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## GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S 'THE SECOND SEX'

NEHA NANDAL

Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages,  
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak.



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### Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir was a French existentialist philosopher, writer, social theorist, and feminist activist. Though she did not consider herself a philosopher, and even though she was not considered one at the time of her death, she had a significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory. As a feminist phenomenologist, evaluating the meanings of the lived female body, Beauvoir discovers the ways that cultural assumptions frame women's experience of their bodies and separate them from their body's possibility. Woman is identified through negation. A woman is not man, she is not this or that; she is always defined with a lack/ other.

**Keywords:** Alterity, Other, Patriarchy, Sex-gender distinction

### Introduction

The French writer and feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most important figures of the twentieth century. According to D. Bergoffen she is a "belatedly acknowledged philosopher". Identifying herself as an author rather than as a philosopher and jokingly called herself the "midwife of Sartre's existential ethics" rather than a thinker in her own right, Beauvoir's place in philosophy had to be won "against her word". Since the works publication in France in 1919, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has continued to shape debates and discussion around gender. Key feminist thinkers, such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, have accredited their intellectual debt to Beauvoir's work. She had been influenced by the new Hegelian revival led by Kojève and Jean Hyppolite in the 1930s. Reading Hegel in German during the war years, she produced a critique of his dialectic of consciousness and its impact can be felt in several facets of her

philosophy. The other influences or ideas which have shaped her understanding of issues are Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. Beauvoir developed her own existential phenomenology which was inspired by Heidegger, Husserl, and Sartre, and along with a philosophy of history inspired by Hegel, Kojève, and Karl Marx. She had taken into account both the historical and existential interpretation of the master-slave dialectic from her readings of Hegel. From Kierkegaard, she retained the notion of the existing individual in pursuit of an authentic, ethical life, but altered it to a secular context. Beauvoir was also influenced by Husserl's focus on consciousness's lived experience of the 'life-world' of perceptions.

*The Second Sex* rests on two connected philosophical innovations. Firstly, the gendering of phenomenological experience and secondly, the positing of an innovative question of existential ontology: What is a woman? The work was originally

written and published in French in 1949. It deals with the fundamental oppression of women by men, characterizing them, at every stage, as the *Other*, defined entirely in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated. Whereas a man extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas woman is fated to immanence, or inwardness. This division is the basis of Beauvoir's later arguments. In the introduction to the book, Beauvoir emphasizes the essentialism of women by referring to different notions and practices that reduce her to womb and try to put her within fixed categories. Man is considered as both positive and a universal category; while woman is thought of as a negative category. "In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (15). *The Second Sex* identifies the ways in which the myth of woman hides the diversity of women belonging to different races and classes. It argues against the either/or frame of the woman question (either both are equal or they are different). She argues for women's equality, while asserting on the reality of the sexual difference. However, she finds it partial and immoral to use the sexual difference as an argument for women's subordination. As a phenomenologist she is indebted to examine women's unique experiences of their bodies, and to determine how these experiences are co-determined by what phenomenology calls the everyday attitude. Beauvoir also points out that we need to recognize sexual differences, and these differences exist and are part of the lived reality of women.

The book opens with the question, "What is a woman", (13) and defines the historicity of the question by denoting to several philosophers of the western canon. The introduction discovers questions of "Alterity" concerning historical situations of dominance and subordination. However, Beauvoir has defined "Alterity" as "the

fundamental category of human thought" (26). In the conflicting sexual binary, woman is the "Other". Beauvoir feels that it tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. Considering the philosophical traditions and the prevalent cultural norms Beauvoir somehow feels that every female human being is not essentially a woman; the category which exist among female human beings; some of them may be considered as a woman while some of them may not be. As to be so considered a female human being must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Beauvoir argues that historically, men have sought to make "the fact of their supremacy a right" (31), creating laws they turned into principles. She argued that 'Gender', the social structure that positions women as subordinate, has structured human societies far longer than capitalism or any other modern forms of government. Therefore, women's subordination cannot be explained as a product of other social systems- it is a social process in and of itself. She thus concludes the introduction by emphasizing that change can only occur when vague notions of inferiority, superiority, and equality are abandoned.

