

# SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S THE SECOND SEX: AN EXISTENTIALIST AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL REVIEW

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## **Abstract:**

The paper is a literary and philosophical review and critique of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This text was one of the foremost works in feminism that significantly shaped global development of feminist discourses and gender studies. It has been designated by scores of social analysts and gender scholars as the most successful and best-seller book in the history of feminism. The book is described as profoundly revolutionary and controversial. Her existentialist feminist ideas expressed in this classical text were evocative, provocative, fecund, classic and pragmatic. The main aim of the paper is to attempt a phenomenological and existentialist exploration of the text and to establish whether or not the solutions proffered in the text are viable for the resolution of the prevailing global gender fissure. The methods adopted in the study is phenomenology and hermeneutical. The analysis reveals that Beauvoir's personal experience; her deliberate study of the lived experience of subjugation, oppression, exploitation and denigration of women globally; and, with insights from phenomenology and existentialism, she underscored a sustainable notion of gender equality in her novel proposition that men and women are different biologically yet equal. Based on these findings, the paper concludes that Beauvoir's postulations are existentially relevant and globally applicable. Her consideration of education as key to women's empowerment and emancipation is inviolable.

**Keyword:** Equality, Existentialism, Gender, Phenomenology, Women.

## **Introduction**

The existential phenomenon of gender inequality is a globally-shared experience. Gender disparity has been in existence in human societies and as such, it could be rightly seen as a perennial and ubiquitous experience of humanity. As a result of this, the human society has been described as a gendered world. The problem of life in the gendered world is the existence of social inequalities, imbalanced power play, and inordinate discriminations against one of the gender type. Specifically, the female gender has been historically subjugated, oppressed, denigrated and excluded from the civic life of society. "Women's status is a very compelling and critical issue all over the world. Men and women are born equally into the biological world, but in the name of the social construct "gender", society inequitably reconstructs them into fictitious image by overstating, exploiting and exaggerating the biological differences existing between the two sexes" (Vincent, Folorunso and Uzomah 108-109). This gender-based inequality in society has motivated concerned scholars and men of goodwill to ask certain provocative questions like: what is the origin of gender inequality? Are men and women born biologically different? Are men and women biologically unequal? Are gender roles determined by biological capabilities or potentials of both genders? Are gender roles and relations the ordinance of society and culture? Is gender equality possible?

These and other related questions have in the last hundred years provoked scholars into women and feminist studies and latter gender studies. In the relatively short history of

feminism and gender studies, so much work has been written. However, the most outstanding and significantly relevant work on gender studies is Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The thrust of this literary review is to explore the existentialist significance of this classical work for the sustainable gender equality.

Simone De Beauvoir was a revolutionary figure who contributed immensely to the historical development of feminism and gender studies. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which has been described by many analysts and gender scholars as the most successful and best-seller book in the history of feminism, is profoundly revolutionary and controversial. Her femini-masculine existentialist ideas expressed in this classical text were evocative, provocative, fecund, classic and pragmatic. Her perception and conceptualization of the predicament of women is inspired by her penetrating insights from phenomenology and existentialism. Hence, focusing on the lived experience of women, she presents a phenomenological, existentialist and hermeneutical gender discourse. She is very apt and deliberate in identifying the origin and foundation of women's subverted social standing in the masculine imperial system of social integration.

De Beauvoir's overriding argument is encapsulated in her cliché:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female represents in the society; it is socialization and civilization as a whole that produces the creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (cited in Wilkinson 343).

In other words, the relegation of women as the second, inessential and inconsequential (the other) sex in relation to men is the making of patriarchy. This bold statement epitomizes and summarizes de Beauvoir's whole feminist program. As far as women and gender studies is concerned, de Beauvoir is well-known by her revolutionary and combustible work, *The Second Sex*, which was one of her earliest attempts to confront human history from an existentialist feminist perspective. This iconic text won Beauvoir many admirers and many detractors, and like Wollstonecraft, this also made her famous and infamous at the same time. To her admirers, she became a celebrity, but to her detractors, she was notorious.

