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Francofemme Duality (Luce Irigaray–Hélène Cixous) the Many Faces of Womanhood in Pantelis Voulgaris' Brides

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ABSTRACT

Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous dealt with issues of female writing and femininity in art and have gained international respect and recognition for their work. In fact, their theories constitute a framework for the comprehension of gender issues. It is commonly accepted that the reflection of womanhood in contemporary art has undergone various changes. According to these two french feminists, women have been always struggling against male superiority and male vision of the world. This inequality of the genders is apparent from a very early age and it is obvious even in language issues. Both of them mentioned the deep relationship between body and language but also the need for a female discourse. This paper shows, through a detailed analysis, this eternal struggle in Voulgaris' film Brides where the audience experiences the many faces of womanhood during war times. This film achieves to deconstruct the image of the woman as an inferior human being. Through the script, the photography and even human gestures, Pantelis Voulgaris creates a film adaptation which bears a profound respect to the original text. As a result, this paper will impose the basic elements of Irigaray's and Cixous' theory upon the female writing of Ioanna Karystiani in order to reveal the inner connection of this film with these feminist theories and meanings.

Keywords: L.Irigaray, H.Cixous, feminism, film, gender.

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1.0 Introduction

Pantelis Voulgaris directed the film *Brides* (2004) which was Hollywood intervened and circulated. It was produced by Martin Scorsese. The film is based on Ioanna Karystiani's book and deals with issues of immigration and femininity. Furthermore, it highlights the difference between the Eastern and the Western world but it does not offer a Hollywoodian happy ending. Throughout the film, a lot of emphasis is placed on women who are struggling for a better life or even for liberation. That is when a lot of issues of male superiority come forward.

Two theorists who have been dealing with issues of male superiority and gender inequality in general, are Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Both of them confirm the words of Duras "we must move on to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in the organism, in the body" (Duras in Marks and Courtivron, 1980, 238) and the words of Fouque "our enemy isn't man but phallocracy; that is, the imperialism of the phallus" (Fouque, 1987, 52).

In fact, a feminist reading can be a liberating act. As Adrienne Rich proposes : "A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been let to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name, and therefore live afresh" (Rich, 1979,35).

The uniqueness of the particular paper is that it offers this kind of feminist reading of the film *Brides*. In fact, no particular study has addressed the theories of Cixous and Irigaray in this film. So, it is crucial to apply these elements and give the film a new critical approach in order to acknowledge its value.

With regards to the methodology adopted, I followed the analytical approach. Firstly, I studied the original text, written by Ioanna Karystiani and then I studied the film in order to have a clear view of the adaptation results. The paper concludes that the film adopts a great deal of the notions studied by Irigaray and Cixous. It also concludes in showing that despite the fact that this film demonstrates the inferiority of the female characters, nevertheless it constitutes a manifesto towards the liberation of the woman from male superiority.

This paper has three sections: the first one presents the theories of Irigaray and Cixous, the second contains a close analysis of the film and the third the conclusions.

2.0 Writing the Body: French Feminism

In order to realise how the female writing issue came into surface, it is necessary to acquire a knowledge of Lacan's theories about the entrance in patriarchal discourse. The first stage is what Lacan calls the Real. This is the stage where there is no patriarchy or domination. It is crucial because it is the exact stage where women should go back to in order to find their own language (Klages, 2001). When the child begins to speak, he comes across the absence. The lack that a child experiences is the mother's penis. So, for fear of castration, the child rejects the mother and tries to find substitutes (Ellmann, 1994, 19). These substitutes lead to what is called "otherness". So, the child is defined by the other and experiences this lack throughout his life.

With regards to Luce Irigaray, the majority of her work, focus on liberating women from the repressive masculine discourse. The distinction that contemporary western feminists make between gender and sex, does not exist for Irigaray. As she states, "[e]quality between men and women cannot be achieved without a *theory of gender as sexed* and a rewriting of the rights of obligation of each sex, *qua different*, in social rights and obligation" (Irigaray, 1985, 13). By giving a new value to feminine body and making it

become a new source of liberation, Luce Irigaray reinvents the relationship between body and language.

