

Marzena Adamiak<sup>1</sup>

## Wherever One Wants to Go. Rosi Braidotti's Concept of a 'Nomadic Subject' and Its Philosophical Possibilities

Feminism is also the liberation of women's ontological desire to be female subjects: to transcend the traditional vision of subjectivity as gender free, to inscribe the subject back into his corporal reality.

Rosi Braidotti (2011: 272)

The ideas embedded in Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity, understood as a coherent and rational identity, have established a universal perspective for a long time. Today, this outlook is being questioned by the experience of difference. The voices of minorities demanding acceptance and representation, both in social practice and in theory, have become more audible. But while theory allows for radical mental conclusions, the social and existential practices require positive theoretical solutions. A postmodern deconstructed subject does not constitute a sufficient basis for social activity or political identification. Therefore, a significant challenge for the feminist theory today is to find a form for the social subjectivity and, at the same time, avoid an oppressive and reductive category. Rosi Braidotti employed the Deleuzian figure of a nomad, and proposed a concept of a subject being resistant to postmodern fragmentation. She made a distinction between identity and subjectivity: identity is rooted in the unconscious, while subjectivity is conscious and a source of political resistance. The resistance is not due to stronger foundations, in comparison to the Cartesian subject, but results from mobility and openness to the Other. Attempting to construct a clearly positive conception of a subject, Braidotti proposes 'a nomadic political project'. The question is: is it possible to put this idea into a social reality or do we have just another sophisticated theoretical concept?

**Key words:** feminism, feminine subjectivity, nomadic subject

---

<sup>1</sup> IFiS, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland; madamiak@ifispan.waw.pl.

## Introduction

My reflections in this paper result from thinking on the turbulences around the categories of identity and subjectivity in the contemporary philosophy and social practice. The turbulences have their source in the question: is it possible to build any subjectivity concept after the poststructuralist critique?

The poststructuralist critique, represented by the thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, or Judith Butler in her early works, concerned the concept of a subject as provided the Cartesian tradition and developed in the age of Enlightenment and modern philosophy. This concept of human subjectivity, understood as being aware, coherent and rational, has long established a universal philosophic perspective, but also a political and ethical one. After the moral decline of the World War II in Europe, however, these ideas were put into question as a possible source of violence and exclusion. According to poststructuralists, the classical philosophical categories, which possess the character of monuments, are tangled in dogmatism and fundamentalism, and we need to rethink them deeply.

The critical need to deliberate constantly over the foundations of our thinking and analyzing the words that we use, levels out a different philosophical tendency: the tendency to climb to the highest peak of the Universe and embrace the Reality with a comprehending glance, which is as enticing as it is dangerous. And it has been so since – as poststructuralists point out – the thematization itself constitutes the product of thinking based on hierarchization. Describing, defining, categorizing, and even establishing names – all of these actions lead to designating those ways of thinking that we see as proper, while rejecting others. Following this direction, we – who we are and who we believe to be – our subjectivity, are a product resulting from our collection of pieces of the world and recognizing them as our own, while rejecting others (Foucault 2005: 353–354).

Thus, as much as the categories like ‘subject’, ‘identity’, ‘woman’, ‘gender’, ‘culture’, ‘nature’, etc., constitute a certain kind of thematization, and, on the one hand, assure a certain type of identification, and allow us to classify our thinking and action, while on the other – confine us to it. The level of our acceptance of the said identifications usually depends on whether it entails any privileges, or not. If we are faced with the latter, we deal with discrimination and exclusion.

From this point of view, the struggle with exclusion is one of the most difficult human undertakings, as it is a fight with one’s own thinking, with its deeper structure. It boils down to the question: how can we include without excluding at the same time? This question brings to the surface the irreducible aporia of the discourse on exclusions. The aporia that manifests that a struggle against violence invariably causes violence of another kind, that the bizarre mechanisms that drive human reality always strive towards maintaining a certain type of homeostasis based on the production, processing and relocation of the centre and the margins.

