



THE DESOLATE WOMAN: A CRITICAL READING OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S 'MARCELLE'

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Abstract

Existentialism is a twentieth century philosophic thought. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are the two French writers who have established themselves as pioneers of this philosophy. Existential man is often a stranger in a strange world. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than of the object. Beauvoir's short story 'Marcelle' is an excellent example of the explication of her philosophy and the predicament of woman in the modern society.

Keywords: Existentialism, Other, Ontology, Social Contact & Oppression

Introduction

Existentialism is the most discussed and the highly argued among the modern philosophic thoughts. Existentialism, fundamentally a philosophy of man, is concerned with an individual person existing in the world, with the problems he has to face in life, with the ways he faces them, with his passions and emotions, above all, with his personal outlook on life. Its definition is thus to some extent one of historical convenience. Existentialism is a catch-all term for those philosophers who consider the nature of the human condition as a key to philosophical problem and who share the view that this problem is best addressed through ontology. The term was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre, and through the wide dissemination of the postwar literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates-notably Simone de Beauvoir. Existential man is often a stranger in a strange world. He is not only a thinking subject but an imitator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this spectrum of existence that existentialism tries to express. This kind of philosophy begins from man as an existent.

Discussion

Simone de Beauvoir, (1908-'86) the most preeminent French existentialist philosopher and writer, has long been regarded as one of the founding 'mothers of modern feminism' and an accepting inspiration to generations of feminists. The publication of her two volume book, *The Second Sex* (1949) in which she delineates the historical and cultural structures of patriarchy, is often credited with establishing the theoretical underpinning of modern feminist scholarship, marks an epoch making event in the history of feminist literature. Beauvoir is also the author of two more philosophical writings, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Coming of Age*. Along with her other fictional writings, the short story collection *When Things of the Spirit Come First* contains a number of short stories explicating her philosophy.

Marcelle, the heroine of the short story with the same title in the short story collection *When Things of the Spirit Come First* is more or less the victim of a mystical belief in a religious, social and intellectual or aesthetic absolute held out to be superior to the material world. Marcelle, though

cherished by her parents, is “dreamy, precocious little girl”, “extra ordinarily sensitive” (WTS 9) let “sadness and the night flow into her” (9) and feels the taste of tears:

“ ‘The story of a woman, cruelly and harshly treated by an arrogant master, who eventually wins his heart by her submissiveness and her love was one that never failed to delight her’ ” (11). She as too ambitious to be a well- known writer, began looking forward to the future and wanted certainly to be the intellectual elite. She stopped believing in God, longed to escape, wishes not to be a burden to her mother and wants to give her life a meaning by doing something for society, but doesn’t need to hurt her mother. She begins to work as a social assistant at a welfare centre, but she does not find her work as rewarding as she has hoped. She feels emptiness in her heart when confronts with the sad plight of the people, but she could do nothing for them. Later she joins the ‘Social Contact’ a movement raised during the war, which does not have any political attachment. Although Christian in its origin, it does not undertake any “religious proselytism” but the “blaze of generosity, good humour and courage” in the heart of the common people (16). She carried out active presence in the movement as she likes its warm and youthful atmosphere: “Social questions concern me very deeply indeed” (16).

She has the naïve belief that “ ‘the barriers between the classes were brought into being by hatred and prejudice alone’ ”(18). However, later in the company of these intellectuals she felt a mysterious femininity: “They valued her because she was energetic, intelligent, and calm. But who would ever be capable of understanding her and loving her weakness?” (20). Eventually she has engaged to Desroches a leading member of Social Contact and an intellectual. Though she was so weary of herself to be lost in him forever, they remain as two separate, solitary entities, because according to him, “Christian should not experience carnal joys before sanctification by the sacrament of marriage” (23). Marcelle accused him of being timid, obtuse, and insensitive and their relationship has been stained.

Denis Charval, a young and too shy, most elegant, abusive artist whom Marcelle married, was

an utter failure, though she “discovered the sweet experiences of communicating with the world” (28). But she has never dreamt a finer destiny than being the inspiration of a brilliant man, brilliant but weak. She is apparently a complete failure to recognize her own strong sexuality and that helps Denis to exploit her. Denis has neither private property nor a job, but always wants to live in pompous and mirth and even blamed Marcelle: “why she did not have her hair cut short?”(35). Denis always wanted a delightful life. Marcelle has to suffer, but she accepts these sufferings with joy as she concerns him “as a child she watched over like a mother during the day change into an imperious young male overwhelmed her and she yielded to his whims with intense pleasure” (36). Later, when she obliged to speak to him firmly, he makes fun of her bourgeois carefulness and mocked the yearning for the ideal that tormented her. She realizes that Denis has a lover, a wealthy woman. Denis married Marcelle only for money because he had nothing to live on and he disliked the idea of working. Denis is certain that Marcelle’s “present tears were no longer the resorting promise of a brilliant future but a sterile bitterness of mind” (40). Moreover she is no longer young; physically weary, a useless old woman who has never known happiness. She succumbed to her destiny, decides to put up with anything to keep him, no matter. “True love forgives all, she reflected” (42). Finally when Denis thwarted her she again feels the thought of the sad precocious child who is:

[C]rouching behind heavy curtains that separated her from the world or hiding in the shadows of a book-lined corridor. She saw herself as an adolescent, enthusiastic and misunderstood, confiding her sorrow to a mauve night sky; she saw her lonely youth, full of pride and high, uncompromising demands. This road, so painfully traversed, had brought her back to solitude; and never again would she be tempted to escape from herself’. (43)

Left alone in a state of limbo, Marcelle rejects everyday pleasures. Ultimately, she destines to suffer: this is her vocation as a self-styled “‘woman of genius’ ” (43), and as Beauvoir remarks: “despite all her repressions, she feels crushed under the

weight of unspeakable transgressions. She undergoes her metamorphosis into a woman not only in shame but in remorse" (*The Second Sex* 347).

In her writings, de Beauvoir was always looking for a satisfactory means of solving the problems of autonomy and co-existence. Her stories try to define the true relationship with other people, where, as Carol Ascher says in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Life of Freedom*, "whether we like it or not, we do impinge on other people's destinies and must face up to the responsibility which this implies" (58). The notion that all are absolutely free has implicit and explicit values, where each must respect the absolute freedom of every other person.

Conclusion

For de Beauvoir women's oppressive situation is not simply individual, but imposed by the impersonal complex of social institutions. The most oppressed woman has no way of living her otherness as a free choice. They try to assume their immanence as a choice through narcissism or mysticism, but never can succeed. As Mary Evans has argued, Marcelle, "like other female characters in de Beauvoir's later novels, suffers agonies of jealousy and misery because the loved one whom she still regards as central to life is demonstrably no longer hers alone" (80). De Beauvoir persists that the institution of marriage and motherhood ensnare women from liberation. In bourgeois society, without marriage woman is an outcast. Since the woman is not educated to earn her own living she needs a husband to maintain her class position. In an interview de Beauvoir shares the same idea with Margaret Simons and Jessica Benjamin that "maternity is a trap for woman because it enslaves them to man, to the home" (Simons 341) and "motherhood is the most dangerous snare for all those women who want to be free and independent, for those who want to earn their living, for those who want to think for themselves, and for those women who want to have a life of their own" (341).

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