



International Journal of Physical and Social Sciences

(ISSN: 2249-5894)

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Title

**SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S CONTRIBUTION TO
FEMINISM WITH REFERENCE TO THE SECOND SEX**

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Simone De Beauvoir was born in Jan. 9, 1908 and died in April 14, 1986 in Paris, France. While studying at the Sorbonne, she met Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau- Ponty, beginning a lifelong association with them. With these two philosophers, she founded a literary and political journal. She belonged to a feminist collective and was politically active in feminist causes. She wrote several novels and a number of philosophical works, the most notable of which was *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; translated as *The Second Sex*, 1952). In the present paper an attempt has been made to draw attention towards Beauvoir's observation on 'how women have been deliberately given secondary place'. De Beauvoir's text (*The Second Sex*, 1952) laid the foundations for much of the feminist theory and political activism that emerged during the 1960s in Western Europe and America. Since then, its impact, if anything, has broadened and deepened: its basic thesis and premises continue to underlie the broad spectrum of feminist concerns. The book's central argument is that, throughout history, woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to man, being downgraded to the position of the "other". Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, woman has remained imprisoned within "immanence", remaining a slave within the circle of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive functions. In highlighting this subordination, the book explains in characteristic existentialist fashion how the so-called "essence" of woman was in fact created – at many levels, economic, political, religious– by historical developments representing the interests of men.

Beauvoir's existentialism, while influenced by Sartre, was also influenced by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Hegel. Her view of freedom is distinguished from Sartre's view by its Hegelian emphasis on mutual recognition. Another moment in Hegel's philosophy that underlies de Beauvoir's analyses of male–female relations through history and ideology is the master–slave relationship. According to Hegel, human consciousness tries hard for recognition and mastery, placing itself initially in a position of opposition toward every other consciousness; a crucial phase in this endeavor for mastery is the willingness of one consciousness to risk everything in a life and death struggle. The consciousness that takes this risk becomes the "master", reducing its opponent to the status of a slave. Because of the nature of his duties, however, the slave is actually more accustomed to the world than the master and it is the slave who gains mastery of his environment. Ultimately, the master is forced to recognize his own

dependence on the slave, to see that his own human worth is gained in a relationship of recognition between himself and the slave: if he is to be recognized as human, he must acknowledge the slave's own humanity, otherwise the latter's recognition of the master will be meaningless. In other words, humanity cannot arise in one person or in one group of people unilaterally: it is something born only of mutual recognition. This master–slave dialectic represents an important stage in Hegel's account of the development of human consciousness, and de Beauvoir skillfully bases the entire argument of her book on this inter subjective model of human consciousness and humanity. She views Hegel's master–slave dialectic as peculiarly applicable to the evolution of the male–female relationship.

In her renowned introduction to *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir points out the fundamental asymmetry of the terms “masculine” and “feminine”. Masculinity is considered to be the “absolute human type”, the norm or standard of humanity. A man “thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison . . . Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature” (SS, xv). De Beauvoir quotes Aristotle as saying that the “female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities”, and St. Thomas as stating that the female nature is “afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (SS, xvi). Summarizing these long traditions of thought, de Beauvoir States : “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (SS, xvi).

De Beauvoir's Hegelian terminology highlights the fact that man's downgrading of woman to the status of “other” violates the principle of mutual recognition, thereby threatening the very status that man has for so long jealously accorded to himself, to his own subjectivity. And yet, as de Beauvoir points out (drawing on both Hegel and Lévi-Strauss), “otherness” is a “fundamental category of human thought”, as primitive as consciousness itself. Consciousness always involves positing a duality of Self and Other: indeed, no group “ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself” (SS, xvi–xvii). Our very conception of our identity involves consciousness of what we are not, of what stands beyond us and perhaps opposed to us. The problem with downgrading another consciousness or group to the status of “other” is that

