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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rethinking the Human: A Feminist Comparative Reading of Narjiss Nejjar's *Dry Eyes* and Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant* through Irigaray's Paradigm of Ethical Sexual Difference

**Sanae KALLOUBI**
*PhD candidate in Langue, Littérature, Imaginaire, et Esthétique, Laboratory, English Studies, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Sais, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco*
**Corresponding Author**: Sanae KALLOUBI, **E-mail**: sanae.kalloubi@usmba.ac.ma

## | ABSTRACT
This paper examines the ways in which the notion of the "human" is reimagined in Leila Abouzeid's novella *Year of the Elephant* (1989) and Narjiss Nejjar's film *Dry Eyes* (2003). This examination is framed within the feminist critical paradigm of ethical sexual difference developed by the Belgian-born French feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalyst, and visionary Luce Irigaray. In this utopian paradigm, the traditional rhetoric of sexual antagonism between the sexes dissolves in favour of intersubjective, spiritual relationality and co-existence. This paper uses a feminist comparative analysis to examine the relevance of Irigaray's ideas on ethical sexual difference in the works of both Abouzeid and Nejjar. It emphasises how these narratives foreground a symbolic female and feminist ethical consciousness that redefines heterosexual relational dynamics. This consciousness is seen as a transformative process that transcends orthodox textual/sexual politics that often subscribe to subjugation and assimilation. It brings into being a new female and feminist discourse that affirms an ethical "amorous exchange," wherein reciprocal respect, understanding, and recognition of one another's differences can foster a more genuine sense of subjectivity.

## | KEYWORDS
Feminism, the human, ethical sexual difference, subjectivity

## | ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### 1. Introduction
Questions about the meaning of the "human" and who speaks for that "human" have been quintessential in feminism's ongoing struggle to regain for women their rightful position of subjectivity within "human" history, which until recently was presumed to designate exclusively "man's history," from which women have been systematically exiled. Feminism, particularly as a critical discourse that is rooted in anti-sexist thought and vigorous socio-political activism, has come to problematise the very concept of the "human," persistently asking: for whom does this category stand? And what are the repercussions of those orthodox defining politics for those who have been either deliberately or carelessly excluded?

Feminist practice, through its historians, philosophers, critics, artists, and theorists, has documented the hard truth that "human," across epochs, geographies, and cultures, has often been understood to mean the male sex—thus designating only one half of the human species as fully human. The other half, that is to say, the female sex, is frequently relegated to a status of negative alterity, or to invoke Simone de Beauvoir (1949)'s seminal phrase, woman is rendered the "second sex."Luce Irigaray uses the terms "genocide" (1993b) and "matricide" (1993) to illuminate the cultural and symbolic erasure and silencing of the mother and the feminine from the formation of subjectivity in Western society and culture (p. 11). Feminist thinkers and activists ascribe such exclusionary politics to deep-rooted, unquestioned assumptions perpetuated by patriarchal societies through cultural politics—assumptions which propagate myths of women's inherent weakness and, thus, inferiority. Women's efforts to rise as equals to men have often been cast as "absolutely unredeemable" acts of defiance against the order of both the divine and nature, as cited by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* when discussing women's historical exclusion from a position of

subjectivity in the realm of creativity (Anne Finch, as cited in Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, 1979, p. 8). The corollary of this gendered subordination has been a repertoire of representation in which men and women appear as antagonistic entities, destined for permanent conflict. The question of how to redress women's absence—or more accurately, their exclusion from the voice of the human—has occupied centre stage in feminist inquiry. While early feminist thinkers, such as de Beauvoir, made the case for an egalitarian rhetoric or an equality-based discourse of rights between men and women, Irigaray advanced a profoundly visionary project that is grounded in an ethics of sexual or sexuate difference. In this project, the idea of the "human" is reimagined as inclusive of both genders, who are, in turn, understood as distinct sexual identities, cherishing their own specificities. They are imagined to co-exist within a space of ethical relationality, characterised by what Margaret Whitford (1991) refers to as a "amorous exchange" (p. 78), which well transcends the limits of conventional conflicting, hierarchical relationships.