The resulting theoretical impasse is also visible at certain stages of activity of the emancipatory movements, forcing them to revise their assumptions constantly. It is especially important in the case of feminism. The process of waves occurring one after another shows how the approach of female theoreticians of the movement evolved with regard to the category which lies at its very foundation, namely the category of a 'woman'. In this paper I consider the concept of a feminine 'nomadic subject' developed by the European feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti as a possible solution to the problem described above, as well as an interesting and important voice in the debate on modern subjectivity.

### Feminist question about subjectivity

A 'woman' initiated feminism, recognised it and experienced the oppression resulting from the social consequences of representing the female sex. The first postulates connected with the right to education, work and vote, seemed to represent the interests of all women. The so-called 'unity of women in the fight against patriarchy', however, proved to be doubtful. The reduction of experiences, needs and hopes of all women to a common denominator of belonging to the female sex, turned out to be oppressive in its nature. That is why the majority of feminist theories turned towards post-structuralism. The central category of the feminist analysis, the category of a woman, was problematic from many points of view, e.g. the intersectional approach or postcolonial feminism. The identification connected with the race, class or sexual orientation, may generate differences in the social status and have a great effect on the quality of life, to a much greater extent than being limited to representing a particular sex (hooks 2000: 15–16).

Thus, the exclusive practices within feminism were a consequence of adopting by the movement certain ideas reflecting the reality in which a particular group of women lived and experienced a specific form of oppression, while, which is also significant, it was not subject to other forms. Therefore, the question is whether the existence of feminism as an equality movement based on the category of a woman, is still justified? If not, does feminism, as scattered voices of numerous groups of interest, cultures and worlds, have a sufficient political impact? Is it still feminism?

All of these questions are the result of turbulences around the category of a subject, whose Cartesian universalistic countenance, which had been carved into the corner stone, became replaced with a number of mirror reflexes. The poststructuralist answer to this problem was the deconstruction of the existing concepts of a subject, and the postulate of the inability to develop a conceptualization of subjectivity that was not likely to become an oppressive category. Following that, the first hardship in the philosophy of 'the feminine subject' stems from positioning feminist theories with regard to the tradition of concept and subject itself, and therefore, questioning the need of its construction as strictly masculine.

But there is a problem – as Rosi Braidotti points out – that the deconstruction of a rational subject that has never truly existed in its feminine form, is a misguided action (Braidotti 2011: 268).

It is therefore justified to search for a feminine subject, which, however, entails yet another problem, namely, bringing the search down to the ‘irrational’ and ‘chaotic’ reality of a body which results from interpreting rationality as masculine. As much as this kind of reality is worth attention and the discussion on carnality within philosophy is extremely valuable, the theoretical consequences of assuming this option prove to be pernicious to feminism in the long run. By rejecting a rational subject, women risk the omission of an important stage in the construction of identity, namely, the one based on gaining power and the sense of empowerment, if these are in fact the privileges resulting from being a rational subject.

Therefore, it turns out that it is not only necessary to establish the feminine subject in defiance of the post-modern tendencies, but also to restore the concept of rationality within the feminist theory and practice. As it is presumably required to restore also other concepts that are ‘traditionally’ attributed to masculinity, the next trap that Braidotti notes is the ‘feminization of thought’ – only apparently appreciating women (2011: 267). The ‘feminization of thought’ is based on dismantling the powerful, strong and rational masculine subjectivity with the help of feminine gentleness and sensitivity. And this took place at an unfortunate moment in history, when women were about to reach out for the discourse, rationality and power. Meanwhile, these concepts became suddenly discredited and, along with their carrier – the masculine subject, eliminated from having their share in contemporary humanities. Thus, as much as fragmentation and dispersion may constitute a new experience and indicate a creative transformation for the masculine subject, in relation to women this position is historically founded: in their case, a transformational movement would be the one faced in the opposite direction – towards the subject.

The problems with the feminine subject and the notion of a ‘woman’ are still present in the global feminist debates, and require the responses from philosophy of subject that would not be entangled with the commonly held cultural stereotypes of femininity. By searching for its place in the pantheon of philosophical categories, ‘femininity’ perhaps is the reason to assume that the experience of a sex is a stronger building material for identity than the experience of being the so-called ‘human’. That is why it is so important to emphasise that a woman as a ‘figure of postmodern subjectivity’ is not identical with a feminine subject, nor is a woman as a subject. What is required is a feminine subject that does not constitute an extrapolation of a masculine process of subjectivity, a simple reversal of the vector of phallogocentric culture. In this way, the thinking about feminine subjectivity perhaps would avoid the pitfalls of postmodernism.

