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Luce Irigaray's Concept of Sexual Difference: An Over-view of Its Psychological, Cultural, Philosophical and Civic Implications

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In the Introduction to her book *Thinking the Difference: For A Peaceful Revolution*, Luce Irigaray says:

I have never called myself simply a feminist, and I feel very little common ground today with a good many feminists, especially when it comes to the relationship between political theory and practice. In my view, it is not possible to give so-called feminist university courses without being concerned with women's freedom...In fact, women's liberation extends far beyond the framework of current feminist struggles, which are too often limited to criticizing the patriarchy, creating women's space, or demanding equality with men without proposing new values that would make it possible to live sexual difference in justice, civility and spiritual fertility. (xiv)

The bulk of Irigaray's writing has focused on the enumeration of a distinct, comprehensive and largely unrecognized difference between the two sexes. Whether it is works like *To Speak is Never Neutral, This Sex Which is Not One*, or clear-cut treatise like *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and *Thinking the Difference: For A Peaceful Revolution*, Irigaray undertakes in them a powerful study of this crucial difference between the sexes, pointing how patriarchal society overlooks/suppresses this vital difference, resulting in women's misguided quest for a certain equality. She dedicates a considerable amount of analysis towards the etching of this critical distinction between the sexes, claiming it as the key towards the much-needed restructuring of our world today. Irigaray asserts, "No world can be produced or reproduced without sexual difference. Everything is sexuante: plants, animals, the gods, the elements of the universe. ('The Three Genres', *The Irigaray Reader*, 149). A women's movement bereft of an emphasis on Sexual difference is shallow to Irigaray:

Demanding to be equal presupposes a term of comparison. Equal to what? What do women want to be equal to? Men? A wage? A public position? Equal to what? Why not to themselves?...Even a vaguely rigorous analysis of claims to equality shows that they are justified at the level of a superficial critique of culture, and utopian as a means to women's liberation. The exploitation of women is based upon sexual difference, and can only be resolved through sexual difference (*Thinking the Difference: For A Peaceful Revolution*, 32).

Moving further ahead from her earlier-proclaimed need in *Speculum* of developing a dual dialectic for re-establishing a political ethics, (one each for the male and female subject respectively), Irigaray in *Thinking...* calls for developing a triple dialectic, a dialectic for the male subject, another for the female and a third for them together as a couple in the community

(39). The need to accept and evolve with the concept of sexual difference comes to assume even greater significance in Irigaray's later works as she attempts a restructuring of all aspects of life-language, culture, myth, laws, society and psyche.

Irigaray in *Thinking...* speaks of two approaches that are required for laying down different norms of life. These are the analysis of the formal structures of discourse and the forging of a new style. Her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is an example of this two-pronged method that she undertakes, as well as a key document for understanding her concept of sexual difference. *An Ethics...* consists of what Irigaray terms "a lot of cultural analyses", as the critic studies texts from Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, developing a new style that resists summarizing, coding, commentaries, exhaustive deciphering of these texts. Irigaray in this book lays down her ideas on sexual difference in the most poetic yet clarion ways. Ascertaining the need to curb the dangers of nihilism, of a consumer society, technical/scientific imperialism, of the age of "unreliability of words", she brings to light ways in which the male society and discourse have acted to keep the issue of sexual difference at bay. Calling sexual difference "probably *the* issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through...", Irigaray seeks to bring about a revolution by reinterpreting ways in which the subject and discourse, macrocosm and microcosm, the subject and the cosmic, have all been studied, constructed and positioned in the masculine form/world. (*An Ethics...*, 7-8). Revisiting History, discourse, mythology and science, Irigaray points out how the feminine is portrayed in terms of a space, a lack, an abyss, even darkness, while the masculine connotes time. Tracing how the woman/mother ultimately becomes a space, an object, a commodity, she enumerates how the maternal-feminine comes to denote that which is deprived of "it's proper" place, even threateningly so. In an almost poetic analysis, she brings Descartes' idea of the first passion Wonder to signify the surprise, astonishment associated with our primeval experience of sexual difference, a difference that she says was eventually suppressed with the use of God, History, discourse. Asserting that "One sex is not entirely consumable by the other..." Irigaray concludes:

We must reexamine our own history thoroughly to understand why that sexual difference has not had its chance to develop, either empirically or transcendently. Why it has failed to have its own ethics, aesthetic, logic, religion, or the micro- and microcosmic realization of its coming into being or its destiny. (*An Ethics...*, 14-15)