Notwithstanding the mix-reactions to her revolutionary feminist philosophy, the strength of Beauvoir's theory lies in the fact that she was not just a liberal feminist, but most importantly, she was quiet objective in conceding to the fact that women also are partially responsible for their deplorable social positioning and condition. Worthy of note also is the fact that with insights from phenomenology and existentialism, she underscored a sustainable notion of gender equality in her novel proposition that men and women are different biologically yet equal. This empirico-factual assertion which adorns motherhood admonishes women to eschew denial of their nature while striving to recreate their distorted and degraded social condition. As an existentialist feminist, she demonstrated that women could be architects of their life by taking the bull by the horn and working out their essence. Meanwhile, she was unequivocal in espousing that the essence of women is not sameness with men because of the existence of certain insurmountable biological differences that make the complete eradication of gender-specific roles and relations impossible. Her consideration of education as key to women's empowerment and emancipation is inviolable.

### **Background to Beauvoir's Feminism**

It is essential to establish two background experiences that shaped Beauvoir into the sort of woman she grew up to become. They include:

1. She was raised by an atheist and progressive father who frequently told her that she would have been born a man because she thought like a man.
2. She had a satisfying and open love affair with the existentialist philosophy, Jean Paul Sartre, and had never felt the inferiority that most women experience as a result of the way they were treated by their fathers, lovers, husbands and other male figures in their life.

Consequently, After conducting research and interviews prior to writing of this manifesto on women inferior role, she felt lucky to have navigated through life without ever feeling held-back or restricted from her desires and ambitions because she was a woman. As a result of her unique existential experiences, De Beauvoir was privileged to capture the life of women in such a unique and critical eye.

In addition to the affectionate influence of Sartre on Beauvoir, his existentialist philosophical orientation impacted greatly on her. In fact, her phenomenological and existentialist outlooks were motivated by existentialist insights from Sartre who is an outstanding existentialist philosopher of all times. In no small measure, this shaped her feminism, the hermeneutical method adopted by her and the viable or pragmatic solutions she proffered.

At the moment Beauvoir decided to undertake the herculean task of researching and writing about women's limited roles, she naively believed that the limitations of women only existed in the rigid and patriarchal confines of the United States. However, it was after she interviewed women across cultures she learned that the limitations of women in the home and outside of it was expansive, global, and existed in her own country. In other the experience of domination, subjugation, exploitation and segregation is a universal shared-experience of women. It is a universally-shared experience of women. Hence, the appropriate method required is the hermeneutical method and cross-culture examination of gender fissure.

### **The Second Sex (1972)**

It should reiterate that the basic thesis of Beauvoir's feminism is "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". This became the fundamental motivation or inspiration of this Beauvoir's most influential book, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's work captures the true extent to which women have been oppressed throughout history as a result of being categorized as the 'Other'. She opines that women have been defined by men and that if they attempt to break with this, they risk alienating themselves. Endeavoring to explain how this category has occurred, Beauvoir established an evident duality or polarization forged by patriarchal assertiveness of masculinity over femininity. According to her, as per men's single story, the man represents the 'self', the essential, or the transcendent, and the women embodies the 'Other', the inessential, or the sex. The core of this single story is the dualization and polarization of humanity.

### **The Origin of Duality and Otherness (Alienation of Women)**

Beauvoir sort to establish where or how this dualistic nature of thought originated-whether it originated from nature or from society. She unequivocally answered that this duality or categorization does not have its origin in nature, but arises from men's stereotypes. Specifically, agreeing with Hegel, de Beauvoir maintained that 'otherness' is a fundamental category of human thought" (xvii). Women are defined and differentiated with reference to men and not with reference to her; she is incidental and the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the "Other." Furthermore, de Beauvoir links woman's identity as 'Other' and her fundamental alienation

to her body, especially her reproductive capacity. Childbearing and menstruation are draining physical events that tie women to their bodies and to immanence. The male, however, is not tied down by such inherently physical events (19-29).

