

BOOK REVIEWS

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley, Intro. Deirdre Bair. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

The Second Sex (Hereafter TSS) epitomizes the core ideas of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy of women. In particular, it highlights three central themes of de Beauvoir's philosophy of woman. First of all, it is the idea that one is not born to be a woman, but becomes one. A person's woman-existence precedes her woman-essence, not the other way around. There is no *a priori* woman-essence—that is to say, femininity--preceding one's existence as a woman. There is no even biological or physiological basis for such woman-essence or eternal femininity. Second, it is the idea that corresponding to the above, the label 'woman' does not signify some eternal essence called "femininity", but connote an existential situation wherein a person who is categorized as a woman occupies the role of the Other of man. By this token, a person's existence as a woman is contingent, not of necessity. "It would appear, then, every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity ... Although some women zealously to incarnate this essence, it is hardly patentable."(IXX). Third, it is the idea that a woman's existence is an enduring struggle for liberty and equality. Women's relationship to their own situations is that they can choose to change it or to stay with it. The totality of a person's existence as a woman is the totality of the person's struggle to choose one way or the other to exist. Therefore, *the Second Sex* is a book of existentialist philosophy of woman in the full sense.

A central claim of the book is that since the time immortal, women have been made or conceptualized by men as the Other of men and made to enter into a relationship of inequality with men wherein women are forced to subordinate to men; the unequal relationship between men and women is not a matter of natural necessity, but the work of some existential contingencies; no natural feminine characteristics and male characteristic provide the ground for the gender division between men and women and a natural basis for the relationship of inequality between men and women; instead, it is a product of existential, purposeful institutionalization that aims at maintaining the control of men toward women. First of all, women are defined by men as so and so, not that they define

themselves. “Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regard as an autonomous being.”(XXII). At times, man defines woman as the Other of man in order to awaken “an unknown being whom he recognizes with pride as himself” on the one hand and to make her “useful to society, to the family” on the other hand (p.176). From time to time she is defined as “the Soul and Idea.”(p.179). At times, for example, in Christianity, “man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity; that is why almost all allegories, in language as pictorial representation, are women.” (Ibid). All the same, as she is defined by man, a woman “is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex,’ by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex—absolute sex, not less.”(IXX). She is his painting, his work of art, and his product of animal instinct. He defines her as the Soul and Idea, she is the Soul and Idea. He defines her as the house, she is the house. He defines her as “a glorified substance”, she is a glorified substance. He defines her as flesh, she is a flesh. Second, women are always defined as the Other of men—the Other with a capital “C”; in a man-woman relationship, “he is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.”(ibid). “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he is with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential.”(Ibid). She is defined as the weak, the inconstant, and the inconsistent. “Frailty, thy name is woman”, Shakespeare’s claim summarizes this. Third, women are existentially institutionalized as ambiguity. On this point, de Beauvoir points out, even the fact that she (de Beauvoir) asks the question of what is a woman in this book itself is of great symbolic significance (XXI). A man would not ask the question of what is a man. He has no a peculiar situation—that is to say, the situation of ambiguity—to deal with. “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...where woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity.”(Ibid).

Notwithstanding, one becomes woman as defined by man because of her existence. In other words, one becomes a woman by existing as a woman, and living as a woman, not because one is metaphysically constituted as so and so. One’s existence defines one as a woman, not one as a woman defines one’s existence. One’s existence as a dependent of man and as the other of man defines one as essentially being a woman. “Woman has always been man’s dependent, if

not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change.”(XXVI) In existentialist terms, as de Beauvoir sees it, woman has always existed as the Other of man historically, though not by necessity. Women turn up in existence, exist as the Other of men, and accept to be defined as so and so. As de Beauvoir sees it, in her time, “Almost nowhere is her [woman’s] legal status the same as man’s, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage ... In the sphere men and women can almost be said to make up two castes ... In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they mobilize the most important posts.”(Ibid.) Moreover, men “enjoy a traditional prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support.”(XXVI-XXVII) That is to say, in existence, men traditionally live with prestige to opportunities education and improvements which is not shared by women. In short, in every front of life, women exist as the Other of men, and are made into the Other of men.

In turn, woman’s voluntary acceptance of her definition as the Other of man institutionalizes woman as the Other of man. “Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object.”(XXIV). It is a work of existential choice, not a metaphysical destiny of necessity. For a woman, “to decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal” would mean for her to renounce her alleged economic, social, and other kinds of security and comfort (XXVII). Conversely, to accept her *status quo* and situation means that “she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance.”(Ibid). Furthermore, for a woman, “there is also temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing.”(Ibid). Therefore, while women have the choice to be or not to be as they are, they generally choose to be as they are defined. “If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change.”(XXV). Thus, even for those women who are of egalitarian mind to some extent, “the myth of Woman, the other, is precious for many reasons. They cannot be blamed for not cheerfully relinquishing all the benefits they derive from the myth, for they realize what they would lose in relinquishing woman as they fancy her to be, while they fail to realize what they have to gain from the woman tomorrow.”(XXXI). No wonder, unlike other minority groups in society, women have never really fight for equality, liberty, and the right to be what they ought to be. “Women’ effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what

men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.”(XXV).

Notwithstanding, while subjectivity is the starting point, a woman’s subjectivity is essentially “the other consciousness, the other ego” (XXIII). “Proletarians say ‘we’ ... Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois... into ‘others’, But women do not say ‘we’ ... They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude.”(Ibid). Admittedly, women have no a united consciousness because they have no a united existence. “Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with relative unit ... They live diverse among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to a certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women.”(Ibid). In women’ diverse existence, “if they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class.”(Ibid). One’s social existence determines one’s social consciousness, as Marx and Engels would insist. Women’ diverse existence determines that they consciousness are diverse, not united. While lack of a unified consciousness contributes to women’ voluntary acceptance of the role of the Others of men, their diverse existence contributes to women’ lack of a unified consciousness. As a result, women as the Others of men are made, institutionalized, and continued.

As a result of the above, women’s existence will be an enduring struggle for equality, liberty, and autonomy. “What peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nonetheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other.”(XXXV). In such a situation, on the one hand, men “propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence” and “her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign.”(Ibid). Thus, there is men’s oppression which women must struggle with. On the other hand, women as consciousness aspire for self-consciousness. Thus, “the dram of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regard the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is inessential.”(Ibid.). Correspondingly, women must face a set of questions of woman. They include: “How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependence? What circumstances

limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?"(Ibid). As Heidegger famously indicates, human beings are the only self-conscious beings to whom their very Being becomes an issue. Women are human beings and ought to be conscious of their situation and ask themselves those fundamental questions of their Being. These questions may be irritating ones, and one may be deeply uneasy to ask them, but they are fundamental existential questions for women. "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity, and they beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways."(XXXVI). But they have a long way to go.

There can be no question that the situation of woman today differs importantly from that in de Beauvoir's time. That said, the three fundamental themes of her existential philosophy of women in the *Second Sex* are still relevant and important today, and her insights into women's situation also do not lose their value and significance. We owe de Beauvoir gratitude for a pioneer work on philosophy of woman. We also owe her gratitude for developing her version of existentialism of woman. We also owe her gratitude for the calling that while most of women today still live as beings-in-themselves, they ought to start to live as beings-for-themselves.

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