this other consciousness or ego “sets up a reciprocal claim”: from its perspective, we are the stranger, the other. Interaction with other individuals, peoples, nations, and classes forces us to acknowledge the relativity of the notion of otherness. But this relativity and reciprocity, in the case of women, has not been recognized (SS, xvii). Woman’s otherness seems to be absolute because, unlike the subordination of other oppressed groups such as Jews and black Americans, her subordination was not the result of a historical event or social change but is partly rooted in her anatomy and physiology. Also in contrast with these other groups, women have never formed a minority and they have never achieved unity as a group, since they have always lived dispersed among males: if they belong to the middle class, they identify with the males of that class rather than with working-class women; white women feel adherence to white men rather than to black women (SS, xviii–xix). Beauvoir points out, the “division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history . . . she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.” Indeed, woman has no autonomous history (SS, xix). Another contributing factor to women’s subordination is her own reluctance to give up the traditional advantages bestowed on them by their protective male superiors: if man supports woman financially and assumes responsibility for defining her existence and purpose, then she can evade both economic risk and the metaphysical “risk” of a freedom in which she must work out her own purposes (SS, xxi). While de Beauvoir admits that by the eighteenth century certain male thinkers such as Diderot and John Stuart Mill began to champion the cause of women, she also notes that, in contradiction of its obvious nature toward democracy, the bourgeois class “clung to the old morality that found the guarantee of private property in the solidity of the family.” Woman’s liberation was let down all the more harshly as her entry into the industrial workforce furnished an economic basis for her claims to equality (SS, xxii–xxiii).

From her own perspective of “existentialist ethics”, as informed by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir rejects all attempts to stabilize the condition of women under the excuse that happiness consists in stagnation and stasis. She insists every human subject must engage in exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence, as a means of rising above and controlling the conditions into which one is born (SS, xxvii). In the first part of her book, de Beauvoir examines the views of women advanced by biology, psychology, and historical materialism, in an endeavor to show how the concept of the feminine has been shaped and to consider why woman has been defined as the other. Regarding the data given by biology, she

acknowledges that a physiological burden is imposed on woman by her reproductive function. In her account of psychoanalytic views of woman, de Beauvoir objects that Freud, Adler, and other psychoanalysts “allot the same destiny to woman”, namely, an internal conflict between her “viriloid” and “feminine” tendencies, arising from her inferiority complex. De Beauvoir’s critique of psychoanalysis spans a number of points. Firstly, male sexual and emotional development is taken as the norm, and Freud assumes that the woman feels herself to be a “mutilated man”, suffering from penis envy; Adler sees her envy as based on her “total situation” of disadvantage (SS, 36–39). This asymmetry is expressed in the significance attached to the phallus, which is the “incarnation of transcendence” for the male (SS, 43). Hence the phallus comes to symbolize a dominance that is exercised in all domains, not just that of sexuality. De Beauvoir next considers the perspective of historical materialism, as expressed by Friedrich Engels in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). She acknowledges that Engels offers some important truths: humanity is not an animal species but a historical reality; and woman’s self-awareness far exceeds her sexuality, reflecting the economic organization of society (SS, 47). Engels’ central argument was that the history of woman depended essentially on the history of technological progress: before the discovery of bronze and iron, women played a significant role in economic life, complementing the hunting and fishing of men with their own domestic productive labor, making pottery, weaving, and gardening. With the invention of new tools, however, the scope of agriculture was enlarged and intensive labor was called for; as a result, women’s domestic work sank into relative insignificance. This was the point at which private property appeared, in turn giving rise to the patriarchal family. Engels argued that, just as women’s economic and social oppression was brought about by technology, so her emancipation would arise in virtue of technological progress, when she could “take part on a large social scale in production” (SS, 49).

