: belonging to nothing and to no law, they circumvent the law and posit themselves as a new law. In this regard, the stranger's radical stance reflects the native's own

desire to circumvent the limit of law. For Kristeva, this heterogeneity is the principle of a universal republic whose diversity defends against any absolute monarchic principle. The incorporation of the stranger follows the example of the Freudian unconscious which betrays to the subject its own barely discernable strangeness. The subject that can incorporate the foreigner recognizes their own foreignness and together they form a paradoxical community of foreigners reconciled to their otherness. For Kristeva, the otherness of the stranger is unraveled in one's own estranged psyche. Psychoanalysis that ventures into the strangeness of one's self cultivates an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. Femininity and foreignness are connected in Kristeva's conception of a heterogeneous production of difference which develops new versions of womanhood and nationality.

For Kristeva, dissidence is the function of the intellectual in political life. In her early essay "A new type of intellectual: The dissident" (1986 [1977]) she identifies three types: first, the rebel who attacks political power; second, the psychoanalyst, capable of transforming the dialectic of law and desire into a productive discursive contest; and last, the writer who experiments with the limits of identity and whose creative language might overturn, puncture, and proliferate ideas of normativity. Kristeva unites those rebellious, psychoanalytical, and writerly functions in her own work, adopting a critical approach to conceptions of sexual, racial, national, and linguistic identity. Language remains, for Kristeva, the means of articulating the diversity of identifications that are otherwise unnamed, unrepresented, or denied.

SEE ALSO: Barthes, Roland; Foucault, Michel; Freud, Sigmund; Klein, Melanie; Lacan, Jacques

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror* (trans. Roudiez, L.). Columbia University Press New York.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in Poetic Language* (trans. Waller, M.). Columbia University Press New York. (Original work published 1974.).
- Kristeva, J. (1986). *A new type of intellectual: The dissident*. In Moi, T. (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*. Columbia University Press New York. (Original work published 1977.).
- Kristeva, J. (1989). *Black Sun* (trans. Roudiez, L.). Columbia University Press New York.
- Kristeva, J. (1994). *Strangers to Ourselves* (trans. Roudiez, L.). Columbia University Press New York.
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Ecrits: A Selection* (trans. Sheridan, A.). Routledge London.

SHAHIDHA BARI

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Bari, S., & BARI, S. (2011). Kristeva, Julia. In M. Ryan (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of literary and cultural theory*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/kristeva_julia_1941

APA

Bari, S., & BARI, S. (2011). Kristeva, Julia. In M. Ryan (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of literary and cultural theory*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/kristeva_julia_1941

Chicago

Bari, Shahidha, and SHAHIDHA BARI. "Kristeva, Julia." In *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Michael Ryan. Wiley, 2011. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/kristeva_julia_1941

Harvard

Bari, S. and BARI, S. (2011). Kristeva, Julia. In M. Ryan (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of literary and cultural theory*. [Online]. Hoboken: Wiley. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/kristeva_julia_1941 [Accessed 20 October 2019].

MLA

Bari, Shahidha, and SHAHIDHA BARI. "Kristeva, Julia." *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Michael Ryan, Wiley, 1st edition, 2011. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/kristeva_julia_1941. Accessed 20 Oct. 2019.