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# "When the Goods Get Together": Luce Irigaray and the Critique of Exchange, Desire and Female Subjectivity

Dr. Girija Suri

Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana, India
Email: girijasuri131989@gmail.com

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***Abstract***— *Luce Irigaray's essay "When the Goods Get Together", included in This Sex Which Is Not One (1977), performs a trenchant and imaginative critique of the ways patriarchal discourse, whether anthropological, psychoanalytic, or economic, reduces women to objects of circulation and thereby forecloses alternative modes of desire and community. Through a deliberately satirical scenario in which women (the "goods") attempt to speak among themselves, Irigaray exposes the structural necessity of women's silence for the reproduction of male alliances and homosocial bonds. She braids Lévi-Straussian kinship theory, Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, Freud's pathologizing of female sexuality, and Lacanian accounts of the symbolic, and she twists these inherited frameworks with mimicry and parody so as to reveal their absurdity and exclusions. Crucially, Irigaray does not only unmask; she gestures toward a utopian economy of plenitude, a community of women characterized by reciprocity, embodied speech, and material connectedness beyond circuits of scarcity and exchange. This essay situates "When the Goods Get Together" within feminist theoretical developments, tracing how Irigaray's method anticipates debates by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and later feminist ethicists, while also considering critical objections about essentialism. Ultimately, the piece argues that Irigaray's parodic dismantling of patriarchal exchange remains a powerful provocation for rethinking subjectivity, relationality, and feminist praxis.*

***Keywords***—***feminist theory, female desire, kinship, Luce Irigaray, parody, psychoanalysis***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Luce Irigaray's contribution to feminist theory is both conceptual and stylistic. She interrogates the categories that organize gendered thought while modeling an alternative mode of critical speech. Writing in the wake of structuralist anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis, and in dialogue with contemporaneous French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, Irigaray insisted that language, law, and symbolic representation were saturated with phallocentric assumptions that occluded female subjectivity. Among the essays collected in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), "When the Goods Get Together" stands out for its deceptively simple rhetorical gambit viz. imagining women as "goods" who might refuse circulation because that provocation both exposes and unsettles several deeply entrenched theoretical and social formations.

Irigaray's text is built upon a dense intertextuality. Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist account in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) argues that the rotation and exchange of marriageable women are central mechanisms by which social alliances are constituted; women therefore function as the medium through which men form bonds and reproduce social order. Gayle Rubin's influential essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975) dramatizes how such exchange systems objectify female bodies and sexualities, embedding them within a political economy of gender (Rubin 174). Irigaray takes up these observations and translates them into a litmus test: if women were to refuse their assigned role as objects in a system of male exchange, what structural instability would follow? This rhetorical hypothesis produces a mirror that reflects the violence and incoherence of the patriarchal imaginary.

Simultaneously, Irigaray engages psychoanalysis as both target and resource. Freud's formulations of female development with the girl's supposed discovery of "lack" and "penis envy" naturalize heterosexuality and render women's desire logically derivative. Freud's 1920 case study, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" exemplifies this bias by treating female same-sex desire as pathological and reflective of arrested development (Freud 149). Jacques Lacan's reformulation of Freudian categories makes language and the symbolic central. Entrance into the symbolic order is mediated by the Law of the Father and the phallus operates as a central signifier that organizes subjectivity (Lacan 287). Irigaray's strategy is not simply to refute these frameworks on their own terms but rather to parody and occupy them so as to reveal their contradictions. In doing so, she creates a mode of feminist critique that is simultaneously analytic and performative; her rhetorical mimicry enacts what she describes, i.e. the absurdity of treating women as goods, and thereby creates the possibility of an alternative discourse.

The stakes of Irigaray's essay are theoretical and ethical. The exchange model does not only structure marriage and kinship; it informs law, religion, and the symbolic economies that sanction gendered inequality. By recovering the materiality of female relationality, the "red blood" of women's ties, to borrow her imagery, Irigaray aims to restore a vital set of relations that patriarchy obscures. The essay's provocative closing fantasy, that women might compose social worlds "without exchange," in which reciprocity and abundance replace scarcity and commodification (Irigaray 198) should not be read as a nostalgic essentialism but rather as a strategic reimagining. It is a demand that feminist theory take seriously not merely as a representational critique but in terms of the invention of new forms of sociality and speech.

This study provides a sustained reading of "When the Goods Get Together", showing how Irigaray's parodic method exposes the ideological premises of anthropology and psychoanalysis, reveals the disavowed logics of male homosocial desire, and gestures toward practical and theoretical alternatives. It also addresses important objections, notably Judith Butler's reservations about the risks of essentialism and Elizabeth Grosz's critique of sexual difference, thereby situating Irigaray within a dialectic of performance, identity, and feminist praxis.