**2. Irigaray's Paradigm of Ethical Sexual Difference**

Irigaray's paradigm of ethical sexual difference is based on her critique of the unquestionable submission of Western philosophy to the idea of a "fundamental model of the human being … : one, singular, solitary, historically masculine…" (Irigaray, 2000, p. 122.) Irigaray (2000) contends that this view of a "singular human subject" echoes the failure of Western philosophy to "imagine that different subjects might exist or that man and woman in particular might be different subjects" (p. 122). In her deconstructive work, which seeks to undermine this aforementioned approach, she contends that traditional philosophy presumed a reductive notion of alterity, in which the "other is not defined in his actual reality but as 'another me': in this perspective, 'there is not really any other, but rather only the same: smaller, greater, equal to me'" (Irigaray, 1996, p. 61). It is based on this logic that Irigaray refuses the equality ideal or the egalitarian discourse that many feminist critics and activists accentuate as the fundamental condition for women's liberation. She instead believes that "To demand equality as women is, it seems to me, a mistaken expression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison" (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 12). This point of comparison presumes that men and women are the same, and in doing so it upholds a reductive notion of alterity. What Irigaray advocates is a woman who is "irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity," and to achieve this, it is necessary to "get out from under this all-powerful model of the one and the many, we must move on to the model of the two" (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 11). Through this paradigm, Irigaray (1995) significantly departs from de Beauvoir (1949)'s assertion that the feminine is the "second sex," contending that "my sex or my gender [genre] were in no way "second," but that sexes or genders are *two*, without being first or second" (p. 10). This model ought not to be a "replication of the same, nor one large and the other small, but made up of two which are truly different" (p. 11). Grounded in sexual difference, this model of the two ensures that both feminine and masculine subjects exist in relationships that are not hierarchical, since the two subjects unite in their common pursuit of "preserving the human species and developing its culture" (p. 12). At the same time that Irigaray's visionary project primarily aims to free the two subjects from the one subject and the other subject from the same, it also aims to suspend "the authority of the One", who might be "man, the father, the leader, the one god, or the singular truth" (p. 12).

Irigaray advocates the view that the pursuit of equal opportunities for women does not imply that they ought to model their needs on masculine modes of existence and action, but that they need to be afforded equivalent opportunities in every aspect of life. It is "a question of discovering what woman is and what she wants; and of opening up ways for her to bring her identity and her subjectivity into being" (Irigaray, 2000, p. 2). Thus, in place of the old egalitarian rhetoric, which overlooks the particularities of the feminine world, with relation to language, to the body, to work, to nature, and to the world of culture (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 13), Irigaray insists upon an equitable inclusiveness of both human genders' specificities. Men and women are equal in their human pursuit of prosperity and continuation, but are different in sexual identity and culture. And because women are more sensitive to a politics of difference, or culture of difference, they need to claim for civil rights specific to women and not equal to men's.

Women's real liberation in Irigaray's equity-based paradigm can only be achieved through sexual difference because, as Irigaray (1993) asserts, "Women's exploitation is based upon sexual differences; its solution will come only through sexual difference" (p. 12). That is to say, this equity condition can only be enacted through what she terms "sexuate" difference, or sexual identity, that is built on the recognition that society, culture, and discourse are "not the monopoly on universal value of a single sex—one that has no awareness of the way the body and its morphology are imprinted upon imaginary and symbolic creations" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 67). Thus, the affirmation that women and men are "sexuate" subjects evokes the idea that they incarnate different sexual identities, as each possesses its own specificities and qualities that merit full validation.

