



## Anaïs Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* and Irigarayan Feminine Divine

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### Abstract

This paper examines female desire in Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954) through Irigarayan concepts feminine divine, feminine *jouissance*, and sensible transcendental. Anaïs Nin's erotic writing in her novels and diaries has been studied by many feminist scholars who examine the concepts of feminine sexual erotic body, the lesbian relationship, and the psychological issues; however, there is no reference to feminine divine in their studies of Nin's novel which is going to be discussed in this study through Irigarayan theories. The study of Nin's *The Spy in the House of Love* is an attempt to trace the signs of feminine desire through Irigarayan 'feminine divine' and 'sensible transcendental'; however, it is shown that Nin's female character, Sabina, is not successful in discovering her autonomous identity through her passionate desire, and she is not able to create a balance between her body and mind, the ideal world of art, music, and dreams and the real world in a relationship with men. Nin's heroine cannot achieve her identity and the full measure of Irigarayan non-dual love because she relies merely on sexual passion and desire. Unlike Irigarayan feminine divine and sensible transcendental, Nin's view of desire is vertical transcendence, erotic and ecstasy.

**Key words:** Feminine Divine; Feminine *Jouissance*; Female Desire; Sensible Transcendental; Autonomous Identity; Unity of Body and Mind; Ecstasy

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Anaïs Nin (1903-1977), the first forerunner and the prominent modern female writer of eroticism, explicitly tries to express female desire and sexual awakening in her novels as a creative power for women's liberation from patriarchal society. She rejects the Christian formulation of woman that denies sexuality and represses desire for the sake of God the Father. She vividly illustrates that a certain discourse about feminine sexuality has been heretofore imposed upon women, and men have separated and alienated women from their bodies. She creates female characters who rail against those formulations, signifying that the feminine identity is more than simply a construction of masculine discourses. She celebrates female erotic energy, and revises the figure of female sexual body as mute. She perceives sexuality as one of the ways of women's liberation from the patriarchal world. "She strives to strength[en] and reveal the pattern of women in the area of creativeness, which was considered a male domain" (Karsten, 1986, p.38). For Nin, "only the united beat of sex and heart can create ecstasy" (Nin, 1986, p.74). She considers eroticism as a basic trait for the development of women's bodies. She mentions "the crucial significance of the female sexual activity for changing the male-usurped foundations for a balanced and life-sustaining living" (Brennan, 1992, p.68). She reveals that "women's erotic love as well as art is a form of feminine expression and freedom" (Evans, 1968, p.304) to destabilize the male portrayal of the erotic experience that has reinforced the oppression of women's sexuality. Reynolds offers how Nin tries to free women from the distorting mirror which men have created for them:

Nin's erotica seeks to return women to their bodies by offering a looking glass and not a distorting mirror. Here women can speak for themselves and by doing so deliver a valuable counter argument for the lies, secrets and silences that typically pass for a woman's sex life. (Reynolds, 1998, p.81)

Nin tries to rediscover many beliefs of modernism "exploring the nature of the feminine and of women's

passions, sexual desires, and their own freedom, including reproductive freedom” (p.29). Nin’s view parallels many French feminists’ ideas about breaking out of an ordered symbolic system which is imposed upon women. She shares with Irigaray “an interest in describing the multiplicity of the female sexuality” (pp.5 & 11). Nin’s philosophy reflects the Irigarayan idea of the ‘feminine divine’, as she believes that women have been denied a connection with their bodies through male sexual universality. She writes in her diary of her feelings regarding women’s sexual desire and a distinguishably feminine creative force within herself and other women. She writes about the “conflict between my feminine self who wants to live in a man-ruled world, to live in harmony with men, and the creator in me capable of creating a world of my own and a rhythm of my own which I can’t find anyone to share” (1972, p.62). Like Irigaray, Nin tries to create a special place for women to have active roles through their specific and creative feminine sexual power.

Woman never had direct communication with God anyway, but only through man. She never created directly except through man, was never able to create as a woman. . . . Woman’s creation far from being like a man’s, must be exactly like her creation of children, that is it must come of her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished by her own milk. It must be a human creation, of flesh, it must be different from man’s abstractions. (Nin, 1972, p.233)

Nin believes that women and men have different sensibilities and experiences, just as Irigaray argues that “woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s” (1985, p.25). Nin writes of women’s self-development in their own terms, not as the imitations of men:

The effort of woman to find her own psychology and her own significance is in contradiction to man-made psychology and interpretation. Woman finds her own language, and articulating her own feelings, discovering her own perceptions. Woman’s role is in the reconstruction of the world. (1972, p.25)

Anaïs Nin questions the traditional male-constructed paradigm of woman as part of the weaker sex and transforms the traditional dominant and submissive roles that have repressed women’s sexual bodies. She tries to resituate and necessitate the specificity of women’s sexual body as a creative force. She asserts that “woman must sever herself from the myth man creates, from being created by him” (Brennan, 1992, p.70). She openly writes about female body and women’s sexual desire in her novels. She tries to release women from traditional repression by focusing on the specificity and creativity of their sexual energetic body and desire, as Irigarayan ‘feminine divine’ defines the multiple sexual parts of women’s bodies. Nin remarks that “women’s body enables them to express the unconscious and instinctive elements that constitute a great deal of their nature” (1975, p.75).