In her efforts to "reexamine" history, restructure and challenge male discourse, Irigaray's foremost critiques the area of Psychoanalysis. Defining patriarchy as "an exclusive respect for the genealogy of sons and fathers, and the competition between brothers" (as quoted in *The Irigaray Reader*, 23), Irigaray traces the use/contribution of Psychoanalysis towards such an end. A practicing psychoanalyst and an erstwhile disciple of Lacan, her relationship to the field of Psychoanalysis is complex. She uses concepts from Psychoanalysis to challenge what she calls "the empire of the phallus", as well as criticizes it for its neglect of historical and philosophical determinants and its own (male) biases resulting from unconscious fantasies. *Speculum* in particular provides a challenge to some crucial Lacanian concepts, especially the primacy assigned to the Phallus and the Mirror theory for its portrayal of the "lack" in the body of the female.

Irigaray's essay 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis' provides a scathing critique of Freudian and Lacanian concepts. Motivated by the death of a woman-friend, a psychoanalyst, the essay

carries an expose' of the male "tradition" within which, Irigaray claims psychoanalysis has been working through the decades. Her indictment of the "Fathers" of psychoanalysis is bitter. She says:

Its (psychoanalysis) theory and practice rest upon historical nothingness. All you have to do to be a real psychoanalyst, woman or man, is read Freud or Lacan- and you'd be better off sticking to the latter. (*The Irigaray...*, 80-81)

Irigaray's essay challenges the tightly-knit, authoritative boundaries of psychoanalysis that draw only from the Unconscious of Freud and Lacan, promoting repression and censorship within the field. It begins by pointing out how the subjective/particular desires of the subject in psychoanalysis with time come to be analyzed by universal, firmly-laid principles of its pioneers and goes on to unravel the effects and implications of this male discourse on women. Irigaray brings to light how the little girl's desires are forced to follow the same pattern of the Oedipus complex faced by the little boy, as psychoanalysts assert that "desire is always the same, regardless of sex." (As quoted in *The Irigaray...*, 90). In such a scenario, Irigaray claims, women are reduced to ghosts, a mere effects/by-products of man's relationship with his consciousness. Poignant examples, such as psychoanalysts' attempts to dismiss the fears/anxieties of female "patients" about rape as unreal add to her claims regarding the field's male biases, its dismissal of the sexual difference that could provide the female subject an Unconscious of its own. Irigaray sees the male imaginary as totally based on organs, while calls the symbolic "a legal way of sanctioning strict cultural endogamy between men...(*The Irigaray...*, 94)." Such a system, she says, represses the natural-maternal gift of birth, as well as the due debt/power that should be assigned to the woman-mother. In an attempt to counter this autological and tautological system of thought and representation, she comes up with the idea of the autonomy provided by the contact of the lips in women (a concept elaborated in the essay 'When our lips speak together'), as well as by the freedom, movement, circulation and nourishment provided by the different bodily fluids in women. Calling male psychoanalysts "petty exploiters" who are anachronistic in their approach, Irigaray continues to work towards developing, what she terms, "a new ethics of the passions" (*The Irigaray...*, 103).

In context of such a comprehensive task, the feminist sees language playing a crucial role. Irigaray connects the lack of regard/power to the woman/mother with the way language deprives the feminine subject of an identity. In the essay 'The Bodily Encounter with The Mother', she calls for forging a language that would be corporeal in its etching of bodily encounter, unlike the existing patriarchal language. Asserting that language "is one of the primary tools for producing meaning...to establish forms of social mediation, ranging from interpersonal relationships to the most elaborate political relations...", Irigaray undertakes a detailed study to show how language is far from being a "neutral" medium. (*Thinking...*, xv) Taking the example of a language like French, she elucidates how language privileges the masculine gender. Her observations range from the fact that in French any plural involving the two genders is always masculine- Voters (*électeur*) or Italians (*Italiens*), to the insight that the most vital realities of our culture always bear the masculine gender- God (*le Dieu*), or Sun (*le soleil*). Irigaray also shows how often even the neuter comes to carry the form of the masculine, as in the case of natural phenomena- "it is thundering" (*il tonne*), "it is windy" (*il vente*) and so on. Working to unravel the sexuation of language and what she calls "the dynamics of the utterance", Irigaray brings to the fore research-observations about the way men and women use

language. Studying samples collected by a team studying obstetrical psychoprophylaxis, she comes up with some crucial insights about men's speech, a speech that seems to distance itself from oneself, as well as from the environment and culture it is placed in. Male speech also draws upon the techniques of competition/production associated with the consumer society. The facts about women's speech in comparison to men are even more engaging:

