

2005

A Study of Kristeva and Irigaray's Critiques of Phallogocentrism: An Interdisciplinary Research of Feminism and Psychoanalysis

Jea Sophia Oh

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, joh@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oh, J. S. (2005). A Study of Kristeva and Irigaray's Critiques of Phallogocentrism: An Interdisciplinary Research of Feminism and Psychoanalysis. *Cerebration Quarterly* Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wccressler@wcupa.edu.

**A Study of Kristeva and Irigaray's Critiques on Phallogocentrism:
An Interdisciplinary Research of Theology and Psychoanalysis : Jea Suk Oh**

(Jea Suk Oh is an Adjunct Lecturer at Kean University, in the Philosophy and Religion Department. She has been teaching Feminist Philosophies, Introduction of Philosophy, and Western Religion for three years and is also a Doctoral Candidate in Theology and Religion at Drew University. This paper was awarded the best oral presentation in the Yale Bouchet National Conference on Diversity in Graduate Education 2005.)

Women have always been alienated from the symbolic structure of the traditional Christian image of God. The symbolic is the realm of society and subjectivity has been governed by the Law of the Father. To discern the subjectivity of women, both Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray stress the necessity of changing the representational system of Christian symbols in phallogocentric culture. Both Kristeva and Irigaray view religion as a possible vehicle for greater interaction between the Symbolic and the Semiotic/Imaginary. Both have carefully discerned the representation of the image of women in relation to religious languages. Christian patriarchal symbolic order is challenged by the Irigarayan imaginary and the Kristevan semiotic. Observing and comparing the works of Kristeva and Irigaray, this paper will find out how they reconceptualize and reconstruct the divine and women especially on their God-talk.

1. The Problems of Christian Symbolic Structure

Feminist scholars and theologians have been arguing against the phallogocentric Christian image of God. Feminists have especially struggled about the masculine image of God, to call new religious symbols according to the female gender throughout women's experiences. Christian Religious symbolic is always already configured as masculine. Christianity is usually complicit with matricide and the occlusion of the feminine in as much as the Father God of monotheism and the homosexual trinity serves to affect the exclusive emergence of the male into semiotic representation and cultural production. Irigaray argues that it is only in relationship to female sexual signs and representations that women can reconstruct themselves and struggle towards real subjectivity. According to Irigaray, it is only female divinity that can provide the imaginary, the symbolic order, whereby women can attain subjectivities, not equal to men but different from them (qtd. in D'Costa 5).

2. Women's Subjects in Phallogocentric Symbolic.

According to Lacan subjectivity requires language, and language is masculine, grounded in the Phallus as universal signifier. When women speak, when women take up subject positions, it is not as women, but as imitation males (qtd. in Verhaeghe).

For Lacan, men and women are only in language. Within the phallic definition, the woman is constituted as 'not all.' As Juliet Mitchell also explains, 'Woman' is excluded by the nature of words, meaning that the definition poses her as exclusion (49). Law, religion, science, and civilization are structured by the masculine symbolic. The feminine is figured as an absence within the real as well as the imaginary and symbolic orders. Thus, women have been excluded from symbolic order. Becoming a subject involves entry into the symbolic. Thus, the language and the whole symbolic order are masculine, so one can only enter into it as male.

As a result, women can only appear as tokens of exchange within this masculine economy. Women's own representation is by silence, absence, lack, or hysteria. Therefore, when woman is mirrored in the Freudian-Lacan mirror there is only lack and deficiency. In this structure, like Lacan and Spivak already said (Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?"), roughly we can say that women cannot speak, cannot be subjects, and certainly cannot develop a feminist symbolic.

What we have here is not evidence that women do not have language, and therefore that they have no subject position as women: what we have is that a powerful man refusing to listen. Probably because the masculine symbolic system denied women's subjectivities and shut women up, so women were considered unspeakable even though women have spoken, yelled, and cried out for a long time. Then, can a woman speak, or indeed enter the symbolic at all? The problem is that women are given the same words men are given: masculine words. Lacking feminine words, women must either babble or remain silent within the symbolic order.

