

Luce Irigaray, Radical Feminism, and The #MeToo Movement:

An analysis of The #MeToo Movement through a Postmodern Feminist lens

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Abstract

Luce Irigaray, a French feminist theorist, used her writing as a tool to further the postmodern feminist movement and her theory of sexual difference. Her work highlights the divergence from traditional, modernist thought and the dream of a well rounded western society that is grounded in the recognition of sexual difference. The #MeToo Movement, the defining feminist movement of present day, proves Irigaray's point of a need for the recognition of sexual difference. The importance of women being able to speak their mind is one the foundations of Irigaray's work and a pillar of the #MeToo Movement. Moving beyond the first step of joining the conversation, the current feminist movement, through the guidance of past feminist works like Irigaray's, needs to find a way to turn words into action and action into lasting systemic change. In this piece I will discuss the roots of postmodern feminism, the work of Luce Irigaray, and how postmodern feminism has guided contemporary feminism's progress.

Postmodern Feminism and Luce Irigaray's Theory of Sexual Difference

I. Defining Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern Feminism began in the 1960's and 1970's (Tong) and is based on the sexual empowerment of women. The popular feminist theory that came before radical feminism was liberal, or modernist, feminism. Which was a wave of feminist thought defined as a "rationalist project of emancipation" headlined by the likes of Mary Wollstonecraft and

revolutionary ideas of enlightenment (Appignanesi). Alternatively, postmodern feminism brought the idea of rejecting the traditional view of men and women as separate, and women as therefore nonexistent.

The postmodern feminist movement was one that, in layman's terms, wanted to take down the dominance of the patriarchy. It recognized the separation of the sexes, male and female, and embraced it, "Woman is still the other, but rather than interpreting this condition as something to be transcended, postmodern feminists proclaim its advantages" (Tong). A main, and important, theme of postmodern feminist thought is, "reject[ing] phallogocentric thought; that is, thought ordered around an absolute word (*logos*) that is 'male' in style" (Tong). Postmodern feminism would be unable to exist if it were not for the modernist work of theorists like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, "Lacan's extreme marginalization of women gave [radical feminism] a boost" (Appignanesi). Therefore, without the feminine theories of men like Lacan and Freud, postmodern feminism would not have been developed.

II. Freud & Lacan's Conceptualizations of the Feminine

Generally, male theories of sexuality that were developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries viewed women, and female sexuality, as virtually nonexistent. "Male theories of sexuality - Freud's or Lacan's - literally cannot think of women except as negatively imaginary, incomplete, or an empty signifier (the vacant womb)" (Appignanesi). The basis of Freud and Lacan's work was that, "Either there is no

feminine sexuality except as men imagine it or feminine sexuality is a schizoid duality” (Appignanesi). In this way of thinking, women were viewed as conceptually negligible and female sexuality was virtually nonexistent.

In Freud’s *The Psychology of Women, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, he delves into his philosophical ideas and beliefs about women and female sexuality. A lot of Freud’s discussion of gender difference relies on the idea that men are active and women are passive from conception onward. “The male sex cell is actively mobile and searches out the female one and the latter, the ovum, is immobile and waits passively...behavior of the elementary sexual organisms is indeed a model for the conduct of sexual individuals during intercourse” (Freud & Sprott). Freud was known to define women as powerless within his work (DuPlessis).

Since the phallus is a symbol of power, its importance, along with women’s lack thereof, is heavily discussed in Freud’s work. “With the change to femininity [the end of the phallic phase of the girl], the clitoris must give up to the vagina its sensitivity, and with it, its importance, either wholly or in part” (Freud & Sprott). Freud determines that all value, sexually and generally, lies within the phallus, and therefore women lacking a phallus are scientifically inferior to men. “The more fortunate man has only to continue at the time of his sexual maturity what he has already practised during the period of early sexual expansion” (Freud & Sprott).

Lacan adapted much of Freud's work to use as the base for his own theoretical work; however, unlike Freud, Lacan was not a practicing psychoanalyst. Lacan's work revolves around the idea of women's lack of value outside of male sexual pleasure and motherhood due to their lack of phallus, "The phallus becoming less an imaginary object than a signification of what is missing" (Leader & Groves). One of Lacan's main ideas was around the Castration Complex, wherein girls become aware of their lack thereof a penis, "She may entertain a nostalgia for the lost phallus or hope to receive it in the future from a man" (Leader & Groves). From his perspective, a child can represent a temporary phallus for the mother, however this will not last, "The child will give this up, the phallus becoming less an imaginary object than a signification of what is missing" (Leader & Groves). Lacan's belief was that women will always lack a phallus and therefore will always be in desire of one but fail to ever fulfill that desire.