In the struggle described by Sartre as that between *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, men are cast in the role of the *pour-soi* (for itself), that is, the continual process of self-realization, or creative freedom; while women are cast in the role of *en-soi* (in-itself), in which, instead of choosing to engage in the authenticating project of self-realization, they consent to become an object, to exist as *en-soi* (136). This implies that this dual categorization emanates from men's self-assertiveness or mind-set and ideologies.

### **Creation Myths: The Culprit of Women's Derogation**

To support her argument that 'Otherness' is a fundamental category of man's thought' (xvii); Beauvoir traces back to the dark crevices of humankind's origin or myth in order to grasp this basic idea and bring it to the limelight. For instance, creation myths; in creation myth, like the ancient Greek story of Helios and Semele, the sun and the moon where usually personified as a male god and the female goddess respectively, with the female figure representing darkness. In genesis, Adam and Eve resided in the Garden of Eden until Eve ate the forbidden fruit, implying an association between women and evil. Women in these stories embody a dark and sinful side of being. The weakness of the woman caused humanity mortal injury. The fate humanity suffers today is the consequence of the deviance of the woman.

### **Women Forced to become Second Class and Minority Folks and Objects**

Relying on the above explained myths and others, de Beauvoir maintained that women in general have been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of human race, and this secondary standing is not imposed or necessitated by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men (vii). Women according Beauvoir, have 'been taught to accept masculine authority. So, she gives up criticizing, investigation of justifying for herself and leaves all these to the superior caste (600). This implies that women have been forced to remain underdogs to men.

Be that as it may, women have been made to be prisoners to men by men in the world of men. Whether she is a wife, a prostitute, a courtesan, or a career or professional lady, a woman who lives for the pleasure of all men is still a prisoner. As long as women function in a state of 'otherness' existing to satisfy the sexual or emotional needs of men, they continue to live as the 'other'. A woman is the object that belongs to the subject, and this makes her less human. In other words, living as the other is living an inauthentic life. It implies that living for men is living a life of waste and servitude. To perpetuate this state of servitude in perpetuity, men erected a social order and structures that made the woman utterly dependent on them. This social order is the patriarchal imperial and hegemonic institutions whose strategic conspiracy is to perpetually keep women as objects for exploitation.

### **The Conspiracy of Women's Dependency**

To remain objects for present and subsequent exploitation, women are forced to be economically dependent on men. This is done through the deliberate empowerment of men and de-empowerment of women. Hence, been economically dependent on men gives

men the leverage to dictate and assert themselves on women. Berating this scandalous economic arrangement, Beauvoir used strong and derogatory terms to define women who financially depend on men. In her very words, they are 'pariah' and 'parasites', because they do not take advantage of their intellect, their freedom, and because they willingly, resignedly rely on men to support and protect them when they can do that by themselves. The married woman, the courtesan, the Nollywood star, the low paid girl are all the same; "she has to please men if she is to succeed in her life as a women... but neither of them gain complete independence" (681). Both successful and unsuccessful women need men for facilitation and validation.

It is instructive to assert that Beauvoir is reasonable and sincere enough to concede that giving the mistrust of women in the cultural imagination, the liberation of women is a difficult undertaking. For instance, women still believe they must act like men in order to gain a position of influence in the public sphere. For example, women in politics tend to wear pantsuits and act in order for men to take them seriously. Beauvoir was unequivocal in her condemnation of the belief that women must emulate men in order to be treated as equal or in order to gain access to positions of power or authority.

### **Insurmountable Biological Differences between Women and Men**

For the records, the zenith of Beauvoir's feminism that dramatically and laterally differentiated her works from her contemporaries is her radical belief in the insurmountable biological differences between men and women; and at the same time holding that men and women are equal. She paradoxically opined that men and women are not the same biologically. On the one hand, men were as males with different reproductive potentials, capabilities and limitations; on the other hand, women were born females with reproductive potentials, capabilities and limitations different from those of their male counterparts, yet irrespective of this incontrovertible differences, they were born equal in dignity and integrity because of the same rational nature share as human beings. Therefore, on the basis of their equality at birth, they ought to be treated equally. This is indeed a radical departure from the status quo.

