

# Woman in Beauvoir's Concept: A Feminist Reading

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the French existentialist philosopher Simon de Beauvoir's feminist viewpoint against traditional patriarchy, which is a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line. It also tries to present her traditional analysis how woman has been unreasonably victimized by man in the society. Beauvoir shows with great erudition that man's dominance has been secured through the ages by an ideological power; legislators, priests, scientists, and philosophers have all promoted the idea of woman's subordination. Hence, Beauvoir concludes that feminist must break this type of patriarchal power to change man at the level of theory, but without entering the theoretical domain on man's terms; however man and woman should live together for a happy life by enjoying equal right and power.

**Key Words:** social constructionism, essentialism, second sex, inequality, subordination, binary opposition, marginalization.

## Introduction

Simon de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a French materialist feminist, socialist, social constructivist (anti-traditional and influenced by futurism, which advocated a complex break with tradition and aimed at new forms, new subjects, and new styles in keeping with the advent of a mechanistic age), and a writer. She examines the patriarchal traditions and institutions that control the material (physical) and economic conditions by which society oppresses women, for example, patriarchal beliefs about the difference between man and woman and the laws and customs that govern marriage and motherhood. Margaret Drabble remarks that Beauvoir's major preoccupations of the existentialist movement are reflected in her novels (78).

Beauvoir's book *The Second sex* created a theoretical or philosophical basis for materialist feminists for decades to come. As estimated by J. A. Cuddon, her book "questioned the whole position and traditional role of women in society and was a critique of women's cultural identification. She also addressed herself to the matter of the representation of women by various male writers, such as Stendhal and D. H. Lawrence. Her writing was "Political" in tone and she was one of the first to examine ways in which men depict women in fiction" (316-17). According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Second Sex* is "a wide-ranging critique of the cultural identification of women" with their "the great collective myths" as represented "in the works of many male writers" (124). The book established the principles of modern feminism.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* launched the second-wave feminism, which, according to Jeremy Hawthorn, is "associated with the battle for female suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (312). As Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz define, "feminist criticism has generally focused on this [phallogocentric] history of male dominance and oppression, observable in every aspect of society" (89). According to Keith Green and Jill LeBihan, Phallogocentrism is "the ordering of Symbolic systems of difference around sexuality, where difference is determined according to possession or lack of the privileged signifier of the phallus" (266).

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Against this background, this paper attempts to analyze Beauvoir's concept of woman from the feminist viewpoint as found in her book *The Second Sex* with special focus on her concept of "woman as Other."

### **Inequality between Man and Woman**

Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Betty Freidan, Showalter, and some other female critics examined the female "self" as a cultural idea promulgated (made widespread) by male authors, and their analyses of literature and culture concentrated on how male fears and anxieties were portrayed through female characters. They saw texts as models of power. The thesis that men write about women to find out more about men has had lasting implications. Beauvoir established the fundamental issues of modern feminism by arguing that "man" defines the human, not "woman" (Guerin et. al. 198). Woman is merely the negative object or "Other" to man, who is the dominating "subject" and who is assumed to represent humanity in general. In grammar, "the inclusive *he*" is used to refer to both man and woman. But Beauvoir is against this kind of phallogocentric (phallogocentric and logocentric) use of words as defined in the traditional grammar.

### **Social Construction of Woman**

Woman is socially constructed as argued by Beauvoir. Her *The Second Sex* identifies patriarchy as the fundamental structure against which woman is defined, referring to it (patriarchy) as "the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies." For her, "woman is not born but made." This idea is called social constructionism. In other words, "women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine." The terms like "man" and "woman" and "feminine gender," "homosexuality," and "heterosexuality" are products of social, not biological, forces (Tyson 321).

Most feminists "distinguish between the word 'sex,' which refers to our biological constitution as female or male [known as biological essentialism], and the word "gender" which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine [known as social constructionism]" (Tyson 86). Opposite to patriarchy's assumptions, women are not even born with a maternal instinct. An instinct is something all members of a species have as part of their natural biological makeup, whereas not all women want to have children or feel comfortable being mothers. Yet patriarchy tells them that they are unfulfilled as women if they don't have children, and there is a great deal of pressure brought to bear upon women in order to recruit them for motherhood. "Clearly, how can we know what 'woman' is 'by nature,' given that we never see her outside the social conditioning of patriarchy?" (Tyson 97).

Woman is always seen in relation to what she is not. Her destiny is inevitably determined by physiological, psychological, or economic forces. She has been deprived of full membership in the human race. In Book I of *The Second Sex*, entitled *Myth and Reality*, Beauvoir asks how "female humans" come to occupy a subordinate position in society to answer this question and to better understand her own identity, Beauvoir first turns to biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. These disciplines reveal indisputable "essential" differences between man and woman but provide no justification for woman's inferiority. They all take woman's inferior "destiny" for granted. Beauvoir says that though male and female are different, yet woman is not inferior to man. Therefore, the concept that "women do not have creative "instance" or "genius" and that of the "eternal feminine" must be discarded from the old panel of entities (Selden 537).