While de Beauvoir sees this socialist perspective as an advance over the previously considered viewpoints, she regards it as incomplete. To begin with, Engels nowhere explains how the “turning point of history”, the passage from communal to private ownership, could have come about. Nor does he show how the oppression of women is a necessary outcome of private property (SS, 50–51). Again, mere technological changes alone cannot explain the economic fortunes of women: it was not simply the discovery of bronze that transformed gender roles but rather the innate “imperialism of the human consciousness”, the very nature of consciousness

which, forever seeking to exercise its sovereignty, includes the original category of the other and a desire to dominate this other (SS, 52). Finally, Engels reduces the rivalry of the sexes to class conflict; but the analogy, thinks de Beauvoir, is unjustified since there is no biological basis for the separation of classes (SS, 52). While de Beauvoir accepts that the contributions of biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism are valuable, they must be situated within a broader context of social life and values that only an existentialist outlook can provide. The “body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man” only within the “total perspective” of his existence (SS, 55).

De Beauvoir proceeds to offer her own existentialist overview of women’s history, an account that challenges certain male-generated myths about women. From earliest nomadic times, women have suffered the “bondage of reproduction”, a function which must be viewed as natural and not as comprising a deliberate project through which she might affirm her existence (SS, 57). Man, on the other hand, was able to transcend his animal nature through invention, risk-taking, and refashioning the earth. While woman’s activity was “immanent”, remaining closely bound to her body, man’s activity created values, and “prevailed over the confused forces of life”, subduing both nature and woman (SS, 59–60). In the earliest agricultural communities, woman’s status was enlarged: it was recognized that the life of the family was propagated through her, and maternity was held to be a “sacred function”. The children often belonged to the mother’s race and common property was handed down through women. This matrilineal regime was characterized by an assimilation of woman to the earth: to man, all nature seemed “like a mother”. Man felt himself to be at the mercy of natural forces, and in “woman was summed up the whole of alien Nature”. Woman’s otherness, her alien power, was projected into powerful female deities associated with life and fertility, as well as death: she was the Great Goddess, the Great Mother, the queen of heaven, the empress of hell, variously called Ishtar in Babylonia, Astarte among the Semitic peoples, Gaea, Rhea, or Cybele by the Greeks, and Isis in Egypt. These goddesses were elevated above male divinities (SS, 61–64).

And yet de Beauvoir disputes the view of Engels and others that there was ever a matriarchy in history, a reign of women. Such a golden age of woman, she insists, is a myth. Even in the era just described, woman’s power was viewed as alien, as other, as always beyond the human realm. The female goddesses were projections of the male mind, and actual political power “has

always been in the hands of men” (SS, 65). Indeed, as agriculture was refined and expanded through technological invention based on the discovery of bronze and iron, man was able to master the soil: instead of passively relying on the produce of mother earth, he could now apply rational techniques to agriculture. Hence man’s mastery of the soil was associated with his mastery of himself: the religion of woman, based on magic and mystery, was overthrown by the male principle of rationality, intellect, and self-creation (SS, 69–71). The Great Mother was dethroned in favor of Ra, Zeus, and Jupiter; woman lost the economic role she had enjoyed in the tribe and patrilineal descent replaced inheritance through the mother. Hence, de Beauvoir agrees with Engels that woman was dethroned by the advent of private property; she herself was property, first of her father and then of her husband (SS, 72–75).

Tracing the history of women through patriarchal times and classical antiquity, de Beauvoir observes woman’s subservience among the Hebrews: Ecclesiastes speaks of her as “more bitter than death” (SS, 78). Throughout the Oriental world, women had little prestige and few rights, notable exceptions being Babylon, where the laws of Hammurabi gave her rights to part of the paternal estate, and Egypt, where goddess mothers retained their prestige and women had similar rights to men (SS, 78–79). In classical Greece, woman was reduced to a state of semi-slavery, and expected to be a cautious and watchful mistress of the home (SS, 84). In Rome Woman “lived a life of legal incapacity and servitude”, being excluded from public affairs and treated as a minor in civil life. The father’s authority was unlimited and he was “absolute ruler of wife and children”. Though women’s situation improved during the later years of the empire, their relative emancipation (in such matters as inheritance and divorce) did not bring them any increase in political power. De Beauvoir calls this a “negative” emancipation (SS, 84–88). During the Middle Ages, Christian ideology “contributed no little to the oppression of woman” (SS, 89). Woman was treated as legally incompetent and powerless by canon law. The state laws throughout the Holy Roman Empire also held woman subservient to her functions of wife and mother. These laws came into contact with Germanic traditions, in which woman was in a state of absolute dependence on father and husband (SS, 91).