## Braidotti's answer

To confront the paradoxical condition of the subjectivity concept, the majority of authors attempt to tread a path between the classical Cartesian *ego cogito* and the poststructuralist 'lack of the cogito'. Rosi Braidotti, who represented the path in her work *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (2011, first published 1994), employed the Deleuzian metaphor of a nomad instead of the Cartesian metaphor of a building as a better definition of subjectivity.

The subject described here is a collection of diversified, non-linear developments and potentially conflicting experiences, an aggregate of variables, such as sex, age, race, social status or lifestyle. Therefore, it is impossible to indicate its unchangeable essence that would define it once and for all. The term 'woman' is a code word, a key serving to initiate the social and symbolic practices, and not a definition of categories of beings.

The sphere of creation of a nomadic subject is the one located 'in between', with the metaphors of travel found in all kinds of transit zones and means of transport. The quasi-places in which one is no longer in a given place, but also not yet anywhere in particular. To a nomadic subject, any place is exactly like that, as it is developed 'in between': languages, cultures, races, sexes, bodies, and ways of thinking (2011: 47–49). However, it is mainly the sphere 'between oneself', which requires the recognition of the polyphony of one's own existence without the need to introduce a symbolic hierarchy into the structure of subjectivity, like Cartesianism did. According to Braidotti, a subject may constitute an absolute monarchy or a deep democracy for itself, this is a question of choice, political determination.

The identity, as Braidotti writes, is a retrospective concept based on the traces from the places in which we have already been, the trails of memories, the codes that we used. A nomad does not succumb to the temptation to settle down in one of those places and promote it to something more than merely a trace.

To a proper Cartesian subject this option is unacceptable, and by transferring these considerations to the sphere of modern politics, we may observe a great resistance towards a multicultural indeterminacy on the part of defenders of the 'mother tongue' and one's own land. "We are all epistemological orphans – Braidotti says – and the ontological insecurity we suffer is our unavoidable historical condition. Afflicted by the melancholy which henceforth marks the end of this millennium, haunted by a feeling of loss, philosophy is no longer the queen of knowledge, nor is it the master-discipline any more. At the most it can claim the status of a merry widow, sadly trying to find her place in the new cynicism of postmodern society. As a famous graffiti on the Paris walls put it: «God is dead, Marx is dead, and I'm not feeling so well myself»" (1991: 2).

Braidotti notes that the process of democratisation, creating a new unionised European identity is not an easy transformation. It requires a profound modification, rebuilding of the structure of a subject and its relationship with the environ-

ment. What is important, this new cultural identity emerges more from the inner dynamics of a subject rather than from its external opposition towards others. A moving nomad is always different in the places where he or she arrives. Thus, the subject's stability may no longer lean on the thematization or reification of the other, nor the revelation. A nomad moves among the others as if they were 'his' or 'hers'. It is moreover necessary to make a distinction between a nomad and a migrant who moves to other places in order to settle down and reinstall his identity in its every detail. Also, nomadism is not based upon 'homelessness', it is rather an ability to make a home anywhere. A nomad is "a subject in transit and yet sufficiently anchored to a historic position to accept responsibility and therefore make [himself] accountable for it" (2011: 34).

A nomad constantly travels between cultures, languages and his or her own figurations, it is an ethical being which avoids relativism of what it would be like to be accused by the Cartesian subject. It is the awareness of multifariousness of the world that generates the ethical position, which does not involve the reasonable 'I' leaning over the Other, nor rejecting oneself for the benefit of the incapacitating otherness of the Other. It is the ethics based on esteem, exchange and sympathy, one that does not require great words and lofty ethical systems or, to quote: "the bubble of ontological security that comes from familiarity with one linguistic site" (2011: 43).