III. Luce Irigaray's Theory of Sexual Difference

Luce Irigaray was a French postmodern feminist theorist. Her work relies heavily on the rejection of Freudian and Lacian values of femininity. Her philosophy was that female sexuality, in the current philosophical discourse, does not exist outside of the male mind; and that the incompleteness, otherness, and objectification of women that comes along with that has cost women the ability to exist outside of and separate from men. She is an advocate for the Theory of Sexual Difference, the importance of the acknowledgement of women as their own entity, separate from men and that women deserve a place within

politics, philosophy, and history. She also believes that female sexuality exists separate from being only a male pleasure.

A. The Sex Which is Not One

In her book, *The Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray discusses the limits of male defined female sexuality, “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (Irigaray). Within male defined female sexuality, “The sight of the penis shows the girl to what extent her clitoris is unworthy of comparison to the boy’s sex organ. She understands, finally, the prejudice-the anatomical prejudice-that is her fate” (Irigaray). In turn, “The rejection, the exclusion of female imaginary certainly puts a woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) “subject” to reflect himself, to copy himself” (Irigaray). The Lacanian concept of placing value strictly on the phallus eliminates the opportunity for women to be sexually empowered, or empowered at all, and therefore leaves them no real place in society.

B. The Speculum of the Other Woman

Moving on to her essay collection, *The Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray focuses on the removal of women from history, philosophy, and politics in Western culture by male theory, once again rejecting Freudian concepts. To

Irigaray, it is impossible for women to be included in a narrative of which they are not invited to the conversation in the first place, “the enigma that is woman will therefore constitute the target, the object, the stake, of a masculine discourse of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which ultimately she is not supposed to know anything about ” (Irigaray). Women are constantly discussed within male theory, “Throughout the ages the problem of woman has puzzled people of every kind” (Freud & Sprott). However, Irigaray thinks that the problem within that is that women are not given the opportunity to be included since they are given no value outside of the sexual pleasure of men and child bearing. Her belief is that in order for women to be included in history, philosophy, and politics, they have to be seen and valued separately from men. Irigaray’s main criticism of Freud’s work is its lack of logic, “Yet on this occasion as on so many others, particularly when it is a question of woman, the text [Freud’s *New Lectures in Psycho-analysis*] will have surreptitiously broken the thread of its reasoning, its logic” (Irigaray). When critiquing his mention of other species' way of living involving both sexes in caring for their young, she says, “Is the necessary conclusion, then, that such animals are more able than you, than we, to distinguish between the sexual function and the parental function? And notably that they at least notice the distinction between female and maternal, between female sexuality and mothering, a distinction that “culture” might perhaps have effaced?” (Irigaray). Her outright objection of his inability to separate women’s sexuality and motherhood is evident throughout her critiques.

C. The Ethics of Sexual Difference

Irigaray's third book, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, is the main basis for her Theory of Sexual Difference. In it she discusses the importance of realizing that there is a sexual difference, "Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through" (Irigaray). Irigaray's definition of sexual difference is, "Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date—at least in the West—and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh...a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language" (Irigaray).

To be able to recognize the need for a difference it needs to be known what the other point of view is, which is, "Traditionally, and as a mother, woman represents place for man, such a limit means that she becomes a thing" (Irigaray).

In making this claim, Irigaray reinforces the idea that from a Freudian and Lacanian perspective women are reduced to objects which are here to serve the needs of men. Irigaray's belief is that, "We must, therefore, reconsider the whole question of our conception of place, both in order to move on to another age of difference and in order to construct an ethics of the passions" (Irigaray).

According to Irigaray, women deserve to be recognized within society in order for a more well-rounded Western Culture and that is only possible through the recognition of sexual difference, "In order for an ethics of sexual difference to

come into being, we must constitute a possible place for each sex, body, and flesh to inhabit” (Irigaray).