Nina uses the body as a central element of perception

and expression of the senses. She focuses on women’s relationship to their bodies (Salvatore, 2001, p.210). According to Nin, women’s sexual body not only points to the inherent difference between men and women’s nature, but also implies that a woman’s body is more complex than a man’s. Salvatore notes, Nin emphasizes both the difference of the sexes and the mediating role of the woman (p.13). Nin remarks that “women have operated with a combination of instinct, emotion, intellect, and observation, a diffused awareness. . . . They are sensory, they feel things with their whole bodies” (1975, pp.76 & 77). Nin’s description of a woman’s “diffused awareness” (p.76) and her eroticized body is comparable to Irigaray’s depiction of the multiple sites of desire in a woman’s body in which “the geography of [female] pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined” (1985, p.28). For both Irigaray and Nin, female desire requires a different, more complex language than that which is adequate to express man’s one-dimensional desire and mode of awareness. The domineering sexual male potency also denies women their own space, with men inhibiting them in their search: “man is forever searching for, building, creating, homes for himself everywhere” (1993, p.141). She further adds that “what is sometimes difficult for women is to provide themselves with a periphery, a circumference, a world, a home” (p.106). Irigaray tries to create a space for women to affirm their own specificity. In Irigarayan feminine desire:

Woman derives pleasure from what is *so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself*. She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either. (1985, p.31)

In the same way, Nin believes that “woman’s sensuality is much more different from man’s and for which man’s language was inadequate” (2000, p.146). Nin tries to discover women’s individuality through their bodies. However, her description of women’s feminine *jouissance* based on feminine erotic *jouissance* reflects women’s biological distinctions from men by believing that “the female body reflects the female mind” (Salvatore, 2001, p.214). While Irigaray’s ‘feminine divine’ is based on the interiority and divinity of women’s body, Nin’s ideas pivot merely on a vision of feminine passion and sexual desire and instinct, “the most ardent frenzy of desire” (Nin, p.414). For Nin, as Reynolds notes, “women have wanted to reveal the facets of their sensuality, but their sexual desire has been suppressed and women have been discouraged from revealing their sensual nature” (1998, p.5). In Nin’s fantasy of sexual awakening, women sexualize all parts of their female bodies. Although Nin refers to the predominant feminine sexual desire by asserting that “a woman can use the appearance of eroticism to tip the balance of power between the sexes in her favor” (p.64), women in her novels cannot free

themselves from phallic pleasure and being the objects of men's desire.

Whereas Nin confuses 'love' and 'lust' in her representation of women's bodily sexual desire and feminine heterosexuality, Irigaray in 'feminine divine' offers women's bodies as a means of spirituality and a powerful element in life, and the embodiment of transformation. Irigaray asserts that while men have their own god to achieve their subjectivity, women need a feminine divinity, their own religion, their own language, their own imaginary and symbolic representations, in short, a "generic identity" (1996, p.144). Irigaray insists on a gendered subjectivity and cultural transformation to bring women's bodies a level of self-expression and 'spiritualization' through appreciating their divine-human potential, their genealogy, and their power. Therefore, Irigarayan spiritualized desire is enlivening. For Irigaray,

Desire is a subtle subjective affect, demanding perhaps our subtlest cultural elaborations. But we have confused desire with instinct and, in the name of this confusion, repressed desire, a specifically human dimension, and source of our greatest cultural wealth. (p.78)

