

## Feminist Views in Simone De Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex': A Critical Analysis

**Harshita Rathee**

(NET, JRF) Deenbandhu Chotu Ram University of Science and Technology, Murthal,  
Sonapat, Haryana, India

---

### Abstract

Gender is a social construct in which different societies have different views and thoughts about which roles a man and a woman should fulfill. Gender studies include women's studies (concerning women, feminism, gender, and politics), men's studies, and LGBT studies and sexuality in the fields of literature, language, history, political science, sociology, anthropology, cinema, media studies, human development, law, and medicine. This research paper critically analyze the concerns regarding gender and the feministic views of Simone de Beauvoir in her work 'The Second Sex.' Feminism is a collection of number of movements and ideologies that share a common goal; to establish and achieve equal political, social, economical, cultural and personal rights for the women. The feminist ideology emphasis on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices in both domestic work and the workplace. De Beauvoir defines women as the "Second sex" because women are defined in relation to men. De Beauvoir argued that women have historically been considered deviant, abnormal. Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* so that women could understand themselves as selves free from idealized notions of femininity..She traces female development through its formative stages: childhood, youth, and sexual initiation. Her goal is to prove that women are not *born* "feminine" but shaped by a thousand external processes. De Beauvoir said that this attitude limited women's success by maintaining the perception that they were a deviation from the normal, and were always outsiders attempting to emulate "normality". She believed feminism to move forward. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir discusses the logistical hurdles woman faces in pursuing this goal. Her work is an exposition of "the pervasiveness and intensity and mysteriousness of the history of women's oppression".

---

### INTRODUCTION

'Gender' refers to the socially constructed roles of and relationships between men and women. The major concerns are men and women, including conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. The difference between 'gender' and 'sex' is that the latter refers only to biological differences. Gender does not mean focusing solely on women or females, but rather on the inequalities between males and females, and should not be confused with feminism or women's studies. Analyses of gender differences often show a disadvantaged and weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical issues. This is why there is a tendency for gender discussions and interventions to focus on correcting these imbalances by specifically targeting women.

Gender studies include women's studies (concerning women, feminism, gender, and politics), men's studies, and LGBT studies and sexuality in the fields of literature, language, history, political science, sociology, anthropology, cinema, media studies, human development, law, and medicine. It also analyzes race, ethnicity, location, nationality, and disability. Many disciplines, such as literary theory, drama studies, film theory, performance theory, contemporary art history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics and psychology are discussed. The Feminist Movement was a series of events in which women were trying to change several issues in society such as having equal opportunities as men, birth control issues, equal pay etc. Gender is a social construct in which different societies have different views and thoughts about which roles a man and a woman should fulfill. Society greatly influences the roles of gender. Throughout in Literature course gender roles have been discussed. Some of the books reinforced the traditional gender roles. Others rejected the norms and tried to push the roles into new boundaries. Most of the books that we looked at also showed discontent in the tone of women's writing. Literature that discusses gender should be appreciated due to the fact that society can view the history of literature, see how society can challenge gender roles, and learn and evolve from it. The perception that gender studies are doctrinal and dogmatic is simply untrue. It is skeptical of traditional distinctions between fields of research, and is more dynamic, innovative and open to new perspectives than establishing disciplines. And far from sticking to a crude "women good, men bad" line, it encourage students to acknowledge the diversity of relations between men and women, the limitations of a victim-centered understanding of womanhood, and the complex ways in which gender intersects with race, class and sexuality. The development of this more holistic approach to gender analysis is one of the reasons why the name "gender studies" is now usually given preference over "women's studies", although the name of the field remains a controversial topic.

Many contemporary writers reject societal gender roles to live and write by the standards of their own convictions. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands, La Frontera* is a good example of creating one's own boundaries. Virginia Woolf mentions in one her books, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, *Bad Mother*, and *The Heidi Chronicles*--exhibit this same tone of discontent, perhaps showing that women's literature has not evolved in the way Woolf predicted at the end of her chapter "Women and Fiction. One view espoused by the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". This view proposes that in gender studies, the term "gender" should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not to the state of being male or female in its entirety.

Feminism is a collection of number of movements and ideologies that share a common goal; to establish and achieve equal political, social, economical, cultural and personal rights for the women. Feminism doesn't mean anti-man. It only means equality of women in every field, supporting women and equality of women including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to fair wages or equal pay, to own property, to education, to enter contracts, to have equal rights within marriage, and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to promote bodily autonomy and integrity, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. The feminist ideology emphasis on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices in both domestic work and the workplace. The research on the

similar topic have also been done before, for example Monique Witting wrote his research on the famous quote of ‘The second sex’; One is not born a woman. Another research on author itself, Simone de Beauvoir by KRISTIN ANNE RODIER, the student of University of Saskatchewan have been done.

Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir, commonly known as Simone de Beauvoir, 9 January 1908 – 14 April 1986), was a French writer, intellectual, existentialist philosopher, political activist, feminist and social theorist. Though she did not consider herself a philosopher, she had a significant influence on both feminist existentialism and feminist theory. De Beauvoir wrote novels, essays, biographies, autobiography and monographs on philosophy, politics and social issues. She is known for her 1949 treatise *The Second Sex*, a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism. *The Second Sex*, published in French, sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. It deals with the treatment of women throughout history and is often regarded as a major work of feminist philosophy and the starting point of second-wave feminism. Second-wave feminism is a period of **feminist** activity that first began in the early 1960s in the United States, and eventually spread throughout the Western world and beyond. Where the first-wave feminism focused mainly on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (i.e., voting rights, property rights), second-wave feminism broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities. De Beauvoir's analysis focuses on the Hegelian concept of the ‘Other’. It is the (social) construction of Woman as the quintessential ‘Other’ that de Beauvoir identifies as fundamental to women's oppression. The capitalized 'O' in "other" indicates the wholly other. De Beauvoir asserted that women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the 'immanence' to which they were previously resigned and reaching 'transcendence', a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, where one chooses one's freedom.

The text is divided into two parts. In part 1, the more academic section, de Beauvoir discusses instances of women being oppressed throughout history, from early nomadic societies until the surprisingly late grant of suffrage in France in 1947. She draws impressively from a wide range of disciplines, including biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, and, of course, history. She attempts to assess women's biological and historical circumstances and the myths by which these have been explained, denied, or distorted. She recognizes that men have been able to maintain dominant roles in virtually all cultures because women have resigned themselves to, instead of rebelling against, their assigned subordinate status. *The Second Sex* has two major premises. First, that man, considering himself as the essential being, or subject, has treated woman as the unessential being, or object. The second, more controversial premise, is that much of woman's psychological self is socially constructed, with very few physiologically rooted feminine qualities or values. De Beauvoir denies the existence of a feminine temperament or nature—to her, all notions of femininity are artificial concepts. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated. He extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas woman is doomed to

immanence, or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she waits for him to save her. This distinction is the basis of all de Beauvoir's later arguments. De Beauvoir states that while it is natural for humans to understand themselves in opposition to others, this process is flawed when applied to the genders. In defining woman exclusively as Other, man is effectively denying her humanity. De Beauvoir insists on the impossibility of comparing the "character" of men and women without considering the immense differences in their situation. She traces female development through its formative stages: childhood, youth, and sexual initiation. Her goal is to prove that women are not *born* "feminine" but shaped by a thousand external processes. She shows how, at each stage of her upbringing, a girl is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence, repetition, and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of subjectivity and flatten her into an object. Denied the possibility of independent work or creative fulfillment, the woman must accept a dissatisfying life of housework, childbearing, and sexual slavishness. Having brought the woman to adulthood, de Beauvoir analyzes the various "situations," or roles, the adult woman inhabits. The bourgeois woman performs three major functions: wife, mother, and entertainer. No matter how illustrious the woman's household may be, these roles inevitably lead to immanence, incompleteness, and profound frustration. Even those who accept a less conventional place in society—as a prostitute or courtesan, for example—must submit to imperatives defined by the male. De Beauvoir also reflects on the trauma of old age. When a woman loses her reproductive capacity, she loses her primary purpose and therefore her identity de Beauvoir mentions such instances of females being complicit in their Otherness, particularly with regard to marriage. The difficulty of breaking free from "femininity"—of sacrificing security and comfort for some ill-conceived notion of "equality"—induces many women to accept the usual unfulfilling roles of wife and mother. From the very beginning of her discussion, de Beauvoir identifies the economic underpinnings of female subordination—and the economic roots of woman's liberation. Only in work can she achieve autonomy. If woman can support herself, she can also achieve a form of liberation. She argued that men used this as an excuse not to understand women and their problems and not to help them, and that this stereotyping was always done in societies by the group higher in the hierarchy to the group lower in the hierarchy. She wrote that a similar kind of oppression by hierarchy also happened in other categories of identity, such as race, class and religion, but she claimed that it was nowhere more true than with gender in which men stereotyped women and used it as an excuse to organize society into a patriarchy. Women who do not follow the domestic norm are looked down upon in society. Beauvoir is explaining that woman referred as "the other." She states, "What is a woman? fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. [...] It would be out of the question to reply: 'And you think the contrary because you are a man,' for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity." As for man there is no need to define what is to be a man, there is no reason because they identified themselves as the superior part. Man represents both "the positive and the neutral," which doesn't need to be explained or defined, and it is self-explanatory. "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him;

she is not regarded as an autonomous being.” Men are the default setting and women are considered a recessive gender. “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.” It is like a symmetrical comparison, but masculine and feminine aren’t asymmetrical. De Beauvoir defines women as the “Second sex” because women are defined in relation to men. Aristotle referred that women are “The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.” She also points out the St Thomas referred to the woman as the “imperfect man, incidental” being.

