Luce Irigaray’s View on Mother-Daughter Relationship

QIU Xiaqing
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

1. Introduction

As a feminist theorist and a philosopher, Luce Irigaray has made her feminist theory quite systematic over more than twenty years’ development. In her early works such as This Sex Which Is Not One (1977), Elemental Passions (1982), An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1984), Irigaray takes a close look at how man constructs the patriarchal society and his singular perspective of interpreting the world. She moves on to explore the possibilities of the existence of female subjectivity in such works as Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution (1989) and I, You, We: Toward a Culture of Difference (1990). In her more recent works, I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History (1993) and To Be Two (1994), to name only two, Irigaray expresses great concern over the ideal model of heterosexual relationship and advocates the construction of an inter-subjective relationship between man and woman on the basis of respect for sexual differences. [1][2][3]
In almost all of her major works, Irigaray discusses the mother-daughter relationship. She finds that “there are often serious and painful problems between daughters and mothers” and that the concerns over the relationship are actually related to the struggles for women’s liberation as “these struggles have significantly helped women become aware of themselves,” and they begin to listen to each other and talk about their problems with their mothers. Irigaray gives an in-depth analysis of the problematic mother-daughter relationship and puts forward her own suggestions on how to improve it. She talks about the relationship in the following four works in particular: “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other”, Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution, I, You, We: Toward a Culture of Difference, and To be Two. By closely reading her works, this paper attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of Irigaray’s unique view on mother-daughter relationship and to point out her unique contributions to feminist theories in general.

2. Critique of Freud’s pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship

Freud declares that the mother is the daughter’s only love object in the pre-Oedipal period and the daughter’s strong love for her mother will probably last till she is over 4 years of age. He goes on to say that the daughter’s love for her mother is based on her assumption that her mother has the penis, so once she finds out that her mother is also castrated, it is likely that she will no longer treat her mother as her love object; instead, she will hate her mother and turn to her father for the compensation of the lack and thus enter the Oedipal period.

Irigaray strongly opposes Freud’s view of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship. She points out that although Freud asserts that the pre-Oedipal phase is more important for the girl than for the boy, he “focuses particularly on certain aspects that might be qualified as negative, or at least as problematic.” These aspects include premature weaning, the forbidding of masturbation, and especially the deprivation of the phallic sexual organ. Thus, the girl becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her mother. Freud also says this mother-daughter relationship has to be given up if the woman is to enter into the desire for the man-father. Irigaray points out that Freud’s real intention is to prove it is the female’s “lack” that causes her to leave her mother and turn to her father. She refutes this “lack” theory by redefining female sexuality from the perspective of sexual psychology. She states that female sexuality is plural and multiple, consisting of various female sexual organs such as the “lips”, the clitoris, the vagina, the womb, the breasts, etc.
Therefore, a woman is not the lack.[8] In this way Irigaray ridicules Freud’s penis-envy theory and says it is “completely pathogenic and pathological” for the daughter to give up her love for her mother in order to enter into the desire for the father. By so doing the daughter ends up losing her subjectivity. [9]

Irigaray emphasizes the importance of subjectivity for both the mother and the daughter. In her famous prose essay “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other” she both teases Freud’s penis-envy theory and points out the daughter’s dilemma: she is almost suffocated by her mother’s overwhelming love and disappointed with her mother’s loss of herself, so she wants to escape. However, she also knows quite well about her father’s patriarchal expectations of her and is clear that she will end up being objectified if following her father:

I, too, a captive when a man holds me in his gaze; I, too, am abducted from myself. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. Reduced to the face he fashions for me in which to look at himself. Traveling at the whim of his dreams and mirages. Trapped in a single function—mothering.[10]

Thus, Irigaray criticizes Freud’s interpretation of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship and gives a new account of the daughter’s ambivalence toward her mother: First, motherhood suffocates the daughter. Second, the daughter sees that the mother does not possess subjectivity; she has lost her identity as a woman. Third, the daughter still needs the mother because “the one doesn’t stir without the other” [11]. In fact, the daughter and the mother are interdependent. Only when both of them remain independent as a woman can they move together and avoid being objectified by men.