Language is masculine, however, is always deferred, never satisfied. As Graham Ward states, "The necessary iterability of words" (152) means that its final and definitive meaning is always deferred-and in being deferred will only refer us to other signs and how it differs from them, where the meaning of one word endlessly points other words (Graham 152). "Difference" opens up a gap, a conceptual space of the other in which deconstruction could be seen. Applied to the divine, by deconstructing the masculine symbolic, we can have a space to suggest an alternative or something different on our behalf.

In Derridian view, the only language available is the logocentric, phallogocentric, binary language. Derrida believed that the symbolic order can be weakened by providing suppressed alternative interpretation of texts. For Derrida, anything communicated through language is a text (*Writing and Difference*). Derrida coined the term *differance* (1) to describe the ineliminable gap (irreducible otherness) between reality and language that confounds us. Irigaray and Kristeva both appropriate the term, *differance*. Language typically excludes women from an active subject position. Irigaray seeks for men and women to recognize each other in language as irreducible others. She argues that this cannot happen until women occupy the subject position, and men learn to communicate with others subjects (*Sexes and Genealogies* 63).

3. The Kristevan Semiotic and the Irigarayan Imagery

Kristeva's semiotic is related to Irigaray's Imaginary and to the pre-Oedipal period. The semiotic emerges from the relationship between mother and infant, is prior to culture and language acquisition, and is dependent upon the body's drives (qtd. in Weedon 161). Irigaray focuses on language and Kristeva focuses on maternal form of signification. Kristevian theory supports the notion that the maternal body is a site for dissolution of Western dualism.

A. Julia Kristeva

a. Semiotic (Semeiotike)

By introducing the idea of an imaginary father into religious discourse, Kristeva challenges the phallogocentric religious symbolic systems. She suggests that the semiotic contains the pre-Oedipal position of love relations recalled in religious symbolism as signs of the maternal. Kristeva distinguishes between two aspects of modalities of language, the semiotic and the symbolic (*Revolution of Poetic Language* 4). The symbolic is what we have already considered constitutes as subjects. The semiotic in Kristeva's usage, is the physical basis of language, its sounds, tones, and rhythms, originating in the body. The semiotic, as physical, is therefore "a psychic modality logically and chronologically prior to the sign: without this bodily basis there could be no symbolic, no language or culture" (Jantzen 195). By considering difference, semiotic opens possibility of diversities and interpretation. Therefore, semiotic is a way of communication which is closer to reality and 'truth'. For Kristeva, semiotic is gendered feminine. Kristeva describes the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic as a dialectic oscillation. Without the symbolic, all significations would be babble or delirium (Oliver "Kristeva and Feminism"). Yet, without the semiotic, all signification would be empty and have no importance for our lives. Signification requires both the semiotic and symbolic.

Kristeva observes that males and females are not innately different but become viewed differently due to their social positions, claiming that there is no opposition between feminine and masculine in pre-Oedipality. Kristeva chooses maternity as a prototype because it breaks down borders between nature and culture, subject and other. For Kristeva, the concepts man and woman are the products not of nature but of signifying practice.

b. Abjection

Lynne Huffer in *Maternal Pasts: Feminist Futures* explains that for Kristeva the maternal body is the site of the abject (80). Abjection is the expression of a division between the subject and its body, and a merging of self and other. The abject should be seen in the context of the semiotic and is repressed upon entry into the Symbolic order which is associated with the repressed feminine (Huffer 80). Kristeva borrows a term, the chora from Plato's *Timaeus*, which represents our maternal and nourishing origins, our bodily affects and drives, and is what provides the semiotic aspect of language with its rhythm and lyrical movement. The chora is a function of iteration

which produces the opening of possibility for stories to take place. Kristeva links this mobile space with nourishing, with the maternal, and with the illusion of mastery and univocal semantics (qtd. in Huffer 80). Although the Platonic chora is a formless matrix of space itself, Kristeva articulates a maternal chora that must have a place of receptacle, the maternal body (Huffer 87). In Kristeva, the chora becomes the focus of the semiotic as the pre-symbolic. The chora is biological but always shaped by social and cultural forces; it is the place from which the semiotic receives its motivation to rupture the sequential logic of the symbolic. Kristeva thus inscribes the body within the signification process.

