

# Desire, sexuality and companionship : Reading *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* as an *écriture* feminine and gynocritical text

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Received on: April 05, 2026 | Accepted on: June 18, 2026 | Published on: June 30, 2026

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## Abstract

*Portrait of a lady on fire* (2019) by Celine Sciamma is a film celebrating the forbidden, erotic lesbian love and companionship. At the same time, it depicts how the non-heteronormative sex creates the sexual identity of the women. This essay attempts to read the politics of representation of sensuous love between two women who subvert the patriarchal conventions related to gaze and intimacy by expressing their love and desire. By this companionship, they assert their identities and rebellious subjectivities. According to Helene Cixous, *écriture féminine* is a kind of narrative written usually by women who oppose the phallogocentric language system. This kind of writing/ creation focuses on feminine sensibilities, experiences and desire. This movie uses the metaphors of silence, images, puns in order to portray their forbidden love. Heloise and Marianne challenge the binary between a subject and an object, a painter and a muse. They make love verbally and non-verbally justifying itself to be a poignant narrative of *écriture féminine*. On the other hand, this movie paints the world of women who happen to be in love with each other. This movie is also reads like a manifesto for celebrating the lesbian erotic companionship which is culturally- socially suppressed. Therefore, this movie highlights the sexual desire, the longings for intimacy between silenced bodies. This essay will also try to examine the aesthetics of love, companionship and desire from the perspective of Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism.

**Keywords:** Lesbian bodies, companionship, sexual desire, *écriture féminine*, gynocriticism, film.

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## Introduction:

Film is a mode of entertainment that generally produces a spectacle of emotions through the art of performances and by staging the illusion of reality in the audience's mind. Since the beginning of the existence of the film studies, the scholars and writers are inclined to dissect the socio-cultural-historical temperament of the movie by doing extensive theoretical research starting from Marxist analysis to the feminist and

memory studies. This essay demonstrates how a cinema, in this case, the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* captures the mood through the representation of a lesbian companionship along with memory and imagination and instills a certain kind of sensation within the audience. The audiences relate with the characters for the plot construction, cinematography and the subtle narrative and they cry in joy or in sorrow. This essay has demonstrated how this film narrative is

read from the theoretical perspective of Helene Cixous' Ecriture feminine and Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism. The implementation of these theories has enabled the readers to realize the significance of reading this film text under the lens of feminism only to understand the agency, autonomy and subjectivities of the female characters of this film. Feminist theory helps the readers to realize how women are oppressed in a heteronormative, patriarchal society and how they can raise their voices against exploitation. This film with the help of these theories fills up the research gap in the field of homosexual love and sexuality and how it should be celebrated positively.

### **Discussion:**

Generally, the society is heterosexual. Homosexuality is still perceived as an injury in the society. Bisexuality as a term was first utilized in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Foucault deals with the societal ideology where homosexuality is problematized. For him, sexuality is a historically constructed institution of power, discourse and bodies. It is perpetuated in order to maintain the status quo. His theory of sexual construction shows and discusses the rise of homosexual that gives birth to the gay and lesbian identity. He also depicts the forces that consider the homosexuality as abnormality and homosexuals are termed as dangerous individuals. Taking the reference of the sexual repulsion during the Victorian age, Foucault states that sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural origins. He prioritizes the roles of institutions that shape the notion of sexuality and its application. The homosexual was termed as a perverse or the deviant type, a suitable case for treatment. In western culture, sexuality is understood as 'Scientia sexualis' or as a matter of science rather a matter of pleasure. All individuals who were sexually active with others belonging to the same sex were labelled as

homosexual. In this case, *Portrait of a lady on Fire* is a rebellion and resistance for projecting female feelings, desire and companionship on screen.

