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### Deconstructing Gender From a Feminist and Buddhist Lens

*In this paper I attempt to deconstruct the difference in gender roles through Buddhist and Derridean philosophy. I examine how “man” and “woman” are defined through their difference, and how this difference is proliferated artificially by a desire of the patriarchy for there to be a greater difference. This artificial separation of society into classes on the basis of gender weakens the “all-powerful” existence of the “I” as Kim Iryop explores in Reflections of A Zen Buddhist Nun. Deconstructing the conditions that leads to these gender roles can help us begin to free ourselves from their constraints as we become less defined by the boundaries we were born within.*

In her autobiographical series of essays titled, *Reflections of a Zen Buddhist Nun*, Kim Iryop examines and recounts her life experiences that led to her adoption and advocacy of a Buddhist philosophy and lifestyle. Among Iryop’s most consequential reflections come on account of the essays, originally published in 1961, being one of the first prominent publications on Buddhism written by a woman, and Iryop’s lived experiences as a woman heavily impact her observations and work as a Buddhist nun. In the eleventh essay, titled “Having Burned Away My Youth” Iryop, reflecting on her experiences with an ex-lover who left her for another woman, reaches the conclusion that “What a person thinks is her actuality, her reality, and her own being. That is why humans possess the capacity to be all-powerful. I am free and all-powerful, but I abandoned myself as a free and capable being and made myself a woman, forcing myself into a blind alley, calling for you, the man, until my voice broke. How crazy that was! How

silly!” (Iryop 2014, 198). Using Iryop’s observation as a base, I will deconstruct gender roles and power in society through a feminist lens. To do this, I will look at gender’s role in society through Iryop’s reflections in her essay, including the freedom and power of the “I.” I will additionally dissect gender’s role in society through Jaques Derrida’s hauntology, as found in his work, *Specters of Marx*, examining how the patriarchy relies on boundaries shaped by Derrida’s idea of *differance* influence how we are taught to see gender and additionally the threat that feminism poses on the patriarchy as a specter of its own. I will argue that the way we definitionally see “men” and “women” prevents us from reaching equitable treatment for every gender in society, but through feminism’s persistence as a specter and our own power as an “I,” the possibility exists for this imbalance to be destroyed.

In her first chapter, Iryop begins with a discussion of the self, and by extension the freedom of the self, through the concept of “I”. In her opening paragraph, she lays out that “Freedom and peace cannot be attained outside of oneself because they are the very self of each and every existence. Everything that happens in our lives is a reflection of our own self” (Iryop 2014, 29). In Buddhism, there is no true self because the self is contained within the universe. We are simply the sum of the conditions that led to our being, and our existence is not a result of our free will but instead of circumstances beyond our control. We had no control over where or when we were born, who we were born to, what body we were born in, what opportunities were presented to us, and what interactions shaped us into who we are today- and so on. We do, however, have control over how we proceed with how these conditions shape our lives going forward. While our freedom is limited, the “I” is ““completely in charge of his or her life,” and thus we have the power to do with our existence as we please (Iryop 2014, 33).

This framework lies behind the first part of Iryop's conclusion that "What a person thinks is her actuality, her reality, and her own being. That is why humans possess the capacity to be all-powerful. I am free and all-powerful..". Her issues arise not because she lacks the capacity to be free, but because she "abandoned" herself by "making" herself a woman (Iryop 2014, 198). This implication frames womanhood as a limiting factor on Iryop's freedom, but it also implies that being a woman is somehow an active choice that Iryop makes that unarms her of her freewill and instead ties her down to a reliance on a man. For Iryop, she observes that pursuit of love only led to her suffering and prevented her from advancing along her path to a spiritual awakening. Cutting out her reliance on a man allowed Iryop to regain control over her own "I" and the freedom and power that comes with it.