All the European legal codes were based on canon law, Roman law, and Germanic law, all of which were unfavorable to women. In fact, women’s legal status remained almost unchanged from the beginning of the fifteenth century until the nineteenth (SS, 97). The essential

institutions that demanded such subordination were private property and the family (SS, 94). As the bourgeois class rose to power, it continued the basic patterns of subordination, allowing rights to widows and unmarried girls but not to married women. The rigorous monogamy required of the bourgeois family, and woman's continued enslavement to the family, gave rise to prostitution throughout Europe (SS, 94–95). While the rising middle class imposed a strict morality on wives, women of leisure since the sixteenth century had been enjoying greater freedom and license. During the Renaissance, a few women were powerful sovereigns, artists, and writers. Their role in culture expanded in the seventeenth century and they played an important part in the salons.

The French Revolution did very little to change the condition of women; there was a certain amount of feminist agitation which proposed, for example, a “Declaration of the Rights of Woman” in 1789, to match the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” actually adopted by the French National Assembly. The Revolution was essentially a middle-class revolution, respectful of middle-class values and institutions, and was accomplished almost exclusively by men (SS, 100). Though some rights were granted to women, the post-revolutionary Napoleonic Code greatly held back women's emancipation, continuing their dependency in marriage; and various middle-class spokesmen, including Auguste Comte and Balzac, reaffirmed the vision of the anti-feminist bourgeoisie, which wished to exclude women from labor and public life (SS, 100–102).

Paradoxically, however, some of the historical forces through which the bourgeoisie drove to power themselves furthered the emancipation of women. The liberal democratic ideas of the Enlightenment and the Revolution initiated at least a theoretical basis for women's claims; even more importantly, the technological and industrial revolutions destroyed landed property and concretely furthered the emancipation of woman. She regained an economic importance through her productive role in the factory: it is this that de Beauvoir calls “the grand revolution of the nineteenth century, which transformed the lot of woman and opened for her a new era” (SS, 104). A number of regulations over the late nineteenth and early twentieth century improved women's working conditions throughout Europe. Women achieved a degree of political organization in the nineteenth century; the Socialist Congress of 1879 proclaimed the equality of the sexes; and the first feminist congress – which gave its name to the movement – was held in

1892. As a result of various suffragette movements, women received the vote in England and Germany in 1918, and in America in 1920 (SS, 113–116).

Two essential factors paved the way for women's prospective equality: one was her ability to share in productive labor; and the second was her recently acquired freedom from the slavery of reproduction through birth control, adopted by many of the middle and then the working classes from the eighteenth century onward (SS, 109). Woman could now make her reproductive function, her pregnancies and child-rearing duties, a rationally integral part of her life, instead of being enslaved by her generative function (SS, 108, 111). Woman was now almost in a position to assume a role of economic independence (SS, 112). And yet, a major factor retarding her freedom was the continued existence of the family, sanctioned by the various ideologies – political and religious – which aimed to detain her in her traditional roles. De Beauvoir's formulation of the central problem of woman is as relevant today as in her own era: woman's obstinate dilemma is the reconciliation of her productive and reproductive roles. De Beauvoir regards the present as a period of transition, in which woman's desire for transcendence is still constrained by her perpetuated subjugation and the defining of her choices by men (SS, 123–124, 128).

