Irigaray in the French Feminist Tradition[1]

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Together with Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray has been regarded as one of the leading French feminists in the contemporary feminist scene. The three female philosophers constitute what Lynn Huffer calls "The Holy Trinity"[2] of French feminism even though none of them was born in France.[3] Each possesses her own intelligence and wisdom to contribute to literary theory and philosophy. In comparison, however, Irigaray has become more and more important than the other two to feminist theory. As Naomi Schor argues,

Whereas in the early stages of the development of French feminisms Irigaray’s writings were almost always invidiously compared to those of Kristeva and Cixous, today, although Kristeva remains a major intellectual presence (especially in the field of psychoanalysis) and Cixous continues to exert her influence through her seminar, her fiction and playwriting, it is becoming apparent that, as the major French theoretician, Irigaray is actually Simone de
Beauvoir’s chief successor.\[^{[4]}\]

Irigaray herself, however, holds a mixed feeling toward this predecessor of hers. On the one hand, she acknowledges de Beauvoir’s contribution to feminist history: By ceaselessly telling her life story, “she helped many women—and men?—to be sexually freer, notably by offering them a socio-cultural model ... she also helped them to situate themselves more objectively in the different moments of a life.”\[^{[5]}\]

On the other hand, Irigaray complains that de Beauvoir remained silent when she badly needed her support.\[^{[6]}\] Furthermore, she ardently opposes the suggestion that she is a daughter of Simone de Beauvoir. She makes it clear that “[n]ot a word passed between us about women’s liberation”\[^{[7]}\]. Irigaray clarifies on many different occasions that she never finished reading *The Second Sex*, and that her position is radically different from that of de Beauvoir:

I think my theoretical filiation ... is much more to the tradition of Western philosophy. Now, I’m not saying that Simone de Beauvoir isn’t part of that tradition, but hers isn’t an oeuvre that I know well nor to which I myself especially refer. It’s possible that I’ve been influenced by her work by means of the ideological climate, but I’m not someone who lives very much in that world.\[^{[8]}\]

If, more than 30 years ago, Irigaray’s theories were believed to be so radical and provocative that it was hard for many scholars to accept, today, almost no scholars can neglect Irigaray who has secured a place in philosophy and feminism with her voluminous works and abundant lectures across the world. This paper, focusing on Irigaray’s contribution to feminism, examines the ways in which Irigaray transcends and develops the French feminist tradition established by Simone de Beauvoir. The latter’s *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949), believed to be the Bible of feminism, affected women’s social status and living situations worldwide half a century ago. It is hoped that such discussions will also shed light on the filial relationship between these two famous women.

**A. Female Roles**

Simone de Beauvoir, in the second book of *The Second Sex*, describes how a woman loosens herself in such feminine roles as baby girl, adolescent girl, wife, mother and middle-aged woman. She argues that in all these stages, a woman
subdues to the social roles that man imposes and designs for her and as a result, she exists as the Other: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.”[9] On the surface, a family is a place where a woman finds a sense of belonging, since “[m]arriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.”[10] However, she is not treated as an equal in the family. “Woman leans heavily upon man because she is not allowed to rely on herself.”[11] As a result, a woman loses her subjectivity and has to identify herself with expected sole roles endowed by patriarchal society. She finally concludes the relationship between man and woman by saying, “The truth is that for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, company, an inessential boon; he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence. The exchange, therefore, is not of two items of equal value.”[12]

The idea that woman is the Other and that marriage is a trade based on the value of woman finds resonance in Irigaray’s works. In Irigaray’s analysis, women are no other but commodities that can be exchanged in the male value system. “Marx’s analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies.”[13] By using this theory of Karl Marx, Irigaray further elaborates on the point that woman has become commodities among men:

... woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire, by “subjects”: workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth.[14]

This exchange is made sometimes “from one man to another”, sometimes “from one group of men to another.”[15] It is beyond doubt that the exchange is made between men only because the activity is purely “man’s business”[16]. Only in exchange can a woman take on value, which particularly exists in her body: “... the properties of a woman’s body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men”[17].
Irigaray explains it further:

Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier, a "likeness" with reference to an authoritative model. A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values.\[18\]

Irigaray argues that "M[m]other, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women".\[19\] No matter what specific roles a woman may take, she does not have "any right to her own pleasure".\[20\] She exists only for man. Her body has marked herself as an important object for man's sexual desires. Irigaray further contends that "T[he] exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other 'wealth' among groups of men"\[21\]. Thus, the circulation of women among men "establishes the operation of society, at least of patriarchal society"\[22\]. In fact, the society "is based upon the exchange of women"\[23\]. In Irigaray's analysis, it can be seen that the essence of this exchange is the exploitation of the woman because throughout the process of exchange, the woman does not have a voice to defend herself.

**B. Female Sexuality**

As a woman herself, Simone de Beauvoir realizes the prejudice against and limitations upon woman under patriarchy. "For him she is sex—absolute sex, no less."\[24\] In de Beauvoir's analysis, the value of a woman lies in the value of her body in male imagination. "Woman... is even required by society to make herself an erotic object."\[25\] Even in the traditional role of wife, a woman is also made an object of man. This observation is acute to disclose the disparity between male and female existence. De Beauvoir's famous saying, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,"\[26\] is much quoted among feminists to emphasize the role of culture and society in shaping female identity. Different from other classes, women cannot share a common culture and tradition since they do not possess a shared living place. Therefore, it becomes difficult for many of them to realize their inferior status. De Beauvoir argues, "... it is not by increasing her worth as a human being that she will gain value in men's eyes; it is rather by modelling herself upon
their dreams."[27] A woman models herself on all the male expectations in the process of growing up, and gradually becomes what she is now, an Other dependent on the One to impose meaning to her existence.

De Beauvoir observes the second sex position of woman, but she fails to find out the philosophical and discursive origin for this inequality. In Irigaray, we see more criticism on patriarchal discourse which drives woman and female sexuality to a marginalized position. Irigaray initiates her analysis on the critique of Freudian and Lacanian phallocentric theories. In Freudian and Lacanian interpretation, the phallus is "the signifier of the desire of the Other", which decides meaning and order, and which "assures and regulates the economy of libidinal exchanges in their double dimension of quest for love and of specifically sexual satisfaction."[28] In comparison, "[h]er lot is that of 'lack,' 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ), and 'penis envy,' the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value"[29]. Since woman lacks, "woman's sex is cut off from itself and woman is deprived of her 'self-affection'"[30]. In Freudian theoretical framework, the phallus is "the ultimate meaning of all discourse, the standard of truth and propriety, in particular as regards sex, the signifier and/or the ultimate signified of all desire, in addition to continuing, as emblem and agent of the patriarchal system"[31]. In this situation, therefore, a woman would "find no possible way to represent or tell the story of the economy of her libido"[32]. What is more, "woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own"[33]. In fact, the division of labor requires that "woman maintain in her own body the material substratum of the object of desire, but that she herself never have access to desire"[34]. As a result, "they have to reside in darkness, behind veils, indoors; they are stripped of their identity insofar as they are a non-manifestation of forms corresponding to male-sexed chromosomes"[35].

Irigaray sharply points out,

... patriarchal cultures have reduced the value of the feminine to such a degree that their reality and their description of the world are incorrect. Thus, instead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract nonexistent reality.[36]

Since the feminine is "an abstract nonexistent reality", its value will have to be decided by the values of the masculine. The male has access to power whereas the female "would fall into the category of fallow land, matter to be made into a
product, or currency symbol.”^[37]

C. The Future Between the Sexes

After representing the subordinate position of woman to man in patriarchal society, Simone de Beauvoir points out that the key to woman’s freedom is to regard her as an equal. Only when man and woman treat each other with mutual respect, equality and recognition can they enjoy free love. Obviously, sexual inequality cannot be eradicated if economic inequality still exists. However, woman’s living condition cannot take on fundamental changes when other elements brought about the economic conditions, such as social, cultural, moral, ethical and other conditions, remain unchanged. At the end of the famous book, de Beauvoir describes a Utopian picture of sexual equality:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other.^[38]