Anaïs Nin's view differs in some ways from Irigarayan feminine divine which is based on instasy rather than ecstasy. While Nin focuses merely on feminine sexual desire, Irigarayan feminine energy grows beyond the limitations of the traditional male discourse and dualities of body/spirit and self/other. Unlike Irigaray's feminine divine and sensible transcendental which transforms the traditional binary oppositions and gives a shape to the alterity of woman's embodied subjectivity, Nin's definition of woman as an erotic being engulfs women in their embodied self. Clare Taylor in *Women, Writing, and Fetishism, 1890-1950: Female Cross-gendering* explores the problem of gendered embodiment, cross-gendered women, and women's erotic relationship in the writings of Anaïs Nin, Djuna Barnes, Sarah Grand, and Radclyffe Hall through sexology, female fetishism, psychological and gender studies. Anne Salvator in *Anaïs Nin's Narratives* reads Anaïs Nin's novels in light of feminist, psychoanalytical, reader-response, semiological, and narratological theories. She describes Nin's shifts of the boundaries of traditional concepts. Julie Karsten's "Self-realization and Intimacy: the influence of D.H. Lawrence on Anaïs Nin" addresses the influence of D. H. Lawrence in Anaïs Nin's several novels, short fiction, erotica, and her diaries. Helen Tookey's *Anaïs Nin: Fictionality and Femininity* offering a new study of Anaïs Nin (1903-77), focuses the cultural and historical contexts of Nin's works, and regards Nin herself as a modern writer and an active figure in the women's liberation movement. Suzette Henke in her essay "Psychoanalyzing Sabina: Anaïs Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* as Freudian Fable" reviews Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* from the psychological perspective in which Sabina, Nin's female protagonist, is

known as Freudian fable. For Reynolds, Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* "was the first study of a woman who tries to separate love from sensuality as man does, to seek sensual freedom" (1998, p.5).

Most studies of Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love* have been on eroticism and psychoanalytical issues; however, there is no reference to feminine divinity in their studies of Nin's novel which is going to be discussed in this study through Irigarayan feminine divine and sensible and transcendental. It shows that there is no threshold and interval between the dualities of sensible and transcendental as well as self and other in forming main character's identity in relation with men, as a result, it leads to her failure of identity. Unlike Irigarayan 'horizontal transcendence' and 'sensible transcendental', Nin's view of love in *The Spy in the House of Love* is based on vertical transcendence, erotic and ecstasy, which is basically sexual. Although Nin tries to revise the male-centered perspective of a patriarchal society by giving her female protagonist, Sabina, sexual freedom, Sabina does not achieve the full measure of non-dual love because she is still tied to men's desire and is engulfed in her sexual body in her relation with men. Nin places Sabina at the center of desire and artistic meaning through her creative art of singing, acting and dancing in relationship with men who are actors, dancers, singers, and musicians. Nin makes an allusion to the creative side of Sabina's empowered and energetic sexual body. Sabina demands desire through the creative work of art and emotional love. Her talent for singing and dancing renews her feminine power. Dance and Music are creative and vital parts of Sabina, like breathing (Nin, 1971, pp.284 & 286).

Sabina is described as a woman on fire, a woman about to be consumed by the raging fever of her sexual desire (Evans, 1968, pp.149 & 158; Papachristou, 1991, p.66). Her sexual desire is described as "feverish breathlessness" (Nin, 63). Anaïs Nin asserts that "Sabina seeks wholeness by the fever of desire" (Evans, 1968, pp.160-161). She refers to sex in the indirect metaphors of "sensual cannibalism," "a carnal banquet" and "tasting every embrace, every area of her body" (Nin, pp.29, 68, & 77). She describes vaginal lubrication as "honey flowing between the thighs" and mentions Sabina's feeling, the need to "wash away the lasting odors of her illicit intercourse" with one of her lovers, Philip (36, 43). In describing the multiple facets of Sabina's female sexuality, Nin appropriates the archetypal conventions related to the female body, such as water, flowers, and fruit. She is interested in these images as expressions of female sexuality. She uses "flower imagery to describe the female sexuality and genitalia" (Reynolds, 1998, p.4). She describes Sabina as scattering her sexuality like a flower "exfoliating pollen," and displaying "hothouse" charms (pp.68 & 77). The traces of 'womanly' pleasure with "pollen and honey" gathered from Sabina's parted



legs (p.69) highlights the multiple nature of body as Irigaray refers to it in her feminine *jouissance*. Nin describes the fire-like images of Sabina's passionate sexual desire when the eroticized Sabina wears a mask of "primeval sensuality" and attempts to live "outside" (p.65) the boundaries of conventional femininity. "Her dress in red and silver with a hole in its sleeves" (p.66) is representative of her fiery hotness: "The first time one looked at Sabina one felt, *everything will burn!*" (p.66). Sabina's feminine sexual power is offered "in the presence of men, either in response to the man's desire or, quite as often, as the expression of her own desire to conquer him" (Harding, 2001, p.58). She has a multiplicity of mysterious and desirable female aspects drawn from various fantasies of her erotic body. Her sexual and powerfully erotic body satisfies men in her physical relationship. However, Sabina fails in her love relationships with men who regard her as an object of desire according to the expectations of the patriarchal world.