From the Latin root, abjection is characterized by that which is cast out, rejected and expelled from the social order. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva develops a notion of abjection that has been very useful in diagnosing the dynamics of oppression. She describes abjection as an operation of the psyche through which subjective and group identity are constituted by excluding anything that threatens one's own borders (Body/Text in Julia Kristeva 98). The main threat to the fledging subject is his or her dependence upon the maternal body. Therefore, abjection is fundamentally related to the maternal function.

In patriarchal cultures, women have been reduced to the maternal function. This misplaced abjection is one way to account for women's oppression and degradation within patriarchal cultures. The abject thus both threatens and promises a collapse of those symbolic structures. In patriarchal system, the masculine is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, and uncountable power of the feminine. This unstableness and asymmetry of the masculine symbolic system can always be anticipated by the deconstruction of the system and threatened by the unpredictable becoming. In order to obtain the hegemony, the masculine suppresses and demonizes the feminine as the other, the abjection. Women are categorized as the human representative of the abjection: the improper, transgression, unclean, sin, evil, etc in Western Christianity.

B. Luce Irigaray

a. Not One But Two

“Across the whole world, there are, there are only, men and women. Being we means being at least two.”

--Irigaray, trans. by Martin Alison, *I Love to You* 48.

In Lacanian view, the body is constructed in the mirror stage, and sexually differentiated in the entrance to the Symbolic order. Irigaray distances herself from Lacan in two manners. As Sarah Donovan points out, Irigaray disagrees with Lacan's depiction of the Symbolic order as ahistorical and unchanging. Irigaray believes that language systems are malleable, and largely determined by power relationships that are in flux. Secondly, Irigaray remains unconvinced by Lacan's claims that the Phallus is an ahistorical master signifier of the Symbolic order that has no connection to male anatomy (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

In Western culture, the imaginary body which dominates on a cultural level is a male body. History was written in male languages by males. As the same token, males have worshipped their patriarchal gods who are the projection of male subjectivities. A masculine subject cannot be the standard of humanity. In order to call a new god who represents women, women need to gain their own subjectivity in the masculine society. What Irigaray suggests is that in order to create female identity and female subjectivity, women must have a sociality among themselves and a language of their own.

According to Irigaray, female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters (*This Sex which is Not One* 23). In the masculine culture, traditionally women's sexuality has been suppressed and prohibited as a forbidden area. Irigaray's analysis of sameness in Freud's theory was particularly important because she used it to criticize his theory of female sexuality. According to Freudian view on female sexuality, women have no subjectivity in sexual relationship to men. Freud understood women's clitoris as a castrated penis which is a little sex organ or no sex organ at all. For Freud, a little girl is a little boy with no penis. Thus, women have been recognized as the defective or lack. Irigaray refers to female subjectivity and sexuality as "a sexuality denied" (*Speculum* 49), considering that "the penis is the only sexual organ of recognized value" (*Speculum of the Other Woman* 49). Irigaray argues that the complexity of female sexuality and eroticism does not fit into male notions of sexuality. Irigaray discovered women's autoeroticism. In her autoeroticism, a woman is not "pleasure-giving" to men but "self-embracing" (*This Sex Which is Not One* 24). The autoeroticism could be a clue to overcome the logic of sameness in phallogocentric understanding of sexuality and its male God. The language she uses to describe this God comes from her account of morphology of women's continual self-touching in the carelessness of two lips. God's identity in trinity honors both self-love and relational wonder. Irigaray's description of women's autoeroticism helps to expand the conceptual horizons of Trinitarian thought. This

God does not need an external other in order for there to be self-knowledge, for such knowledge is eternally generated through the relations of the Trinity. Such a God can relate to that which is truly 'other' than God, without reducing the other to a function of divine, narcissistic desire, as is the case in phallogocentric conceptions of the Divine-human relation like the caress of two lips – always touching yet half open. Cast in the language of immanence, this God is both matter and movement within which subjectivity coalesces in time-space-“the infinite that resides within us and among us, the god in us, the Other for us, becoming with and in us” (Hollywood 63).

b. Calling a New God

The West ascribes the gender of God as always paternal and masculine. Irigaray sees that God has been created out of man's gender. She argues that up to now religious projection has been a male homosexual affair. Irigaray argues that the God who has for centuries reigned in Western culture is male, a God who mirrors the patriarchal culture and masculine desire. She adds that woman has no mirror in order to become woman.

