

## **Women's Agency in the Perspective of Taoism and Psychoanalysis: An Interconnective Study of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Zi and *This Sex Which Is Not One* by Luce Irigaray**

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### **ABSTRACT (11 pt)**

Women's agency is a global issue that has long been debated in studies across cultures, histories, religions and philosophical systems. Studies of feminism in Eastern and Western philosophy have tended to compare the two without addressing how psychoanalytic perspectives, the main basis of the Western feminist movement, interact with Eastern feminist ideas. This research fills the gap by exploring the interconnectedness of women's agency in Eastern Taoism through Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching* and Western feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*. This research aims to understand how the two texts relate to each other in representing women's agency. Using descriptive qualitative methods and content analysis, this study found that in the *Tao Te Ching*, women are depicted as “mysterious female” (玄牝), who symbolizes the Yin principle, as the source of life, the center of regeneration, and cosmic balance. Women are also identified as the Tao itself, which is the gateways (玄牝之门) and root of heaven and earth, while in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray asserts that women's bodies possess a regenerative agency that men cannot naturally surpass. Both texts offer resistance to patriarchy, Irigaray with an explicit critique of the repression of women in Western culture, while the *Tao Te Ching* has historically been a masculine non-oppositional response to patriarchal Confucianism. This research offers a new perspective in cross-cultural feminist studies by connecting Eastern religious teachings with Western feminist psychoanalytic perspectives that share a common intention on aspects of human consciousness.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The discourse on women is certainly something that will never be finished. Cross-cultural, ethnic, sociohistorical, religious, and various belief systems have their own views and patterns in talking about women (Daróz, 2021). Of course, this variety of perspectives often leads to controversy and debate, ranging from domestic roles that are considered natural to public positions. This is a necessity considering that gender roles and perspectives are socially constructed (Hamid, Agustang, & Idrus, 2024). These

patterns often create systemic social, political and economic inequalities, which apply to the power model of male elites over subordinated women or collectives (Figuerola et al., 2023). Such patriarchal tendencies are often justified by interpretations of religious doctrines and belief systems prevailing in society (Liljefors, 2023).

Explorative and comprehensive analysis of the various discourses on women is needed, in order to wisely understand their position. Philosophical and religious texts seem to offer more profound and influential constructions in discussing women's agency. Misogynistic and patriarchal traditions are inspired by philosophical texts, as are feminist movements (Amin, 2015; Suryawan, 2023). On the other hand, the reality is that every religion has its own issues with women (Ayu, 2023). This statement does not seem excessive, given the fact that almost all religions have rules that specifically regulate women's lives, but are often interpreted in a position that is less favorable to them (Najitama, 2010). This image of women being oppressed and silenced seems to be the most commonly held view of Eastern women in the Western world. However, the subordination of women is a global problem that has persisted throughout history, experienced in both the West and the East, regardless of region, social class or ethnic identity (Huda, 2020).

Taoism, as a traditional Chinese belief system and one of the oldest religions in the world at over 7000 years old (Zhafira, 2021), certainly has its own views on women that are interesting to uncover. In general, Daoism was born against the backdrop of patriarchal and conservative Confucianism, which for twenty centuries dominated China's body politic (Cleary, 1989). Confucianism placed women in discriminatory gender roles. Women were discredited to certain domestic duties (Kaku, 1996). In its political movements, this ruling ideology ensures that all political power remains concentrated in the hands of a narrow-minded and patriarchal male elite (Hartati, 2016). To achieve this goal, there are efforts to suppress freedom of thought, limit imagination, inhibit social change, and ignore the spiritual side of humanity, especially towards women (Despeux & Kohn, 2003). In contrast to this oppressive regime, the ancient tradition of Taoism emphasizes femininity. A system that values the role of the female element as an integral part of the harmony of the universe (Fleming, 2009).

Knowing how women's agency or femininity in Taoism certainly requires a comprehensive study of the *Tao Te Ching*, which is the main text in containing the main points of Taoist philosophy (Nefrindo & Koli, 2023). Previous research by Lai (2000) explored the concept of femininity in the *Tao Te Ching*, which while supporting feminist values such as gentleness and non-aggression, remains within a patriarchal framework. Her focus on the complementarity of Taoism offers a contribution to contemporary Western feminist philosophy to review the equal relationship between masculinity and femininity. In addition, Fleming's (2009) research connects twentieth-century Western feminist perspectives with ancient Taoism, through an exploration of influence, agency, and respect for women. Taoism, which emerged before patriarchal traditions, has a perspective that honors femininity through the concept of cosmic *Yin* and the mythology of the Goddess as an immortal figure (Fleming, 2009).

