

Review

Irigarayan divinity and Tantric Yogic breath

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This contribution offers a reading of Luce Irigaray's recent works of Western thought in relation to Eastern yogic tradition of "breath". Irigaray as a French feminist in her theories of 'feminine divinity' and 'sexual difference' relies on Eastern notion of 'breath'. This paper aims to reveal the concept of 'breath' in the West and East. Unlike Tantric yogic breath which serves as the basis of sexual union, Irigaray in her theories of 'feminine divine' and 'sexual difference' imagines an embodied and sexed subjectivity for women through breath. She tries to create a divine space for women through their breath and their sexual body. She uses yogic breath as a space between body and spirit, nature and culture, and masculinity/femininity. However, Irigarayan breath derived from yogic tradition is bodily breath. Irigaray considers breathing as a requirement and a necessity especially for bodily divinity. For her, the cultivation of breath in a specific spiritual practice of yoga represents just a way of overcoming repression of women's body in Western society.

Key words: Breath, women becoming, autonomy, love, feminine divinity, feminine jouissance, intimacy, sexual difference, sexual union, dichotomy, yogic tradition, Hinduism, feminist theory, Luce Irigaray.

INTRODUCTION

Luce Irigaray as a French feminist acts as a kind of bridge between Western and Eastern traditions. She uses the notions of 'breath' and 'silence' derived from yogic tradition in her 'sexual difference' and 'feminine divine' to allow for women's becoming as well as intimacy between sexes. Her recent works focus on the difference between Western and Eastern cultures with respect to Tantric yogic breathing (*prana*) as the essence of a living body. Breathing as the most important vital power in yogic practice is equated with life itself and with person's Self (*Atman*). Irigaray's thematic focus on the figure of 'breath' is observable in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), *I Love to You* (1996), *The Forgetting of Air In Martin Heidegger* (1999), *To Be Two* (2002), *The Way of Love* (2002), *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (2002), and *Sharing The World* (2008). Irigaray affirms yogic practice to create the horizontal relations between the sexes and to restore certain relations between feminine culture and patriarchal Christian culture, aiming not toward a reversal of power

but a possible coexistence of perspectives, of subjectivities, of worlds, and of cultures.

The encounter with yogic traditions gives the figure of breath a further range of meanings for Irigaray, incorporating its role as a medium for exchanges between body and spirit, nature and culture. She focuses particularly on the role of breath as a means through which humans passively and actively reunites natural and the spiritual within themselves. Irigaray states that "the gesture of both natural and spiritual life is to breathe by oneself (Irigaray, 2002). For Irigaray, to become spiritual it is necessary to transform the vital breath "into a more subtle breath" (Irigaray, 2008) which corresponds to the transformation of natural life into a spiritual life.

Irigaray rejects traditional forms of Western Christian religion in which transcendental and corporal are separate and cannot associate with each other. Unlike Christian tradition that teaches human to despise the body for the sake of the soul, Irigaray finds in the Eastern tradition of yoga an imperative to cultivate breathing as

an activity of the self which combines body and spirit together. Irigaray in "The Age of Breath" brings women back to the very beginning of the Christian story and reminds women that "the breath of God is within each of us. According to Genesis story, God creates humanity by sending his breath into matter, into earth" (168). She calls the age of breath: "our epoch has to return to awareness and to cultivation of the breath before and beyond any representation and discourse" (166). This epoch is the age of breath, an age where the body, silence and listening are paramount in establishing a possibility of an ethical gesture between two sexes.

Irigaray derives breath from yogic tradition. For her, breathing is a requirement and a necessity especially for bodily divinity. Regarding the divine body, Irigaray writes: "I am thinking of certain traditions of yoga that I know something of, cultures where the body is cultivated as body In these traditions, the body is cultivated to become both more spiritual and more carnal at the same time" (Irigaray, 1996). She discovers that the 'corporeality' begins with the bodily phenomenon of 'breath' as the first autonomous sign of life. "Without a cultivation of breathing women and men cannot reach a human relation. Maternity is the invisible sharing of breath and soul" (Irigaray, 2008). Irigaray considers breath as a "second birth assumed and willed by oneself" (Irigaray, 2002). Humans are given the gift of breath and at the same time they are called to cultivate their breath.