IV. Luce Irigaray In Practice and Critiqued

Irigaray’s work is, of course, commonly praised by other postmodern feminist thinkers and theorists, “Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, one of the most important texts of recent feminist thought” (Homans). The main critique of her work is not of the content itself, but instead of her way of writing, “ But Irigaray is not well represented by fragments, and she has been misunderstood by many readers who haven't been able to read her more fully. Hers is a thought so complex and so massive that only complete works will do, and yet her French is often so difficult that even fairly fluent readers balk at it” (Homans). She has however been praised for the different perspective that she brought to the postmodern feminist movement, “One of the major themes of Irigaray's work, perhaps the most controversial, is her view that women and especially women's desires are excluded from discourse, which is for her equivalent to conscious life. Unlike many feminists in the United States, Irigaray does not emphasize the contributions and accomplishments of historical women because femininity has been constructed so thoroughly by men” (Homans). Irigaray’s work is believed to be revolutionary in progressing the feminist movement and advancing the differentiation between the sexes.

An interesting perspective that her work has been used to analyze is that of religion. In her work, Irigaray often discusses God as female instead of the typical male pronoun

associated with God, "Irigaray sheds light on the "womanliness" of God, suggesting that God is both a model and an agent for the disruption of patriarchy and the creation of a feminine subjectivity" (Priest). Irigaray's discussion of woman and God is seen almost interchangeably, "If 'God' were substituted for 'woman' in this passage [Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 229] and the masculine pronoun for the feminine, it would be easy to take *Speculum of the Other Woman* for a mystical text, and Luce Irigaray for an apophatic mystic. Irigaray writes "woman" as the mystic writes God: as the unknowable, the unspeakable, the absolute other" (Priest). Irigaray's thought of seeing woman and God as one in the same was a sort of revolutionary concept to be openly discussed, "It is the unspeakable possibility of God/Woman" (Priest).

V. Conclusion

Irigaray's work and her Theory of Sexual Difference has been helpful in the progression of the feminist movement, "The disruptive presence/absence of this "feminine" modality in discourse has the potential, Irigaray's work further suggests, to bring into existence a new symbolic order in which both masculine and feminine will be represented" (Priest). Her avid rejection of Freudian and Lacanian feminine thought led her to the idea of a world in which sexual difference is acknowledged and appreciated. Wherein women are not only seen through the male mind but where their sexuality and power are truly their own and they have a place and voice within history, politics, and philosophy.

The #MeToo Movement is a modern day feminist movement that has roots in postmodern feminist work such as Luce Irigaray's. I will take a look at the successes and failures of the movement from a postmodern point of view.

French postmodern feminist theorist Luce Irigaray spent her career refuting Freudian and Lacanian feminine theories and advocating for women's voices to be heard. The main part of her writing revolves around her Theory of Sexual Difference; the idea that not only are men and women different but that women have - and deserve - the ability to exist outside of the male mind. Irigaray was a firm believer that female sexuality should not be male-centered or male-defined as it historically had been, and that women have traditionally been excluded from history, politics, and philosophy as well as all conversations surrounding them.

The #MeToo Movement began in 2006 ("About") but grew in awareness and popularity in 2017 through social media sites like Twitter. The main goal of the movement is to progress the conversation about sexual violence against women and help victims find their voice. In their own words, "Our goal is also to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors. Young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls, and all communities of color. We want perpetrators to be held accountable and we want strategies implemented to sustain long term, systemic change" ("About"). Similar to Irigaray, the work of the #MeToo Movement centers around the necessity for women to be included in the conversation, for their voices to not only be heard but also listened to, and for the result of that inclusion to be the betterment of society.

Irigaray argues that women have been continuously removed from or disregarded in conversations; the #MeToo Movement is a modern day example of women not only being a part of the conversation, but starting, leading, and controlling it. The #MeToo Movement was founded by Tarana Burke after an experience she had where a young girl confided in her about sexual violence she had experienced. Burke was unable to speak about it with her, or to let that girl know that she was not alone. Systemically, as Irigaray mentions in her work - especially when refuting the likes of Freud and Lacan - women have been taught that conversations regarding politics, philosophy, or science are not the place for them. That women's simple lack of phallus gives them an inherent and unchangeable lack of autonomy and power within society. Women are continuously told to be quiet and stay in their place, which is how, as a society, we ended up in a time where the #MeToo Movement is necessary. It can also be assumed that this systematic silencing of women is why it was so hard for Burke to stand up and share her own truth. The patriarchal society that women have been raised in, and that Irigaray aims to destroy, is one that forces women into silence on a daily basis in order to keep itself functioning.