3. Patriarchal disruption of the mother-daughter bond

Although the daughter is not lack of maternal love in the pre-Oedipal phase, her relationship with her mother is problematic. In Thinking the Difference, Irigaray explores the root that causes this inharmonious relationship. She finds that the ultimate purpose of Freud’s penis-envy theory is to establish a male culture where females are subordinated:

Freud is acting like a prince of darkness with respect to all women, leading them into the shadows and separating them from their mothers and from themselves in order to found a
culture of men-amongst-themselves: law, religion, language, truth and wisdom. In order to become a woman, the virgin girl must submit to a culture, particularly a culture of love, that to her represents Hades. She must forget her childhood, her mother; she must forget herself as she was in her relationship to Aphrodite’s philotes.\textsuperscript{12}

In Irigaray’s observation, the abduction of Persephone is the original sin of patriarchy. Irigaray further points out, “Patriarchy has thus destroyed the most precious site of love and its fertility: the relationship between mother and daughter”\textsuperscript{13}. In order to find the traces of the daughter’s estrangement from her mother, Irigaray argues that we must go back in time just as Persephone does, beginning at the end.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Irigaray traces the whole process of the disruption of the female line of descent and finds that the female ancestor was already murdered in the Greek mythology, the Greek tragedies as well as the Bible:

The Old Testament does not tell us of a single happy mother-daughter couple, and Eve comes into the world motherless. Although Mary’s mother, Anne, is known, the New Testament never mentions them together, not even at the moment of the conception of Jesus.\textsuperscript{15}

Therefore, it can be said that the mother-daughter bond was already broken in the ancient times:

In myths concerning mother-daughter relationships and myths about the goddess/lover and god couples, the story, setting and interpretation were masked, disguised to varying degrees by the patriarchal culture that was growing up. This culture erased—perhaps out of ignorance, perhaps unwittingly—the traces of an earlier or contemporaneous culture.\textsuperscript{16}

Irigaray points out, the fact that Persephone never turns to her mother for help proves that the female line of descent was already interrupted.\textsuperscript{17} Since the mother-daughter bond is broken, the daughter is faced with an even worse situation than her mother—“And I walk with even more difficulty than you do, and I move even less”\textsuperscript{18}.

4. Establishment of the mother-daughter bond

Based on these critiques and findings, Irigaray puts forward her own idea
concerning the re-establishment of the mother-daughter bond:

Woman is deprived of the possibility of interiorizing her female identity. It is imposed upon her as pure exteriority. And that’s one of the reasons why she herself, just like the society that defines her, privileges the mother-son relationship; the mother-daughter relationship reminds woman, women, of their lack of subjective identity, and arouses affects for which there is no corresponding cultural organization.  

Here Irigaray explains Freud’s influential belief that the mother can get infinite satisfaction only in her relations with the son, which is the most satisfactory of all human relations. Irigaray asserts that the society we have is “a between-men society”: “It is a society which excludes between-women sociality, separates women from one another and hence does not have a female culture”. In her opinion, renewing the broken mother-daughter bond means that we must cultivate a female culture, that we need to interpret and construct a female history in order to open up another era in our culture that respects differences, especially sexual difference.

According to Irigaray, one important way of renewing the broken mother-daughter bond is that woman must assert her subjectivity as a whole woman, hence her plural identities as both mother and daughter. “Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. Both of them. In a female whole that, furthermore, is not closed off….Achieving, through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, in-finite”. For her, “mother” has rich connotations. Besides its usual meaning of one’s mother in the biological sense, it also means the common female ancestor, and the one who engenders “love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious”. Mother is creative, thus Irigaray says it is “necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women”. She emphasizes that “[w]e have to be careful about one other thing: we must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that mother, to our mother within us and between us.”