The interdependency that Iryop invokes between "man" and "woman" can be seen through Jaques Derrida's idea of differance and hauntology in *Specters of Marx*. Differance is the concept that stating that the meaning of words relies primarily on their difference with other words. Derrida lays out that "Inscribing the possibility of the reference to the other, and thus of radical alterity and heterogeneity, of differance, of technicity, and of ideality in the very event of presence, in the presence of the present that it disjoins *a priori* in order to make it possible, it does not deprive itself of the means with which to take into account... the effects of ghosts, of simulacra, of "synthetic images," or even, to put it in terms of the Marxist code, of ideologems," (Derrida 2006, 94). In this passage, Derrida explains how the differance between principles can lead to those principles effectively haunting each other as ghosts that reflect their ideological oppositions. Applying a feminist perspective, differance explains how societal views on "man" and "woman" take hold. There can be no concept of a "woman" without "man," nor

can there be “man” without “woman.” Gender roles form in an effort to adequately define this difference. Different expectations in fashion styles, household chores, career paths, and social behaviors and cues form out of a desire for the patriarchy to create difference between “woman” and “man” and give meaning to the words. Without these distinctions, “man” and “woman” begin to lose their meaning and with it the power gap between “man” and “woman” diminishes.

However, applying Iryop’s Buddhist philosophy, the separations created by difference begin to dissipate, demonstrating the artificiality of the definitions of “man” and “woman.” According to Iryop, “The self always functions through contradictory polarizations. She uses the example of “Love is a synonym for enemy,” and “on the joys of heel there is sorrow,” (Iryop 2014, 213) These contradictions deconstruct the notion that binary opposites exist. One extreme necessarily contains elements of the other extreme. Love does not exist without hate, and often our strongest feelings of hate are directed at people we once or still loved- for example past relationships or being annoyed at our families. Just the same, we don’t know joy without knowing sorrow, what goes up must also come down. Thus, these extremes are not opposites but instead are tied together into one and into the self. They do not exist separately from each other, nor does the “I” exist separate from these extremes. Just the same, men and women are portrayed as two opposite of a binary that exists entirely separate from each other, and yet their existence is interdependent and not ‘opposite’ at all. Just as joy contains elements of sorrow, “woman” contains elements of “man” and vice versa. The more these differences are deconstructed, the more their definitions become muddled and harder to define. Just as joy and sorrow are the same emotion presenting themselves in different ways, the difference between “man” and “woman” lies in how we choose to view or interpret them, and not in some falsely

conceived binary opposite. Iryop observes that “To put it simply, as one thought arises, the separation between life and death, suffering and pleasure, self and others, man and woman, occurs. When a border between self and others is drawn, one’s sense organs perceive polarization; once a boundary between man and woman is made, everything is understood through this distinction,” (Iryop 2014, 195). Drawing a line between “man” and “woman” forces how we see society to be filtered through this border, redefining our power as an “I” into gendered roles that force on us an exaggerated dichotomy between binary genders. For Iryop, this boundary perpetuated her suffering on account of her not being able to let go of her attachments, specifically her attachment to the man on who the chapter is a reflection on. While letting go of a past romantic partner is an issue that arises across genders and relationships, the polarization between “man” and “woman” exacerbates the feeling that one has to attach themselves to their role in society in relation to someone of the opposite gender for their own self worth and happiness.

This idea that the difference between “man” and “woman” are nothing more than mere fabrications is reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Similar to Iryop’s own assertion that she “made” herself a woman, de Beauvoir makes the argument that “one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one” (de Beauvoir 1949, 283). de Beauvoir goes on to explain that it is the expectations of women that define what a “woman” is rather than something truly inherent. A “woman” is instead defined by the men and patriarchal systems surrounding her, following Derrida’s principle of differance that “woman” is defined by the difference between her and a “man”. de Beauvoir’s argument likewise relates back to Iryop’s assertion that she gave her freedom up by “becoming” a woman. Both de Beauvoir and Iryop view

womanhood not in terms of a condition at birth, but rather a condition of society. It's societal expectations that define a woman in terms of their difference from men, and it is this societally derived difference that subverts Iryop and de Beauvoir's freedom from men alike.

It is under this pretense that feminism threatens to become a specter on society.