In Book II of *The Second Sex* entitled *Woman's Life Today*, she traces female development through its formative stages: childhood, youth, and sexual initiation. Her goal is to prove that woman is not born

"feminine" but shaped by a thousand external processes of the society. If the woman has no independent work or creative fulfillment, she must accept a dissatisfying life of housework, childbearing, and sexual slavishness.

### **Woman's Subordinate Position**

Beauvoir reflects on how a bourgeois woman performs three major functions: wife, mother, and entertainer. She also reflects on the trauma of woman's old age. When a woman loses her reproductive capacity, she loses her primary purpose of life and therefore her identity also. Her concept of "the other" is carried into *The Coming of Age*, an expression of strong disapproval on cultural attitudes to ageing—now also a strong feminist theme.

In "Woman's Situation and Character" of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir reiterates the controversial claim that woman's situation is not a result of her character. Rather her character is a result of her situation. Her mediocrity (the quality of being average or not very good), complacency, lack of accomplishment, laziness, passivity—all these qualities are the consequences of her subordination, not the cause of her subordination.

Beauvoir studied some of the ways by which women reinforce their own dependency. Narcissists (women who have excessive self-admiration and self-centeredness), women in love, and mystics (women who practice or believe in mysticism—an immediate, direct, intuitive knowledge of God or of ultimate reality attained through personal religious experience)—all embrace their immanence by drowning selfhood in an external objet—whether it be the mirror, a lover, or God. Females are complicit (involved with other people in the wrong or illegal activities) in the Otherness, particularly with regard to marriage. Lack of economic independence is also the cause of the female subordination. Only in work can she achieve autonomy. If she can support herself, she will be able to achieve a form of liberation.

### **Woman's Oppression**

Presenting woman as Other, Beauvoir explores the historical oppression of women. Women's status is not simply a matter of definition but a fundamental way of thinking that has political consequences. In a patriarchal society, Beauvoir observes, men are considered essential subjects (independent selves, with free will), while women are considered contingent beings (dependent beings controlled by circumstances). Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but also in terms of their inadequacy to comparison to men. The word "woman," therefore, has the same implications as the word "other." A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man's Other. She is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man's world; she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is. She has always become a victim to man due to his "phallic pride."

### **What is a Woman?**

Woman is not man's own self but she is man's Other. She is different from man; not the same as man. The act of defining oneself is different for woman and man. "When a woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying "I am a woman," revealing the fundamental asymmetry between the terms "masculine" and "feminine." "Woman is riveted [fastened] into a lopsided [with one side lower, smaller, etc. than the other; unevenly balanced] relationship with man; he is the One, she is the Other" (Selden 521).

Man doesn't have to begin defining himself with "I am a man" because it goes without saying that he is a man. The relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles (i.e., they are not equal), for man represents both the positive and the neutral whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity (a situation in which two—man and woman—provide the same help or advantage to each other; mutual dependence, action, or influence).

Man fundamentally oppresses woman by characterizing her, on every level, as the Other, defined exclusively in opposition to man. In defining woman exclusively as the Other, man is effectively denying her humanity. Othering woman means treating them as less than fully human being to devalue them. The subjugated are othered. "There are many [social], political, and economic motives for othering, but the primary psychological motive seems to be the need to feel powerful, in control and superior" (Tyson 434).

### **Duality, Otherness, or Binary Opposition**

Beauvoir shows many unequal dualities (i.e., a situation or nature that has two states or parts that are opposed to each other), binary oppositions (paired opposites; dichotomous terms), or imbalanced gender roles. As mentioned by Ross Murfin and Supriya M. Ray, they are: masculine/feminine, father/mother, son/daughter, phallus/vagina, head/heart, active/passive, reason/emotion, light/dark" (122).

Similarly the other binary oppositions are: man/woman, male sex/female sex, masculine gender/feminine gender, positive + neutral/only negative, right/wrong, man's body (a freedom house)/woman's body (a prison house), perfect man/imperfect woman, human male/human female, autonomous/relative, complete/incomplete, one(self)/other (not the same, outsider), familiar/strange (alien, transcendental, mysterious), oppressor/oppressed, independent/dependent, superior cast/inferior cast, man-the-sovereign/woman-the-liege (vassal, slave, faithful, loyal) mutilator/mutilated, giver/receiver, saver/saved outward/inward, center/periphery, lover/loved, seducer/seduced, kisser/kissed (122).

In these paired opposites, the first part is related to man and the second one to woman. The first part is always superior and respected. For example, man is superior to woman. Woman is taken as a sex object. WIFE stands for "wonderful instrument for enjoyment." The category of the Otherness or duality was born with the consciousness itself. But the duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes. For example, Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night. Thus, Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.