Although both studies compare women's agency in Taoism with Western philosophical systems, they do not mention the analysis of psychological disciplines in viewing women, which is the basis of Western feminism (Gherovici & Steinkoler, 2022). Psychological assumptions, especially psychoanalysis, became the basis for the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, along with the emergence of existentialist feminism (Hollows, 2024; Puspasari, 2021). One of the important texts in the era of the psychoanalytic feminism movement is *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977) by Luce Irigaray, which contains a critique through a psychoanalytic lens of the dominance of masculinity

in Western culture that ignores women in history, making them exterior objects of desire and placed in a schizoid position (Pinggong, 2018). Given the urgency and lacuna of such analysis, the purpose of this research is to look at the comparison and interconnection between Taoism and psychoanalysis, in viewing women's agency. This research will focus on the interconnections between the texts of Lao Zi's *Tao Te Ching* and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is No One*, which are the main references of both philosophical systems in viewing women's agency.

In addition to the gaps mentioned above, the relevance of this interconnection study is based on the similarities between Taoism and psychoanalysis, which focus on the origins and dynamics of human consciousness (Roth, 2009; Leonardi, Gazzillo, & Dazzi, 2022). As a way of life, Taoism teaches every human being to have an awareness of inner unity with the Tao (the way of nature/real reality/ 天地之正) (Sun & Chen, 2024). Humans must manage their consciousness by believing in the laws of the universe, living life naturally, harmoniously, and following the flow and laws of nature without going against the current (Riyani, 2022). On the other hand, psychoanalysis departs from the initial assumptions of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who introduced the structure of human consciousness which is partitioned into three parts, namely consciousness, pre-consciousness, and unconscious areas (Shreyas et al., 2024; Nawariah, 2022). In its development, this psychoanalytic paradigm was used by many figures to develop personality theory (Susanto et al., 2023), such as Alfred Adler (1870-1937), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), Karen Horney (1885-1952), Anna Freud (1895-1982), Erich Fromm (1900-1980), including feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1930-). Therefore, this interconnection study will offer a rich perspective on how women are viewed in two philosophical constructions that have similar intentions on the inner aspects of human beings. Practically, the results of this study can be used as the basis of philosophical arguments to reconstruct the view of women that has long been discussed in a pejorative tone.

## II. METHOD

This research is an interconnection study, which is research based on a paradigm that brings together the science of a belief system with general sciences or philosophy (Hamzah, 2020). A qualitative descriptive approach was used in this study to find knowledge or theory (Mukhtar, 2013), through various data collection methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The method used is content analysis, which aims to understand, interpret, and reveal messages in a text or information (Ulfah et al., 2022). The primary data sources analyzed were the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Zi and *This Sex Which Is Not One* by Luce Irigaray. Secondary data sources include scientific journals, research articles, and books with relevant theories to support the analysis of primary data. Data collection includes three steps: first, repeatedly reading the primary data sources, noting important elements and themes related between the two sources, and finally, analyzing their interconnections. Furthermore, the data analysis technique uses the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Rijali, 2018).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Women's Agency in *Tao Te Ching*

#### 3.1.1 Women as the Source of Life

In *Tao Te Ching* women are regarded as the source of life. She is not only a symbol of biological fertility, but the universal principle of acceptance, emptiness, and

continuous regeneration, as well as the embodiment of *wu we*, which is nurturing without transcending (Roberts, 2001). As in stanza 6 which reads:

谷神不死，是谓玄牝。  
玄牝之门，是谓天地根。  
绵绵若存，用之不勤。  
(Original Text, Stanza 6)

*The valley spirit never dies –  
It is called "the mysterious female";  
The gate of the mysterious female  
Is called "the root of heaven and earth."  
Gossamer it is,  
Seemingly insubstantial,  
Yet never consumed through use.*  
(Translated by Victor H. Mair, 1990, Stanza 6)