## II. PATRIARCHAL EXCHANGE, FEMALE DESIRE, AND IRIGARAY'S PARODIC CRITIQUE

At the center of Irigaray's essay is a dramatization of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist insight, i.e. kinship systems are constituted through the exchange of women. In those systems, women are objectified as the medium of male alliances; their personhood is subordinated to the social currency they furnish. Irigaray seizes this analytic frame but transposes it into a deliberately grotesque economy, in which the marketplace of exchange is made literal and the "goods" are human beings. Her rhetorical question—"What would happen if the goods refused to go to market? If they began to speak to each other outside the exchanges organized by men?"—serves as both a thought experiment and an epistemic instrument (Irigaray 196). It forces readers to imagine the contingency of a system that appears natural because its terms have been normalized through repetition and ideology.

The thought experiment accomplishes several interlocking aims. First, it reveals that patriarchal order depends upon the depoliticization of women: to be effective, exchange requires that women be rendered mute, available, and transferable. Second, it exposes the underlying conflicts and contradictions in social theory: accounts that treat women as mere objects inadvertently make women's interiority and capacity for speech disappear from analytic view. Third, and most provocatively, it renders visible the possibility, empirically denied by patriarchal discourse, of women's agency and solidarity beyond male networks.

Irigaray's engagement with psychoanalysis intensifies the critique. Freud's early twentieth-century model constructs female sexuality as a deficiency narrative: the girl's trajectory is described as a process of discovering the absence of the phallus and orienting herself toward men as objects of desire or as replacements for the lost organ. This narrative both hierarchizes desire and marginalizes non-heteronormative expressions. Freud's clinical rendering of a woman's attachment to another woman in the 1920 case study offers in Irigaray's view a paradigmatic illustration of this exclusionary logic. Same-sex female desire is read diagnostically as failure rather than recognized as an intelligible mode of subjectivity (Freud 149).

Lacan's symbolic elaboration further locks subjectivity into the binary of presence/absence and into phallic regulation. In Lacanian terms, the phallus is the privileged signifier around which desire and law cohere. The subject's position is always an effect of entry into the symbolic network, mediated by the paternal law (Lacan 287). Here again, Irigaray's mimicry proves illuminating. If the phallus is the master signifier, and women are defined negatively in relation to it, then women's speech is rendered suspect or unintelligible within the symbolic. Irigaray's parody thus performs a double move. It shows that the logic of symbolic intelligibility depends upon

women's exclusion, and it reclaims a form of speech that has been rendered foreign to the symbolic register.

Irigaray's parodic strategy intersects productively with Hélène Cixous's concept of écriture féminine. Cixous insists that women must "write the body" and inscribe modes of speaking that represent the feminine differently (Cixous 882). Irigaray, while not identical to Cixous, advances a kindred project. She uses mimicry to reveal that patriarchal languages are contingent and reversible. By inhabiting the language of anthropology and psychoanalysis and then exaggerating its premises, Irigaray opens a fissure in discourse that allows other modes of signification to emerge. Her satirical tone, at once comic and disquieting, is thus a methodological weapon wherein laughter is enlisted as critical exposure.

Perhaps the most unsettling implication of Irigaray's satire is its revelation of male homosocial desire as both foundational and disavowed within patriarchal economies. The circulation of women, she suggests, does not only create ties between women and men but also creates and sustains male alliances. Men bind themselves to one another using women as the medium of affiliation. Eve Sedgwick's later work in *Between Men* expands on this notion, showing how male homosociality often conceals erotic dynamics that are structured through but not reducible to heterosexuality (Sedgwick 25). Irigaray's parodic scenario exposes the degree to which the prohibition of direct female solidarity functions to hide male-to-male desire. If men's exchanges are predicated on denial of certain impulses, then the restriction upon women's speech and association serves a crucial ideological purpose that obviates the need to acknowledge those disavowed bonds.

This argument about disavowal also helps explain why women's same-sex desire has historically been pathologized not only because of patriarchal phobias about sexual difference, but because female solidarity threatens the social architecture that relies upon women as tokens of male alliance. If women were to form autonomous networks and their speech were legible outside patriarchal scripts, then the ideological apparatus that justifies their circulation would be exposed as contingent rather than necessary.