Furthermore, in order to improve the mother-daughter relationship, Irigaray thinks it imperative for the daughter to communicate with the mother:

We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic
and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.[27]

Here Irigaray lays emphasis on the creation of a female language that can speak the daughter’s bodily encounter with the mother. Woman has long been silenced and passive, so she does not have access to language “except through recourse to ‘masculine’ systems of representation which disappropriate her from her relation to herself and to other women”. Daughters and mothers often lack a personal path for exchange as the world is defined by man. Thus Irigaray says women need “words, images, symbols which represent the significant events in their life and which allow to build them in the feminine”.[29] “Let’s hurry and invent our own phrases. So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace.”[30] In Irigaray’s opinion, a female language plays a significant role in the construction of female subjectivity. Only when women create a language of their own can they assert their own identity. “The constitution of the deeper self necessarily comes into being with language, images, and representations.”[31] Therefore, Irigaray advocates that the male discourse be subverted and a female language based on the harmonious mother-daughter relationship be established.[32]

In order to establish an inter-subjective relationship between the mother and the daughter, Irigaray also puts forward six pieces of practical suggestion in her book Je, Tu, Nous. The second piece of suggestion, for example, goes, “In all homes and all public places, attractive images (not involving advertising) of the mother-daughter couple should be displayed”. Irigaray believes that the mother and the daughter can improve their relationship by doing things together in their everyday life. In addition, she thinks both the mother and the daughter should make contributions to improve their relationship. She stresses the importance for both of them to have their own space and to experience themselves as autonomous and free subjects. [34]

In fact, as early as 1979, Irigaray observed that the absence of one’s own space may result in the loss of one’s subjectivity: “[y]ou put yourself in my mouth, and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. I’d like to see you while you nurse me. [...] So that we can taste each other, feel each other, listen to each other, see each other—together”. [35]
5. Evaluation of Irigaray’s theories

Renewing the mother-daughter bond, according to Irigaray, can not only help women find their own identity, but it can also help the two sexes understand that they are different individuals, that they have different words, that the woman is “no longer the nature-body for which man will be the word”. Because of this, the two sexes “can unite their incarnations and engender spiritual as well as natural children. [...] I think that such an alliance between women and men could work towards achieving the reign of the spirit which, according to Christian theology, corresponds to our present mission.” [36] Irigaray also points out that only when the mother and the daughter are on good terms can we “define a culture of the female” [37]. Irigaray’s contribution to feminism, especially with regard to mother-daughter relationship, lies mainly in the following aspects:

First, Irigaray advocates an inter-subjective relationship between the mother and the daughter. She stresses the need to construct a female identity and holds the view that subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are vital for the construction of a female identity. Giving up her love for her mother means the loss of the daughter’s subjectivity. [38] The lack of subjective identity is the very reason why the mother-daughter relationship is problematic. [39] Through subjective relations between mothers and daughters women can get out of the vicious circle of the patriarchal phallocratic order and give daughters the possibility of spirit or soul. [40] Irigaray believes the establishment of a harmonious mother-daughter relationship depends mainly on the inter-subjective relationship between the mother and the daughter. She acknowledges the intimate relations between women and nature, but she also points out that this does not prevent the mother and the daughter from having a human relationship between them. [41] This human relationship, according to Irigaray, should be “a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers”. [42] In other words, it should be an inter-subjective relationship where both the mother and the daughter become subjectivity. Apart from this, Irigaray thinks it important for both the mother and the daughter to take initiatives to help each other form their subjectivity:

Today, only a mother can see to it that her daughter, her daughters, form(s) a girl’s identity. Daughters that we are, more of the issues concerning our liberation, we can also endure our mothers and educate each other among ourselves. I think this is essential for the
One way of forming subjectivity is to open up one’s space, as Irigaray says in *Je, Tu, Nous*: “To establish and maintain relations with oneself and with the other, space is essential...important for them [women] to have their own outer space, enabling them to go from the inside to the outside of themselves, to experience themselves as autonomous and free subjects” [44].

