

## Rethinking Language in Irigaray's Mimesis Applied in David Mamet's Oleanna

Shahrzad Mohammad Hossein<sup>1</sup>, Narges Raoufzadeh<sup>2</sup>, Fatemeh Sadat Basirizadeh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2,3</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

[shahrzadmohammadhosein@gmail.com](mailto:shahrzadmohammadhosein@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Throughout history, women have always sought their rights and place and this has long been the subject of much debate among writers and critics. So writers and critics, both men and women have reflected this issue in their works in different ways. From the very outset of her career, Luce Irigaray showed a keen interest in the exploration of the key role that language has in determining how women are evaluated in their society and the position they hold in it. In order to show resistance to masculine values imposed on them, women resort to strongholds such as mimesis in opposition. This paper aims to primarily, trace the backgrounds of this notion, secondly, to pursue the effect and use of it by women characters and to depict in what way it is employed as a means of resistance. Examples that will be provided shall be selected from the play "Oleanna", a modern play written by David Mamet.

### Keywords

phallogentrism; mimetic speech; sexual hegemony; deconstruction; inferior position



### I. Introduction

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) the Algerian critical thinker, in one of his most outstanding works titled *Spectres de Marx*, uses deconstructive philosophy to examine the permutations of 'spectre' as well as its accompaniments 'haunting' and 'spirit' (Lechte 129). Within the boundaries of Western patriarchal culture, elements have been used and exploited to establish binary systems of symbolic representation. In such systems, women as 'the other' can exist only by providing a negative counterpart. Unless they can, the 'woman' is lost and forgotten and hence becomes a "specter". As Narges Raoufzadeh (2019) in her article entitled "Analysis of Love, Death, Rebirth and Patriarchy in Two Contemporary Poetess Forough Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems" has mentioned "According to almost all feminist scholars, patriarchy refers to the rule of the father in a male dominated society as a social and ideological construct which regards men as superior to women. They are of the opinion that men's domination over female sexuality is central to women's subordination. In fact, man is the head of the family who controls women's sexuality, labor, production, reproduction and mobility. Moreover, the effect of patriarchy can be traced in politics, public life and economy as well as in all aspects of social, personal, psychological and sexual existence" (60).

Furthermore, Derrida maintains that phallogentrism, which is advocated in most Western societies, privileges a masculine and highly individualistic point of view, thus, in

such a society, woman can not enjoy existence unless they are defined in a binary opposition to the 'male'. In such a case, the value of a woman always escapes recognition and her value is that of becoming the product of a man's labor. Consequently, the intersection of the two notions, phallocentrism and the existence of woman as a specter gives birth to a notion with which woman can challenge and resist the impositions of a phallogentric society. Basirizadeh (2019) in her article entitled *A Comparative Study of the Psychoanalytical Portrayal of the Women Characters by Virginia Woolf and Zoya Pirzad* mentions that, "In de Beauvoir's view if women really want a status, they should deconstruct the structures of the masculine society and present their own definition of femininity. This definition would be the proof of woman's presence and existence counter-intuitive to masculine canon of knowledge in power" (2).

## II. Research Methods

Luce Irigaray (1930 - ) Belgian born French feminist has picked up women's issues henceforth and has introduced the idea of mimesis. This literary term is basically defined as imitation, mimicry, the act of resembling, and recently, has come to be used as the notion of expressing and presenting oneself. Irigaray has enhanced the meaning and states that in order to escape the phantom-like position allocated to women in the society and to defy the dominant phallogentric order of the society, it is necessary to employ mimesis as a form of resistance with which women can imitate stereotypes so as to place them in the limelight and undermine stereotypicality. She suggests that the notion of mimesis should be used as a critical tool in reading texts, especially ones in which women stand in direct opposition to men in a binary relationship. In texts which women are presented as foils or antagonists, mimesis is the process of resubmitting to stereotypical positions imposed on them, with the purpose of questioning those views. This point can further be illustrated with a simple example. For instance, if women are viewed as illogical, woman should try their best to challenge the matter quite logically. The juxtaposition of logical versus illogical undermines the claim that women are illogical. Or for example, if women's bodies are viewed as multiple and dispersed, women should speak from that position in a playful way so as to show that this view stems from a masculine economy that values identity and unity and excludes women as the 'other'. Irigaray; moreover, suggests that women should not fear criticism and challenge since negative views can only be overcome when they are exposed and demystified.