For a start, it is commonly accepted that Irigaray is influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and her basic theories are presented in her work, *Speculum of the other Woman*. According to Freud, the feminine development begins when the two sexes separate into boys and girls. And that is the definite point for Irigaray. It is this exact moment when a fissure between linguistic and psychological functioning of girl is created. She states that, since girls develop in a phallogocentric linguistic structure, their body is conceived as the negative aspect of maleness.

Penis envy is the next developmental stage wherein the girl realizes that she lacks the master signifier (phallus) and therefore rejects her own castrated body. (Irigaray, 1985, 68). And that's her very first introduction to the field called "imaginary". Irigaray claims that, "woman's castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her *having nothing*.. Nothing Like man. That is to say, *no sex/organ* that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality. *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth,*" (*Speculum*, 1985, 48). Consequently, the girl rejects her own body because it is not a space for her own understanding of her identity and she enters a state called "hysteria" which, according to Irigaray, is caused by her "loss"² but this loss escapes any representation, hence the impossibility of "morning" it. Hysteria is her effort to maintain her own sexuality, against strong repressive powers by looking outside of her body, but she cannot succeed because, "it is precisely for which she is not – the phallus – that she asks to be desired and simultaneously to be loved," (*This Sex Which is not One*, 1985, 62).

Furthermore, Irigaray affirms that this developmental stage is centered around the "fact" that the little girl has been castrated, and now she is without, so that:

"The nonsymbolization of her desire for origin, of her relationship to her mother, and of her libido acts as a constant appeal to polymorphic repressions (be they melancholic, maniacal, schizophrenic, paranoiac...). She functions as a *hole* – that is where we would place it at its point of greatest efficiency, even in its implications of phobia for man too – in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes. But this fault, this deficiency, this 'hole,' inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself...she borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them. " (*Speculum*, 1985, 71)

As can be easily understood, masculinity has been turned into the major subject offering to man the ability to choose his reference point which is important for the structure of language. As the girl grows up and becomes a woman she, always, has to deal with language that refers only to masculine experience. As a result, the female experience is considered to be an "otherness" and the woman can never feel independent.

Moreover, according to Irigaray:

"Female sexualization is thus the effect of a logical requirement, of the existence of a language that is transcendent with respect to bodies, which would necessitate, in order- nevertheless - to become incarnate 'so to speak,' taking women one by one. Take that to mean that woman does not exist, but that language exists. That woman does not exist owing to the fact that language -- a language -- rules as master, and that she threatens -- as a sort of 'prediscursive reality'? -- to disrupts its order." (*This Sex Which is not One*, 1985, 87)

So, the phallus which is the master symbol, dominates and denies access to all women with regards to the creation of new symbols. However, the girl starts to imitate the masculinity "so that she becomes the mirroring of the masculine (*Speculum*, 1985, 72). Or, as one could state: the woman becomes a *doppelgänger*, meaning the double projection of masculine.

² A psychological loss and not a physical one.

To *parler-femme* is to adopt the discourse of a woman, to incorporate her body in language and to reject the superiority of the opposite sex. Irigaray's feminist strategy involves a "rétour et retouche" which is a metaphor. She claims that: "Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself," (*This Sex Which is not One*, 1985, 29).

As it is widely known Irigaray's theories are closely related to psychoanalysis. On the other hand, Hélène Cixous states that women should be liberated from the closure of the psychoanalysis but they both created the term "phallogocentric". In fact, Cixous is mostly associated with "L'écriture féminine" (female writing). She quotes Derrida in order to clarify what is important in one's writing:

"A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its laws and rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called perception. And hence, perpetually and essentially, they run the risk of being definitely lost. Who will ever know such disappearance? The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelopes a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading." (Conley 8)

According to Cixous:

"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement." (Cixous, 2012, 875).

While Luce Irigaray focuses on differences between sexes, Cixous remarks the plurality of differences existing among subjects:

"Pure I, identical to I-self, does not exist. [...] The difference is in us, in me, difference plays me. And it is numerous: since it plays with me in me between me and me or I and myself. A "myself" which is the most intimate first name of You. I will never say often enough that the difference is not one, that there is never one without the other. [...] I is never an individual. I is haunted. I is always, before knowing anything, an I-love-you" (Cixous, 1994:xviii).