According to Whitford (1991)'s description, Irigaray's model of ethical sexual difference aspires to a "humankind" that equitably contains both womankind and mankind. This reimagined humanity is to be based on full respect of both subjects' sexuate identities, meaning the right of both to exercise their own subjectivity and authority in determining their linguistic, bodily, and cultural identities (p. 10). The integral differences that distinguish women from men ought to be embraced with mutual

affirmation and respect. Neither sex would be in need to assimilate the norms of the other or erase his/her distinctive qualities. The male and female genders, therefore, engage in an ethical intersubjective relationality, in which the conventional polarity of object/subject is substituted by subject/subject interconnectedness. Irigaray (1985)'s metaphor of "the speaking lips," which she elaborates in her text "When Our Lips Speak Together," further crystallises her ideal of subject/subject relationality between mankind and womankind. According to this poetics, man and woman constitute the two essential lips of the human voice; neither should obscure or silence the other, but both need to co-exist in an ethical exchange, with the ultimate purpose of achieving a more equitable human order that would function as the seed for social prosperity and welfare. Describing her vision of an ethical relationality that is founded on sexuate or sexual difference in *Conversations: Luce Irigaray,* Irigaray (2008) states that:

> Men and women must modify their relational identity. Certainly, women 'spontaneously' privilege the relation between subjects and men the relation to objects. The feminine subject constructs itself through a relation to the other, the masculine subject through the manufacture of objects and worlds starting from which it is possible for him to exchange with the other. Let us say that woman must learn to put some objectivity susceptible to being shared between *I* and *You*: this relation must not remain, for her, at the level of need and of subjective immediacy, otherwise the *you* risks disappearing as *you*. The man, on the other hand, needs to rediscover the other as subject beyond his universe of objects. (p. 14)

According to this critical framework, ethical sexual difference becomes a condition for both sexes to actualise authentic subjectivity and, through this process, to dismantle conventional structures predicated on the politics of hierarchy and assimilation.

Another foundational element of Irigaray's ethics is her conception of love between man and woman, as well as the dimension of divinity or spirituality constitutive of this love. Through this notion, she emphasises the irreducible, innate spiritual qualities of both men and women as essential for human self-affirmation and coming to subjectivity. She rethinks the traditional construction of the man-woman love relationship as one more closely linked to "share flesh, to a sensual experience, to an immanent lived experience [un vécu immanent], including reproduction" (Irigaray, 1995, p. 17). Her proposal is a different modality of love, "extending beyond all intuitions, sensations, experiences, or knowledge which she may have of him (p. 17)" and he of her in turn. She insists on a heterosexual couple experiencing the divine in the act of love, an idea which she extensively explores in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference,* Irigaray (1993), where she proposes that:

> The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be both horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and celestial. As Heidegger, among others, has written, this link must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal, in which a sexual encounter would be a celebration, and not a disguised or polemic form of the master-slave relationship. (p. 17)

The terrestrial and celestial love between a woman and a man is situated in a space that Irigaray (1993) describes as the "sensible" transcendence. In other words, the "amorous exchange" between them is not purely erotic or carnal but also spiritual: "still in the world of senses ("sensible"), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual" (p. 82). Divinity within this paradigm offers a transcendent horizon, enabling lovers to resist fusion into sameness or assimilation of the other and instead to rise as humane subjects.

**3. Abouzeid and Nejjar Reimagining Heterosexual Relations Through Ethical Sexuate Difference**

In spite of the fact that Leila Abouzeid and Narjiss Nejjar emerge from different linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic coordinates, both authors strongly ally in their profound preoccupation with the female cause in the Moroccan context. Both, too, articulate a female and feminist ethics that deeply resonates with Irigaray's visionary paradigm of ethical sexual difference, albeit each does so through the prism of her own medium as well as social, cultural, and ideological statuses. Abouzeid, a Moroccan writer who is rooted in the Arabic tongue and the currents of postcolonial literary expression, crafts her narrative through both a textual and a spiritual engagement with identity, memory, and decolonisation. Nejjar, by contrast, is a Francophone filmmaker whose creative locus oscillates between Morocco and France. Her film translates the language of feminist resistance into a cinematic idiom, shaping visual narratives that reimagine female identity through corporeal imagery and silence, as much as through speech. While their cultural mediums (novel and film) and linguistic backgrounds (Arabic and French), along with other variables, may appear to place them on divergent orbits, both authors converge in their commitment to the female cause within their homeland, even as their thematisation diverges to a large extent.

Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*[1] chronicles a woman's complicated journey from dependence to independence—both physical and psychological—as the heroine Zahra struggles to reclaim her sense of selfhood in the wake of divorce and the

[1] *Year of the Elephant* was originally written in the Arabic language by Leila Abouzeid (published as *Am Al-Fil* in 1983) and later translated into English by Barbara McKean Parmenter. It appeared in English translation as *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence and other stories* in 1989.

disillusionment that shadows national liberation. Nejjar's film *Dry Eyes*[2] exposes the sufferings of a remote Moroccan village of prostitutes, particularly laying bare the ways in which women negotiate their grappling with shame, survival, and dignity within a closed patriarchal system. Indeed, despite the undeniable distinctness of their contexts, both narratives usher a symbolic ethical emergence of both the feminine and masculine through which human bond is re-imagined and redefined beyond the strictures of subjugation and assimilation. Here, different possibilities of relationality are center-staged, specifically those that privilege reciprocal understanding, recognition and a reverence for the Other's irreducible difference.

In *Year of the Elephant*, Abouzeid transposes the master/slave, subject/object polarity that regulates Zahra's initial relationship with the masculine—that is to say, her husband—into a luminous subject/subject connection between the heroine and the character of the *Sheikh*, the village's spiritual guide to whom the community turns for counsel and solace. In the midst of her crisis and her arduous quest for illumination in the wake of her husband's cruel repudiation, Zahra deliberately seeks the *Sheikh*, wishing his support. What emerges as singularly remarkable is Zahra's attentiveness, even when deeply wounded by the wreckage of her marriage, not to convert her predicament into resentment against or enmity towards men as a whole. Instead, she turns towards the figure who embodies faith and wisdom. Yet, this appeal is not be understood as a symbol of submission to the superiority of the other sex, but is to be meditated as a trust in the necessity of heterosexual complementarity in the pursuit of renewal or reconstruction of subjectivity. The scenes depicting their encounters are imbued with a relationality that transcends the dualism of subject/object, given that Zahra and the *Sheikh* converse in a space where each listens and responds with an exquisite attentiveness that transcends simple dialogue. Indeed, their connectivity occurs within the dynamics of what Irigaray (1993) terms the "interval," signifying a space between sexuate subjects that preserves positive alterity or otherness while fostering mutual reverence and transformation; this space is not to be bridged or erased, but rather valued as the fecund ground for becoming: "A place for both to enter and exit ...; for both, a possibility of unhindered movement, of peaceful immobility without the risk of imprisonment" (p. 12). The *Sheikh*'s empathetic interaction with Zahra's anguish signals a radical deconstruction of the traditional conception of masculinity, as it listens, receives, and reflects with gentle compassion; it surfaces not as a masculinist force that possesses or commands. And it is herein that Irigaray's idea of "love" emerges to depict a different perspective of love between the sexes. This love goes beyond libidinal desires, instead transcending towards a spiritual communion that generates not offspring of the flesh, but procreates "self-engendering" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 106). This love requires not a fusion of the flesh but the union of souls, a fecundity of the inward. In Irigaray's vision, such a form of ethical love fecundates both sexes in turn. In the case of *Zahra* and *Sheikh,* it is Zahra who appears to fecundate most from this spiritual connection—by the space he offers for her pain to find voice, and by his words of faith and wisdom, she is gradually ushered into a new, self-affirmative phase of her existence: "I have forgotten the past. Completely forgotten it as if never happened or had nothing to do with me" (Abouzeid, 1989, p. 69). The *Sheikh*, too, albeit to a lesser degree, is touched by this communion; Zahra's evolution and arrival at "luxury" (p. 70) becomes for him a source of fulfilment that manifests in the "smiles" adorning his face during their last conversation.