According to Derrida, "At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back; in the future, said the powers of old Europe in the last century, it must not incarnate itself, either publicly or in secret," (Derrida 2006, 48). Specters take root by the power of what they could be. In Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, he is examining Marxism as a specter on Europe in the way that Marxism is not a threat on the European elite, and yet Marxism (and specifically preventing Marxism) sits at the forefront of their worries and concerns. Just the same, feminism presents a specter on the patriarchy and women themselves based on its threat to radically rearrange gender dynamics in society. de Beauvoir's as a founding feminist seeks to destroy persisting gender roles as Iryop tries to escape them. Just as the political elite benefit from capitalism and have a vested interest in fending off communism, the patriarchy derives its power from maintaining a male-centric society and has a vested interest in preventing the rise of feminism. The patriarchy recognizes the shift in gender roles as a zero-sum game where they believe they will end up losing out if feminist ideology is allowed to take root, thus the patriarchy constantly feels threatened by the very threat of feminism, despite it not yet actually being any threat to those in charge. Derrida describes that "the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but

which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter” (Derrida 2006, 5). Feminism in its most radical form lacks a concrete body in way of a following that could seriously threaten to take out the patriarchy, but at the same time it’s framework gives it a presence that can’t be escaped because it threatens “woman’s” dependence on “man”.

In the United States, we have recently seen direct evidence of this backlash against redefining gender roles through the recent waves of anti-trans bills that have passed in state legislatures across the country. Trans people possess little power or influence over society and no threat to those in power, and yet many politicians have recently felt compelled to react in opposition. In some cases, such as Utah’s bill that bans trans kids from participating in sports, these reactionary bills affect as few as a single person. However, the rise of trans acceptance represents a challenge to the strict boundaries that have separated “man” and “woman” and reconstructs how gender can be designed. This threat alone gives trans and feminist theory the power of a specter that causes those that benefit from traditionally patriarchal structures to feel the need to react and fight against a force that cannot actually be defeated.

Just as feminism presents a specter upon the ruling male patriarchy, so too does the male image of a woman cast a specter upon women themselves. Nancy J. Holland explores this phenomenon further in her essay titled “The Death of the Other/Father: A Feminist Reading of Derrida's Hauntology.” Holland uses Derrida’s work to explain that she sees a ghost of herself that represents not the woman she is, but the idealized, well-mannered woman that her father wanted her to be. She observes that “The ghost who looks at me, the spectral Other I have internalized so thoroughly that in some sense it has become me, is not my father, or not only my

father, but also my father's vision of the eternal, idealized Woman he would have loved- as he never could love my mother or my/self- the Woman he, talk, dark, slender (this is intended to generate laughter when spoken in person) that I was meant to become for him," (Holland 2001, 67). While the patriarchy is haunted by the invisible threat that feminism imposes upon them, women themselves are haunted by their inability to escape from men. Derrida explains that "The specter *appears* to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood. This non-presence of the specter demands that one take its times and its history into consideration, the singularity of its temporality or of its historicity," (Derrida 2006, 126). The ideal "woman" that Holland feels pressure to become does not exist, she lacks a body or a physical form, and yet it is her ghost's non-presence that haunts her from living free of the expectations of being a "woman." A "woman" in theory has power to, not unlike what Iryop eventually did by becoming a nun, free herself from the restraints from "man" and the power men have over her, but only by withdrawing herself from society completely. However, in practicality, if a "woman" is to continue to present herself to society, she becomes acutely aware of how she is perceived by the male gaze, and she is haunted by her inability to meet the expectations that a male-dominated society expects her to live up to. It is impossible to go into society without interacting with men and more specifically the patriarchal standards of men that have been put in place, thus "woman" is constantly haunted by how society views her.

Thus, combined with feminism's haunting of the patriarchy, men and women together effectively end up haunting each other in different ways due to their interdependence on each other to define their respective roles in society.