Women attach much more importance to their relationship to the other sex, while men keep to themselves...In general, women are much more interested in others. This can be seen, for example, in the use of transitive with a person as the animate object- 'Je le lave' (I wash him), 'M' aimes-tu?' (Do you love me?). Women are more attentive to the question of place: they are close to things, to others...Women are more interested in the present and the future, and men in the past. Women are more concerned with the message to be transmitted than men are... (*Thinking the ...*, 49)

In her study, Irigaray questions some of the long-held assumptions about women's use of language, showing how women are more objective in their speech, more concerned with the context, while men indulge often in an impassioned assertion of the "I". This provides women with a greater ability to incorporate the world and the other, making them more capable of creation/invention. All that is required is their assertion of themselves in the "I". (*The Irigaray...*, 146).

She comes back to Psychoanalysis to enumerate how language disorders could be used to study differences between the male and female subjects, thereby proving the futility of treatment through collective therapies. In her essay 'The Three Genres', Irigaray compares the reactions of male obsessionals and female hysterics. Analysing several samples of speech of female hysterics, she shows how the sentences used in this case focus on the perspective of the 'You' involved, for example- "You love me?", "I love what you love" In contrast to this, the male obsessional builds sentences that are "I" centric- "I wonder if I am loved", or, "I say to myself that perhaps that I am loved". Collective cures and therapies like Psychoanalysis are hence proved defunct as they do not take into account the difference between male and female subjects being treated. The idea of sexual difference is further established through enumeration of differences in the ways male and female schizophrenics speak. (*The Irigaray...*, 145).

The analysis of the "I" and "You" are part of Irigaray's larger project of challenging the apparently neutral/universal discourse developed in patriarchal hands. In 'The Three Genres', she develops the idea of the Genre as "the site of the nonsubstitutable positioning of the *I* and *you* and of their modalities of expression..." She claims, "Should the difference between the *I* and the *you* disappear, so do demand, thanks, appeals, questions..." (*The Irigaray...*, 141). The establishing of these two genres of *I* and *you* are part of her attempt to question the neutral "truths" prevailing through "universal" discourse, where the *I* is increasingly becoming evasive and evanescent. Holding a combination of science, technology and religiosity responsible for this erasure of the *I* as well as the *you*, Irigaray seeks to check the male project of imposing himself on the neuter/nature through his genderless, universalist discourse. Language is taken up by Irigaray as the key tool for studying this "neutral" discourse, as well as for restructuring prevalent discourse on the lines of sexual difference. She looks upon sexual difference as crucial to the creation of a new culture and hence calls for a sexualization of discourse by imprinting language with a "mark of gender" (*The Irigaray...*, 144). Her analysis of the masculine gender of

collective male and female plurals in French and the masculine status of the apparently-ultimate truths like God and Sun, once again become prime examples of the way discourse, all through, has been dominated by the male genre.

At the same time, Irigaray acknowledges that narratives and commentaries are not sufficient for bringing about a change in discourse. What is required is the establishment of a new culture through forging of a new style. Hence her efforts in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* to read male discourse from Plato to Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, weaving them all in a style that resists dichotomies, easy commentaries and thorough encrypting.

In fact, the examination of philosophical discourse becomes central to Irigaray's project of establishing a new culture that is conscious of the sexual difference involved. In her essay 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine' Irigaray writes:

...it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt*, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse...this domination of philosophic logos stems in large part from its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the Same*...And in its greatest generality perhaps, from its power to *eradicate the difference between the sexes* in systems that are self-representative of a 'masculine subject' (*This Sex Which is Not One*, 74)

In her study of the important philosophers of each age, Irigaray aims to lay bare the ways in which specular economy comes to repress the feminine by attaining a kind of transcendental subjectivity that promotes a universalist discourse. The aim, however, is not to locate women as the subject or object of such a discourse but to destroy, jam, block such a machinery that reduces the female to a lack in the history of man. She attempts to take the female beyond the ambiguous task of mimesis that partly allows her to tackle this discursive exploitation, towards a disruptive excess brought about by a style that promotes corporeal language, feminine desire and above all, an acknowledgement of sexual difference.