The proposed stanza, "*The valley spirit never dies-It is called 'the mysterious female'*", explicitly features women through the symbol '*female*' or "*mysterious female*" which is closely related to the *yin* principle in Chinese philosophy (Liu, 2024). Women in the *Tao Te Ching* are not reduced to individuals or social categories, but rather become analogies for the cosmic principles of emptiness (Tortchinov, 1996), harmony, and infinite fertility (Zou & Chen, 2023). Ames & Hall (2002) convey their interpretation of this stanza with the phrase "*the dark, moist, and accommodatingly vacant interior of the vagina*", suggesting that women are a symbol of abundant creative power, which, although not shaped or fixed, generates continuous existence. On a conceptual level, "*the mysterious female*" represents the principle of *wu* (无), or emptiness (Michael, 2023). This emptiness is not nihilistic, but rather inherently productive. Wagner (2003) explains that the *spirit of the valley* is the nothingness in the middle of the valley; it is formless and its contours are invisible, but it is precisely from this nothingness that everything is realized. In other words, the woman in this analogy is the center of regeneration and the source of existence, the root of both heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*) (Levitt & Nie, 2022).

Roberts (2001) mentions that the valley (*gu*) as a symbol of women also includes the dimensions of death (*yin*) and life (*yang*). In this context, women are not only associated with physical fertility but also with the cosmic cycle of birth and death, as metaphorized in the myth of the underground river that carries the setting sun back to the east to start a new day. In the perspective of *Taoist* cosmology, women also transcend physical duality. As noted by Huainanzi in Lau & Ching (1992), the "*door ' or 'root of heaven and earth ' referring to 'the mysterious female'*" is understood to be the same base as *Taiji* (the Great Ultimate), which forms the Yin and Yang formation .

Furthermore, Heshang Gong's (1993) commentary on this stanza focuses on an intuitive and subjective understanding of the Tao. This interpretation emphasizes *breath* and *spiritual cultivation*. In this stanza, the term "*mysterious*" is understood as heaven, while "*female ' (translated as 'womb')*" is associated with earth. The nose and mouth are considered a pair that represents this relationship: *the primal energy (yuanqi)* from heaven enters through the nose, while *the primal energy* from earth enters through the mouth. While the physical symbolism in this stanza can be read as explicit, it is not reduced to mere biological aspects. Rather, as Wile (1992) argues, women's association with the earth, the valley, and fertility reflects women's role as a vital aspect of the cosmic order, which transcends bodily categories to indicate spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. In

the *Tao Te Ching*, woman as the *mysterious female* is the center that nurtures, produces, and sustains, without ever being used up, as stated, “*Gossamer it is, seemingly insubstantial, yet never consumed through use.*”

Furthermore, in another stanza, it is explained that the *Tao*, which is the source of all things, is described as the mother of the earth and sky (Wang, 2023). The feminine principle is associated with productive creation and regeneration. As explained in stanza 25 below:

有物溷成，先天地生。  
寂兮寥兮，独立而不改，周行而不殆，  
可以为天地母。  
吾不知其名，强字之曰道，强为之名曰大。

...  
人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。  
(Original Text, Stanza 25)

*There was something featureless yet complete,  
born before heaven and earth;  
Silent – amorphous –  
it stood alone and unchanging.  
We may regard it as the mother of heaven and earth.  
Not knowing its name,  
I style it the “Way.”  
If forced to give it a name,  
I would call it “great.”*

...  
*Within the realm there are four greats,  
and the king is one among them.  
Man, patterns himself on earth,  
Earth, patterns itself on heaven,  
Heaven, patterns itself on the Way,  
The Way, patterns itself on nature.*  
(Translated by Victor H. Mair, 1990, Stanza 25)

The stanza reads: “*There was something featureless yet complete, born before heaven and earth; Silent-amorphous-it stood alone and unchanging. We may regard it as the mother of heaven and earth.*” places a formless and nameless primordial entity as the source of all things. This entity is then called “*Way*” (*Tao*), the cosmic origin, described as the mother of heaven and earth (Mare, 2023). The representation of *Tao* as “*the mother of heaven and earth*” suggests that women in Taoistic cosmology are elevated to superior figures to patriarchal forces, as they reflect the principle of eternal regeneration (Roberts, 2001). After creation, *Taoist* children ( *wanwu*/万物) slowly move away from their source before eventually reuniting with it. This reflects the cycle of life, which not only originates from the feminine principle but is also directed back to it.

