



# A French Feminist Reading of Theresa Rebeck's *Spike Heels*

Hasan Hussein Karo

College of Humanities - English Dept., University of Zakho – Kurdistan, Kurdistan Region / Iraq

E-mail: [hassan.karo@uoz.edu.krd](mailto:hassan.karo@uoz.edu.krd)

Received: 15 Nov 2023; Received in revised form: 18 Dec 2023; Accepted: 25 Dec 2023; Available online: 05 Jan 2024

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**Abstract**— *This study discusses the complex personality of Georgie in Theresa Rebeck's High Heels (1992) by depending on the feminist points of view of one of the French feminist practitioners, Luce Irigaray. A short introduction is given to illustrate the woman's situation in this study while referring to the play. This paper is limited to the analysis of Georgie's personality though employing some of Irigaray's feminist ideas. Her dissatisfaction with her life and the patriarchal system will be the focusing points of this paper. Georgie's motives and personal movements will be explained as a method to reach her dream.*

**Keywords**— *hate, patriarchal system, woman's body, sexual harassment.*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women had suffered from different types of injustice in their various environments. As a result, this led to the emergence of different kinds of movements to stand against this type of mistreatment of women. As a means of survival, women had used and taken benefit from multiple chances to adapt with their surroundings, sometimes their physical sexuality was involved to escape their sordid reality. In speaking of female sexuality, male members of society have taken advantage of this as method of entertainment, not being aware of their circumstances. In Theresa Rebeck's *Spike Heels* (1990), it is obvious that women use their sexuality or being used by men to achieve a sense of identity or reaching to a certain level of self-realization. In the case of Georgie, the protagonist of the play, there is an obvious illustration of low self-esteem that she feels when she interacts with the patriarchal society. The feeling that most women of her era

have felt that men have been attracted to their bodies rather than to their minds. Rebeck as female writer began to broaden women's creative interests and celebrate their experiences with the advent of Second Wave Feminism at the beginning of the 1960s, after some of their demands had been met through their struggles throughout history. Later writers were able to freely and openly find and explore women's experiences in their writings as a method of expression for women.

## II. FRENCH FEMINISM

After the time of turmoil, the French feminist movement reached its zenith as a second wave of feminism gained strength in various nations beginning in the 1960s. French feminism in its classic formulation is represented by the work of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. The concept of French feminism, which in English feminist theory refers to one school of feminism that

developed throughout the 1970s and 1990s, is another notable occurrence. It is supposed to place more emphasis on theories about the body than it does on political concepts. Women's studies and gender studies courses have slowly begun to appear in French institutions during the past thirty years. Since the 1990s, French researchers and academics interested in gender and sexuality problems have increased day by day. The French feminists always tend to say that "women are subjected to discrimination due to the fact that they are of a different gender, that they have particular needs that are ignored and unfulfilled" (Girsang & *et al.*, 2023: 46). Thus, the female protagonist of the play is discriminated by the two male characters in which she highly suffers from and tries to find a way to reach her goals.

### III. SPIKE HEELS

A two-act play by the American playwright Theresa Rebeck that centers on the issues of "sexual harassment, the control and use of women, self-determination and identity, and changing expectations of men in a feminist era" (Thomason, 2000: 273). It is the first play that was staged at Vassar College by New York Stage and Film Company as the form of workshop. There are four characters in this play. They are familiar with each other. The so-called protagonist Georgie achieves her personal realization through some encounters and problematic situations. Rebeck tends to convey an image of suffering female character through her dramatic lines "conveying the playwright's feelings about a specific individual or social consequence" (Girsang *et al.*, 2023: 46). She wants to tell the reader what is really happening in Georgie's life, the protagonist of *Spike Heels*.

### IV. FEMINISM AND SPIKE HEELS

The play starts with Georgie knocking on her neighbor's door, Andrew. She has just arrived from work complaining about her day to him. From the very beginning, the reader can understand that Georgie is not satisfied with her life or the way she views men "I have been on the stupid goddam subway for twelve hours, so help me God, squished between four of the smelliest fat men on earth..." (Rebeck, 1992: 4), this shows that she really abhors the man-figure, far from her ideal imagination of expected-man. Women