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) an overtly sensational movie by Celine Sciamma celebrates the tale of a lesbian companionship that generates various kinds of emotions such as desire, solace, grief and empathy. Capturing emotions are a daunting task. This essay tries to examine the politics of representation of emotions caused by companionship, love and the nuances of desire through the silences. As it is a celebration of a story of lesbian companionship, it creates a safe cinematic space that comforts the lesbians, queer and other non-heteronormative partners. This movie provides solace to the wounds of the non-heteronormative entities received from the patriarchal society. Throughout the movie, one can detect tension, anxiety and conflict that get vanished into oblivion as the movie demands peace from the audiences.

### **Methodology:**

Helene Cixous, a French critic and writer has conceptualized ecriture feminine in her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." According to Cixous, Ecriture Feminine is a style of writing that challenges the phallogocentric language promoting the feminine voices and experiences. This narrative focuses on the female body and subconscious with the intention to demystify the masculine, patriarchal structure of the language. If we take a look at the theory of Elaine Showalter, an American critic, we can find the same kind of writing like ecriture feminine that promotes feminine sensibilities, subjectivities and experiences from a historical and sociological perspective. She has theorized this writing or creation as gynocriticism in her essay "Towards a feminist poetics." She examined the works produced by the female writers to study the female authorship and categorized into three

phases. The first phase is called the 'feminine' phase where the women writers copy the male literary customs and system. The second phase is entitled as 'feminist' phase where women writers assert their own identities and voices. The last is defined as 'female' as it creates a different feminist tradition celebrating self-discovery and freedom of the women. In this film, the female characters such as Heloise and Marianne go through the process of becoming a true 'woman.' Simone De Beauvoir believes that no one is born as woman. They become women by following and adapting the biased gendered roles which are socially-culturally-historically constructed. Therefore, gender is a construction and womanhood are a performance. Hence, the selection of these theories.

### **Female gaze and Portrait of a Lady on Fire:**

Borrowing the theoretical concept of female gaze by Laura Mulvey, it can be argued that this movie captures the growth of the companionship, its climax and fall from a psychological point of view. Mulvey in her essay has talked about the male gaze, voyeuristic pleasure and scopophilia and how the male audiences derive pleasure by looking at the sexualized bodies of women. This film debunks the conventional definition of male gaze and establishes the female gaze as it is directed by a female director. Female gaze is a concept popularized by Mulvey herself who redefined the very meaning of it and how it gives an autonomy on the female body and perspective. Female gaze does not reduce female bodies into sexualized objects. Instead, it glorifies them and makes them human. It is a detailed character study of Heloise and Marianne along with other women characters. Apparently, this movie is a story of a painter and a model and their forbidden erotic companionship. The painter paints the picture of her ladylove depending on her memory and imagination. There is an exchange of romantic gaze and that gaze gets interchanged

between two women. Though the movie shows the interplay of female gaze and desire, it does not depict the women bodies as the objects of desire. By asserting sexuality, desire and asking for companionship, this movie transforms the muse/model into an active subject who takes part in the game of love and companionship. In this case, companionship is a projection of emotion, enactment of the suppressed feelings and the performance of libido.

### **Silence, desire and enactment of companionship:**

As this film establishes the forbidden erotic love, desire of the lesbians or women, this section of the essay engages into a discussion of what it means to be an ecriture feminine text. Ecriture feminism is the self-expression of the feminine voice, feminine body, their sexuality and desire. Human bodies are the place through which patriarchy functions. The chauvinistic, aggressive male gaze only desires for bodies. But these bodies can transform themselves into the site of protest against the autonomy of patriarchy. The French Feminists like Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous and Monique Wittig have initiated their revolutionary approach to reciprocate their reactions against dichotomies. The idea of Ecriture feminine has propagated a completely different discourse of writing that deals with the women experiences out of their scars. The bruises interweaved in their bodies can be viewed as the subtle texts of power play and humiliation. The master symbol is the symbol of the phallus through which power of the hierarchical structure flows down. It controls the body, mind and psychology of the women to subjugate them. It is a way to liberate feminine sensibilities from the clutches and domination of patriarchal mode of expression with the aim of capturing sexuality, voices and desire through the metaphor of silences, pauses and imagery. Ecriture feminine is for women and is generally by women. There are some exceptions too. In this film, the director has