Sabina's relation to one of her lovers, Mambo, is through his singing: "Sabina loves Mambo's music rather than himself. She sought only pleasure that she loved in him only through music" (Nin, p.60). Sabina and Mambo fulfil their sexual desire through their dance:

When they danced he changed. Mambo held Sabina firmly, so encompassed that every movement they made was made as one body. He held her head against his, with a physical finiteness, as if for eternity. His desire became a center of gravity, a final welding... her eyes into his, his eyes thrust into her very being...Fever shone in his face like moonlight. She knew he had desired her. (Nin, p.59)

In relation with Mambo, Sabina is not recognized as an individual and her sexual needs are developed to fulfil Mambo's passionate desire, unlike Irigarayan notions of love based on the creative encounter of autonomous and independent subjects who are capable of giving and receiving energy. Philip, another lover of Sabina, tries to satisfy her and his own desires through singing:

There is a jazz drummer. Drum-drum-drum-drum- upon her heart, she was a drum, her skin was taut under his hands.... [Philip's] singing showered upon her heart and body, and the drumming vibrated through the rest of her body.... She felt possessed by his song.... Desire flowing between them.... Wherever he rested his eyes, she felt the drumming of his fingers upon her stomach, her breasts, her hips. (Nin, p.67)

Like Sabina's other lovers demanding a joyous and sexual relationship with her, Philip's physical relationship with her is explicitly offered for satisfying his sexual needs.

They fled from the eyes of the world, the singer's prophetic, harsh, ovarian prologues. Down the rusty bars of ladders to the undergrounds of night propitious to the first man and woman at the beginning of the world, where there were no words by which to possess each other, no music for serenades, no shows to court with, no tournaments to impress and force a yielding, no secondary instruments, no adornments, necklaces, crowns to subdue, but only one ritual, a joyous, joyous, joyous, joyous

impaling of woman on man's sensual mast. (Nin, p.63)

Nin shows how Philip pursues his own sexual desire in the statements such as "impaling of woman on man's sensual mast" (p.63) and "Caresses . . . Acutely marvelous, like all the multicolored flames from an artful firework, bursts of exploded suns and neons within the body, flying comets aimed at all the centers of delight, shooting stars of piercing joys" (p.68). Sabina is treated as an object of Philip's desire in his service for fulfilling his own sexual needs; as Philip says to Sabina:

You appear as something beyond the actor who can transmit to others the power to feel, to believe... Why we love actress... the one who is only revealed in the act of love... the one who understands only one part of us, is the miraculous openness which takes place in whole love. (Nin, p.104)

Nin's description of the lovers' relationship for fulfillment of their male desires is in contrast to Irigarayan love as a shared space of lovers and an ethical proximity; "Holy breath as an atmosphere of ethics is thus a place in individuals where they secure for others, which is not reachable" (Škof, 2015, p.28). While Nin emphasizes vertical transcendence and love as an ecstasy, Irigaray focuses on horizontal transcendence between subjects, and love as instasy, irreducible and non-possessive. Irigaray creates a form of desire that respects the otherness of others in sexual difference by "accepting that the subject is not the whole, that the subject represents only one part of reality and of truth, that the other is forever a not I, nor me, nor mine: not yet I, not yet mine to integrate into me or into us" (2004, p.26). Irigaray in *Conversations* says that:

[T]he feminine subject does not relate to the self, to the other(s), to the world as a masculine subject does. This does not depend only on bodily morphology and anatomy or on social stereotypes, as many people imagine. Rather, it is a question of relational identity that precisely realizes the original connection between body and culture. (Irigaray, 2008, p.77)

Irigaray focuses on the relational identity and connection between body and culture. Her 'feminine divine' and 'sensible transcendental', beyond bodily morphology and anatomy and social stereotypes, as a way of spiritual enlightenment, transcend the hierarchical dualities of body and mind and self and other, while Nin's idea pivots merely on bodily desire in the realm of social stereotypes which are limited to the dualities of body and mind, and self and other.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper examined feminine desire through Irigarayan feminine divine and sensible transcendental in Anaïs Nin's *A Spy in the House of Love*. It displayed how Nin was able to express her female character's feminine sexual desire in relationship with several men; however, her heroine

could not create a balance between her body and mind, thus, she encountered the multiple fragmented selves instead of discovering her distinct subjectivity as Irigaray defined in her sensible transcendental and feminine divine. Sabina felt disfiguration when she appreciated only her sexual desire, even she could not recognize herself in the mirror due to her fragmented and multiple selves. It can be said that Nin was not completely able to grasp an essence of the Woman, either for herself or her female character due to the sociocultural-historical constructions of womanhood imposed upon herself and other women such as Sabina. She was aware of the sacrifice of women's subjective identity, and showed her own resistance to the boundaries of these constructions which limited a woman's identity. She referred to the erotic nature of women without being completely aware of the fact that as long as an erotic emerged through the fantasy of motherhood and wifehood, it generated masculine constructions of eroticism based on masculine fantasies.

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