have been brainwashed into thinking that men and women are equal in every sense of the word. Georgie thinks that women have more expectations of men than the other way around, mainly positive but in the end, they are changed completely. The way she describes her misery by wearing high-heeled shoes just to impress men "I hate heels, I have ruined my arches... just as a bunch of stupid men can have a good time looking at my ...legs." (*ibid.*) This belongs to the idea of viewing women as objects as Irigaray states "to become the object of a mere optical transaction." (1985: 297).<sup>1</sup> As a result, it shows the main aim of feminist movement from the beginning its emergence till now that "questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies" (Cuddon, 2013: 273). Georgie criticizes the whole patriarchal system that she suffers from. The way she talks about rich people makes the reader aware of the injustice that agonizes her personality. She is obliged to do her own personal quest to know more about herself within the patriarchal society "discontented with such misrepresentation and mistreatment, woman would, from then on, do her own defining" (Gambaudo, 2007: 93). Irigaray claims that the "whole of the current economic system would have to be recalculated. And if she is granted the life of appearance, it will be a darkling affair" (*ibid.*: 345). It is understandable that there is something wrong with the way the system works when she says:

I swear to God, the mass transportation system in this entire country is just a mess, and do you know why? Because rich people do not take the subway. Rich people own cars. This is the richest goddam country in the world; there is no reason that we couldn't have decent subway systems in our stupid major cities. It's totally a class issue (Rebeck, 1992: 4).

According to Georgie, there are some rules to follow to be liked or even accepted into the man's environment of workplace. She is not comfortable when she refers to her work as a secretary at one of tax law company "I'm scared all the time down there. They're different from me." So, Georgie's background is totally different from them that makes her afraid all the time as "coming out of different

<sup>1</sup> Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Trans. by Gillian C. Gill., will be employed in this study as a main source

to analyze the dramatic lines in Rebeck's *Spike Heels*.

times, places, logics, "representations," and economies." (Irigaray: 1985: 297). She hates her boss, Edward, who is a close friend of Andrew. She was hired through Andrew's recommendation even though she doesn't possess any college degree. For this reason, she thinks that Edward tries to make some sexual moves on her as she tells Andrew that his friend tried to rape her. Georgie negatively addresses her boss "as far as I'm concerned, Edward can just go ... himself. I mean, your little friend is just a prince." (Rebeck, 1992: 8). Depending on Irigaray's idea, the female character of Georgie in this situation is "chaste because she has faced the worse perversions" (1985:199). So, it is understood that her boss is like a parasite that tries to take advantage of Georgie's body. As a negative member of the society, he tends to eat flesh of Georgie that leads to her world into a jungle. Edward turns the world into a hell for female members who just want to make a living when he talks to Andrew "I'm not going to make the world a better place... We make it worse" (Rebeck, 1992: 20).

Another attitude that makes Georgie really upset is taking advantage of her. Andrew takes a move and kisses Georgie. Minutes later, he feels regret for doing that. He even tells Georgie that "I made you better than this" (*ibid.* 26), meaning he is fully in charge of her creation without leaving any freedom for her. Reminding her of her previous life offends her and opens personal scars:

Could it be true that not every wound needs to remain a secret, that not every laceration was shameful? Could a sore be holy? Ecstasy is there in that glorious slit where she curls up as if in her nest, where she rests as if she had found her home... She bathes in a blood that flows over her, hot and purifying...she has been authorized to remain silent, hidden from prying eyes in the intimacy of this exchange where she sees (herself as) what she will be unable to express (Irigaray, 1985: 200).

Each character, as is obvious, possesses some kind of ability and makes an effort to employ it, but the consequences are not what the character had hoped for. Since Andrew has the authority as a college professor and naturally assumes the position of the teacher in his interactions, he can "mold" Georgie into becoming someone else. Although he tries to look as though he is only trying to

help her, in this instance, his true face is evident. In an effort to have a sexual intercourse with Georgie, Edward makes crass use of his authority as a lawyer and an employer as well as the social roles that men and women perform, as Irigaray describes that "woman's weaker social interest "is no doubt derived from the dissocial quality which unquestionably characterizes all sexual relations" (1985: 119). In this play, as is frequently the case in society at large, the males are in positions of power, and those men are acting upon the weak women. Acting as a father or teacher figure for Georgie, Andrew takes charge of her life, telling her what to read, how to speak, and even where to work. The dual roles of employer and sexual predator are played by Edward that often "made women into sexual objects, existing only for the pleasure of promiscuous men" (Thomason, 2000: 277). He is demanding, rude, and confrontational. The women, on the other hand, are acted upon. Halfway through the play, Georgie understands that Andrew and Edward were trading her as a commodity between themselves as Irigaray claims that men "raise woman from her status as a mere commodity" (*ibid.*: 56).