Irigarayan Feminine Divine

Irigaray turns to yogic tradition to explore women's body as divine, and the natural as spiritual. She talks of breath as a way of infinity and freedom of women from patriarchy. She employs 'feminine divine' as a means for reverence of women and the material reality. Irigaray's exploration of divinity is not mystical; rather it is an erotic exchange. She creates feminine divinity and bodily desire as a different space for women to breathe freely. She helps women to "construct a space for [ourselves] in the air for the rest of [our] time on earth- air in which we can breath and sing freely, in which we can perform and move at will" (Irigaray, 1993). Irigaray believes that neutralization of women leads to their destruction.

Irigarayan 'feminine divine' derived from Tantric tradition of 'Sakti' proposes a way of women's liberation from the phallogocentric structure of the Western society where cosmic universal power is referred to the masculine God. For Irigaray, the cultivation of breath in a specific spiritual practice of yoga represents just a way of overcoming repression of women's body in Western society. Irigaray introduces women's body as the pathways of their spiritual enlightenment. In her theories of 'feminine divine' and 'carnal ethics,' she divinizes the female body and women's sexual desire since it is devalorized and reduced in Western culture to its role in reproduction or to the status of an animal instinct – both

of which impoverish women's sexual desire and ignore their autonomous self and their subjectivity. Irigaray lets women gain an access to their autonomy, and opens a way for their sexual body by cultivating breathing. Her claim is that women can only 'spiritualize' themselves in the West through their body and can achieve real autonomy by learning to value silence and the breathing of themselves and others.

Irigarayan 'breath' is defined based on women's autonomy and their female body. For Irigaray, breath is the source of life in women's body. She tries to create a divine space for women through their breath and their sexual body. She argues that "we need to relearn how to breathe. It means that we in effect need to learn how to reborn. Through neglecting our breath we prevent our becoming, particularly our spiritual becoming" (Irigaray, 2002). Irigaray recounts to women how they can breathe through yoga. When she sees that "the West is stifled by its inability to breathe" (6), she enables women through breathing to return to themselves, to their corporeal rootedness, to become more aware of their autonomy. "We, as humans, were made alive through the breath of the divine. The divine, through air and breath, is within us. Within our bodies, we incarnate the living breath of the divine" (7).

Irigaray extracts the 'incarnation' from Hinduism for new thinking about women's bodies as vessels of the divine rather than other's bodily needs: "When we recognize our bodies as spiritual vessels, we acknowledge that our connections with others cannot be reduced to bodily need" (Irigaray, 2002). According to Irigaray, women recover their own unique conception of the divine as a part of the process of discovering their own uniqueness as women. "We are given the gift of the incarnation in the very beginning and it is our task to cultivate that incarnation. Women should become divine: Women are to gain their own gendered subjectivity by becoming a divine in the feminine" (Luce Irigaray: *Teaching* 68). Irigaray explains the important role of the mother/woman in the process of breathing:

The divine appropriate to women, the feminine divine, is first of all related to the breath. To cultivate the divine in herself, the woman has to attend to her own breathing, her own breath, more even than to love ... Becoming divine is accomplished through a continuous passage from nature to grace, a passage that everyone must realize by oneself.... The feminine breath seems at once more linked with the life of the universe and more interior. It seems to unite the subtlest real of the cosmos with the deepest spiritual real of the soul... which inspires a woman appears to remain joined with the universe's breath, related to the wind, to the cosmic breathing ... In this way, the woman can welcome the other in her soul (Irigaray, 2004).

Woman shares her breath preeminently by keeping it 'inside'. By a 'feminine economy of the breath' she is

keeping and cultivating breath inside the body and sheltering in herself the first seed of nature. For Irigaray, this is the spiritualization of the body, or nature. "The first breath of the world we share is both in nature (macrocosm) and in woman (microcosm)" (Irigaray, 1993). Irigaray insists that women have "forgotten air" and they must be rescued from being 'forgotten' or 'repressed' within the Western culture and tradition. She asserts that:

Though we all know how to breathe, we neglect to breathe consciously. The air we breathe, in which we live, speak, appear; the air in which everything enters into presence can come into being. This air that we never think of has been borrowed from a birth, a growth (Irigaray, 1993).