Therefore, Irigaray invokes a new God: “A female god is yet to come” (*Divine Women* 8). She emphasizes that every woman should imagine a God. Irigaray denies the uniqueness of Jesus' incarnation. Irigaray sees that in the incarnation of logos, Jesus was sexed. Jesus' maleness is only one of sexes, therefore, it is a partial incarnation since he did not encompass all of humanity. Irigaray also argues for the incarnation of all bodies as potentially divine. God, language, and woman are linked in the idea of becoming. Jantzen agrees to Irigaray by saying that Divinity in the face of natal is a horizon of becoming, a process of divinity ever new, just as natality is the possibility of new beginnings (255). God, like everything else, is in process, involved in change. In this respect, process thought makes it possible to think of God as the living, responsive God (Jantzen 255). Thus, Irigaray suggests a new god of becoming in an ongoing incarnation: One that is coming.

4. Critiques on Kristeva and Irigaray

Huffer criticizes that Kristeva returns to ontology, she obscures the fact that those beginnings lie not in the chaotic formlessness of a space before being, but in the womblike space of representation and knowing, the theatrical scene of Plato's cave (*Maternal Pasts* 79). Huffer discerns that the *chora* is virtually equivalent to the *hysteria*, a womblike repository of maternal essence (83). She criticizes that

reading Kristeva through Irigaray allows us to compare the *chora* with the *hystera*, and to develop that comparison in order to ask political questions about the maternally coded instability which both finds and threatens signification in language (Huffer 83).

Kristeva and Irigaray seize on those moments in order to theorize the instability of the feminine, either in ontology (Kristeva) or in epistemological (Irigaray) terms. While Irigaray uses the *hystera* to talk about the mother as an illusory ground of philosophical truth, Kristeva uses the *chora* as a maternal element of negativity that threatens the possibility of being itself. According to Huffer, Kristeva's ontological essentialism is clear while Irigaray's theory never escapes the cinematic realm where the meaning of beings always presupposes their construction through representation (76). Therefore, Kristeva tries to leave the cave in order to find a prelinguistic originary source of being. Huffer also writes that the Platonic *chora* is the nonsensical rhythm of iterability, nothing but movement itself, therefore, a verb which would be constitutive of a potentially liberatory movement. This movement, for Kristeva, is arrested as the noun, *chora* as maternal thing (87).

Irigaray has taken several criticisms from feminists as an essentialist. Her essentialistic view of gender can be called "a strategic essentialism" which is emphasized by Gayatri Spivak. According to Spivak, strategic essentialism deals with a situated group, when one makes claims for or against essentialism. Irigaray also clarifies that "a strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (4)... "No doubt female physiology is present but not identity, which remains to be constructed" (*I Love You* 107). Irigaray claims that establishing an identity appropriate to her gender is extremely difficult because Western civilization is "without any female philosophy or linguistics, any female religion or politics" (*I Love You* 44). In order to gain a subjectivity of her own, Irigaray takes essentialism strategically. Irigaray's use of strategic essentialism has been criticized as essentialism itself. Irigaray engages with essentialist view as a strategy. However, Spivak reminds us that real deconstruction is neither essentialist nor antiessentialist. It invites us to think through the counterintuitive position that there might be essences and there might not be essences (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 10). It should be counted according to the counterintuitive position but as Irigaray observes, in the male dominant system, woman cannot be the truly other in the economy of a single subject. In the face of a 'radical alterity', woman cannot simply be man's complement because that would subsume otherness under the sign of the same. According to Derrida, "the other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to my ego, precisely because it is an ego" (*Writing and Difference* 125).