Simply stating, the irony is that Edward appears to believe that Andrew's approval is more essential than Georgie's interest in him or even his consent when Andrew grants him permission to approach Georgie as men regard women as their tools to be used any time they want "a projection of his "primitive" oral instincts" (*ibid.*: 58). The different social roles that men and women play are at the center of this play, as is frequently the case in society at large, the males are in positions of power and by that power women are expected to act upon. Irigaray carries on to attack the idea of using women as objects:

To get back to justice or the 'sense of justice' one might wonder how woman could possibly acquire it since she is included in the exchange market only as a commodity. If commodities could speak, they might possibly give an opinion about their price, about whether they consider their status just, or about the dealings of their owners. (*ibid.*: 118).

As an independent character, Georgie hates the way men tend to take advantage of her or even control her as de Beauvoir claims that women recently acquired "freedom

from slavery of reproduction through contraception” (Habib, 2011: 218). Georgie likes enjoying her personal freedom without any interference from any male domination, as Irigaray asks why “should women be interested in a society in which they have no stake...?” (1985: 119). Georgie’s aim is to adapt with her environment through her sense of liberation she thinks she has. She feels that she is free in her choice of wearing, ignoring the way the society views her and her style. By doing so, she tends to accomplish her quest in life which is uncovering her true female identity. She has ignored the fact of persuading men of their mistreatment towards women as Irigaray states that “we have the greatest difficulty in persuading them that they are mistaken” (1985: 65).

Georgie’s anger at men is justified when she gradually realizes the true nature of men in her environment. They seek her flesh as predators rather than her inner beautiful personality. Being heavenly wonderful creature, she suffers from such a divine bless. Edward’s sexual tendency towards Georgie is animalistic and sometimes more as Irigaray relates such behavior to certain types of monstrous animals “the pattern of behavior with certain animals” (1985: 17). When Lydia, Edward’s former girlfriend meets Georgie for the first time, she describes Edward as a ‘dog’ that seems a loyal being from outside and a monstrous creature from inside. She tells Georgie that Edward used to call her a ‘vampire’, sucking his blood and destroying every single moment of his life. After a discussion, the two female characters get along very well after realizing the two male characters motives and their dreadful desires. They believe that by uniting and putting their hands together, they can survive and be stronger.

In a review in The New York Times, Klein claims the dilemmas that the two female characters, especially Georgie, going through as “enduring pain, medieval torture is more like it” (1994). The way Georgie fights men for her freedom makes her a dangerous warrior in the patriarchal environment as Klein states Georgie’s fighting makes “Godzilla look like a Barbie doll.” (*ibid.*). This would make feminists proud as Georgie makes men fear her.

As the title refers, Georgie still wears her high- heeled shoes because she feels some sense of power while doing that. Being attractive through wearing shoes is Georgie’s final aim to be in control of her sexuality, disdaining Edward’s

sexual harassment though his money and being rich in a male-dominated society as Irigaray states “since the real issue is always men's competition for power.” (1985: 118). To have any influence, she must accept the position of temptress that the shoes bestow upon her. She is told to stop wearing the shoes by Andrew, who wants to change her and downplay her sexuality, but later in the play he reveals that he too finds them attractive, as claimed by Irigaray that “the problem is that woman often finds it hard not to claim access to the procedures of equivalency that are still limited by right to men alone” (*ibid.*). That’s why Georgie employs her feminine personality to overcome the male dominance of her life and particularly her body in her side to reach her goal.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study has concluded that Rebeck’s *Spike Heels* (1992) is a perfect example of feminism when it comes to the character of Georgie. It has been proved through critical ideas of brilliant French feminist Luce Irigaray. The way that Georgie suffers in her life in male-dominated society puts a lot of question marks on reader’s head. Through money, Georgie is harassed and being used by her boss at the work, or through sophistication and knowledge by her neighbor friend, Andrew. She uses her high-heeled shoes to make her more attractive or even taller so she can enjoy some sense of power over male characters. Unfortunately, her sexual attractive personality is seen as a bait for the two male characters. This study has reached the conclusion that Georgie hatred towards men is justified since she feels she is being hunted as a prey by predators in the play as Irigaray claims that the power of domination over women seems legal in the eyes of the patriarchal society. The reader can tolerate with Georgie’s too much cursing since she feels emotionally liberated from her anger at the male characters’ attitudes towards her in the play when she is treated as an object rather than a complete human being.

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