created a space for women who freely express their silenced, prohibited companionship, love, grief, joy, sufferings and sorrow. This film renders a voice to the voiceless souls who are assumed as 'other' and their 'abjected' bodies are the centre of taboos and myths. This film takes a refuge in the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice highlighting the female perspective. Directed by a female director, this intense movie comments on the female companionship, sexual relationship and other emotions attached to it. While doing so, the director deconstructs the stereotypical male gaze which usually reduces women bodies into the mere objects of desire. Instead, she employs her female, subversive gaze which breaks away from the conventional idea of companionship and love. For the use of rebellious, female gaze, the audiences find themselves in the crying mood as well as in the joyous mood. It is assumed that women bodies evoke out pity, sorrowfulness and grief. This movie gives a critical and aesthetic look at the concept of grief and solace. This movie does not end with a straightjacketed ending or meaning. Instead, it creates ambiguity, plurality which is a need to produce meaning in the context of non-heteronormative companionship. The name of the movie is also symbolic as it shows the intensity and volume of the erotic, sensuous love which deepens grief, solace, joy and sympathy. Fire symbolizes passion and, in this case, this passion is prohibited socially and culturally from blossoming into marriage. All the companionship is based on certain emotions. Without emotions, there does not exist any relationships, be it platonic or sexual. With the exchange of active gazes, the two female protagonists admit their companionship. This movie is a portrait of silence, mediation on feelings that are difficult to capture materially. Feelings are fluid, non-linear and complex so does the companionship of these two ladies. With the assertion of the love and romantic relationship, they are also asserting their identities. Therefore, this movie builds the

narrative of self-discovery and the rebirth of the spirits and identities which are supposed to be silenced. Cixous's ecriture feminine, revolutionary writing attacks the Lacanian symbolic language system and re-establishes a new relationship between 'self' and 'other.' This feminine writing is the revelation of female body along with its scars and wounds that are implanted and imposed on the bodies by the masculine discourses. She uses the myth of Medusa as she was cursed by the Goddess Minerva who turned her into a monster with a head of hair full of snakes and her gaze could transform anyone into stone. Later, Perseus killed her. Here, the brutal act of murder is an indirect way of silencing the voice of females. Freud in his essay "Medusa's head" states that the act of cutting off her head symbolizes the castration complex in males in the pre-oedipal stage. The male child fears the lack of phallus in his mother. Therefore, he rejects her and goes to his father and identifies himself with him. Taking this into further consideration, Lacan states that by identifying his own self with his father, the child enters into the world of masculinity that is run by rules. This is the symbolic world where the voice of mother or girl child has no place. From this position, boys acquire a different language and a girl child learns a different language. Thus, the language of women belongs to the pre-structured stage. Therefore, their utterances, words all are incompressible and pre-linguistic. In her essay, she unravels the beauty of the primitive, the sublimity of the marginalized body by subverting the misogynist texture of androcentric world. Cixous in her essay states that "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing." (Cixous) Women should express themselves by maintaining their own position. This language is free flowing. It is the revaluation of their suppressed voices or a way of uplifting the female from their passivity. In her essay, she also uses another term "the other bisexuality". Bisexual writing is feminine writing

that claims for the sexuality that can go for both male and female. Cixous asserts that “writing is a gesture of love.” (Cixous) She refers to the concept of “Third body” that means a new mode of writing that liberates feminine pleasure or desire by not submitting itself to the masculine rules but by providing to it a space that goes for the negation. In the movie *Portrait of a lady on Fire* celebrates the stories and erotic love of women and their voices become the language of protest. Mariann’s profession as a painter becomes a rebellious act whereas Heloise’s resistance for making her portrait also justifies itself as an act of protest. This film inserts new language of intimacy by using silences, pauses, metaphor, images, light and sound to criticize the phallogocentric language in terms of visual convention. Thus, this film embodies itself as an example of ecriture feminine text.