Irigaray brings air and breathing to the fore to suggest that "we must each, on our own, come into relation with the divine. Air and breath allow us to relate and, at the same time, individuate ourselves" (Irigaray, 2002). Lovers experience their autonomous self through their own space of freedom and then their souls combine and rebirth to a new one. For Irigaray, women and men share same air, yet they are autonomous and different: "The breath not only creates an autonomous world for individuals but also unites the lovers in breathing the same air" (11). In other words, their union is through their alliance and freedom. According to Irigaray, each woman and man discovers her or his own breath, and the divine within met the possibility of respect and love. Irigaray suggests that "the integral nature of breath awareness in yoga practice can contribute to the respect of the natural and spiritual life of self and of other because the breath is something shared by everyone" (Irigaray, 2002).

Sexual difference

Irigarayan theory of 'divinity' centers on 'sexual difference' in which she proposes a difference of consciousness and divinity between men and women and therefore "it is necessary for women to experience their own transcendence and their own practice of yoga" (Irigaray, 2002). For Irigaray, 'god' has no independent reality outside of the human psyche. Irigaray asserts two distinct projections of the divine: masculine and feminine. Irigaray defines different divinities for women and men according to masculine and feminine forms and she searches transcendence in individuals' gender. Irigaray argues this centers around the body; specifically the breath of the body. Through air and breath, she introduces women and men's bodies as spiritual vessels for achieving divine love. She positions love as a mediator for approaching the other of sexual difference and places 'breath' as a "mediator between the corporeal and the spiritual, masculinity and femininity, and inside and outside" (Irigaray, 2002). Lovers discover their divinity through and

within their sexual incarnation.

Irigaray interprets breath as "a figure of the non-hierarchical and reciprocal exchange and relationship between subjects and as a model for a reconceived subjectivity and intersubjectivity with new possibilities for understanding individual autonomy" (Irigaray, 1993). Through yogic tradition, Irigaray creates a deep intimacy that is grounded in breath within the individual to achieve unity and reciprocity. "Yoga explores all of our real desires, dark and light, in a compassionate setting. By yoga, we learn how to create a spiritual portal through the sexual act; uncover our deepest purpose and learn to offer ourselves fully" (14). She draws on the notion of 'breath' to represent the possibility of a form of subjectivity and spirituality that is embodied. Irigaray creates reciprocal love through the breath between self and other:

Love, the mediator, is a shared outpouring, a loss of boundaries, a shared space, a shared breath, bridging the space between two sexes; it does not use the body of the other for its jouissance; each is irreducible to the other. The loss of boundaries does not lead to fusion in which one or the other disappears, but to a mutual crossing of boundaries which is creative, and yet where identity is not swallowed up (Whitford, 1991).

In fact, Irigarayan love and breath as a mediator can be indications of lovers' sexual difference and women's sexual desire. Irigaray introduces air as a distinguished space between lovers as well as the condition for the production and reproduction of life. For Irigaray, women's sexual 'jouissance' in their love relationship is for their liberation; where they cultivate love for themselves and intimacy with another, grounded in their own and lovers' silence. Irigarayan 'female jouissance' produces an ecstatic energy or pleasure in women and encourage women to explore their own sexuality, their own pleasure and their own body. The recognition of Irigarayan 'feminine divine' and 'sexual difference' and the interiorization of breath can be instructive for struggles for sexual and cultural equality in the West. In 'sexual difference,' she finds "a spiritual path, which can lead us to love, to thought, to the divine" (Irigaray, 1996). Irigaray defines love as a space between two sexes. She says;

Carnal love becomes thus a spiritual path for energy, the flesh becomes spirit and soul thanks to the body itself, loved and respected in its difference, including at the level of breathing. Sexual difference is, in fact, the difference that can open a transcendental horizon between humans, in particular between man and woman. The transcendence is in the respect of each person's natural and spiritual life..... Between man and woman, thanks to love, an awakening to transcendence can take place that corresponds to the reign of spirit as spiritual breath, as soul (Irigaray, 2002).

