

УДК 396.1

## Specific Nature and Applied Methodology of Gender Theory in Cultural Studies

**Natalia M. Libakova\***

*Siberian Federal University*

*79 Svobodny, Krasnoyarsk, 660041 Russia<sup>1</sup>*

Received 6.11.2009, received in revised form 13.11.2009, accepted 20.11.2009

---

*This article is about the urgent modern problems of the interaction cultural studies and gender theory. Separation of gender category and initiation of gender theory provided new opportunities for cultural and social studies. It is the author's opinion that modern Russian humanitarian science only starts to study gender methodology. There are two parallel trends in the Russian humanitarian science: study of the western experience and creation of Russian theories and fields of application for the gender approach. The book «Epistemology of the closet» by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky can be offered as example of the effectiveness of gender methodology applied to the study of cultural phenomena which is absolutely essential for the understanding of the specific character of modern diversified culture.*

*Keywords: «women's studies»; «cultural studies»; gender; «gender studies»; women's language; «queer identity»; Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky; «Epistemology of the closet»*

---

**Point of view.** Modern development of research trends in the world and, in particular, Russian humanitarian science is mostly accounted for by changes caused by the so-called «anthropologic turn» which is characterized by a turn to the complex study of a human being and culture in their integrity. Changes in the scientific perception of a human being caused by the «anthropologic turn» appeared as an attempt to find the way out of a complicated situation identified by the great minds of the world as «the human crisis», «anthropological catastrophe», «death of culture» and «end of history». «An integral individual» has been out of the scientific analysis for a long time. There has been no place for him/her in the system of social sciences and the humanities. Until recently even anthropology

was considered a science focusing only on natural dependence of a human being. «The anthropologic turn» has affected all spheres of anthropology, changed the research trends and made the problem of a human being the central point and the main subject for scientific research, thus marking the transit from sociocentrism to anthropocentrism. The following anthropologic trends appeared in the sphere of socio-humanitarian research: *phenomenology, personalism, existentialism, structuralism, hermeneutics, and cultural anthropology.*

One shall particularly note «cultural Studies» based on the idea that modern world is a total multiplicity: class, racial, ethnic and cultural (principle of «multiculturalism»). Within the frameworks of cultural studies this research

---

\* Corresponding author E-mail address: trognonulia@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> © Siberian Federal University. All rights reserved

trend considers a great number of objects and phenomena that have not been studied before as they were considered marginal. These are such cultural phenomena as ethnic and sexual minorities, pop music, various types of sexual behavior, identity etc.

While «cultural studies» are focused on urgent modern problems, «culture» in the Russian science is the subject of culturology traditionally based on logicism originating from G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy, and very much theorized and apart from practical research, the study of phenomena from real cultural environment. Here Russian science shall follow the world trends of scientific development caused by «the anthropologic turn». Covering a wide range of phenomena in modern cultural environment, «cultural studies» develop in the same way as gender studies formed on the basis of «women's studies». «Women's studies» are the result of a powerful social women's movement called «feminism» – which is a women's movement on behalf of their rights in various spheres, opportunity to actively manifest women's spiritual creativity. Separation of gender category and initiation of gender studies provided new opportunities for cultural and social studies. Gender is constructed and considered as a stratification category interconnected with other categories such as race, ethnos, class, and age.

Gender studies initially appeared and developed in American science and education sphere (1960-1970). Later on, in 1980's such research programs appeared in West-European science. In the 90's of the XX-th century gender studies became wide-spread all over the world.

The prevailing traditionally men's discourse is criticized within the frameworks of gender studies (Yu. Kristeva, H. Cixous and L. Irigaray's concepts)<sup>1</sup> with all the researched phenomena,

regardless of their natural original properties and qualities, being fixed in the language and transferred into strict logical intelligible systems. Women's style of scientific research and women's expressive language is developing in response to that. H. Cixous calls utopian expressive language «women's writing» as contrasted to «men's» rational writing. L. Prigarey speaks about a principal change in symbolism – from monosemantic «phallic» to polysemantic «vaginal». The diversity of terms accentuates in different ways new specific understanding of the language with no central terms forming the basis of hierarchy. Yu. Kristeva believes that marginal feminist writing can change the existing «colonial» pattern. Thus, scientific style of presentation is being developed fixing static- and monosemantic-definitions-rejecting approach to the world. New «multicoloured» vivid women's language free of rigid patterns of strict logic is formed and firmly established in opposition to the traditional men's discourse based on strict logic where all phenomena receive a fixed monosemantic assessment such as «black» or «white».