Second, Irigaray advocates the creation of a female language. Irigaray believes that the restoration of the mother-daughter relationship is closely linked to the respect for female speech, and this requires changes to symbolic codes, especially language, law and religion. [45] The serious and painful problems between the mother and the daughter are mainly due to their lack of communication which in turn is partly caused by the lack of a language of their own. [46] Therefore, Irigaray advocates the creation of a female language on the basis of a harmonious mother-daughter relationship.

In many of her works Irigaray stresses the importance of such a language and encourages women to discover or invent words that are particularly associated with the female body and female experiences. “I suggest mothers create opportunities to use the feminine plural with their daughter(s). They could also invent words and expressions to designate realities they feel and share but for which they lack language.” [47] Irigaray finds that the little girl always uses “you” and “I” when she talks with her mother, which implies that the mother and the daughter live together or do something together. However, she also finds that the mother often uses the imperatives when she talks to her daughter; but when she talks to her son she sometimes or even often uses “you” and “I”. This shows that “the mother no longer respects the two poles of dialogue: I and you”. Because of this, the daughter is silent and suffering. She “doesn’t even find a with Her, the Mother, with whom to have an inner dialogue.” Thus the exchanges between the mother and the daughter are often covered up by exchanging objects or money. [48] In order to have an inter-subjective exchange with others we need a language that is “an exchange of words” and real dialogue. [49] In other words, for Irigaray, the language must be communicative in nature.

Third, Irigaray emphasizes the importance of communication between the mother and the daughter as well as the reestablishment of a female genealogy. Irigaray finds that the mother and the daughter have never spoken to each other.
"[S]omething crucial is missing: communication with the mother."\(^{[51]}\) In her opinion, the communication can bring mother and daughter together and establish a reciprocal relationship between them.\(^{[52]}\) Irigaray also points out the symbiotic relationship between the female genealogy and mother-daughter love, "[a] woman celebrating the eucharist with her mother, sharing with her the fruits of the earth she/they have blessed, could be delivered of all hatred or ingratitude towards her maternal genealogy, could be consecrated in her identity and her female genealogy".\(^{[53]}\) So she advocates the reestablishment of a female genealogy. She says, "there is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mothers’ side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters". So "[l]et us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history."\(^{[54]}\)

In addition, Irigaray finds it necessary for women to love one another apart from the mother-daughter love. She says: "[l]et us also try to discover the singularity of our love for other women. [...] This love is necessary if we are not to remain the servants of the phallic cult, objects to be used by and exchanged between men, rival objects on the market, the situation in which we have always been placed."\(^{[55]}\) She uses the term "women-sisters" to show her expectation of the relationship among women. She thinks the love for women-sisters can help women establish a mutually beneficial relationship and prevent them from being subjected by men.

6. Conclusion

Irigaray begins the issue of the mother-daughter relationship with the searches for the broken mother-daughter bond and points out that it is the patriarchal culture that has murdered the female ancestor, resulting in the disappearance of love between the mother and the daughter and the loss of subjectivity for both of them. Thus she suggests a harmonious mother-daughter relationship be reestablished to resist the patriarchal culture. In order to achieve this she emphasizes that both the mother and the daughter must become subjectivity. And one way that can help women assert subjectivity is to create a female language. It is equally important for them to communicate with each other to enhance their mutual understanding. Irigaray also points out the symbiotic relationship between the female genealogy and mother-daughter love. Based on this, she suggests a female genealogy be constructed to keep women’s identity. In the meanwhile she thinks the mother-daughter love should be extended to the love for women-sisters.
Irigaray contends that a harmonious mother-daughter relationship also plays an important role in improving the relationship between man and woman. “In order to rediscover and improve in the culture of love between men and women, we need to restore the value of the mother-daughter relationship.” Irigaray’s argument to establish a female genealogy has evoked a critique of essentialism, but recent studies have agreed to believe that this strategic essentialism will force man to rethink his relationship with woman, and thus prove constructive in re-establishing sexual relations based on respect for sexual differences.