An equal relationship between man and woman is also Irigaray’s concern, but she goes a step further than presenting an ideal picture of sexual equality to discuss the possibilities and ways to achieve such equality. In the first place, Irigaray creatively defines female sexuality in the hope of establishing a female identity not dependent on the male one.^[39] The pluralistic and multiplistic features of female sexuality shock the philosophical scene by their originality and subversive stance. Secondly, Irigaray advocates the restoration of a harmonious mother-daughter relationship so that a female genealogy is established in compatible with the male one. Based on the above two foundations, a new man-woman relationship can be finally reached. This new man-woman relationship, according to Irigaray, is “a relation of two,” which is regarded as “the most important gestures of our time”^[40]. This relationship is between two subjectivities, two individuals of compatible social status, and two identities of equal standing. This is a relation “of reciprocal respect, of autonomy, and at the same time … of reciprocal affection”^[41].

To be two means to help each other to be, to discover and to cultivate happiness, to take care of the difference between us, not merely because of its role in generation, because it
represents the means of humanity's production and reproduction, but in order to achieve happiness and make it blossom.[42]

In order to make it possible, Irigaray further argues, "[w]oman must be the one to initiate this process of remaining two, two who are differentiated, but not according to the mother-child, mother-son model. In order to do this, she must gain her own autonomy, her own interiority."[43]

From Simone de Beauvoir to Luce Irigaray, we are able to see the changes of feminists' political stance and the development in their tradition. Both of them agree on the subordinate position of woman in patriarchal society in relation to man, but their perspectives are different. De Beauvoir's theoretical basis is biology, human history, sociology and anthropology whereas the theoretical basis for Irigaray is psychology, philosophy and modern linguistics. The latter even tries to trace the origins of Western mythological tradition to find out the theoretical fallacy of phallocentric theory. Both de Beauvoir and Irigaray intend to find out the sources of woman's differences from man. The former argues that sexual identity is constructed by culture and society whereas the latter constructively defines female sexuality. Strategically the former opposes Freud's theories by exposing the elements that shape one's sexual identity in the process of growing up; whereas the latter attacks Freud's psychological analysis of female sexuality as the dark continent by describing the features of female sexuality. Both de Beauvoir and Irigaray long for an ideal future of sexual equality. The former believes that this future can be realized if man and woman treat each other with respect; whereas the latter presents ways of making it a reality by focusing on mother-daughter relationship and asking for a relationship of two subjects.

Both de Beauvoir and Irigaray met with severe criticism when they first published their ideas since the public could not accept their rebellious attitudes. Both of them lost their jobs for their insistence on their beliefs. It is most sarcastic for these two feminists since the phallocentric system that they ardently fight against deprives them of the chances to speak. However, Irigaray does assert her voice in male-dominated discourse. Ping Xu thus comments on Irigaray's often debatable discursive strategy, "to assume the feminine role deliberately is to exercise a resistance from within the phallocentric discourse, so as to disrupt it by forcing it to admit the consequences of its own logic which it cannot or does not want to admit according to the same logic"[44]. For Xu, here lies Irigaray's special
contribution to feminism because traditional feminism fails "to resist being
reabsorbed into the existing male-dominated order that is actually characterized by
sexual indifference." Here, too, lies the crucial difference between Simone de
Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray:

Whereas for Beauvoir the goal is for women to share fully in the privileges of the
transeendeeent subject, for Irigaray the goal is for women to achieve subjectivity without
merging tracelessly into the putative indifference of the shifter.