Her tackling of such philosophical discourse is seen in the piece 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', where Irigaray exhibits how woman is simply reduced to the place of man's Other. Examining Levinas' *Time and the Other* Irigaray shows how the feminine in Levinas stands simply in relation to male "jouissance", his idea of the "caress" being aimed at reducing the other's body to a means of pleasure, a future, for the male self. She also points out that this reduction of the flesh of the Other into his own temporality by the male subject leads to the loss of the feminine as the Other. Levinas' failure to recognize pleasure in this communion, as well as his substitution of the feminine by the son are also seen by Irigaray as reasons for this loss. Contrary to being led to a new spiritual or religious level, or to a realization about the other through the concept of the caress, Levinas, according to Irigaray: "...clings on once more to this rock of patriarchy in the very place of carnal love. (*The Irigaray...*, 183)" Furthermore, she identifies in Levinas' ethics a failure to distinguish between philosophy and theology (unlike Heidegger), which in Irigaray's views, leads to a form of Monotheism wherein masculine passion is concealed. Also, she replaces Levinas' term "beloved" with "woman lover", to purge the passive positioning of female subject, as well as the reduction of the act of love already into a thing of the past. Calling Levinas' description of pleasure "unacceptable", Irigaray explores the way in which the woman is exploited as a reproducer, eventually taking as back to the *Song of Solomon* that did recognize the pleasures of the female lover: "...for it says, and repeats: 'do not

awaken (my) love until *she* please.’ She, the lover, remains a subject in the act of love. (*The Irigaray....*, 188)”

Returning to Irigaray’s essay ‘The Three Genres’, she looks upon the entire project of recognizing sexual difference as more than a feminist endeavor to emancipate woman. She says: “The issue is not simply a matter of justice for one sex, but of responsibility for the preservation, organization, consciousness and creation of life, of the world (*The Irigaray...*, 143).” Proclaiming the need to usher such a comprehensive revolution, she asserts:

What we need is a general cultural mutation...Patriarchal culture is a culture founded on sacrifice, crime, war...The people of men need others, who are persons in the full sense of the word...who will allow them to understand themselves and to find their limits. Only women can play this role. Women do not belong to patriarchal culture as genuinely responsible subjects. From this arises the possibility of interpreting this culture in which they are less implicated and have fewer interests than men. (As quoted in Introduction, *The Irigaray...*,11)

The French feminist’s book *Thinking the Difference- For a Peaceful Revolution*, is especially dedicated to the task of enumerating the technological/civil/religious nexus that threatens women even today, putting them at the margins of patriarchal society. Produced in the form of lectures delivered in the aftermath of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in April 1986, the book brings together themes of exploitation of women in a paranoid world of consumer society, nuclear technology, rigid/biased psychoanalysis and futile Declaration of Human Rights. In the chapter titled ‘A Chance to Live’ Irigaray refers to anthropological taboos on mother-son relationship, the primacy given by psychoanalysis to the Unconscious of the male child, the emphasis on theories/studies of destruction/disappearance/decomposition of Life and world in the different branches of Science pursued by man, the increasing threat of scientific (nuclear and other) threats to life of women, as well as the duty to obey God, the Father, as factors working together to keep women in a precarious position in a male world.

Similarly, in pieces like ‘The Bodily Encounter With the Mother’ and ‘Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order’, Irigaray speaks of the ways in each female sexuality has been repressed by a forced economy of male unconscious upon the desires of the girl child, resulting in her distancing from the mother. The discourse of psychiatry, according to Irigaray, reassigns this silence to women through a diagnosis of female hysterics, schizophrenics and obsessionals by the male psychoanalyst. In all her writings, Irigaray brings into light the ways in which male “jouissance” remains a focus of all sexual cultures, reducing the woman to a machine for procreation. In ‘The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine’ Irigaray says:

In our social order, women are ‘products’ used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, ‘commodities’. How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general?...The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as ‘subjects’ (*The Irigaray....*, 131).

Irigaray also takes up the anthropological taboo on the mother-son relationship under her analysis, by studying Christian/Classical myths. In ‘A Chance to Live’ she underlines the need to

bring to light female ancestry and the need to provide due recognition to the power of the maternal involved in creating and sustaining life. The prominence given to father-son genealogy is also critiqued, as is the affirmation of the father as the sole head of the family. In the context of Christianity, she shows how the maternal as well as spiritual functions are assigned to the men/fathers, through, what Irigaray terms as “appropriation of female virginity”, since Mary remains a Virgin mother. Similarly, in Greek/Roman mythology Athena, the virgin goddess has the role of being the spiritual protectress of the new Greek polis. (‘How do Women Become Civil Women?, *Thinking...*, 56)

Her focus is especially on recovering the Mother-Daughter relationship, which she sees as crucial to the restoration of the powers of the mother/woman. In ‘Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order, she declares:

...the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. The man-god-father killed the mother in order to take power. And isn't there a fluidity, some flood, that could shake this social order? And if we make the foundations of the social order shift, then everything will shift...(The Irigaray..., 47).