Pursuant to this understanding, Beauvoir's condemnation, of women who seek to deny their nature to act, think and behave their men stems from her foundational belief that the biological differences between men and women must be acknowledged. In other words, women simply by their biological engineering are simply women and not men. Women must experience ovulation and menstruation, pregnancy and childbearing, etc.). This simply implies that whatever roles these biological configuration imposes on women must be wholeheartedly accepted and those that it excludes women from should also be avoided by women. She therefore, discourages women, especially feminists from getting cut-up in this abstract notion that women are human beings and therefore not women. One can add that because of sex-differentiation, there cannot be a genderless society.

### **Sexism: What Does it Mean to Be a Woman?**

Beauvoir explicitly maintains that being a woman does not imply been the 'other' or 'sex'. So, she strongly and unequivocally discourages women from embracing their status as the "Other" in the society and remaining complainant towards men. She condemns with the strongest term possible, the example of some women in politics who use their status as the 'sex' or 'Other' to have men assist them in reaching their goals by sleeping with powerful politicians. She asserts that there are countless stories wherein a woman aspires to a smaller goal than a man normally would and then uses her stereotypical role as a sexual object to have a man in power make her goal become a reality for her. In a less extreme way, a woman by acting infantile invites men to take pity on her and ease her path towards

relative success because it makes him feel like an essential or a positive being, since he is making a difference in her life. In a word, women must not allow sexist disposition objectify and exploit them.

The woman must embark on the struggle for authentic living and independence on her own. She must fight her way through the huddles alone relying not on men as facilitators. If she relies on men, she gives the credit of her success to men; and this in turn reinforces men's ego.

### **Women Partly Responsible for the Sustenance of their Otherness Placement**

Furthermore, Beauvoir, condemns women who remain attached to the benefits of being inferior to men because they do not have responsibility for their own lives and future. 'It is an easy road; on it one affords the stain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. Women may fail to lay claim to the status of subjects because, she is often very well-pleased with her role as the 'Other'. Women must resist the temptation to remain inferior by acting docile, complacent or infantile. Nonetheless, Beauvoir does not totally blame women for wanting to act in this manner. She places part of the blame on men because they are the ones who perpetuate this culture of 'otherness'.

### **The Lee Way to Women's Sustainable Emancipation**

Against the backdrop of the insurmountable differences between men and women as ordained by nature in biology, any hope for liberation of the womenfolk? What is the prospect for the attainment of justice, equity and objectivity? Or are women totally condemned by nature to be subservient to men in men's world? Beauvoir's response to these questions was optimistic.

As an existentialist philosopher, she vehemently maintained that all hope is not lost. She strongly opined that the fate and future of women lies in their hands. She challenged woman to rise to expedite actions to liberate themselves from this age-long sidelining.

She enunciates pragmatic modalities on how women may economically, politically, intellectually and sexually liberate themselves from the status quo. To get out of this quagmire, Beauvoir maintains that, first, a woman should accept that she is both a woman and also a human being. As established earlier and worth of emphasis, the concept of women and men being equal, while still different was revolutionary in terms of the history of feminist theory. This implies that the equality of men and women Beauvoir advocated for is justice and fairness, not sameness. De Beauvoir urged women "to decline to be the 'other', to refuse to be a party to the deal" (xx).

In agreement with Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, de Beauvoir encouraged women to strengthen their "feminine" rational faculties and critical powers, to exist as a *pour-soi*, that is, a transcendent subject who constructs her own future by means of creative projects. However, de Beauvoir fully recognized that this moral choice was fraught with anxiety, since "women's independent successes are in contradiction with her femininity, since the 'true woman' is required to make herself object, to be the 'Other' (Beauvoir, xx). Against this traditional ordinance, she challenged women to do it alone.