The stanza also articulates a nested cosmological hierarchy: “*Man, patterns himself on earth, Earth, patterns itself on heaven, Heaven, patterns itself on the Way, The Way, patterns itself on nature.*” This principle emphasizes the importance of harmony and order. In this hierarchy, the *Tao* (as the cosmic mother) is at the top. Based on Wagner's (2003) analysis, the *Taoist* concept of “*pattern itself on nature*” (*ziran* / 自然) is the ultimate model for the

harmony of the universe, and women, as the embodiment of natural regeneration, play a fundamental role in maintaining this continuity.

Women, like the *Tao*, are a force that does not impose dominance but sustains the existence of all things in a silent but significant way. In this view, women's agency in the *Tao Te Ching* transcends the limitations of social hierarchy or traditional roles. Women symbolize the essential and universal source of existence (Ames & Hall, 2002). Furthermore, stanza 28 describes women with various wise qualities that sustain sustainability:

知其雄，守其雌，为天下溪。  
为天下溪，常德不离，复归于婴儿。  
知其白，守其黑，为天下式。  
为天下式，常德不忒，复归于无极。  
知其荣，守其辱，为天下谷。  
为天下谷，常德乃足，复归于朴。  
朴散则为器，圣人用之，则为官长。  
故大智不割。

(Original Text, Stanza 28)

Know masculinity,  
Maintain femininity,  
and be a ravine for all under heaven.  
By being a ravine for all under heaven,  
Eternal integrity will never desert you.  
If eternal integrity never deserts you,  
You will return to the state of infancy.  
Know you are innocent,  
Remain steadfast when insulted,  
and be a valley for all under heaven.  
By being a valley for all under heaven,  
Eternal integrity will suffice.  
If eternal integrity suffices,  
You will return to the simplicity of the unhewn log.  
(Translated by Victor H. Mair, 1990, Stanza 28)

This stanza highlights the principle of duality between masculinity and femininity, which, as mentioned earlier, reflects the Yin-Yang concept in Chinese philosophy. Lao Zi emphasized the importance of balance between these two principles, where masculinity (*yang*) symbolizes strength, dominance, and expression, while femininity (*yin*) symbolizes gentleness, humility, and acceptance (Liu, 2024; Joshi, 2024). This stanza explains that it talks about controlling excessive positive qualities (such as "proud male stance") by maintaining a balanced opposite, namely "meek female reserve." (Roberts, 2001). This approach is not meant to demean masculinity, but rather to show that unchecked dominance requires balance through feminine traits. By becoming a "ravine for all under heaven," the individual not only becomes a receptacle of acceptance, but also achieves an eternal integrity that allows a return to the natural state, a simplicity that does not need to be tempered (Yeh, 2008).

Watson (1963) adds that the "ravine" image can also be seen as a symbol of productive submission. This submission does not imply weakness, but a strength capable

of pulling other entities back towards their original harmony. This principle is reflected in the idea that the *Tao* “flows like water” to the lowest places, a deep respect for the value of humility traditionally associated with feminine nature. Ames and Hall (2002) state that *Taoism* does not support exclusive dichotomies, but advocates the unity of polarities through androgynous figures. Everything contains *Yin* and *Yang* which refers to a holistic balance (Scheibler in Zhang, 2019). In this case, women are not seen solely as complements to men, but as a source of cosmic power that unifies all differences.

Further in the stanza, the metaphor of the need to return to the infant state or original simplicity (*pu*/朴, “unhewn log”) is explained, suggesting that true wisdom lies in the ability to drop pretensions, an attribute also traditionally associated with femininity. Wang Bi in Ames & Hall (2002) mentions that “*infancy*” symbolizes the natural state of human beings before the emergence of duality. As feminine, women are associated with latent potential and regenerative power that allows for the return of everything to its origin.