**Example.** In the last decade of the XX-th century Russian human studies were characterized by the so-called «culturological boom», an increased interest in various western theories and studies in the sphere of philosophy, culture and other disciplines. Gender studies were also involved into this process, but it is an objective fact that Russian science was falling behind in this sphere. One cannot ignore certain achievements in the study of the conceptual field of gender studies (Gender Studies Centres work in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Tver and Saratov, research carried out, scientific works being published) but still modern Russian science sometimes considers such research as marginal<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Postl, *With Freud and without Freud /Sex. Gender. Culture.* German and Russian studies, M.: Russian State Humanities University, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Gender Studies in Russian and the CIS. Who is who.* Reference book. – Compiling editor Zoya Khotkina. M.: Documentation Centre Women's archive, 2000. – 160 p

E.g. Analyzing «Epistemology of the closet» by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, a famous feminist, O.V. Timofeeva<sup>1</sup>, Russian philosopher, asserts that the topic of homosexual identity Kosofski's work is devoted to is absolutely irrelevant for the Russian scientific environment. Timofeeva called her review «Mysteries of an empty closet», thus emphasizing that «Epistemology of the closet» in her opinion is absolutely senseless «empty» work.

As for the Russian higher education, only few universities offer courses connected to gender studies trends. Gender theory is present in the university curriculum mostly as author's or elective courses. Russian researches point out that modern Russian humanitarian science only starts to study gender methodology. The open situation has given rise to two parallel trends in the Russian humanitarian science: study of the western experience and creation of Russian theories and fields of application for the gender approach. Another peculiarity of gender studies understanding in the Russian science is also worth mentioning. Gender theory is surely connected to the women's studies and feminist theory, but these theories are not identical, each having its own specific features. However, the fact that gender theory in Russia has developed on the basis of the feminist theory is very important and urgent, because feminist theory in Russia is still a theory and has not caused any significant changes in a traditionally patriarchal Russian culture.

Following the trend of women's studies gender studies give an opportunity to analyze various directions of women's activity and their importance in all spheres of social life as well as make certain issues that have been out of scientific research, concealed or ignored urgent: racial, ethnical and sexual minorities' problems. Feminist and gender studies are one

way or another connected to the issue of identity identification, analysis of social inequality and personality identity connection, social status dependence upon the person's gender and sexual identity.

The expanding research field of gender studies is covering new edges of identity which results in appearance of new terms. The term «queer identity»<sup>2</sup> was first introduced by Tereza de Lauretis meaning «odd» and «eccentric» identity in order to define a complicated concept of women's homosexuality. This term became widely used in feminist theory in order to define «odd» and «eccentric» identities, not only homosexual but all modern identities that are out of the frameworks of the traditional gender dichotomy. The term «queer identity» appeared due to the development of the feminist theory, transfer to post feminism and further establishment of gender theory the subject of which is not restricted to one sex – female or male («women's studies», «man's studies»), or two sexes, but is restricted to minimum five sexes: female, male, heterosexual, homosexual, and transsexual.

Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky is one of the most influential and prominent theorist of the modern feminism (T. de Lauretis, J. Butler, E. Grosz)<sup>3</sup> who dared to outrage the society by extraordinary and queer topics of her research and extraordinary approaches. Modern female-thinkers are turning to the study of real cultural phenomena, address urgent issues connected to sexual and gender identity. The book «Epistemology of the closet»<sup>4</sup> by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky was published in 1990 and translated into Russian in early 2000's. Researchers assess «Epistemology of the closet»

<sup>2</sup> The term «queer» (English queer – odd, strange, other) throws back to gay and lesbian studies which appeared and were spread in the West in 1970-1980's.