The timing of the #MeToo Movement is important to look at. It officially began in 2006, but did not gain real traction until around 2017 when it went viral on Twitter. Irigaray was one of the pioneers in discussing radical feminist thought and the idea of the inclusion of women into all aspects of life, she started her theoretical work in the 1960's. Had it not been for the due diligence of her and her peers, the #MeToo Movement would not have been able to exist in today's world. Today, we are connected with people from all over the globe instantly through social media. Traditionally, one of the ways that women were always kept quiet and in their

subordinate place was through isolation; women were in charge of the household in most cases and many women who went out and spoke their minds were deemed insane and dismissed. It was not until women were able to get together and speak with each other about their lives that anything got done; that is how both liberal (suffragist) and radical (postmodern) feminism began, through women sharing stories with other women and realizing they had similar ones. The #MeToo Movement was able to harness the classic tool of sharing stories and escalate it through social media sites like Twitter where #MeToo was trending for months in 2017 and as of late 2018 had been used more than nineteen million times (Brown). Women from all over the world were able to log on from wherever they were, read stories of survivors, and maybe even find the courage to share their own story.

One of the foundations of Irigaray's work is the outright rejection of Freudian and Lacanian conceptualizations of the feminine. Freudian and Lacanian feminine theories were based on the idea that women only exist for male pleasure, their worthiness comes entirely from their womb, and maternity is the be all and end all. The most postmodern part of the of the #MeToo Movement is the way in which it gives women an outlet to speak up for themselves when men, specifically in positions of power, have violated them. The phallus is a central part of Freud and Lacan's arguments as to why women are inherently lesser than, the phallus is the deciding factor of one's power. Power is therefore the separating and defining trait of the patriarchy, if power is reduced down to the phallus then women will always be denied it. However, Irigaray and the #MeToo Movement would beg to differ. Power, to them, is not decided by the woman's lack of

phallus but instead power is obtained through our voices and the ability to speak freely in any and all conversations.

#MeToo in Hollywood and Politics

Hollywood is a place where the patriarchy thrives; and where the patriarchy thrives, sexual assault, harrasment, and rape are likely to live. One of the defining cases of the #MeToo Movement was the allegations against film director Harvey Weinstein. The allegations of sexual assault, harrasment, and rape began with actress Rose McGowan in October of 2017 and continued to be released into 2018 (BBC Staff). The original allegation from McGowan was followed by a tweet from another actress, Alyssa Milano, asking other women to share their stories using #MeToo in their tweets. From there, it went viral. Weinstein adamantly denied all of the allegations despite the fact that they were pouring in from both everyday people and celebrities.

Looking at the Weinstein case with Irigaray's work in mind is revealing. It clearly aligns with her work in the basic sense of allowing women to use their own voice and be a part of a greater conversation. However, it also deals with the notion of the importance of sexual difference. Hollywood is structured to favor men in power and keep women subordinate to those men. It often tries to silence women, like Weinstein did when he offered McGowan one million dollars - which she denied - in turn for her silence (BBC Staff). The women in these situations can find themselves torn between standing up for themselves or keeping quiet to advance in their career.

The sexual difference that is important to note here is the systematic oppression that women face, that oppression is something that every woman in her lifetime faces and no man ever will, it is the sole factor that separates all men from all women. The oppression is found in silencing, invalidating, and excluding women. If the difference, the oppression, is never admitted and never addressed then progress cannot be made. The #MeToo Movement was an almost entirely successful attempt at addressing and solving that issue through the unsilencing of women.

The rise of the #MeToo Movement in 2017 led to the popularization of the Believe Women and Time's Up campaigns. The 2018 award season was filled with Times Up pins worn on red carpets and acceptance speeches begging viewers to listen to and believe the women speaking up around them. It seemed as though progress was being swiftly made, the conversation was open and moving forward and the oppression was being recognized. Unfortunately, it turns out it would take more than just tweets and award show speeches to undo years of systemic sexism.