### 3.1.2 Women as *Taoism's* Essential Virtue

In another stanza, women's agency is also described as transcending normative gender roles. Women as symbols of *yin*, *xuan*, and *rou* are fundamental principles in *Daoism*. Women symbolize an invisible but always active latent force, at the core of the “*mysterious integrity*” that connects humans to the *Tao*. As stated in stanza 10 below:

天门开阖，能为雌乎？  
明白四达，能无知乎？  
生之蓄之，生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰，是谓玄德。  
(Original Text, Stanza 10)

Open and close the gate of heaven,  
can you play the part of the female?  
Reach out with clarity in all directions,  
can you refrain from action?  
It gives birth to them and nurtures them,  
It gives birth to them but does not possess them,  
It rears them but does not control them.  
This is called “*mysterious integrity*.”  
(Translated by Victor H. Mair, 1990, Stanza 10)

Women are presented as central figures in a cosmological role that does not dominate, but becomes the medium through which existence proceeds harmoniously and without coercion. Jiang Xichang (1937) mentions that the *Tao* creates a duality of male and female, yet true wisdom is found in the calmness associated with women, not the liveliness of men. In the *Tao Te Ching*, this female principle appears in other stanzas such as the previous stanza 28 “*Know masculinity, Maintain femininity*”. This overall idea depicts women as the guardians of the tranquility that underlies wholeness and harmony in the *Tao*.

The role of women is also connected to the concept of *rou*- gentleness and flexibility - which are fundamental *Taoist* virtues. *Rou* symbolizes the ability to adapt, accept and act without excessive effort, as explained through the concept of *wu wei* (action without force) (Roberts, 2001). The term “*the gate of heaven*” has various meanings such as nose and mouth, political fortune, natural principles, and the meeting point of human consciousness with the outside world (Guying, 1987). This interpretation emphasizes

women's role as the "gate" of existence, which receives and channels primordial energy (*yuanqi*). In a spiritual context, this gateway is a symbol of meditation and inner stillness that supports transformation without external control. Furthermore, Wagner (2003) notes that this stanza does not mention a subject explicitly, emphasizing the non-personal nature of woman as a cosmic principle. This nature is described through the term *xuan de*, a mysterious virtue that marks action without trace as well as creation whose source cannot be known. Like the *Tao*, women in this analogy give birth and nurture without possessing, nurture without controlling.

Another stanza affirms the primacy of the feminine principle in the *Taoist* essence that is soft, pliable and life-giving as the essence of sustainability and harmony in individual, social and cosmic contexts. While the masculine principle, which is strong and rigid, ultimately leads to destruction if used predominantly without balance. As in stanza 76 below:

人之生也柔弱，其死也坚强。  
草木之生也柔脆，其死也枯槁。  
故坚强者死之徒，柔弱者生之徒。  
是以兵强则灭，木强则折。  
强大处下，柔弱处上。  
(Original Text, Stanza 76)

Man alive is tender, gentle,  
Hard and fast in death.  
Living plants are tender, fragile,  
Dry and frail in death.  
For fast and hard are marks of dying,  
And gentle, tender marks of life.  
Strength in arms brings destruction,  
As the strong branch will be broken.  
Let strength and might be put below,  
And tender, gentle in control.  
(Translated by Moss Roberts, 2001, Stanza 76)

Roberts (2001) highlights that this stanza emphasizes the sacredness of life (*sheng*), not death (*si*). In *Taoism*, human life is not measured by socially regulated generational time, as prioritized by Confucian and Mohammedan traditions, but by natural time in line with the seasons. This reflects a respect for the biological or reproductive principle (maternal/feminine) over the social or generational principle (masculine). The final line in this stanza highlights the superiority of the life-giving feminine principle of gentleness over the rigid and destructive masculine principle.

Ames & Hall (2002) add that *Taoism* challenges our conventional assumptions with a theory of correlative relationships between antinomies. In this context, softness and flexibility, which appear weak, are in fact true strengths, while strength and rigidity, which appear strong, are in fact fragile. Wagner (2003) provides an additional insight that the use of violence and domination by a ruler (*qiang*) will bring about destruction. In his commentary on the term *mie* (will be destroyed), he states that a ruler who uses violence to dominate (*ba*) will be hated by other entities under heaven (*wan wu*), which will eventually destroy him. This confirms that a soft and pliable approach, such as the feminine principle, is a path more in tune with the *Tao* and more capable of achieving harmony in government and life.