Mimesis repeats a negative perspective and ridicules it in a manner so that eventually it is annulled and in the end discarded. The deformed female form of subjectivity that accompanies the male form which dictates master/subject/male versus slave/other/female should be curtailed and should be offered no instance of repeating itself. Fortunately, the view on subjectivity has altered; however, male dominance has not. The 'other', the female, should not be neglected if we hope for a paradigm shift. Irigaray emphasizes on mimesis as a result of her belief that a second sex can and should exist in its own right as opposed to being considered as a deformed version of male identity so that we can challenge and pass back through the oppressive formulation of sexual differences. Irigaray challenges the phallogentric model in which the feminine is reduced to the inverse or indeed the underside of the masculine. Using mimesis as a powerful weapon, women can dispute and displace male-centered structures of language and thought through a challenging practice toward a feminine discourse that would reduce the strength and dominance of phallogentricism. Women who resort to mimetic speech and behavior try to recover their true place in a sexual hegemony and so they try to regain their place before being exploited by discourse and

repressed by male dominance. According to Gertrude Postl, “Women are able to sustain their exchange value only if they stand by the ‘phantom-like reality’ of their existence which is to say ‘mimetic expression of masculine values’”. She further maintains, “Remaining on the market is a question of survival and for this survival, woman is willing to mime man, to pretend to have a phallus which entails a willingness to accept the standard accessories of femininity”.

### III. Discussion

#### 3.1 Mimesis in Practice, Act I

In David Mamet’s “Oleanna” (1992), there are instances of mimetic expressions galore. All throughout Act I, John speaks condescendingly to Carol because in a hegemonic order he stands in a higher position and as Carol’s instructor supersedes her in the matter of rank. Carol lives in a male centered society, a patriarchal society that sees women as a means to fulfill their ideals. Narges Raoufzadeh (2020) in her entitled “A Foucauldian Reading: Power in Awakening by Kate Chopin” States:

“She lives in a society that encompasses traditional and patriarchal patterns in their most restricting sense. The community in which she dwells is a male-centered one in which the norms have described the female as the one who is dependent on the male, and is domestic and emotional. She should be “an angel in the house” taking care of her children and her husband. The female model of perfection is the sacrificial mother-woman who effaces herself for her family’s welfare.

On the other hand, the male figure is described as independent and traditional. He should be in control of his family and especially his wife. He bears the responsibility of economic matters of his family. While his wife controls the domestic affairs, he is responsible for social matters. She is surrounded by controlling men and mostly conventional women. In such a society, her efforts to become independent from her husband and male dominance is a great opposition and threat to the dominating social and cultural structures (161).

In Oleanna Mamet beautifully portrays this situation. John’s superior position and its imposition on Carol drive her to an inferior position and she resorts to mimetic behavior and speech in order to rescue herself from the undesirable situation she is in. John intends to secure his dominant position and he does so by humbling Carol with his awkward propositions and his insincere show of affinity. He jocosely embraces Carol in order to sympathize with the difficult situation she has, but quite obviously he only intends to take liberties with her. He decides to bribe her into visiting his office more than required and treats her as if she were a commodity produced for the sake of his libidinous satisfaction.

#### 3.2 Mimesis in Practice, Act II

Intent on reversing her position from an inferior one to a superior one, from the beginning of Act II, Carol resorts to mimetic behavior and speech. She proffers a report she has been working on for a long time about John’s sexist conduct in the academic atmosphere. Ironically, as her instructor, John would expect Carol to prepare different kinds of reports and not ones that would jeopardize his career at university. Perhaps the most vivid example of mimesis, as Irigaray defines it, is observed in this section of the play. After John reads the report that Carol has prepared, he tries, in a futile attempt, to make light of the situation and overtly claims that no one will believe her. He is sure because he is a member of the tenure and belongs to that “group”. Carol is well- prepared to respond to this and retorts that she is

not alone in this and there is a group which has prepared the report and she is also a member of that particular group. In another scene, John's anger gets the better of him, and he professes that a college education is not for women and they are only making vain attempts to achieve positions for themselves. In a mimetic effort, Carol responds that her academic knowledge is exactly what has enabled her to distinguish the truth of matters and be able to oppose John. "Migration and diaspora are concerns of postcolonialism"(Qtd. in Zaheri birgani 12).