<sup>3</sup> I. Zhrebkina Feminist theory of the 1990's: problematization of women's subjectiveness/Introduction to gender studies / SPb.: Aletheia. – 2001

<sup>4</sup> Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, Epistemology of the closet /M.: Idea-Press, 2002

<sup>1</sup> Timofeeva, O.V., Mysteries of an empty closet //New Literary Review, 2003 – No. 64

as a very important step in the development of gay-theory facilitating the establishment of queer-theory and negotiation of dead-end of ideological and political pseudo-neutrality in the vast sphere of humanitarian sciences.

Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky defined modern culture as homophobic and on the basis of this axiomatic statement considers the definition of male homosexuality to be one of the major problems of the XX-th century in «Epistemology of the closet». The author refers to literary works, analyzes them, distinguishes and articulates homosexual discourse in the sphere of western culture. Kosofski specifies two approaches to the definition of importance for the problem of homo/heterosexual characteristics: minoritizing and universalizing. The first approach treats a problem as a problem of a certain minority, whereas the second approach treats the same problem as inevitably important for all people. Problem consideration on the basis of these two approaches can also be extrapolated to the understanding of other problems regarding not only sexuality. The analysis of literary works (by Wilde, Nietzsche, Melville, Proust and Henry James) is based on the objective axiomatic facts appealing to which Kosofski gives grounds and proves her point-of view.

It is an objective fact that people differ from each other. On the one hand this fact is not denied and is confirmed, but on the other hand a number of problems and complicated issues arise here, including those regarding cultural, social and self-identification, as well as the absence of a clear system of criteria and features on the basis of which one could define and classify these differences. The most widely-used principle to distinguish the peculiarities of human-beings is as follows: «naturally occurring-cultural», «natural-unnatural». Analyzing such binary combinations Kosofski calls into question binarisms established in the western culture and

proves their invalidity. She criticizes the widespread understanding of everything cultural as «only cultural», as contrasted to natural, biological, supposedly easy to change and amend in the necessary «right» way. Kosofski analyzes gender inequality problem as typical for the human culture, that is unnatural quality with no biological foundation and thus changeable. By this statement widespread among many researchers-feminists Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky criticizes the careless attitude to culture as flexible and easy to change. Studying such dichotomous pairs as culture—nature, activity – passivity, sense – feelings, spirituality – corporeity Kosofski defines the peculiarities of perception of these oppositions and their role in culture. She is interested in the fact that the content of these dichotomies is compared with the content of «man-woman» dichotomy. In this case culture, activity, sense, and spirituality are considered «men's» elements, and nature, passivity, feelings, and corporeity are considered «women's» elements correspondingly. Kosofski proves that firstly, the abovementioned dichotomies considered as a matter-of-course truth are formed under the pressure of ideals and values of the traditional patriarchal culture. Secondly, the researcher points out that the comparison of the above-mentioned dichotomies and the «man-woman» dichotomy can lead to a wrong understanding of the components of these dichotomies. Within the frameworks of the problem under consideration Kosofski does not consider the following oppositions as equal: natural-unnatural, heterosexual – homosexual, normal – abnormal. Here she calls in question the established «equalities»: natural = heterosexual = normal and unnatural = homosexual = abnormal. The author believes that such an approach dividing people's identities into «right» – «wrong» and «natural» – «unnatural» is unacceptable and is a violation of human's rights as it violates the right of a person to be as he/she is. In this respect

Kosofski touches upon the problem of tolerance in modern society consisting of many different individuals and being a synthesis of the variety of cultures, subcultures etc. «Epistemology of the closet» reveals a clear anti-homophobe approach. The author emphasizes that it is unacceptable to depress people because of their «unnatural» sexual identity as well as on the basis of gender, race, nationality, age, physical defects etc.

Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky also touches upon such a problem as terminological tension urgent for the whole gender theory. The researcher differentiates between sex, gender, sexuality and sexual intercourse<sup>1</sup>. She also makes distinction between feminist, gender, gay/lesbian and anti-homophobe studies. Gender is considered an analytical core of feminist gender study, and sexuality is an analytical core of gay/lesbian anti-homophobe studies.<sup>2</sup>

The central categories in Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky's research are «*the closet*» and «*coming out*». The author reviews the meaning of the term «closet» in all its complexity and multiple aspects, analyzes all the possible meanings of «the closet» in culture starting from a secret room and treasure house to a wild animal's den and sewerage. Such a polysemantic concept reflects to the full extent all the inconsistency and complexity of the problem under research. Kosofski treats «the closet», first of all, as a space for some secret, any secret connected to self-identification (gender, race, ethnos, religion, sexuality etc). Such generalization of «the closet» polysemy gives great opportunities for understanding of the homophobe problem of modern culture and definition to homo/heterosexuality. The uniqueness of human identity and ego shall be considered as a personal secret problem or as a

value or treasure. The author sees the solution in «the coming out» – the exit from the closet, that is through recognition of the right of a human being for self-determination and freedom in understanding of his/her identity. However it does not require taking all mysteries and secrets out of the closet. It is enough to recognize the right of each individual to expressly demonstrate his/her identity, on the one hand. On the other hand, a person needs to transfer his/her «closet» mentality and become free of «the closet» and all mysteries and secrets connected to it. Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky proves that «the closet» exists due to cultural values and ideals and «the coming out» is a bold and strong move in culture development that implies the review of traditional generally established standards and mechanism for personal identification and prevailing right of a human being (but not social and cultural pressure) for self-determination. It is worth mentioning that «the closet» category is not a notion or term in the usual sense of a definite form for certain complete knowledge. «The closet» is more likely a developing image, vivid and dynamic which can be changed and filled with various shades of meaning and all possible sense nuances. It is a perfect example of the new scientific language developing within the frameworks of women's studies as opposed to the traditional discourse formed by the patriarchal culture on the basis of rationality and logics. Women's studies, in particular Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky's work, show that there are such phenomena the study of which requires introducing amendments into the scientific language. The author insists that it is impossible to express all knowledge about the diversified, dynamic and procedural reality with the help of strictly fixed schemes of rational notions and logical categories. Women's studies establish the principles of modern science that make account of not only men's but also women's

<sup>1</sup> Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, *Epistemology of the closet* /M.: Idea-Press, 2002

<sup>2</sup> The same p. 38

experience and idea of the world as well as form a new discourse covering rationality, sense and intuition.

**Conclusions.** Thus, women's studies solve a philosophic problem regarding the ways and genuineness of cognition with the help of sense or feelings, suggest a mixture of approaches and simultaneous rational and sensual study. In general, the importance of «Epistemology of the closet» by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky is not restricted to the contribution to the study of social homophobia and definition of male homosexuality. The research conducted by the author demonstrates the effectiveness of gender methodology applied to the study of cultural

phenomena which is absolutely essential for the understanding of the specific character of modern diversified culture.

Methodology worked out by gender researches provides all necessary tools for the study of identities' variety which, in its turn, allows to understand and recognize the variety of equal components and to reach mutual respect between men and women as well as develop tolerance in relations of various races, ethnoses, religious confessions and sexual minorities. Taking into account the peculiarities of the Russian situation, gender approach and methodology is essential for understanding of the specific character of modern Russian cultural phenomena.