There are some critical voices from feminists arguing that Kristeva and Irigaray aesthetically romanticize the maternity by applying an ontological and an

epistemological strategy. Kristeva's interpretation of maternity is not located in women's body only ontologically. Rather, this is the power of life which is on the margins of symbolic order and trapped in the semiotic chora. Kristevan semiotic can be recognized as subverting the symbolic order of language. In the semiotic space men and women would have access to a pre-symbolic experience of maternal functions.

If we understand Kristevan maternity and Irigarayan imaginary as the fecundity of every life, that is definitely not limited on women's body but also located in men's body and nature which could be reached to Christ in its life giving love; God as the source of life that brings new beginnings in our anticipation. Like Irigaray says, "life is always open to what happens. A future coming not measured by the transcendence of death but by the call to birth of the self and the other. The fecundity of a love whose most elementary gesture, or deed, remains the caress" (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 186). The fecundity is not limited to women, especially to fertile women but is applied to every creation, even men and nature. Fecundity is a movement of becoming, a creative oscillation, a dynamic vibration. This creative movement toward life can be called natality which this whole creation (woman, man, squirrels, trees, and even rocks) is born into, since every life functions as the matrix of becoming interconnected, interdependent.

The works of Kristeva and Irigaray allow us to envision representations of Christ that both enlarge on and take us beyond the maternal image. All body can be open to presence of the divine. Not only Women, but also men, children, the disabled, the homosexual, and the whole creation are reflecting the image of God, as the maternal body: birthing, dying, renewing itself. Discovering the fecundity of life, "natality" functions as a transformative suggestion. This maternal foundation of natality threatens the masculinist phallogocentric God. The natality of life shakes the firm ground of the masculine God in the western theology, in doing so, the destabilization would occur in the western imaginary by which the gaps would open up for women subjects that horizons for becoming divine. Life is in its process of own transformation through which every living is creating, mothering, becoming in reflecting the Imago Dei.

Notes:

(1) According to Derrida, the double meaning of differance is temporization and spacing of ontological differences. Thus differance is the name we might give to the active, moving discord of different forces, and of differences of forces. Therefore, we can say that one is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is the other in differance, one is the differance of the other. So it is the irreparable loss of presence and the irreversible usage of energy. Peggy Kamuf ed., A

Derrida Reader: *Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 61-77

Works Cited

Crownfield, David, ed. *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis*. Albany: SUNY UP, 1992.

D'Costa, Gavin. *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture, and the Divine*. London: SCM Press, 2000.

Donovan, Sarah. "Luce Irigaray- 1931-Present". *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2003 University of Tennessee, Martin. 2 Mar 2005.
<<http://www.iep.utm.edu/i/irigaray.htm>>

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Differance*, Alan Bass trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Huffer, Lynne. *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Hollywood, Amy. "Divine Woman /Divine Women: The Return of the Sacred in Bataille, Lacan, and Irigaray. *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today*, ed. Francis J. Ambrosio, New York: Fordham University Press, 1999.

Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke. London: Athlone University Press, 1984.

Irigaray, Luce. trans. By Martin Alison, *I Love to You*. Routledge: New York, 1996.

Irigaray, Luce. *Divine Women*. Trans. Stephen Muecke. Sydney: Local Consumption, 1986.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex which is Not One*, Catherine Porter trans. New York: Cornell University, 1985.

Irigaray, Luce. *Sexes and Genealogies*, Trans., Gillian C. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian G. Gill. New York: Cornell University, 1985.

Jantzen, Grace M. *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution of Poetic language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Mitchell, Juliet. Ed. *Jacques Lacan and the Feminine Sexuality*. London: Norton, 1982.

Oliver, Kelly. "Kristeva and Feminism". Center for Digital Discourse and Culture. 1998 Virginia Tech University. 2 Mar 2005
<<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/Kristeva.html>>

Peggy Kamuf ed., *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* London: Macmillan, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
Paul Verhaeghe, Marc du Ry trans., *Does The Woman Exist?: From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine*. New York: Other Press, 1999.

Graham Ward, "Theological Materialism," ed. Colin Crowder, *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-realism*. London: Mowbray, 1996.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.