

Re-reading Female Homosexuality in Psychoanalysis: Luce Irigaray's Feminist Critique of Freud and its Cinematic and Literary Resonances

Arpita

Research Scholar

SDM Govt. P.G. College

Doiwala, Dehradun

Email Id: sonaarpita173@gmail.com

Mob: 9773528296

Abstract

This paper re-examines female homosexuality with a feminist look at classical psychoanalysis, focusing on Luce Irigaray's critique of Sigmund Freud's views on lesbian desire. It argues that Freud's interpretation of female same-sex attraction shows the patriarchal thinking present in early psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, it highlights the tendency to link desire with masculinity and to see lesbianism as a deviation or illness. By analyzing literary works like *The Well of Loneliness*, *Orlando*, and *Lihaaf*, as well as Hindi films such as *Fire* and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, the study investigates how cultural narratives negotiate, resist, and reshape common ideas about women's sexuality. The paper claims that lesbian desire challenges the patriarchal system where women are treated as objects of exchange. Instead, it emphasizes women's power as desiring individuals. Through this cross-disciplinary approach, the study positions female homosexuality as a significant challenge to male-centered knowledge and representation.

Keywords: female homosexuality, feminist psychoanalysis, patriarchal discourse, lesbian desire, gender representation, Indian cinema

Luce Irigaray's critique of psychoanalysis represents a key feminist contribution to twentieth-century thought. Writing during a time influenced by structuralism and poststructuralism, Irigaray questioned whether fields that claimed to explain human subjectivity were themselves shaped by gender biases. Her work takes on the long-standing authority of Sigmund Freud, whose theories of psychosexual development significantly shaped modern views on sexuality. Instead of outright rejecting psychoanalysis, Irigaray applies its methods to expose how its terminology favours masculine experiences as the norm. This conflict is especially clear in Freud's views on female homosexuality. What Freud describes as clinical observation, Irigaray sees as proof of a symbolic system that fails to recognize women as independent subjects of desire (Irigaray 171–78).

In her essay "When the Goods Get Together," part of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray argues that psychoanalysis reflects the social context from which it originates (Irigaray 192). In her reading of Freud's case study of a young lesbian patient, the account shifts from a neutral depiction of pathology to a demonstration of theoretical limitations. Freud connects the patient's same-sex desire to masculine identification, disruptions in development, and family dynamics that supposedly steered her away from a "normal" heterosexual path (Freud 152–60). This reasoning assumes heterosexuality is the natural endpoint of female development and that any

deviation needs to be explained. Irigaray argues that this assumption is itself ideological (Irigaray 179). By claiming that desire is organized around the phallus, psychoanalysis positions women as secondary, defining them based on what they supposedly lack (Irigaray 183).

Freud's views often link activity, ambition, and mental strength with masculinity (Freud 165). When these traits appear in women, they are interpreted as signs of virilization or inversion. In this framework, lesbian desire only makes sense if it is translated into masculine terms. Freud suggests that a woman in love with another woman must assume the "man" role in the relationship (Freud 168). Irigaray questions this binary thinking by examining the naturalness of these categories (Irigaray 186). Why must activity be seen as male and receptivity as female? Why should desire follow a single developmental path? By revealing these biases, she shows that psychoanalysis mirrors a wider cultural narrative that prioritizes male subjectivity as the norm (Irigaray 188).

A key point of Irigaray's critique is the notion that patriarchy serves as both a symbolic and an economic system (Irigaray 170). Using Marxist language, she suggests that women function as objects exchanged between men (Irigaray 172). Marriage, family structures, and inheritance systems strengthen connections among men through the transfer of women's bodies and reproductive abilities. In this setup, female sexuality supports male interests, securing lineage, property, and social order. Lesbian relationships disrupt this exchange because they take women out of male-centered transactions (Irigaray 193). If women form connections that do not revolve around men, the whole logic of patriarchal exchange is challenged. Freud's struggle to understand lesbianism without seeing it as pathology reflects not just personal bias but also a structural commitment to maintaining male centrality (Freud 170).