### 3.2 Women's Agency in *This Sex Which Is Not One*

#### 3.2.1 Critique of the Commodification of Women

Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* reveals that in a patriarchal system, women are in a subordinate position, where their value is determined by masculine standards, both in social, sexual, and economic contexts (Čuříkú, 2023). As Irigaray writes:

*"For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established, in terms of the standard of their needs/desires, by 'subjects': workers, merchants, consumers. Women are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce." (This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 31).*

Women have long been constructed as *use-value* in the masculine system (Irigaray, 1985). Women are treated as commodities exchanged between men, where their value is determined by the needs of men as "subjects." (Ramchiary, 2022). The "phallic" signifiers given by male figures (such as fathers or husbands) show how women are controlled and valued only in relation to men. Irigaray also criticizes how women are made "guardians of material substance," where their bodies become symbols of reproduction and continuity, but are never given the space to explore or express their own desires (Thorgeirsdottir, 2022). This reveals that women's existence in the patriarchal system is passive and instrumental, rather than as autonomously free or active individuals (Dufourcq et al., 2024). Furthermore, Irigaray points out that women's desire has never had a space or language that is equal to that of men:

*"Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks." (This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 25).*

The patriarchal logic that has dominated Western civilization since the time of the Greeks has suppressed women's expression of desire, replacing it with language that serves men's needs (Selwood, 2024). As a result, women lost autonomy over their own desires and became alienated from their bodies and experiences (Irigaray, 1985). Irigaray challenges the dominant view in patriarchal discourse that reduces women's bodies to monolithic and centered on genital functions. Instead, she argues that women's bodies are infinitely plural, both in terms of sensuality and identity:

*"Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural." (This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 28).*

In this quote, Irigaray expresses the revolutionary idea of the female body as a plural entity, distinct from the rigid and linear masculine framework. Irigaray states that the female body cannot be reduced to a single organ or function, but rather is a complex network of infinite potential sensuality (Roberts, 2016). This plurality, according to Irigaray, has long been suppressed by a patriarchal culture that only recognizes women's value in relation to men's needs. This critique opens up opportunities to reconstruct

sexual narratives that are more inclusive and respectful of the complexity of women's bodies:

*"Woman derives pleasure from what is so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself."*  
(This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 30).

Irigaray argues that women's desires cannot be compartmentalized into concepts of possession or consumption, as is done in masculine culture. Women's desire is intimate and constantly flowing, defying the idea of "having."

### 3.2.1 Representation of the Female Body in Patriarchal Symbolism

Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* underlines that women's superiority lies in their natural function as a source of regeneration, something that is fundamentally unmatched by men. As Irigaray writes:

*"As mother, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the 'natural.' His social and economic structures, and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature: these structures thus always remain at the level of the earliest appropriation, that of the constitution of nature as landed property."* (This Sex Which Is Not One, hlm. 184)

Women, through their natural function as parthenogenetic goddesses, symbolize the regenerative process of nature as a life-creating and life-giving force (Giancola, 2021), while men remain bound to this process without ever being able to truly master it. However, Irigaray argues that the patriarchal system forces a separation between this natural value and the social value of the female body:

*"A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable bodies: her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body."* (This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 179)

The female body, both as a source of regeneration and as part of society, is always divided and subjugated by masculine values. Patriarchy demands that women fulfill their regenerative role, but only within the framework of male rule. Women's existence as a source of life is reduced to an instrument that serves the masculine social order, with no recognition of their contribution.

*Mothers are essential to its (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that only insofar as they are appropriated by him.* (This Sex Which Is Not One, p. 185)

### 3.3 Interconnection of Women's Agency in *Tao Te Ching* and *This Sex Which Is No One*

The following table contains the interconnections of women's agency in *Tao Te Ching* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, through some of the common aspects or common themes identified:

**Table 1.** The Interconnection of Women's Agency in *Tao Te Ching* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*