She and the group she represents will have no fears of questioning the educational system and this bravery comes from the fact that they themselves are part of the system and know all the details. At the end of Act II, John tries to impose himself on Carol by having physical contact with her and from the same position she is trapped in, she lets out a scream which does double duty. On the one hand, it informs John about his new position, the one in which he can no longer feel he has the upper hand. It also gives him insight as to the 'new' Carol who is no longer a pathetic creature, satisfied with a subordinate position in confronting him. On the other hand, this act of mimetic behavior deconstructs what Carol formerly believed to be true about herself, the fact that as a female student she constantly has to submit to an inferior position. She has rediscovered a new aspect, in essence, which can reverse her position and give her a different stronghold. Carol finds she has the power to relieve herself and oppose to what she thinks wrong or inappropriate; not only John's faulty estimation of her potentialities but also the academic curriculum which is rife with shortcomings of all sorts.

### **3.3 Mimesis in Practice, Act III**

In Act III, the audience finds John in despair because Carol's reports have been affective and John is suspended. In a final attempt at mimesis, Carol proves that she and other women in general can resort to law and order to attain what they are liable to. The final scene is significantly meaningful in that emerging from her spectral marginalization, Carol becomes John's instructor in her mission to abdicate him from his position of dominance and to educate him on the extent to which his views are corrupt and selective. Carol's final proposition is the final attempt she makes at resubmitting the stereotypical view both John and the audience have of the 'female'. John can compromise and agree to ban a list of books which he unhesitatingly refutes. Perhaps the reversal of positions, losing both face and ground, at this rate, has proven too much for him and he has not had enough time to come to terms with the change of events. Leaving her 'ghost-like' existence behind, Carol becomes audaciously bold in employing or perhaps misusing her new-found power. She corrects John when he refers to his wife as 'baby' and condescendingly prohibits him from repeating this. John who cannot adapt himself to his new position in this hegemony and is determined to oppose this reversed hegemonic order, lifts a chair in order to attack Carol physically. She cowers down in a corner of the room and covers her head (the organ in which the logic of all her decisions lie within) with her arms to prove once more that the phallic symbol which John had tried unsuccessfully to represent can no longer intimidate her and she is completely capable of protecting herself. In this way, she defies John and renders his efforts in subverting her futile.

## IV. Conclusion

For some feminist writers, a patriarchal system which valorizes masculinity and; therefore, most males, is the predominant outcome of Lacan's Freudian anthropology. No doubt, Lacan has only reinforced this impression in the eyes of many women with his provocative aphorisms, 'woman does not exist', and 'woman is not all'. The first statement is meant to indicate that there is no essence of femininity. And this is why sexuality is always a play of masks and disguises (Lechte

106-107). This may apparently give a very dark picture of women in that it places them in an inferior position in a hegemonic order. However, according to Luce Irigaray this is not where everything ends and it is just the beginning of the story. If language for Lacan is irreducibly phallic, the only way women can speak or communicate at all is by appropriating the masculine instrument. In order to speak clearly, to communicate and to forge links with others – to be social—the woman must speak like a man. If women are to have an identity of their own, the phallic version of the symbolic to which they have been subjected to, for so long, must be subverted. The symbolic has been the source of women's oppression (192). Luce Irigaray picks up the story from here and introduces the notion of mimesis, the weapon women possess, in order to show resistance and undermine the characteristics stereotypically attributed to them. Women, in a process of mimesis, use language and behavior to subvert their inferior position and confront or perhaps overcome the inferior rank allocated to them in the hegemonic order. Various instances in David Mamet's play "Oleanna" depict how mimesis works out.

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