Twentieth-century literature vividly illustrates these tensions. In *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall depicts Stephen Gordon as an "invert," drawing on early twentieth-century sexology that viewed lesbianism through the lens of congenital inversion (Hall 74–82). Stephen stands out from childhood, with her love for riding, fencing, and tailored clothing marking her as different from traditional femininity. Hall focuses on Stephen's physical presence, cropped hair, and discomfort with dresses, portraying her identity through visual and behavioural markers associated with masculinity. These narrative techniques reflect medical theories of the time that equated gender non-conformity with sexual orientation, implying that a woman who loves other women must have a masculine psyche trapped in a female body.

Stephen's romantic relationships further bolster this connection. With women like Angela Crossby and later Mary Llewellyn, Stephen takes on protective, financially responsible, and emotionally stoic roles typically assigned to men in heterosexual romance. Her desire manifests through sacrifice and guardianship, making her seem chivalrous and self-denying. The pivotal choice to let Mary go for the sake of her social respectability highlights the tragic context surrounding lesbian love (Hall 391). Rather than envisioning a potential future for same-sex relationships, the novel appeals for sympathy by showcasing Stephen's suffering and moral integrity. This approach humanizes the lesbian protagonist but also reinforces the reality of exclusion.

The novel's well-known plea—"Give us also the right to our existence"—captures this tension. Hall wants society to recognize lesbians, but she bases their legitimacy on the notion of innate difference and a nearly masculine identity. In this way, the text remains bound to the same binary thinking that Luce Irigaray critiques. Female desire is only understandable when redefined through male-coded characteristics, and subjectivity is assured by mimicking masculinity rather than redefining femininity independently. Therefore, while *The Well of Loneliness* is notable in lesbian literary history for its visibility and emotional depth, it also reveals the theoretical constraints of its era, showing how deeply rooted patriarchal and phallogocentric ideas shaped even sympathetic portrayals of female same-sex love.

A different perspective emerges in *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. Woolf's main character undergoes a sex change from male to female in the middle of the story, yet this shift is presented casually, as if sex were a changeable quality rather than a fixed biological fact (Woolf 138–45). Orlando awakens as a woman without losing memory, temperament, or creative spirit, suggesting a consistent identity beyond physical change. This narrative choice challenges the belief that gender identity is biologically determined or psychologically preordained. Instead of representing gender as an essence tied to anatomy, Woolf depicts it as shaped by history and social understanding.

As Orlando travels through different centuries—from the Elizabethan court to the Victorian period and into modern times—the expectations for masculinity and femininity change dramatically. While living as a man, Orlando benefits from freedom of movement, property ownership, and public authority. Once she transitions into a woman, those privileges decline, highlighting the legal and social restrictions placed on female identities (Woolf 152–60). By illustrating this contrast, Woolf shows that gender roles depend on historical context rather than being naturally determined. The transformation also reveals how power systems define what is considered appropriate masculine or feminine behaviour.

Desire in the novel similarly resists clear classification. Orlando's attractions challenge conventional categories, complicating the line between heterosexual and homosexual identities. For instance, Orlando's bond with Princess Sasha eludes simple labels even before the sex change, charged with ambiguity and performative elements (Woolf 73–79). Later, Orlando's connection to Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine involves mutual recognition of gender fluidity; each person perceives traits of the "other" sex in the beloved (Woolf 189–92). Woolf thereby unsettles rigid distinctions, implying that masculinity and femininity coexist within individuals rather than being strictly separate.