For Irigaray, carnal love is therefore cultivated and made divine. "The act of love becomes the transubstantiation of the self and his or her lover into a spiritual body. Love is witnessing to that which is *between* us, the invisible bond created through *the labor of the negative* (space) and differences of sexes" (Irigaray, 2002). For Irigaray, the difference between sexes attracts them to each other: "Love relationships through lovers' limitation will be beyond domination and recognition. What I do not see of you draws me toward you" (69). In Irigarayan 'sexual difference,' the other is the irreducible difference of one sex to another. "Air let someone be in the present, enter into presence in the present, which emptiness does not allow to humans... Respecting the air between us and drawing from it in the present allows each to be and become" (Irigaray, 2002). For Irigaray, the breath as a space between lovers creates respect and honor. "Breathing makes women aware of the moment they are touched by the other. Breath therefore generates the space in-between the subjects" (10). When Irigaray answers, "I am listening to you" and "I give you a silence" (Irigaray, 1996), integral to this listening and gift of silence is the space between lover and beloved: "It is a silence made possible by the fact that neither I nor you are everything, that each of us is limited," (58) marked by non-hierarchical difference. A silence is the primary gesture of *I love to you*.

Irigaray uses silence, love and the breathing to represent non-hierarchical dualistic modes of exchange and relationship between subjects. In silence, "relations between two different subjectivities cannot be set up starting from a shared common meaning, but rather from a silence which each one agrees to respect in order to let the other be" (Irigaray, 2008). Hence, for Irigaray, breath and silence get endowed with a very positive meaning: "a return of woman to herself, in herself for a meeting again with her own breath, her own soul.... The first task is to consider and cultivate a relation with the other as other" (19). The silence is what men and women share. It is a place where the other can exist and be.

Irigarayan 'sexual difference' with a shared space between self and other creates autonomous self for women. "We need to cultivate a sensory perception, and in my perception of the other I need to be careful not to appropriate the other. I can never perceive the other completely. I approach the other as an embodied subject. Perception must maintain duality. We have to remain two in bodies if our aim is for a shared world" (Irigaray, 1996). For Irigaray, bodily proximity to another is only possible if women first form a relationship with their own breath and self. She calls this self-affection and it begins with the premise that men and women are with two different bodies. Irigaray describes self-affection as:

The real dwelling to which we must always return with a view to faithfulness to ourselves and our inability to welcome the other as different. Dwelling within one's own

self-affection, opening oneself requires us to return our original 'home' to a natural human identity (Irigaray, 2004).

Women grow and meet with the other through self-affection without losing themselves and annihilating the other. Irigaray believes that a woman can have relationship with the other, especially the lover, and can share spiritual integrity after appreciating her internal breath. "The woman would not have to quit her body, to leave herself, her breath. Her task would be, rather, to make divine this world - as body, as cosmos, as relations with others (Irigaray, 2008).

Irigarayan divinity and breath are considered by some feminists. Marie-Andree Roy begins by reviewing Irigaray's argument that women need to reconceive divinity in the feminine in order to find a specifically feminine subjectivity and to provide a basis for the reverence of female embodiment. Roy expands upon Irigaray's theory of 'sexual difference' as paradigmatic of difference in itself, and as privileged site of corporeal spirituality enhanced, in Irigaray's view, by the cultivation of the breath. Ellen T. Armour takes Irigaray's notion of the 'sensible transcendental', to overcome the traditional Western division between transcendence (spirit) and sensibility (body). According to Armour, Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental' emerges as an important resource for imagining both divine otherness and sexual difference beyond rigid separations between self and other, immanence and transcendence, human and God. Joy et al. (2003) returns to Irigaray's 'Divine Women', that women need a feminine divine to serve as the foundation for especially feminine subjectivity. Irigaray creates different divinity for women where women's body plays an important role in their divinity.

Yogic Breath in Hinduism

Unlike Irigarayan 'feminine divine' and 'sexual difference' which seek divinity merely in material and sexed body, Hindu yogic tradition goes beyond the limits of gendered and sexed body. "Soul goes beyond body in different forms of physical, subtle and causal. The unity of these three bodies in Hinduism leads to spiritual wholeness and makes Self or *Atman*" (Adiswarananda, 2005). Although the path of spiritual wholeness in Hinduism is through the body, the body acts as a means of self-realization rather than Irigarayan embodied self in gross and subtle body. For spiritual wholeness in Tantric yoga, "individual goes beyond the limitations of gross and subtle body where feminine and masculine energies are integrated" (Tigunait, 1999). In fact, Hinduism sees "the human body as a vehicle of the divine and an instrument of liberation" (Subramuniaswami, 1993). It can be said that body in Hinduism is a manifestation of the non-dual Self. "The bodies have an end, but the Self (the infinite

consciousness) is eternal. The Self or infinite consciousness is one and non-dual" (Venkatesananda, 1993).