### **Economic and Social Independence: The Beginning and End of Women's Liberation**

Consequently, she suggests that in order for women to gain subjectivity, they need to live independent and self-reliant life. They can love men, enjoy them as lovers and as wives, taking a clue from the way she maintained a long relationship with Sartre without marrying

or living with him. To achieve this feat, it is expedient that women must be economically and socially autonomous. It is only through empowerment that women can be free financially and emotionally. Once women begin to work, demanding wages that are equal or commensurate to that of men, women can be independent of men and act on their own accord. According to Beauvoir's existential point of view, when she is productive, active she regains transcendence and asserts her equality with men. Equal education of men and women is essential for fostering the assertion of women as equal subjects with men.

### **Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir**

A critical perusal of Wollstonecraft's work and that of Beauvoir, reveal striking similarities. The most striking similarities are in the area of objectivity and sincerity. Both acknowledged that the society to a great extent is responsible for the deplorable nature of women, also, that women have some share of the blame because of their deliberate intention to accept and maintain the subverted gender identity and roles men have created for them.

Another gray area where these scholars of repute have a meeting point is in the recognition of the fundamental value of education as a tool for proper and potent empowerment. Needless to add that both scholars were liberal. If all feminists should consider their approach, perhaps feminism would have been had a broader and widespread acceptance by a great and many scholars.

### **Evaluative Conclusion**

Earlier in the introduction to this treatise, we noted that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, is undoubtedly a revolutionary and controversial text that is welcomed with mix-feelings. As such the text earns her many admirers and detractors. For instance, on the one hand, "the Vatican placed it on the index of forbidden books, Albert Camus complained that, Beauvoir made Frenchmen look ridiculous, Karl Menningir found it 'pretentious' and 'tiresome' and a reviewer in the Atlantic monthly faulted it for being 'bespattered' with the repulsive lingo of existentialism'. On the other hand, Philip Wylie eulogize it as one of the few great books of our era" (Jacob, 43). Moreover, a recent commentator proves to be among her admirers as she establishes the centrality of Beauvoir to gender and women's studies:

De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is an extensive and impressive examination of the lot of women everywhere and today this book is central to most introduction courses in woman's study. One cannot take on the history of women and their subjugation without first learning a term such as 'Other' which Beauvoir penned in this unique framework of women's role in the society as the second sex—the one that depends on the first, men—for survival and fulfillment (cited in Uzomah 393).

Today, many regard this massive and meticulously researched masterwork as not only as pillar of feminist thought but of twentieth-century existentialist philosophy in general (Uzomah, 392-393).

Beauvoir's avid belief in the insurmountable differences of men and women coupled with her conclusion that they are different yet equal, is the zenith of her contributions to feminism that requires a thoughtful attention. This goes a long way to assert that gender parity which is the vowed goal of feminism and gender studies should be understood as fairness and a quest to establish an egalitarian society. Radical feminists' construal of gender parity as gender sameness or genderless society is illusive and delusional. Yes, men and women owing to their intractable biological differences are not the same, yet they as human beings, are equal in all respect. A man is a man, and a woman is a woman, this is a

biological given. In this same line of thought, one can authoritatively argue that the quest for gender neutrality or genderless society is another infamous and trivial project that is futile. We are born differently, yet equal in dignity and equally endowed with rationality as human animals. As a result of this fact, the only disparity that must exist between men and women in terms of social roles and gender relations must be only that ordained by their respective biological differentiation. By this token, socio-cultural interpretation of biological sex, must not exaggerate or exploit these differences.

Beauvoir's conceptualization of gender equality and her novel proposition that men and women are different biologically yet equal is germane and sustainable. Based on these findings, the paper concludes that Beauvoir's postulations are existentially relevant and globally applicable. Her consideration of education as key to women's empowerment and emancipation is inviolable.

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