Such narrative experimentation hints at later feminist and queer critiques of binary thinking. By refusing to anchor identity in fixed sexual difference, Woolf disrupts essentialist views of sexuality and highlights the shifting nature of the categories themselves. In this way, *Orlando* aligns with Luce Irigaray's argument that sexual difference cannot be reduced to hierarchical oppositions based on lack or complementarity (Irigaray 209). While patriarchal dialogues often treat women as extensions of men, Woolf envisions a subject whose identity surpasses these limitations. Through its playful yet sharp exploration of gender and desire, *Orlando* imagines a relationship model built on fluidity, diversity, and historical consciousness.

In South Asia, literature and film have addressed societal expectations about gender and sexuality. The Urdu short story, *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai offers one of the earliest and most detailed portrayals of intimacy between women in twentieth-century Indian literature. The story takes place in an upper-class Muslim home, narrated from the viewpoint of a young girl who notices the unique relationship between Begum Jan and her female attendant, Rabbu (Chughtai 12-18). Instead of being a space of comfort and stability, the domestic setting becomes an area of repression. Begum Jan's marriage to a distant and uncaring husband leaves her emotionally and physically unfulfilled. In this setting of neglect, the bond between the two women develops not as a mimicry of masculinity but as a response to emotional deprivation and isolation.

Chughtai's storytelling relies on suggestion rather than straightforward description. The recurring image of the quilt—"lihaaf"—moving in the dark creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, allowing readers to deduce the nature of the relationship without explicit explanation (Chughtai 16). This subtlety avoids sensationalism and focuses on Begum Jan's emotional experience. By highlighting feelings of loneliness, longing, and the quest for warmth, the story emphasizes women's inner lives, challenging mainstream portrayals that reduce female same-sex desire to abnormality or spectacle. The text does not portray either character in a masculine light; instead, it shows their intimacy as arising naturally from shared vulnerability.

The public response to the story further highlights its importance. After its release in 1942, Chughtai faced an obscenity trial in colonial India, accused of breaching moral standards (Chughtai 3-5). Though she was acquitted, the controversy exposed deep social anxieties about women expressing sexual independence in literature. The obscenity charge reveals how unsettling the acknowledgement of female desire—especially when it lies outside heterosexual marriage—was to existing social norms. The scrutiny Chughtai faced reflects the broader societal mechanisms that seek to regulate and silence non-conforming sexualities.

By revealing the emptiness of Begum Jan's marriage and the hypocrisy of a social system that prioritizes male satisfaction over female well-being, *Lihaaf* critiques the patriarchal structure that confines women to roles of silent endurance. The same-sex intimacy in the story serves as an alternative form of recognition and care within a system that denies women agency. In doing so, Chughtai challenges conventional views and anticipates future feminist arguments that argue for recognizing women as subjects of desire rather than passive figures under male authority. Through its intricate narrative and historical controversy, *Lihaaf* stands out in South Asian literary history, illuminating how female sexuality can disrupt entrenched power structures (Chughtai 18).

Indian cinema further explores these themes in the public eye, where representation gains urgent political importance. *Fire*, directed by Deepa Mehta, tells the story of Radha and Sita, two sisters-in-law trapped in emotionally barren marriages. Set in a traditional joint family in Delhi, the film situates their relationship within daily life—kitchen chores, prayer rituals, and shared bedrooms—thus rejecting the idea that lesbian desire is foreign or abnormal. Instead, desire emerges from silence, neglect, and the lack of mutual recognition in patriarchal marriage. Critics have noted that the domestic setting shows how heteronormativity is maintained not just by law but by everyday cultural practices (Gopinath 45-48). The protests and violent backlash during the film's 1998 release demonstrate how fragile normative frameworks can be in the face of female

agency. By choosing each other over compliance with marital expectations, Radha and Sita symbolically escape the system where women's bodies are seen as vessels of family honour and continuity, reflecting Luce Irigaray's idea that women function as commodities in patriarchal systems (Irigaray 193).