Notes:
[1] 刘岩：《露丝·伊里加雷：法国后现代女性主义者》，《中国女性主义》2004年秋季卷，第130-131页。
[Liu Yan, “Luce Irigaray: French Postmodern Feminist”, in Feminism in China, Autumn 2004, 130-131]
[2] 刘岩：《母性身份研究读本》，武汉：武汉大学出版社，2007年，第163页。
[Liu Yan, A Theoretical Reader in Motherhood (Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2007), 163.]
[3] Kwok Wei Leng, “Irigaray, Luce”, in Lorraine Code, ed., Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 275.
[4] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, eds. Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray, Trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 30-31.
[5] 弗洛伊德：《精神分析导论讲演新篇》，程小平译，北京：国际文化出版公司，2000年，第115-141页。
[Sigmund Freud, New Lectures on Psychoanalysis, trans. Cheng Xiaoping, et al. (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Company, 2000), 115-141.]
[6] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 47.
[7] Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 101.
[8] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 28.
[9] Margaret Whitford, ed. The Irigaray Reader, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 44.
[10] Luce Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other,” trans. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981), 66.
[11] Ibid., 67.
[12] Luce Irigaray, Thinking the Difference, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 110.
[13] Ibid., 112.
[14] Ibid., 107.
[15] Ibid., 100.
[16] Ibid., 101.
[17] Ibid., 106.
[18] Luce Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other,” trans. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981), 60.
[19] Luce Irigaray, I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 47.
[20] Luce Irigaray, I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 47.

[Sigmund Freud, New Lectures on Psychoanalysis, trans. Cheng Xiaoping, et al. (Beijing: International Culture Publishing Company, 2000), 139.
[21] Luce Irigaray, I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 44.
[22] Ibid., 47.
[23] Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 105.
[24] Margaret Whitford, ed. The Irigaray Reader, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 43.
[25] Ibid., 43.
[26] Ibid., 43.
[27] Ibid., 43.
[28] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 85.
[29] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 32.
[30] Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter & Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 215.
[31] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 52.
[32] Liu Yan, “Luce Irigaray: French Postmodern Feminist”, in Feminism in China, Autumn 2004, 135
[33] Luce Irigaray, Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.
[34] Ibid., 48.
[35] Luce Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, trans. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7.1 (1981), 61.
[36] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, eds. Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 34.
[37] Luce Irigaray, I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 47.
[38] Margaret Whitford, ed. *The Irigaray Reader*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 44.

[39] Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1996), 47.

[40] Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

[41] Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 111.

[42] Margaret Whitford, ed. *The Irigaray Reader*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 50.

[43] Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 50.

[44] Ibid., 48.

[45] Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, trans. Karin Montin (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), 112.

[46] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. *Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray*, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 30, 32.

[47] Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.

[48] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. *Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray*, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 36, 37.

[49] Ibid., 85.

[50] Luce Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir Without the Other”, trans. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7.1 (1981), 60.

[51] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. *Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray*, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 31.

[52] Ibid., 21.

[53] Margaret Whitford, ed. *The Irigaray Reader*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 46.

[54] Ibid., 44.

[55] Ibid., 44.

[56] Luce Irigaray & Sylvère Lotringer, ed. *Why Different: A Culture of Two Subjects. Interviews with Luce Irigaray*, trans. Camille Collins (New York: Semiotext(e), 2000), 65.
QIU Xiaoqing  B.A. (1995) in English from the Department of Foreign Languages, Central South University (Changsha); M.A. (1998) in British and American literatures from the Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou); M.A. (2003) in Tourism Management from the Department of Environment, University of Westminster, UK. She is currently a lecturer and Ph.D. candidate in GDUFS. Her academic interests include American fiction, gender studies, and eco-feminism.