### References

- Alchuk, A. The woman and visual signs. – M.: Idea-Press. – 2000. – 280p. (in Russian)
- Andrew S. Jacobs The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography// Edited by Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller J Am Acad Relig, March 2007; 75: P. 185 – 188. – <http://services.oxfordjournals.org>
- Bredihina, L.M., Dipuel, K., The Gender theory and art. The anthology: 1970 – 2000. – M: «The Russian political encyclopedia», 2005. – 592p. (in Russian)
- Culture and culture studies: dictionary. / Ed. A.I. Kravchenko. – Moscow, Catherineburg, 2003. – 928 p.(in Russian)
- Culture Studies. Encyclopedia in 2 volumes. Vol. 1. – Moscow, 2007. – 1392 p.(in Russian)
- Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, Epistemology of the closet / University of California Press, 1990. – 258p.
- Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, Epistemology of the closet /M.: Idea-Press, 2002. – 272p. (in Russian)
- Gender and language / Ed. A.V. Kirilina. – M: Language of slavic culture, 2005. – 624p. (in Russian)
- Gender and Material Culture in Historical perspective / Ed. Moira Donald and Linda Hurcombe. – N.Y., 2000. – 216p.
- Gender and society in history / Ed. L.P.Repin, A.V.Stoganova, A.G.Suprjanovich. – SPb.: Aletheia, 2007. – 696p. (in Russian)
- Gender in Research. Research in Gender / The Coordination for Gender Studies in Denmark. – Copenhagen, 2003. – 72p.
- Gender Studies in Russian and the CIS. Who is who. Reference book. – Compiling editor Z. Khotkina. M.: Documentation Centre Women's archive, 2000. – 160 p (in Russian)
- Gertrude Postl, With Freud and without Freud // Sex. Gender. Culture. German and Russian studies, M.: Russian State Humanities University, 2003. – P.33 – 76 (in Russian)
- Introduction into Gender Studies. Part 1. A Reader. // ed. by I. Zhrebkina. Kharkiv: KCGS; Sankt Petersburg: Aletheia, 2001. – 708 p. (book series Gender Studies, in Russian).

Introduction into Gender Studies. Part 2. A Reader. // ed. by S. Zhrebkin. Kharkiv: KCGS, Sankt Petersburg: Aletheia, 2001. – 991 p. (book series Gender Studies, in Russian).

Introduction into Gender Studies. Part 3. Sillabi of North American and West European Universities.// ed. by S. Zhrebkin. Kharkiv: KCGS, 2001. – 412 p. (book series Gender Studies, in Russian).

Katz, K. Gender, wages and discrimination in the USSR: a study of a Russian industrial town // Camb. J. Econ., July 1997; 21: p. 431 – 452. – <http://services.oxfordjournals.org>

Lewis Jill. Gendering Prevention Practices. – Oslo, 2003. – 51p.

Lindsey L.L. Gender Roles. A Sociological Perspective. – New Jersey, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005. – 491p.

Marriott, D. 15 Black Cultural Studies // Years Work Crit Cult Theory, 2006; 75: p. 274 – 282. – <http://services.oxfordjournals.org>

Oakley Ann. Gender on Planet Earth. – Cambridge.: «Polity», 2002. – 291p.

Timofeeva, O.V., Mysteries of an empty closet //New Literary Review, 2003 – No. 64

Usmanova, A. Gender problematics in the culture theory // Introduction into gender researches (part 1). – Kharkov, SPb: Aletheia. – 200 – 708p. (in Russian)

Werndly, A. Cultural Studies: General // Years Work Crit Cult Theory, 2001; 8: p.35 – 41. – <http://services.oxfordjournals.org>

Yingling, T. Sexual Preference/ Cultural Reference: The Predicament of Gay Culture Studies // Am Lit Hist, 1991; 3: p.184 –197. – <http://services.oxfordjournals.org>

Zdravomyslova E., Temkina A. Institutionalization of Gender Studies in Russia: Issues and Strategies // Gender in Teaching and Didactics / Frankfurt: Perelang, 2003. P. 161-176.

Zhrebkina, I. Subjectivity and gender: the gender theory of the subject in modern philosophical anthropology. – SPb.: Aletheia, 2007. – 312p. (in Russian)

Zhrebkina, I. «Read My Desire...» Postmodernism. Psychoanalysis. Feminism. – M.: Ideia-Press, 2000. – 256 p. (in Russian).

Zhrebkina, I. Feminist theory of the 1990's: problematization of women's subjectiveness/ Introduction into gender studies / SPb.: Aletheia. – 2001 (in Russian)