Irigaray considers the start of Patriarchy as a point where the daughter was forced to abandon the shelter of the mother and transplanted in the house of her husband, whose name and children she must bear. In the section titled ‘The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry’ of her book *Thinking the Difference...* she takes up a detailed examination of Greek-Roman myths for tracing these roots of patriarchal customs, as well as the bonds of the mother-daughter relationship. She traces the birth of sexual difference in the children born of the yet sexually undifferentiated Chaos and Gaia. Tracing the entire genealogy of these figures and gods, Irigaray gradually shows how the mother-daughter relationship is continually repressed, broken, discontinued and challenged by the male. While Aphrodite's mother gradually loses her mention in the genealogy of gods, Zeus emerges as the single-most powerful god, without a female equivalent. The Demeter, Kore/Persephone myth becomes the principle base for Irigaray's examination of the mother-daughter relationship. Whether it is the version in which Hades abducts Persephone who has is eventually returned but with pomegranate seeds that tie her down to the Underworld forever, or the version that is based on Jupiter's giving away of his daughter Persephone in an attempt to establish his omnipotence over all gods, the fate of the daughter/woman is in the hands of the male gods who turn her into an object.

Irigaray's efforts are also directed towards recovering the powerful bond that links mother and daughters. In both versions of the myth, she points out the sternness with which Demeter punishes all in her abandonment of fertility all across. Zeus is forced to send for Persephone's return, and the mother-daughter are finally reunited in the company of Hecate. Irigaray in her analysis of these myths concludes:

But why abduct her from her mother? Why destroy female ancestries? To establish an order man needed, but which is not yet an order of respect for and fertility of sexual difference...To make an ethics of sexual difference possible once again, the bond of female ancestries must be renewed...(Thinking..., 109)

Coming back to Irigaray's views about rights and laws enumerated in a male world, she says in the Preface to *Thinking...*: "...this moving *Declaration of Human Rights* means virtually nothing in terms of my everyday reality as a woman...(xi)." In a world where women's existence is increasingly threatened, Irigaray holds such universalist rights as futile. In her essay 'The Necessity for Sexuate Rights', she calls for a separate set of rights and duties for the two sexes based on the principle of sexual difference. Taking up Hegel's study of Sophocles' character Antigone in his *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, Irigaray shows how patriarchy begins with the enforcement of the laws of the family/state on the daughter who wishes to follow the laws of the mother, a set of cultural/religious laws pertaining to earth, fertility, sacred bonds of blood. Tracing these ancient male restrictions as prevailing prejudices even today, she calls for a restructuring of woman's civil status by providing her a befitting set of rights and duties. In her attempt to provide a concrete direction to this movement for better civil rights, she etches the following set for women:

1. The right to human dignity...
2. The right to human identity...legal recognition of virginity...The right to motherhood...
3. Mutual mother-child duties will be defined in the code...
4. Women will have a civil right to defend their lives, the lives of their children, their dwelling places, their traditions...
5. At the purely financial level: The unmarried will not be penalized by either direct or indirect taxation...
6. Systems of exchange, for example linguistic exchange, will be reshaped so as to ensure women and men a right to equivalent exchange
7. Women will have equal representation in all places where civil or religious decisions are taken...

(‘How to Define Sexuate Rights?’, *The Irigaray...*, 208-209)

She also reiterates the need for these civil laws to translate into written laws for the creation of a social order where women would be able to live their selves, explore their subjectivity.

In ‘Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum’ of the Social Order, Irigaray states:

The culture, the language, the imaginary and the mythology in which we live at the moment...I say to myself...let's have a look...this edifice that looks so clean and so subtle...let's see what ground it is built on. Is it all that acceptable?...The substratum is the woman who reproduces the social order, who is made this order's infrastructure...(The Irigaray..., 47)

Sexual difference that forms Irigaray's key concept and contribution to the school of French Feminism, becomes the tool with which she studies psychoanalysis, language, discourse, culture, philosophy and mythology to unravel the repressed state of the female subject. In her aim to restructure the forms of life, Irigaray embarks upon her comprehensive task of studying

each of these aspects in order to provide the sexuate/appropriate rights, recognitions and lives to the two sexes.

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