But the question is: does such a concept of subjectivity allow to avoid the regime of power? The whole story of an ethical, nomadic subject freed from the shackles of fundamentalism, transferred onto the contemporary social and political dimension, perhaps sounds like a wishful fable. Transit zones do not always offer the atmosphere of excitement connected with travelling, and the others do not always respect the otherness that we represent. The lack of the sense of belonging may be hell to those who do not travel willingly out of their curiosity of the world. The European integration may provide the opportunity to stretch the horizons of one's identity, but it may also induce the pressure to unify, with the term 'community' concealing the existing ethnocentrism and a different kind of exclusion. As much as the European community constitutes an area of nomadic travels, it sometimes imposes on migrants the need to change places.

Moreover, the discovery of new lands, the acquisition of other cultures and languages is also connected with violence. Deleuze refers to nomadic tribes as 'war machines' aiming at tearing away the goods provided by native tribes. While stepping against the political violence – as Braidotti writes – one needs to be aware of the dark side of nomadism. Therefore, the concept of a society composed of nomadic subjects is not a naïve tale of a paradise freed from violence.

Another question arises: why, then, do we prefer the violence of pirates than that of a regular army? Braidotti writes about her ambivalent attitude towards the nomadic violence. This is the violence we fear, as any other kind of violence, as we fear ourselves, the existence that we embody. But at the same time, in a sense, we desire it, because it carries a certain secret and the prospect of transformation. The

nomadic violence snatches us from our beaten tracks and, at times, we are grateful for it, since in our attachment to the system into which we are rooted, we would not find enough strength for it. And nomadism offers us the opportunity to go wherever one wants to go.

It is not an attempt to justify the violence of a nomad inscribed in the metaphor, but rather a realistic recognition of the fact that we live in the world of power relations, in the world of politics of desire which organizes our thoughts and experiences. While thinking about a model of identity, and thus the politics of dealing with oneself, Braidotti chooses the nomad identity as more authentic nowadays.

Moreover, Braidotti's concept is particularly interesting, because apart from the declarations of a need to seek for 'a new concept of the subject', it also offers a proposal of a working plan for the feminist nomadic thinking, based on three levels of sexual difference. The first level analyzes the differences between men and women, the second – among women themselves, and the third – the differences existing within a woman. Only such coordinates, as Braidotti sees it, make it possible to position a feminist nomadic subject as differentiated and non-hierarchical at the same time. Still, the concept of difference as such, similarly to other concepts coined throughout history, should be recovered.

Therefore, the essentialist connotations related to the concept of difference that provide an excuse to oppose its application in the feminist theory, do not have to be obvious and decisive. Contrary to the contemporary feminists' speeches against the sexual difference as inevitably heading towards the restoration of the metaphysics of the 'eternal femininity', Braidotti believes that the difference, as a revised term freed from the traditional context and not entangled in hierarchisation, rule, determination of the better and the worse side of things, could constitute the basis for a new identity project. Yet, at the same time, she does not want to give up the asymmetry. According to Braidotti, the sexual difference is a major reason of asymmetry and 'differently' does not mean 'equally'. A false notion of the sexual asymmetry emerged as a result of thinking from the perspective of the concept of 'gender', and particularly due to its institutional career as 'gender studies' (2011: 141). Moreover, the concept of 'gender' puts an emphasis on the social and material factors, whereas the 'sexual difference' opens the area of linguistic and symbolic references. And both these areas constitute significant fields of exploration of gender theories, they both shape and reveal the feminine experience. Meanwhile, the extremism present within these both approaches leads to reductionism and poses a risk of a wrongful understanding of essentialism. One of them may involve the deepening of social separation and reduction to 'what is feminine', whereas the other may unify the differences that occur on numerous levels and lead to a reduction of 'what is human'. In Braidotti's view, this impasse becomes unblocked in the situation when we reject the dualist way of thinking as a 'module of existence of patriarchy'. What is meant here is the classical dichotomy, such as 'nature-culture, active-passive, rational-irrational, masculine-

feminine', which cements the universalisation of a masculine subject and locks a woman in the position of the Other.