While Irigarayan breath insists on the sexed body, the corporeality of spirit, and the space between lovers for creating gender limitation and sexual difference, Tantric yogic breath lies in subtle body and is "a way of transcendental and spiritual life and it elevates body toward spiritual consciousness" (Feuerstein, 1989). Breath in Hinduism is neither mere matter like a corpse, nor wholly immaterial or incorporeal, it augurs a conception of subjectivity in which materiality and spirituality, nature and culture, flesh and words are thought as inseparably intertwined. "Breath is the opposite of substances that remain contained and immobile, fixed in one place; breath is constitutively that which crosses boundaries between inside and outside, between multiple spaces and subjects" (Rama et al., 1976). In yogic tradition, breath is neither personal nor a property of someone else; rather it represents the priority of intersubjective relationships over the individuality of subjects.

Unlike Irigarayan 'sexual difference,' Tantric yoga addresses sexual union as "a central means of Tantric spirituality" (Shaw, 2003). In Tantric sexual union, the partners circulate energy through their chakras (energy spots) to help each other to achieve balance and enlightenment. In sexual union, men and women need each other; while each sex has both masculine and feminine attributes, each sex is out of balance in energy without the other. In fact, man and woman cannot achieve enlightenment without each other's help.

The partners become saturated with one another's energy at the deepest levels of being. They consciously absorb one another's energy and then deliberately direct that energy through their yogic anatomy, into the subtle nerve-centers (Chakras). This energy carries the quality of the partner's emotions, and consciousness. Therefore, at this level the partners permeate one another being (Shaw, 2003).

The goal of Tantra is to reunite male and female principles. Through breathing and yogic tradition, the kundalini (the feminine aspect), lying dormant like a coiled serpent in the muladhar) is awakened. The yogi realizes the supreme non-duality of the Self by awakening the female force 'Sakti' and making it move upward along the spinal cord. Through yoga, the female Kundalini ascends and unites with 'Siva, the male force, at the brahmarandhra as she enters the final energy center (Chakra) of the subtle body. Through yogic breath, feminine energy ascends the chakras, it moves through the feminine elements, and descends through the masculine. "In ascent, one understands by fully experiencing, incorporating and transcending each chakra's energies as one moves toward spirit; in descent, one intentionally illuminate the chakras with spirit" (Frost and Frost, 1989). Just as the feminine energy incarnates ascension and learning, masculine energy incarnates descent and application of knowledge. The presence of the masculine and feminine energy in each of the partners amplifies their energies in sexual

union:

The goal is the carnal and spiritual refinement of both partners through the incorporation and discipline of all aspects of human being. Each chakra also has its own meditation, its own sound, god/goddess, taste, smell and element (air, earth, fire, water). There is no part of self that is rejected in Tantra, but all parts are disciplined. Each sex has both the masculine and feminine of each chakra in them (146).

The male and female union in Tantric yoga shows the transcendence of two forces of the femininity and masculinity resulting in identification with the non-dual divine Self in ecstasy and bliss. Within the Tantric tradition, the uniting of two aspects of energy takes place within the individual. Thus, the union of 'Siva, masculine aspect, and 'Sakti, the divine female energy of the universe, is beyond Irigarayan duality of the masculine/feminine and her gender categories.

Conclusion

Irigaray's attitude on women's physical body as divine and breath as a space between different sexes in her 'feminine divine' and 'sexual difference' does not seem to be in accord with the ideal of self-fulfillment that Hindu Tantric yoga seeks. Yogic tradition transcends Irigarayan air and breath which are defined as an in-between space within lovers and outside of them, and as a model of intimate exchange between lovers; between the two gendered identities. Unlike spiritual wholeness in Hinduism which occurs when sexes go beyond their physical body with integrating their breath, Irigarayan divinity arises in sexual body and the breath acts as a space between the lovers. For Irigaray, one way of understanding the integral connection between spirituality and sexuality is to view sexual energy as that which has the capacity to represent women's autonomous identity. Irigaray is interested in sex for its own sake in the expression of love that reaches its culmination in an intimate relationship of a man and a woman which remains merely at the physically erotic level. Irigaray considers breathing as a requirement for bodily divinity and for empowering women's sexual body. Thus, the sexual relation cannot transmute into a spiritual relationship where sexual desire has generally been as a work of the flesh alone and not of the spirit.

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