It is not at all the intention of this essay to make a superficial comparison
between these two great feminists. It is hoped that the reader is able to see the
continuous effort of feminists of different generations toward the same goal of
sexual equality. It is also hoped that such comparisons will highlight Irigaray’s
transcendence over her predecessors and her unique contribution to feminism in the
new century. "Sexual difference is one of the important questions of our age, if not
in fact the burning issue." Irigaray opens her lecture in this way at the Erasmus
University in Rotterdam on September 21, 1982. She then explains, "According to
Heiddegger, each age is preoccupied with one thing and one alone. Sexual difference
is probably that issue in our own age which could be our salvation on an intellectual
level." Sexual relationship will remain a major concern among people of the 21st
century. Understanding Irigaray, especially her unique philosophical stance, is
crucial to understanding female sexuality, female identity and sexual relationship.
Both man and woman may find home in her theories.

Notes:

[1] This group of essays is conducted under "Guangdong Higher Institutions’ Arts and
Humanities Research Project" (2006), entitled “Irigaray’s Feminist Theories”. Project code:
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[2] Lynne Huffer, Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of
Difference (Stanford, C A: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21.

[3] They are generally regarded as “French” feminists mainly because their academic activities
have been centering in France and because they mainly write in the French language.

[4] Naomi Schor, “Previous Engagements: The Receptions of Irigaray”, in Carolyn Burke,
Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford, eds., Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and
Modern European Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 4.

[5] Luce Irigaray, “Equal or Different?” trans. David Macey, in Margaret Whitford, ed., The
Irigaray Reader (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 30.

[6] Irigaray sent Simone de Beauvoir a copy of her doctorate dissertation, which was published as *Speculum of the Other Woman* in 1974. She said that she sent it to her as if to “an elder sister”, but to her disappointment, de Beauvoir never replied. Those were the most difficult years in Irigaray’s lifetime because soon after the publication of the book, Irigaray was expelled from the Lacanian school as well as from her teaching position at the University of Vincennes. For Irigaray’s reference to this incident, please see Luce Irigaray, “Equal or Different?” trans. David Macey, in Margaret Whitford, ed., The Irigaray Reader (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 31; and “Je—Luce Irigaray’: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray”, interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, trans. Elizabeth Hirsh and Gaëtan Brulotte, *Hypatia* 10.2 (Spring 1995), 113-114.

[7] Luce Irigaray, “Equal or Different?” trans. David Macey, in Margaret Whitford, ed., The Irigaray Reader (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 31.
[8] Luce Irigaray, “‘Je—Luce Irigaray’: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray”, interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, trans. Elizabeth Hirsh and Gaëtan Brulotte, *Hypatia* 10.2 (Spring 1995), 113-114.

[9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 16.

[10] Ibid., 445.
[11] Ibid., 500.
[12] Ibid., 731.

[13] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 172.

[14] Ibid., 31-32.
[15] Ibid., 171.
[16] Ibid., 177.
[17] Ibid., 187.
[18] Ibid., 179-180.
[19] Ibid., 186.
[20] Ibid., 187.
[21] Ibid., 172.
[22] Ibid., 184.
[23] Ibid., 170.

[24] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 16.

[25] Ibid., 543.
[26] Ibid., 295.
[27] Ibid., 359.

[28] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 61-62.

[29] Ibid., 23.
[30] Ibid., 133.
[31] Ibid., 67.
[32] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 43.
[33] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 187.
[34] Ibid., 188.
[35] Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 46.
[36] Ibid., 20.
[37] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 114.
[38] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 740.
[39] As for Irigaray's definition of female sexuality in more details, please see Liu Yan, “Luce Irigaray: A French Postmodern Feminist”, *Feminism in China* (Autumn 2004), 130-139. Irigaray meets with severe criticism of being essentialistic in her philosophical stance because of her definition of female sexuality as distinctive of male sexuality.
[40] Luce Irigaray, “‘Je—Luce Irigaray’: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray”, interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, trans. Elizabeth Hirsh and Gaëtan Brulotte, *Hypatia* 10.2 (Spring 1995), 111.
[41] Ibid., 111.
[42] Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two*, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 57.
[43] Ibid., 57-58.
[44] Ping Xu, “Irigaray’s Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism”, *Hypatia* 10.4 (Fall 1995), 80.
[45] Ibid., 78.
[46] Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray”, in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 64.
[47] Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference”, trans. Seán Hand, in Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 165.
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