Similarly, in *Dry Eyes*, Nejjar's cinematic language conjures a relationship between Hala and Fahd that incarnates Irigaray's idea of two-subjectivity—that is to say, a bond premised not in consumption or objectification, but in the ethical desire for the other's irreducible singularity. Fahd's validation of Hala's profound emotional and existential depth marks a significant departure from the patriarchal logic of appropriation, and aligns with what Irigaray (1993) calls "becoming in relation" (p.42), signifying a dynamic wherein the difference of each subject is not erased, but respectfully recognised. Hala, representing a prostitute who is pressed by the grip of poverty into the sex trade, initially resists Fahd's promise of genuine love. However, as he rises above her expectations to embody a masculinity that is unaccustomed to the familiar archetypes of domination, her perceptions metamorphose. He conveys to her an "interval space," a sanctuary where he does not seek to assimilate her into his own horizon; instead, he exhibits genuine compassion for her plight and that of her sister prostitutes, going to the extreme extent of wearing a woman's gown, putting on lipstick, and even weeping for Zainba's consumption by the machinery of the sex business. Fahd's strong ethical commitment not to perceive of Hala as a mere commodity and his sobriety in the face of her "dryness" vis-à-vis his extended affection ultimately fecundates in her coming to the resolution to break free from her social, economic, and inner crises and to liberate herself by embracing the "transcendental sensible" and genuine love that Fahd proffers. This love, even as it plainly bears a romantic tinge, transcends corporeal desire, becoming instead a meeting of souls, a harmonious communion that strives towards yet unexplored thresholds of being and becoming within their selves. Notably, the love that prevails and triumphs in Nejjar's narrative is not a simplistic denouement or resolution in the classical sense, but rather a threshold to greater possibilities; it is a prologue to life's as-yet unwritten chapters.

[2] *Dry Eyes* (*Al-Oyoun Al-Jaffa*) was first released in 2003. It generated intense polemic upon its release in Morocco due to its portrayal of what was deemed as social taboos.

**4. Conclusion**

What surfaces from this feminist comparative analysis is that both Abouzeid's novella *Year of the Elephant* and Nejjar's film *Dry Eyes* enact Irigaray's luminous vision of ethical sexual difference. They emerge to dissolve the entrenched binaries of domination and assimilation, proposing instead male and female subjectivities that are primarily relational and transformative. In spite of their distinct artistic forms, they craft literary and cultural spaces where the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine are not eradicated but reimagined through a distinctly female and feminist consciousness—even though neither author has explicitly pronounced herself as "feminist" in the Western sense of this ideological label. In the imagination of both women authors, femininity is neither a state of being that is mimetic of masculinity nor a mere site of resistance; instead, it is a space of becoming and an incarnation of ethical renewal of being in the world. In both narratives, the two poles that constitute the human subject engage in a relational and intersubjective connection based on their specific sexual identities, where neither is seen as the negative counterpart of the other, or his/her "appendage," to borrow the terminology Buchi Emecheta (1979) uses in her novel The Joys of Motherhood to describe gendered relational dynamics. Rather, both human sexes coexist and interact through a positive form of alterity. Through Zahra's reclamation of spirituality and Hala's emergence from the fringe of existence, the works inscribe a feminist poetics of encounter, the most significant marker of which is the idea that to be human means to be in dialogue with the other, to be receptive of his/her specificity.; it means to allow oneself to drift towards the difference of the other and by so doing venture into one's own vulnerability in service of mutual flourishing. Within these intervals and spaces conventional dynamics of possession and assimilation dissolve in favour of listening and compassion, and a new vocabulary of love and recognition is engendered. The ethical "amorous exchange" that fecundates from such relationality, utopian as it might appear, can become a daily endeavour in which both men and women alike are invited to transcend the constrained spheres that patriarchal conventions have prescribed. By engaging in such a pursuit, human subjects can reconstruct the very notion of the human, not a unified, objective whole, but as a profoundly subjective chorus of voices, experiences, perspectives, and desires; each irreducible to the other but indispensable for its flourishing. Ultimately, it can be said that Abouzeid and Nejjar's fictions do not offer simplistic resolutions or perfect harmonies, as hasty readings might anticipate; rather, they gesture towards an ever-expanding threshold of relationality, where being human is far-less a state than a presence in the interval, listening, responding, honouring the other's difference, and in the process, becoming more fully oneself. And indeed, it is here that lies the promise of a feminist ethics, one that consists of the luminous idea that in embracing sexuate difference, we may encounter not humans' lack, but their inexhaustible capacity for interconnection, becoming, and eventually flourishing.

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