For Cixous, there are no binary oppositions. She believes that the dualistic structure must be rejected, since all dualities derive from the male/female opposition and are never neutral, promoting an hierarchy where females are the weak and powerless side (Hekman, 1990).

"Man/woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior...means high or low, means Nature/History, means transformation/inertia. In fact every theory of the culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic system – everything that is, that's spoken, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts us – it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to man/woman opposition" (Cixous, 1981b:44).

In her work, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she uses a lot of metaphors drawn from the female body in order to depict the link between women and femininity. She describes the act of writing female texts as writing with "white ink" (Cixous, 1975, 881). And these metaphors are used to describe the *écriture féminine* but also to replace the *phallus*. This female writing is nothing but a transformative writing style used to link female desire with sexuality and language. Cixous's conception of *écriture féminine* clearly expands on the Derridean notion that writing is a space for *différance* and for the breakdown of

patriarchal discourse (Weil, 2006, 131). This notion asserts that meaning is generated through “the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers” (Moi, 1985, 106).

Language is a powerful and potentially oppressive force in shaping our identities, and Cixous takes this idea and uses it to further explore the particular alienation that women experience in relation to language (Weil, 2006, 158). Furthermore, the emphasis on the spoken word and on alternative forms of expression beyond (and incorporated into) the written word may help to elucidate Cixous’s own writing style, which refuses to conform to standard rules of grammar and structure, leading to “experiments with prose that break normal syntax, effacing borders between subject/verb and active/passive” (Weil, 2006, 165).

Given that each woman has her own story to tell, Cixous believes that women can tell their story by writing through their bodies. For years, women have been defined by their own bodies as a result of dominant male activity. Cixous suggests that women who have been defined by the male dominance can do one of two things. Firstly, they can remain trapped inside themselves thereby perpetuating the passive role imposed on them by the male. The second alternative women have, and the option Cixous supports, is that they can use their bodies as a tool. By using their bodies as a means of communication, women are able to speak with the very thing that they have been confined within.

3.0 The case of Pantelis Voulgaris' film: *Brides*

Brides is a production by widely known Greek director Pantelis Voulgaris and screenwriter Ioanna Karystiani based on Karystiani's novel. Set in 1922, the film follows the journey of 700 "mail-order brides" from poor countries all over Europe as they cross the Atlantic towards the promised husbands in America. In Samothrace, we meet Niki whose fate demands that she be shipped to Chicago to marry the tailor Prodrornos, the man to whom her older sister was married yet without success. Then, we meet Norman Harris, an Irish-American photojournalist. When American newspapers repeatedly reject his photos, Norman gives up his work to return home. His passage back is the same ship carrying the 700 brides to New York- though he's in first class and they are in third. During the trip, he becomes fascinated with the brides, and undertakes a project to photograph each one in her wedding dress. During the same time, Niki is hired to create costumes for the entertainment troupe on board in first class.

Women are presented as inferior human beings and their inferiority is even obvious through their speech: a trembling intonation along with elliptic phrases betray their fear towards the unknown. As Irigaray has stated, women feel inferior because they lack the phallus and this is obvious throughout the film. For instance, when the father says: "She is ready to travel across the whole world and she is 27 years old", the daughter responds in a trembling and full of fear voice: "29 years old" as if she realizes that time has gone by and she is still unmarried and that this trip is her final chance to find a husband or maybe her final punishment? In another instance they say "Prodrornos is a very honest man" implying that Niki is reinforcing in this way the inequality of the sexes. Even Niki seems to accept the superiority of Prodrornos when she says: "Prodrornos is getting married for a second time and this woman comes from the same family". Although when reading the script someone might think that Nike is angry about this fact, on the other hand Niki seems quite ashamed because they could not satisfy Prodrornos' desires from the very first moment and so he had to get married once more.

Woman has clearly nothing, as Irigaray confirmed. A female character in the particular film, Charo, is getting married in a Greek church while her husband is away in the States...nevertheless, Charo has put on her wedding dress and she is obliged to go through the whole celebration that, to our eyes, seems like humiliation. Charo acts as a desperate woman, as a toy that follows the rules of a game. Even the bruises on her back constitute a flaw that she must hide: "Do not worry Charo. By the time you reach Canada, your bruises will be gone".