Here Beauvoir suggests that the two terms of the duality, however, are equally independent or important. But the concept of Otherness between man and woman is unequal. It is human nature that "no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" For example, natives set foreigners against themselves; Jews against anti-Semite; inferior Negroes against superior whites; natives against colonists; proletarians against the bourgeois. Levi-Strauss concludes: "Passage from the state of Nature to the state of culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts . . . of social reality." Hegel in his dialectic method says that "we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness" (Beauvoir 211).

Beauvoir says that though the One differentiates oneself from the other, yet the other consciousness (the other ego) wants a reciprocal claim, right advantage, or dignity. As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes use the concept of Other, not in its absolute sense but in its relative or reciprocal sense But this reciprocity has not been

recognized between the sexes. Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? It is because they are made submissive or docile by men since the beginning.

### **Comparison between Woman and the Other Marginalized Groups**

The majority impose their rule upon the minority or they persecute, harass or punish the minority. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews. Nevertheless, a history shows that the stronger such as man has subjugated the weaker such as woman (Beauvoir 212).

There are parallel or similar cases between women and the proletariat (working-class) in that they neither ever formed a minority nor a separate collective unit of mankind. Both groups are exploited by and are dependent upon men and the bourgeois (rich class) respectively. Women, like other oppressed classes and oppressed racial, religious, and ethnic minorities, are oppressed and marginalized. But, unlike the other oppressed groups, "there is no historical record of women's shared culture, shared traditions, or shared oppression. They have been, in this sense, 'written out' of history, not considered a topic worth covering" (Beauvoir 212-13).

There are also differences between these two groups in that women have always existed but the proletarians have not; they (proletarians) have become rich or upper class. Proletarians and Negroes say "We" but women do not say "We." It means that women authentically assume a subjective attitude. The proletarians have accomplished the revolution but women have displayed nothing more than a symbolic agitation. "They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received" (Beauvoir 213).

Women cannot revolt against men because they have neither concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit nor definite resources. "They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat." Women of all class (low, middle, and high) cannot unite together. A woman of a higher class cannot associate herself with the women of a lower class. But a member of an ethnic minorities or the working class can associate with any of their class living anywhere in the world. Women are attached to fathers, husbands, or certain men. Women of low and high or black and white classes are attached to men of their respective classes. "Woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males" because "the bond [marriage and sex] that unites her to her oppressors [males] is not comparable to any other." The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. This biological fact makes women's oppression a "natural condition" rather than the result of a historical event" (Beauvoir 213-14).

This does not suggest that woman cannot hope or seek to overcome their oppression. But it is certain that it is not so easy to be free from men's control. Yet, the couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves fastened together. They are sexually united for recreation and offspring. Therefore, they are two components of a totality in which one without other becomes incomplete. One is necessary to the other and vice versa.

From the viewpoint of Beauvoir, some women of the legendary or mythological stories were powerful and controlled men but they could not maintain their power forever. Though man claims that man is independent and woman is dependent upon man, yet the truth is that man is dependent upon woman for sexual pleasure and offspring; therefore, man does not want to emancipate woman socially (Beauvoir 214).

Though, Beauvoir is anti-traditional, she is not revolutionary or radical because she says that "she [woman] is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (214). They are like the two wheels of a cart or two wings of a bird. Without the other, one's existence is not possible.

### **Conclusion**

Beauvoir concludes that master and slave are united by a reciprocal need on the basis of economic factor but man and woman are not united by a reciprocal need. Man always takes things more for his advantage. There is inequality in every field of life between man and woman—whether economic, social, legal, religious, official, or familial. There are two roads for her. The easy but inauspicious road is to give up liberty and become a commodity, a saleable object or thing. By doing so, she can be free from the tension of economic and metaphysical risk of existence but she will be passive, submerged, lost, and ruined. Another road is difficult but prestigious for her. This is to reject her hensure role and to claim equality and liberty as man.

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* indicates woman's second, not first, position in the society. Her rhetorical strategy illuminates the sense of woman's oppression, segregation, discrimination, inequality, woman's myth and reality, her life today, various situations or roles of the adult woman, her character, goals, and obstacles. She wrote for her intellectual or advance readers—both male and female. She expected her audience to accept her observations on woman's status because there are no justifications that woman is (intellectually or morally) inferior to man regardless of the biological or natural differences of sex. Beauvoir adopts a persona (i.e., a fictional personality or self) of an iconoclast, constructionist, socialist, critic, feminist, and philosopher as well. She does not use personal experiences, anecdotes, and interviews to make her case because they cannot claim to be authentic. Rather she observes woman's condition objectively, which can persuade her intended audience. Though anti-traditional, she accepts that as two wheels are necessary for a cart to move on, or as two wings are necessary for a bird to fly over the sky, so also man and woman are necessary for each other to run a family, society, and the whole world. Both man and woman should be equally treated for a happy life. But the society relegates woman to an inferior position by labeling her as woman, not as a human being.

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