Are there woman, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: ‘Even in Russia women are still women’; and other erudite persons—sometimes the very same—say with a sigh, ‘Woman is losing her way, woman is lost.’” De Beauvoir argued that women have historically been considered deviant, abnormal. She said that even Mary Wollstonecraft considered men to be the ideal toward which women should aspire. De Beauvoir said that this attitude limited women's success by maintaining the perception that they were a deviation from the normal, and were always outsiders attempting to emulate "normality". She believed that for feminism to move forward, this assumption must be set aside. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir discusses the logistical hurdles woman faces in pursuing this goal. Her work is an exposition of "the pervasiveness and intensity and mysteriousness of the history of women's oppression"

*The Second Sex* helped to inspire subsequent feminist arguments against psychoanalysis, including those of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; *Feminine Mystique* will always appear the more dated and flimsy as her political force would linger as a clear and certain factor in feminist politics in the United States. In this respect, Friedan was the public intellectual more in keeping with political troubles. Yet, in quite another way, Friedan and Beauvoir are bound together in the changing history of feminist thought and practice. They were at the center of political and cultural movements that held the stage at a crucial moment of global change, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Like Millett, Beauvoir's contentions were based more on literary than scientific sources and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* in which she discussed about women who have somehow been separated from their libido, from their faculty of desire, from their sexuality.

Puglia, who has identified *The Second Sex* as one of the influences on her 1990 work of literary criticism *Sexual Personae*, writes that most modern feminists do not realize the extent to which their work has simply repeated or qualified its arguments. Millett commented in 1989 that she did not realize the extent to which she was indebted to Beauvoir when she wrote *Sexual Politics*. In an interview with Betty Friedan, De Beauvoir said: No, we don’t believe that any woman should have this choice. No woman should be authorized to stay at home to bring up her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one. It is a way of forcing women in a certain direction".

These are some of the famous quotes in ‘ The Second Sex’ which later became the famous statements by de Beauvoir;-

:-One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman

It is de Beauvoir's most famous statement. Femininity is a construction of civilization, a reflection not of "essential" differences in men and women but of differences in their situation. Situation determines character, not the other way around. Woman is not born fully formed; she is gradually shaped by her upbringing and the environment she lives in. Biology does not determine what makes a woman a woman—a woman is made to learn her role from man and others in society even the other women who lives in her family and environment. Woman is not born passive, secondary or nonessential, but all the forces in the external world have conspired to make her so. Every individual self, regardless of gender, is entitled to subjectivity; it is only outside forces that have conspired to rob woman of this right. Destiny is not a cosmic force but a human choice, the result of culture and circumstance.

:If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through "the eternal feminine," and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman?.. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say, "I am a woman"; on this truth must be based all further discussion.

She first points out the inadequacy of defining woman either by her biological operations or by some broad understanding of the "eternal feminine. She asks a simple question, do women even exist? She admits they do, "provisionally" and when 'man' wants. The word "provisionally" is significant. As de Beauvoir develops her argument, she will make the radical suggestion that "woman" does not, in fact, exist as an immense category and that men and women alike should always be defined primarily as humans. Throughout history, woman has been denied this privilege. The latter part of this quotation introduces de Beauvoir's personal motivation for writing this book. When looking back on her life, she finds that she cannot define herself without defining herself as a woman and a human being. Her effort to find out what it means to be a woman, then, is also an effort to make sense of her experience on earth.

:- 'Weakness' is weakness only in light of the aims man sets for himself, the instruments at his disposal and the laws he imposes."

Man sets all the rules and regulations for women; her lifestyle, her way of dressing, her do's and don'ts. She expresses that in women's life every law for her living is set by man; the laws which he imposed on women without knowing their will or choice.

Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* so that women could understand themselves as selves free from idealized notions of femininity. De Beauvoir goes into great detail to debunk what she refers to as "the eternal feminine," or that "vague and basic essence, femininity." This myth takes many forms—the sanctity of the mother, the purity of the virgin, the fecundity of the womb—but in all cases serves to deny women's individuality and trap them inside unrealizable ideals. She wonders on the facts that why there are no books written on women, she wonders why there is nothing to write about the women in spite of the fact that she is also the other part of the society and is equally important as man. She uses the phrase "the eternal feminine" to describe all the terrifying processes of

fertility and reproduction that arose from male discomfort with the fact of his birth and the inevitability of his death. As the author of human history, man has conflated woman with her womb. He has lumped all those mysterious processes of life and reminders of death, which both confuse and frighten him, under a single dismissive myth. She expresses that women is not just a 'womb'. She is much than that. De Beauvoir points out that just as there is no such thing as the "eternal masculine," there is no such thing as "eternal feminine." Or, to put it differently: there is no essence, only experience. She is equally important and essential as man. Without women man are nothing and vice versa so there is no way to put women behind or make her feel that she is not essential. . All beings, de Beauvoir insists, have the right to define their own existences rather than labor under some vague notion of "femininity."

#### REFERENCES

- Bauer, Nancy (2006) [2004]. "Must We Read Simone de Beauvoir gender concerns?". In
- Beauvoir, Simone (1971). *The Second Sex*. and Gender studies . Alfred A. Knopf.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1989) [1952]. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (2002). *The Second Sex (Svenskupplaga)*. p. 325.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1949 (translated 2009)). *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde
- "Gender Studies". Whitman College. Retrieved May 1, 2012.
- Healey, J. F. (2003). "Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Class: the Sociology of Group Conflict and Change.