Thus, the nomadic project forces its way through the three levels of depiction of the sexual difference, but also integrates the three areas of thinking about the subject. It starts with the distinction on the ontological or existential level, goes through the political-social reflection and ends with the psychological analysis of 'I' in which the expression of longing becomes more meaningful. Therefore, the most significant determinant of the nomadic subjectivity seems to be processuality. What proves to be crucial are the desires and passions, the affirmation of life with its instability and variety. The multiplication of differences on the third level bursts the heavy categories from the first level and does not leave any doubts as to the second one. Braidotti writes: "It is about the ability to adapt and develop suitable navigational tools within the fast-moving techno- and ethno- and gender-scapes of globally mediated world. Against the general lethargy on the one hand and the rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism on the other, hope rests with a non-rapacious ethics of sustainable becoming: for the hell of it and for love of the world" (2006: 278).

### Closing remarks

To summarize the above deliberations, it seems today that post-structuralism, having fulfilled its critical role, does not respond to a certain irreducible existential need of a person to associate oneself with a somehow defined identity. That is why turning back to the positive definitions of identity is a clearly visible tendency in the field of philosophy today. Therefore, further theoretical challenge involves the establishment of a subject category with the entire poststructuralist awareness of the impossibility of making such a move.

The contemporary feminism attempts to cope with this difficult situation. It tries to respond to the need of the simultaneous deconstruction and recognition of a feminine subject, or its simultaneous creation, in such a way however, as not to endow it with a stiff, oppressive and reductive structure. A theoretically reckless project, which entails taking two steps back whenever one step forward is made, is to establish a new language, with the only one available now being the old one in which the distance makes it impossible to utter any truth. It is reckless, yet necessary. Hence, if we fail to see the habit of hierarchisation at the most fundamental level of thinking and speaking, we will only be shuffling the places of those who win and lose. As Rosi Braidotti said: "The point is to overcome the dialectics of domination, not to turn the previous slaves into new masters" (Braidotti, Butler 1994: 39).

However: is Braidotti's response satisfactory? Is the concept of a feminine nomadic subject a possible solution to the problem of oppressive tendencies of the matization?



It seems that the pillar of this concept is to go beyond duality towards processuality. This gesture should make it possible to establish a point of view based on difference, without the acceptance of relativism. This would mean that it is feasible to provide a category of subjectivity which would be socially and psychologically functional and not aspirant to universality. The theoretical abandonment of dualism is not an easy task, however, and requires a reconfiguration of the basics of thinking. Meanwhile, Braidotti, who criticizes the post-structuralism as a consequence of male thinking about subject, and searches for the feminine subjectivity that would not be just an inversion of the vector of phallogocentric culture, chooses the figure of a nomad that had been earlier proposed by Deleuze, undoubtedly one of 'the high priests of post-structuralism' (Braidotti 2011: 267). Thus, despite the threats from the poststructuralist perspective, she sees nomadism as a creative field of reference.

In summary, I am not fully satisfied with the outcome of Braidotti's work – it definitely still needs a deep rethinking of the mechanisms of constructing subjectivity – but I agree with her assumptions. It seems that, probably, the best way to overcome the mechanism of exclusion is to seek new categories outside the systems of dichotomies that regard processuality. Besides, nowadays we need subjectivity that is at the same time localised and culturally diversified. Even if 'a nomad' is ultimately not the best metaphor, we can use its philosophical possibilities in overcoming the Cartesian tradition. As Braidotti writes: "Resting on a nomadic understanding of subjectivity, I will attempt to de-pathologize and to illuminate in a positive light some contemporary cultural and social phenomena, trying to emphasize their creative and affirmative potential" (2002: 5).

## Bibliography

- Braidotti R., 1991, *Patterns of dissonance: a study of women contemporary philosophy*, transl. by E. Guild, New York: Routledge.
- Braidotti R., 2002, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti R., 2006, *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti R., 2011, *Nomadic subjects. Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti R., Butler J., 1994, *Feminism by Any Other Name. Interview. Rosi Braidotti with Judith Butler*, A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, vol. 6, no. 2+3.
- Foucault M., 2005, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London–New York: Routledge.
- Hooks B., 2000, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*, London: Pluto Press.