A more mainstream portrayal appears in *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar. Here, lesbian identity is woven into a narrative about family misunderstandings and eventual acceptance. The protagonist's struggle is not depicted as moral wrongdoing but as the emotional weight of secrecy in a society centered on mandatory heterosexual marriage. By incorporating queer desire into the familiar structure of a Bollywood family drama, the film seeks to normalize same-sex love through empathy and reconciliation. In contrast, *Girlfriend*, directed by Karan Razdan, sensationalizes lesbian desire by representing it as obsessive, possessive, and mentally unstable. This portrayal echoes earlier negative narratives that link same-sex intimacy with danger and abnormality. The differences between these films illustrate the shifting nature of Indian popular culture: while some narratives move toward acceptance and recognition, others cling to fear-based stereotypes.

The theoretical implications of Irigaray's critique connect with Michel Foucault's broader reflections on discourse and power in "The History of Sexuality." Foucault argues that sexuality is not a timeless truth waiting to be discovered but a concept formed through networks of knowledge, regulation, and institutional discourse (Foucault 58-63). Terms like "homosexual," "normal," and "perverse" arise in specific historical contexts and serve to categorize and control bodies. From this perspective, Sigmund Freud's view of lesbianism can be seen as part of a modern scientific trend to categorize sexual difference within developmental frameworks (Freud 172). Irigaray builds on Foucault's ideas by showing that these categorization systems are not only historical but also deeply gendered. The language of analysis often assumes masculine dominance and feminine deficiency (Irigaray 178).

At the heart of this debate is the issue of subjectivity. If women are defined mainly as objects swapped between men—through marriage, family ties, and reproduction—their desires are treated as secondary and derivative (Irigaray 170). Female homosexuality challenges this structure because it claims relationships that don't require male approval or mediation. Instead of fitting relationships into a strict "male/female" framework, lesbian intimacy can reveal the diversity within femininity itself. Irigaray resists defining a single model for such relationships; instead, she supports recognizing diversity and difference beyond binary limitations (Irigaray 209). In this way, lesbian desire acts not just as a sexual orientation but as a challenge to the symbolic hierarchies that define womanhood through deficiency or complementarity.

Reassessing Freud through Irigaray's feminist lens reshapes the discussion about sexuality at a fundamental level. The key issue is not whether lesbian desire fits into existing psychoanalytic frameworks, but whether those frameworks can encompass the complexity of women's lived experiences. By questioning the foundational assumptions of psychoanalysis, Irigaray shows how knowledge systems can normalize inequality while claiming to be objective and universal (Irigaray 171). Literary and cinematic works from Western and South Asian contexts illustrate both the persistence of patriarchal beliefs and the creative efforts to confront them. Together,

they reveal how representation becomes a vital space for negotiating and redefining sexual difference.

Ultimately, a forward-thinking approach to sexuality requires moving beyond frameworks that link normality with heterosexual reproduction and authority with masculinity. Acknowledging women as subjects of their own desire necessitates reimagining not only intimate relationships but also the cultural and institutional structures that shape them. Irigaray's ideas remain crucial because they emphasize that theory must remain accountable to the subjects it examines (Irigaray 210). Female homosexuality, rather than representing a deviation, becomes a vital space for reconsidering relationality, agency, and the meaning of sexual difference. By questioning patriarchal exchanges and embracing diversity, feminist critique opens the door to social structures based on reciprocity and recognition rather than hierarchy and exclusion.

Works Cited

Chughtai, Ismat. *Lihaaf*. Translated editions vary; references correspond to standard English translations.

Fire. Directed by Deepa Mehta, performances by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, Trial by Fire Films, 1996.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." 1920. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. 18, Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 145–72.

Girlfriend. Directed by Karan Razdan, performances by Isha Koppikar and Amrita Arora, Prithvi Nandy Communications, 2004.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2005.

Hall, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness*. 1928. Virago Press, 2008.

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell UP, 1985.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga. Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, starring Sonam Kapoor and Anil Kapoor, Fox Star Studios, 2019.

Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando: A Biography*. 1928. Harcourt, 2006.