Although the majority of the response was positive and supportive, there were some voices that did not take the movement too kindly. When it came to the Weinstein case, fellow director and alleged perpetrator of similar crimes, Woody Allen, referred to the #MeToo Movement as a witch hunt and claimed that the situation was sad for Weinstein (Swenson). The use of the term 'witch hunt' was not something said without purpose. The term emphasizes the years-old claim that women who speak out and speak up for themselves are deemed crazy - something that Irigaray fought against through all of her work. Reclaiming a woman's power through the removal of her own voice is a tool of the patriarchy, that removal is done through the

invalidation of claims and the classic line, 'she's a woman so obviously she's just crazy.' It is the same tool that Allen was using in his defenses of the Weinstein case. Weinstein was only found guilty recently, in March of 2020 he was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison for first-degree criminal sexual act and third-degree rape and upon release he will be a registered sex offender (Levenson, Eric, et al.). After his sentencing, in court, Weinstein said "'I'm not going to say these aren't great people, I had wonderful times with these people, you know,' Weinstein said of his accusers. 'It is just I'm totally confused and I think men are confused about all of these issues'" (Levenson, Eric, et al.). Weinstein's lack of understanding and empathy help to define the sexual difference that Irigaray wrote about. He has no ability to understand the suffering of the women he hurt because he, as a man, is ignorant to those experiences and that is where the difference in the sexes lies.

In July of 2018 Judge Brett Kavanaugh was nominated to the US Supreme Court by President Donald Trump. Soon after his nomination, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward accusing Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her as a teenager. Kavanaugh adamantly denied the allegations and it led to the Kavanaugh Hearings covering TV screens endlessly for the following weeks. It also led to a resurgence in the #MeToo Movement and the question of whether or not we, as a society, should believe women.

The Kavanaugh Hearings highlighted a problem within the Movement; even if women use their voice and are allowed to be a part of the conversation, that does not mean they will be taken seriously. More women began to come forward with allegations against Kavanaugh, it was

reminiscent of the earlier Weinstein case. Trump was in full support of Kavanaugh, he was the Allen to Kavanaugh's Weinstein. Breaking the glass ceiling to get into the conversation is the first step, and the #MeToo Movement accomplished that in an extraordinary way. However, when it came time to turn words into actions in a political way, it failed. The testimony of Dr. Ford was emotional and moving, but there was only so much her words could do. Kavanaugh was appointed to the supreme court in October of 2018 by a fifty to forty-eight vote (Tatum).

The challenge that prevented Kavanaugh from not being appointed and the #MeToo Movement from making a significant political change is the way in which the patriarchy and politics are married in our society. Postmodern feminism's roots are based in the rejection of such traditional values, and so in order for real progress to be made those patriarchal traditions have to be dismantled. As of present day, they are unfortunately fully intact.

The #MeToo Movement can be seen as centered around the basic idea of sexual difference, that difference being the oppression of women. On the surface that sounds like a bad thing because being oppressed is an objectively bad thing. However, that difference from a postmodern perspective, although unfortunate, is actually an important and powerful tool in the progression of women. Since that specific difference is often unknown and never felt by men, it gives women a unique perspective in the conversations about politics, philosophy, history, and everything in between, which is why it is important for them to be included. That oppression can also be seen when looking at the relationship between female sexuality and the patriarchy.

The #MeToo Movement is seen as an advocate for women's right to power and autonomy over their own body and one specific aspect of that is sexuality. Traditionally, female sexuality is seen as existing only for male pleasure, that is why so many men - Weinstein and Kavanaugh included - see nothing wrong with their actions. To them the female body is something they are inherently entitled to. By giving women a voice, a platform, and support, the #MeToo Movement is giving women their sexuality back. It is giving them the ability to hold men accountable for their actions and say out loud that they do not exist solely for the pleasure of the men around them but that they are smart, worthy, and powerful women on their own; their body and their sexuality belong to them.

It is a very Freudian and Lacanian way of thinking that empowers the patriarchal society we have cultivated, one that thinks that women are always in search of the phallus of which they lack. Men see this as an inherent weakness, one that in their mind they can easily solve since they do not lack the phallus. It gives people like Weinstein the ability to think that it is okay to assault women and then question why they are mad at him, because in his mind he was simply giving them what they lack. Though twisted, it is true, and it is what Irigaray, postmodern feminism, and the #MeToo Movement have been collectively fighting for and continue to.

The first part of the #MeToo Movement's mission, beginning the conversation and making it an inclusive one, was completed. Although it was time consuming and difficult, in some cases, like Weinstein, it even accomplished the second part of the mission which was to have violators be held accountable. The third part of their mission, long term systemic change, however, is a battle

that is nowhere near over. It is a battle that postmodern feminists have been fighting since their movement began. The only way that battle can be won is if women continue to speak up in all realms of society, but most importantly in politics. Men will also have to come to terms with allowing women to have power and autonomy over their own body and their own sexuality. The #MeToo Movement and Irigaray's work cannot be silenced by the patriarchy, but they will need to keep speaking up and advocating for systemic progress to be achieved.

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