Aspect	Tao Te Ching	This Sex Which Is Not One
<b>Woman as the Source of Life</b>	"The valley spirit never dies – It is called 'the mysterious female'; The gate of the mysterious female is called 'the root of heaven and earth.'" (Stanza 6)	"As mother, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the 'natural.'" (p. 184)
<b>Principle of Regeneration</b>	"There was something featureless yet complete, born before heaven and earth; We may regard it as the mother of heaven and earth." (Stanza 25)	"A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable bodies: her 'natural' body and her socially valued, exchangeable body." (p. 179)
<b>Manifestation of Acceptance and Harmony</b>	"Know masculinity, Maintain femininity, and be a ravine for all under heaven. By being a ravine for all under heaven, eternal integrity will never desert you." (Stanza 28)	"Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's; woman's desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West." (p. 25)
<b>Medium of Productive Emptiness</b>	"Open and close the gate of heaven, can you play the part of the female?... This is called 'mysterious integrity.'" (Stanza 10)	"For woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity." (p. 31)
<b>Transcending Social Categories</b>	"It gives birth to them but does not possess them, It rears them but does not control them." (Stanza 10)	"Mothers are essential to its (re)production... Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it." (p. 185)

In the *Tao Te Ching* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*, female agency is positioned as a vital entity that connects the regeneration of life, but with different emphases. *The Tao Te Ching* describes women as the "mysterious female" (玄牝), a symbol of the *yin* principle, which symbolizes emptiness, receptivity, and the inexhaustible source of cosmic existence (Wawrytko, 2024). Women are the gateways (玄牝之门) to the roots of heaven and earth that are honored as noble Goddesses in *Taoism* (Overmyer, 1991). Meanwhile, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray asserts that the female body is a natural source of regeneration, which men cannot fundamentally surpass (Martin, 2021). But Irigaray focuses on the problem of how this vital female function is often reduced by patriarchy to a mere means of reproduction. This critique suggests that women, who naturally control the cycle of life, are trapped in social structures that limit their autonomy (Picone-Wightman, 2019; Hreinsdóttir, 2025).

In both views, women are recognized as the source of life, the guardians of continuity and natural transformation. Although both texts place women in a highly elevated role, there are differences in the way this role is understood. *The Tao Te Ching* celebrates the feminine principle as the center of regeneration that transcends social hierarchies, whereas *This Sex Which Is Not One* accentuates how patriarchy subjugates this role of women through the commodification and fragmentation of their bodies. *Taoism*, however, is considered a masculine non-oppositional reflection of patriarchal mainstream *Confucianism* (Despeux & Kohn, 2003), even though it predates patriarchal ideology itself (Fleming, 2009). Thus, through such historical analysis, both *Tao Te Ching*

and *This Sex Which Is Not One* offer perspectives on women's liberation from the shackling patriarchal ideology.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Women in the *Tao Te Ching* have such vital agency as the source of life and the center of infinite regeneration. Women are described as the "mysterious female" (玄牝), the symbol of the *yin* principle, which symbolizes emptiness, receptivity, and the source of cosmic existence and harmony. Woman is the *Tao* itself, the gateway (玄牝之门) and the root of heaven and earth, while in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray argues that the agency of the female body is the natural source of regeneration and the principle of sustainability that men fundamentally cannot surpass. Moreover, both texts are a response to the patriarchal ideology that has long subordinated the position of women. *This Sex Which Is Not One* asserts that women, who are the guardians of the cycle of life, are trapped in the shackles of patriarchal autonomy. On the other hand, although *Tao Te Ching* does not explicitly state so, through historical studies, it can be seen that *Taoism* emerged as a non-oppositional masculine reflective response to the patriarchal Confucian teachings, even though *Taoism* was born before the patriarchal ideology itself.

The findings have theoretical and practical implications for the study of feminism and Eastern philosophy. This understanding can be used in cross-cultural gender studies to explore models of women's empowerment that are not only based on criticism of patriarchy, but also offer a paradigm of balance and inclusiveness. In addition, the findings of this research enrich the discussion of feminism in Eastern and Western philosophy, which are often compared, but do not mention the psychoanalytic perspective which is an important basis for the Western feminism movement. Future research, to extend the findings and enrich the discussion, is expected to explore how feminine principles in the *Tao Te Ching* resonate interdisciplinarily with various feminist traditions beyond Irigaray's psychoanalytic feminism. And the analysis can be extended to more concrete cultural contexts, such as how *Taoist* feminine principles are applied in religious practices or social policies in societies influenced by philosophical systems.

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