Iryop's personal experiences with her failed relationship that she describes in chapter 11 demonstrate this interdependence. She asks, "The knife of an enemy can only hurt the body, but who could have known that the touch of love could damage both body and mind?" (Iryop 2014, 140). This question draws back to Iryop's examination of extremes existing as part of each other. The subject of Iryop's desires, the person who she shared some of the happiest moments of her life with, is also the same person who is the cause of her pain and suffering. The extremes don't exist separately on their own because a greater capacity for one extreme coincides with the same potential for the other extreme. This delicate line is explained by Iryop saying that "Although the differences might be as infinitesimal as a strand of a hair, they can be the cause of situations that become life-and-death serious or make people enemies for generations to come" (Iryop 2014, 143). There is not a big difference between someone that becomes a life-long friend and someone who becomes a life-long enemy, and often the only difference is circumstance and perception. In the most positive portrayal, Iryop's desire to depend on a "man" was mutually beneficial and equitable and added meaning to her life, but on the other end of the spectrum that desire and dependence held her down, preventing her from reducing her suffering, and forfeited the power of her "I" on account of her being a "woman."

Iryop goes on to dissect how her desire for a lover, her constructed reliance on a "man," prevented her from her spiritual journey and perpetuated her suffering. She writes that "If only I could attain the absolute love of a man, I was ready to ignore whether my living environment would be fortunate or difficult, what other people might say about me, or even the constraints of morality" (Iryop 2014, 151). Through the social conditions of her upbringing, Iryop saw finding and being with a "man" as the key to her happiness when in the end her experience only

perpetuated her suffering. By surrendering herself to these standards, she surrenders herself to being a “woman,” once again ending up being haunted by how male society sees her.

In her journal article “Presence with a Difference: Buddhists and Feminists on Subjectivity,” Anne Klein grapples with the dialogue between Buddhism and feminism. She presents practicing mindfulness as a means of minimizing the suffering associated with the attachments created by the social standards of modern society. She explains that mindfulness is “important because it is said to entail a focusing capacity beyond the level of ordinary flickering attention,” noting that in traditional Buddhist tradition mindfulness calls for “observation first of the breath, in order to stabilize the mind, then of the body and mind, along with the existential attributes of these, such as impermanence. This focusing capacity makes it possible to notice particular details to which one was previously impervious,” (Klein 1994, 117). In this way, mindfulness allows us to carefully dissect the difference between our socially constructed barriers and how they impact our suffering, not in the least the socially constructed binary of gender. Seeing the impermanence of these barriers leads us to realize that as our own “I,” we are not confined to these barriers, and we have the power to deconstruct them, change them, or abolish them. For Iryop, “The value of our existence depends on how much we realize what we possess. That’s why human beings are considered the most valuable of all beings. But even though we are humans we operate at the level of puppets. We eventually must regain what we originally possess and live as mindful human beings,” (Iryop 2014, 201). By practicing mindfulness, we start to reclaim the power we lost to the patriarchal standards of expression and identity. Before an awakening on account of mindfulness, these socially constructed standards force us into these roles of who we are supposed to be, but through an examination of these

standards we are able to better redefine ourselves on our own accord and reclaim the potential of the “I.”

In conclusion, the construct of gender can be explained through the Derridean concept of differance. “Man” and “woman” are defined by how they interact and relate to each other. A society immersed in patriarchal ideals and conditions, this differance is exploited and exaggerated into the gender norms that people have been expected to fall into for generations. These unattainable and suffocating expectations act as a specter on us, always in our shadow but never taking a physical form. Similarly, feminism- an ideology inherently concerned with the deconstruction of these gender norms as a specter on patriarchal society- just as communism acts as a specter on Western society. Feminism lacks the physical body or spirit to challenge the political power of the patriarchal elite, and yet the backlash against it is swift and consistent because of the power of what it could be and the end goal of a radically different society that it foretells. It is under this structure that leads Iryop and de Beauvoir to both come to the conclusion that they “became” women rather than being born as one. By deconstructing the traditional views of binary gender, this burden of “becoming” a “woman” loses its meaning and we are able to free ourselves from the suffering caused by a patriarchal society and take control again of the, as Iryop believes, the “all-powerful” nature of humans.

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