Not least among the factors inhibiting woman's social and economic freedom is the perpetuation of certain obstinate myths of woman, in the realms of art and literature as well as in daily life. De Beauvoir examines the literary presentation of the feminine by writers such as Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Claudel, Breton, and Stendhal, authors whose attitudes toward women she takes to be "typical" (SS, 188). Montherlant, like Aristotle and St. Thomas, believes in "that vague and basic essence, femininity", defining it negatively (SS, 188). These writers, says de Beauvoir, reflect the "great collective myths" of woman: woman as flesh, as first womb then lover to the male; woman as the incarnation of nature and the door to the supernatural; woman as poetry, as the mediatrix between this world and the beyond. She appears as the "privileged Other, through whom the subject fulfills himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness" (SS, 233). But these myths are coordinated very differently by each author: the Other is defined according to the terms in which the One sets himself up. And for each of them the ideal woman is "she who incarnates most exactly the Other capable of revealing him to himself".

De Beauvoir notes that all of these writers – despite the affection and sympathy for women displayed by some of them – require woman to “forget self and to love”. Lawrence sees her as summing up the feminine sex in general; Claudel, as a soul-sister, Breton, as a woman-child, and Stendhal, as an “equal”. With varying degrees of insistence, they express a need for feminine devotion and self-sacrifice (SS, 236). De Beauvoir’s point is that, no matter how exalted or debased woman is in the works of these writers, she fulfills the role of otherness, being always an integral aspect of man’s self-definition, of the fulfillment of his being, rather than enjoying true autonomy. De Beauvoir notes, however, that Stendhal views woman not merely as object but as a subject in her own right. Woman according to him is simply a human being” (SS, 233).

In an important chapter entitled “Myth and Reality”, de Beauvoir observes that the myth of woman exerts an important influence not only in the world of literature but equally in everyday life. She points out that the myth of woman is a static myth: it “projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced”. In other words, the myth substitutes for actual experience a transcendent idea which is timeless and unchangeable; because this idea is beyond or above the realm of actual experience, it is endowed with absolute truth. Hence mythical thought opposes this fixed, universal, and unitary idea of the “Eternal Feminine” to the “dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women.” If we say, for example, that “woman is flesh” or that she is “Night” or “Death” or “Nature”, we are effectively abandoning worldly and practical truth and soaring “into an empty sky” (SS, 239). And the myth is unquestionable: if the behavior of a real woman contradicts the mythical idea, she is told that she is not feminine; the “contrary facts of experience are impotent against the myth” (SS, 237). In short, what the mythical treatment of woman does is to pose woman as “the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being” (SS, 238).

Of all these myths, the one most deeply “anchored in masculine hearts” is that of the feminine “mystery”. This myth allows man the luxury of “legitimately” not understanding woman, and, above all, it enables man to remain alone by living in the company of an mystery: such an experience is more attractive for many than “an authentic relation with a human being” (SS, 240). De Beauvoir argues that such feminine mystery is an illusion: in truth, there is mystery on both sides, male and female. But the male perspective is elevated into an absolute and normal

perspective, and from that vantage point, woman appears essentially mysterious. What underlies the feminine mystery is an “economic substructure” of subordination: mystery always belongs to the vassal, the colonized, the slave (SS, 242–243).

In the conclusion to her book, de Beauvoir argues that the age-old conflict between the sexes no longer takes the form of woman attempting to hold back man in her own prison of immanence, but rather in her own effort to emerge into the light of transcendence. Woman’s situation will be transformed primarily by a change in her economic condition; but this change must also generate moral, social, cultural, and psychological transformations. If girls were brought up to expect the same free and assured future as boys, even the meanings of the Oedipus and castration complexes would be modified, and the “child would perceive around her an androgynous world and not a masculine world” (SS, 683). Moreover, if she were brought up to understand, rather than inhibit, her own sexuality, eroticism and love would take on the nature of free transcendence rather than resignation: the notions of dominance and submission, victory and defeat, in sexual relations might give way before the idea of exchange (SS, 685). De Beauvoir is confident that women will arrive at “complete economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis” (SS, 686). And both man and woman will exist both for self and for the other: “mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other”. In this recognition, in this reciprocity, will “the slavery of half of humanity” be abolished (SS, 688).

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