In fact it is poverty that drug those women away to America and not the American dream. Hundreds of women are waiting at the port for the ship to come. This ship is actually their salvation, their only hope to prove that they are not a burden anymore. The many faces of womanhood are apparent in this film. There are women who represent upper social classes and the other women, the brides, who are settled in the lower levels of the ship promoting in this way the image of inferiority.

Surprisingly enough, when the photographer proposes to take them a photo wearing a wedding dress, they all accept except for Niki. The director creates an image which is extremely moving but also depressing. All these women wearing almost the same wedding dresses are waiting for this photo as a hope that they will feel somehow like real brides.

A quite shocking scene is when Niki reveals that the whole trip is a fraud. Many of these women are travelling to meet the same man. This is when we realize the issue of "hysteria" that Irigaray mentioned. They want to shout to escape from this miserable situation but they realize at the same time that they are regarded as the negative side of masculinity. It is as if they feel that they deserve this fraud to happen.

On the other hand, Charo is the one who puts an end to her torture. She chooses to commit suicide as a an act of revolution or as an act of salvation. She refuses to surrender, she refuses to follow the destiny that others tried to impose on her. This is when we witness Karyastiani's *écriture féminine*. Charo stands up and faces male gaze...a great proof of the so-called *liebestod*. Charo dies because she cannot marry the man she once loved.

Additionally, Niki is also a proof of this female writing. She refuses to surrender to the old man who is trying to frighten her. Even her language is adapted to the social context and she certainly "parle-femme": "I'm not afraid of you...I'm not Yelena". Even when she is asked: "Where are you from?" she responds consciously enough "I come from a place I'll never see again".

Niki is a woman who tries to prove herself equal to men. In a very interesting scene, Niki wakes up in the morning and realizes that her hair turned grey. She cannot hide her sadness and even her fear. Norman touches her hair as an act of love. When she finally meets her husband, Prodrornos, he is surprised to see that the woman he has been waiting for is actually old or she seems old. But he accepts her exactly as she is.

4.0 Conclusions

Undoubtedly, Karyastiani's novel is an act of revolution, a real female writing. She creates strong images not to alleviate woman's pain but to make her fight for her rights. She gives us different aspects of womanhood so as to let us choose the most acceptable one. She has a strong critical tone towards male characters. Man represents the upper class, the power or even the good manners and the culture. This is when she creates Niki, a woman who comes from Samothrace and achieves to communicate in English with the photographer, a woman who achieves not to surrender to the upper class, a woman who realizes what she is going through but it is a conscious choice. She actually chose to do this trip, to marry Prodrornos...she is not forced to do it. She is not the victim, she just tries to help her family. She does not accept to be regarded as a burden anymore.

Pantelis Voulgaris adapted successfully the novel in screen and achieved to convey all the messages included in the original novel. He created the "portrait of a young woman" who is obliged to live someone else's dream. It is a strong political and social manifesto which forms part of the whole feminist dialogue. Women refute male dominance and they are ready to liberate themselves. Even in the end of the film, the director does not offer us a happy ending. Niki is not willing to forget. She does not want to forget the man she once loved.

A lot of feminist issues are portrayed in this female writing by Ioanna Karystiani. According to V. Woolf, woman writer is trapped in a sexist literary tradition:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction. In fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband (Woolf, 1995, 51).

The female writing is a revolutionary act and that is obvious in the particular film. Karystiani brings women back to the discourse from which, according to Cixous, they have been violently separated. They acquire a voice that can now be heard. Taking into account Irigaray's "rétour et retouche". we witness those women who may look afraid but they do not fear to resist.

Most women in Brides have different voices and they represent different consciousnesses or even ideas. For Bakhtin "voice-consciousness", or "consciousness-voices" all are the same:

"Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice-consciousness the is born and lives" (Bakhtin, 1984, 88).

All this plurality of female reflection creates an image of a deeply feminist text that achieves to give justice to all those women who have been victims of patriarchal tradition or even of their own lives. All the female protagonists achieve to speak as a woman and to demand equality as a common "I", according to Cixous. As she said, "I is always, before knowing anything, an I-love -you".

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