However, Irigaray does not limit herself to exposing problems but also also envisions alternatives. Her provocative assertion that "women among themselves are already outside the commerce of men. They are already a community without exchange, a world of abundance rather than scarcity" (Irigaray 198) introduces a normative vision of sociality that runs counter to exchange logic. This imagined economy of plenitude is not a naïve retreat into essentialism but a strategic reframing. By modeling a different economy of relationships, Irigaray suggests that feminist theory must account for forms of reciprocity and material connection that are occluded by capitalist and patriarchal conceptions of scarcity.

Irigaray's "red blood" imagery which privileges embodied specificity is instructive here. It insists that women's ties are not merely symbolic tokens but have material force: nursing, touch, caregiving, and mutual aid. Marx's critique of commodity fetishism provides a useful comparison. Just as commodities hide the labor that produced them under layers of market value, so too do patriarchal exchanges hide the lived relations and labors of women behind the sign of transferable value. Recovering the material dimension of women's relations therefore becomes a critical project i.e. to make visible the labor and life that exchange systems obscure.

Scholars have criticized Irigaray on several fronts. Elizabeth Grosz expresses concern that Irigaray's privileging of sexual difference could inadvertently reify the categories (man/woman) she seeks to destabilize, thereby constructing a new essentialist opposition (Grosz 107). Judith Butler also registers suspicion that by positing a recoverable feminine subjectivity, Irigaray might risk fixing identities that feminist performative theory attempts to show as constructed and iteratively produced (*Gender Trouble* 19, 33). These critiques are important and must be taken seriously because feminist theory must avoid reproducing exclusionary taxonomies.

Nevertheless, Butler's and Grosz's critiques do not render Irigaray's project obsolete. Instead, they set up a productive tension. Irigaray's insistence on difference is a corrective to earlier universalist tendencies that effaced sexual asymmetries and material disparities. At the same time, Butler's performative account insists on the contingency of categories and the political efficacy of disrupting repeated scripts. Read together, these perspectives offer a dialectical field. Irigaray insists on the significance of gendered lived experience and the symbolic rearrangements needed to render women audible. Butler warns against treating such rearrangements as metaphysical essences. Irigaray's mimicry can thus be read as a performative intervention, not a metaphysical claim. She enacts the destabilization of categories while refusing to relinquish the material particularities of gendered life.

The ethical dimension of Irigaray's imagination is also crucial. If speech and solidarity among women can generate a new economy of relations, then feminist praxis must attend to modes of everyday interaction such as forms of care, accountability, and mutual recognition that constitute political life as much as law and policy do. Irigaray's emphasis on communal abundance challenges feminists to think about praxis not only as critique but as invention posing questions such as how might scholars and

activists cultivate institutions and everyday practices that approximate reciprocity rather than exchange? How might feminist pedagogy, community-building, and cultural production instantiate the kinds of speech and relation Irigaray evokes?

Practically, this could involve foregrounding grassroots networks, cooperative models of labor, and cultural practices that valorize mutual care. It also suggests a hermeneutic shift in scholarship whereby rather than only reading patriarchal texts against the grain, feminist criticism must also produce affirmative accounts of female relationality that are sensitive to embodiment and difference. Irigaray's satire thus offers both a diagnostic instrument and a programmatic impetus.

## III. CONCLUSION

"When the Goods Get Together" remains a bracing intervention in feminist theory because it combines analytic rigor with rhetorical inventiveness. Irigaray's strategic parody of anthropology and psychoanalysis unmasks the ways in which women are treated as objects of circulation and in doing so she opens up the conceptual space to imagine alternative economies of relation. Her insistence that women's speech and embodied ties be reclaimed from the obscuring logics of exchange is not a retreat to essentialism but a performative provocation. Speech and solidarity, she suggests, can remake what counts as intelligible and valuable.

Critiques from Butler and others raise indispensable cautions about the risks of reifying difference, but those critiques can coexist with an appreciation of Irigaray's program. Feminist theory benefits when it holds opposite imperatives together such as interrogating the constructedness of gender categories while also attending to the material, embodied experiences that those categories mediate. Irigaray's work compels exactly this double movement. She asks us both to dismantle the discursive machinery that sustains domination and to imagine and enact new modes of relation that remap desires and responsibilities.

The rhetorical question that animates the essay i.e. what happens "when the goods get together?" is therefore still an urgent challenge. It asks scholars, activists, and readers to imagine social worlds in which the exchange logic that underwrites gendered domination is no longer operative, where women's voices are audible, and where relationality is measured not by scarcity and transfer but by reciprocity, care, and abundance. If such an imagination is difficult, precisely because patriarchy has made alternative speech difficult to recognize, then Irigaray's parody is all the more necessary. By making the absurdities of the present visible, she enables the work of inventive transformation.

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