### **Gender as performance and how the film incorporates this idea:**

This section of this essay examines how the film incorporates Judith Butler’s philosophy of gender as performance. Judith Butler in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in phenomenology and Feminist Theory” has stated that “Acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”(Butler, 1990). According to her, gender is a fluid trait of identity that needs to be shaped and subverted and through performance, identity is formed. Heterosexuality is the conventional performance through which power is being channelized. It is our performance that constitutes our identities and selves. It is assumed that sex is biological and gender is constructed. Butler challenges this notion by demystifying the distinction between sex and gender. To her, “sex is a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies.” (Butler)

Therefore, sex is not static; it is in a process where regulatory norms materialize sex. Sex becomes a fiction and that fiction is central to the establishment of subjectivity. In the book *Bodies that Matter*, she states that “I neither proceeds nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within matrix of gender relations themselves.” (Butler) Butler therefore terms gender as “corporeal style” that has no relation to essential truths about the body but is strictly ideological. Therefore, gender becomes the script that we, the characters have to rehearse in order to play it or to reproduce it as the reality. This movie plants this concept of gender and the formulation of lesbian identity as performance from beginning to the end. That is why, all the non-heterosexual bodies find ‘solace’ as their struggles, stories have been told in this film through the characterization of Heloise and Marianne and their performative love.

Heteronormativity is considered as a default thing whereas the lesbians are considered as ‘others’ and ‘abnormal.’ The lesbian companionship destabilizes and denaturalizes the construction of genders, biological sex and the relationship between gender and sex. Like queer identity and politics, bi-sexual politics and identity arose out of the gay and lesbian political movements as well as the feminist movement. Queer is an abusive, derogatory term used for them who do not abide by the rules of the structure of the society. Performing queer is a resistance so does the lesbian love. It states that identity is not static. It destabilizes the notion of sexuality, identity and gender. The concept of the self is not a single identity but an agglomeration of multiple social practices. This movie attacks at the fragile gender roles as well as the heteronormative society which tell a male entity to be an active looker and a woman to be a passive object. Heloise and Marianne subvert the conventional positions held by a male painter and a female muse by engaging into a deep lesbian companionship which also

demands the active engagement of their female bodies and souls. Thus, this movie becomes a classic 'feminist' movie enabling itself to be a strong vocal about the longings and companionship between women.

### **Conclusion:**

The movie is set in Brittany in the eighteenth century. The movie centres on the lives of women in spite of any reference of male ones. Thus, the unique female bonding posits this movie as an Avant Garde film narrative that defies the patriarchal conventions of the society. The passionate relationship between the painter and her model subverts the ethos of hierarchical power structure and destabilizes the rigid binaries between subject and object. Simultaneously, the film tries to normalize the homosexuality or non-heteronormative narration. Through the characterization Of Marianne and Heloise, the interplay of glances and gazes is depicted through their mutual trust and respect.

At the end of the movie, the audience gets to see the fall of the forbidden love as it does not fruition into marriage. It also attempts to represent and experiment with grief attached to the loss of love. The audience also feels sympathetic as well as empathetic for the female characters. This movie embraces disruptions, discontinuity to promote the complications and complexity of companionship and any kind of feelings. This movie is a complete study on female psychology, unconscious and how they execute autonomy over their own bodies. Subversion and resistance go hand in hand. All the subversive bodies attempt to resist the conventions and existing authority. Celine Sciamma, the female director of the movie uses erotic as a power against subjugation. Through the representation of erotica, companionship, desire and feelings, the movie establishes the power of the female bodies. Thus, this essay analyses the politics of feelings and a lesbian companionship from the theoretical

perspective of ecriture feminine and gynocriticism.

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### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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The author/s declare/s no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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