*The Second Sex* is divided into two volumes; volume 1 consists of "Facts and Myths" which consists of an "Introduction" along with its three parts. The first word of the "Introduction" is "I". Thus, the reader is presented with the unconventional nature of seemingly academic work as the narrator describes herself informally in the first person. Moreover, she is identified by her sex. It consists of three parts and is further subdivided into chapters in these parts:

- Part 1- Destiny (Chapter 1-3)
- Part 2- History (Chapter 1-5)
- Part 3- Myths (Chapter 1-3)

The initial chapter begins with a simple definition: Woman is "a womb, an ovary." Insult or exaltation- in terms of the male version- roots woman in nature and "confines her in her sex" (41). Beauvoir says that sexual differentiation cannot be comprehended at the cellular level, but with respect to reproduction, differentiation occurs "as an

irreducible and contingent fact" (43). This particular section does not give any reason for sexual hierarchy. She begins the next chapter by criticizing Freud who she notes "was not very concerned with woman's destiny" (74). Systematically disabling the psychoanalytic reliance on sexuality as the basis of personality and the accompanying insistence on anatomy as destiny, Beauvoir comments on the psychoanalytic recognition of difference with respect to masculine and feminine behaviours, of which, she asserts, both sexes are capable. Thus making a myth of psychoanalytic narratives, and favoring choice over psychoanalytic determinism, she notes that a girl climbing a tree is not imitating her father, nor is she exhibiting virile behaviour when she paints, writes, or engages in politics. These activities are not only "good sublimations," but are "ends desired in themselves". She quotes that Freud had described femininity as a dark continent and had never resolved the question of the wants of a woman. Later, Jacques Lacan (a French psychoanalyst) had focused on the notion of the girl's unresolved sexuality. His positive assessment of the developmental hesitation in girls- which Freud had characterized as "infantile" and "incomplete"- is a significant review. Beauvoir asserts that woman's sexual initiation begins in trauma, necessarily requiring a masculine intervention. She takes up those aspects of feminine experiences that remains conventionally unspoken, but are foundational to their identity and perspective. Beauvoir points out that historical materialism refuse to accept the definition of woman as a sexed organism. She emphasizes that woman is not just a worker, and there are times during which her ability to reproduce is as significant as her ability to produce. She points toward various factors shaping women's condition that lie outside labour distribution; for example, childbirth and sexuality. Because these are not accounted by historical materialists like Engels, she believes it is essential to go beyond his theory in order to clearly explain women's condition in society. Beauvoir however, says that it is impossible to deduce women's operation from private property; she sees a chain reaction citing the imperialism of human consciousness. She posits that equality between the sexes necessarily begins in the

shared enterprise of meaningful work. Thus, we can say that Beauvoir rejects Freud's sexual theories and Engels economic theories on almost the similar basis.

According to Beauvoir, "once woman is dethroned by...private property, her fate is linked to it for centuries" (117). She compares the position of women in Greece, where women did not have any freedom; and Rome, where despite freedom, women did not have any means of employment, often resulting in hedonism and gluttony. She thus, came to the conclusion that happiness is not the essential component or condition of freedom. Beauvoir says that Christianity has always aided the subordination of women: The story of the Virgin birth acknowledges that the woman's body is dirty and a place of skin. As, Saint Paul writes: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church." During the medieval ages, women's situation remained stagnant, though cultural norms sometimes gave certain moderations. In her work, Beauvoir quotes the example of German families. She also highlights that with the abolishment of serfdom, rural communities developed in which spouses lived on equal footing, each doing their part to sustain the family. Beauvoir further adds that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "participation in production and freedom from reproductive slavery...explain the evolution of woman's condition" (171). She notes that after 1890s women have united for their reproductive rights, divorce initiated by women and suffrage while she also regrets that women's history has been written exclusively by men. Throughout the history, it's been observed that women could not or would not act for their own benefit.

The work makes a clear distinction between myths and facts with respect to women's situation. Beauvoir says that historically men have always controlled all powers, and "since the earliest days of their patriarchy, they have thought it best to keep woman in a state of dependence" (159). There are governing myths: cultural beliefs transmitted through familiar stories- legends, fairy tales, folk tales- that convey certain beliefs/ mental habits to posterity. Men have written the history of women, and have also defined the mythological hierarchy of

their inferiority. She refers to the most dominant biblical myth, the story of Eve who was never an equal for Adam; since the very beginning, Eve's potential as an individual is inapt. Eve is a convenience for Adam: a thing, an object. Twenty years later, a prominent feminist Kate Millett echoed it by commenting that patriarchy has God on its side (*Sexual Politics*, 1970). Beauvoir claims that the subordination of women serves the economic interest of men and also suits their moral ambitions, and myths have reinforced such ideas. The objectification of women and the generalizations that define them are commonly used in myths across human culture. For Beauvoir, a woman is "all... which is inessential: she is wholly the Other". Her stories, her mythic identity, have been created by men.

### Conclusion

Beauvoir concludes that "in defining woman, each writer defines his... ethic and the... idea he has of himself." According to Beauvoir, literature propagates various kinds of myths about women and womanhood. The central idea of the "Eternal Feminine", which presents an abstract concept of timeless and unchangeable feminine essence as absolute truth, clashes with the day-to-day experiences of flesh and blood women. Beauvoir comments that the "eternal feminine" fiction is strengthened by biology, history, psychoanalysis, and literature.

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