



Beyond the Second Sex: The Ongoing Relevance of Beauvoir's Existentialism in Today's Gender Norms.

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ABSTRACT

The societal expectations and norms that Beauvoir critiques in "The Second Sex" are still palpable today, stifling women's existential freedom and autonomy. Existentialist concepts like "the Other" and "bad faith" are starkly evident in the marginalization of women in the workplace, where they're often relegated to secondary roles and expected to prioritize others' needs over their own, leading to self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Moreover, the idea that "existence precedes essence" is challenged by the fact that women are still expected to conform to traditional gender roles, rather than being free to define their own identity and purpose. This existential constraint denies women the freedom to choose their path, to take responsibility for their choices, and to create their meaning in life. Beauvoir's existentialist framework remains early relevant today, as seen in the struggles of women.

Keywords: Existentialist, Gender roles, Freedom, Bad faith, Responsibility.

Existentialist framework offers a powerful tool for understanding and challenging these constraints, and for promoting greater freedom, autonomy, and self-definition for women.

Simone de Beauvoir was a French writer and feminist, a member of the intellectual fellowship of philosopher-writers who have given a literary transcription to the themes of existentialism. She is known primarily for her treatise *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vol. (1949; *The Second Sex*), a scholarly and passionate plea for the abolition of what she called the myth of the "Eternal Feminine."

Her novels expound the major existential themes, demonstrating her conception of the writer's commitment to the times. She describes the subtle destruction of a couple's relationship brought about by a young girl's

prolonged stay in their home; it also treats the difficult problem of the relationship of a conscience to “the other,” each individual conscience being fundamentally a predator to another. Simone de Beauvoir revealed herself as a woman of formidable courage and integrity, whose life supported her thesis: the basic options of an individual must be made on the premises of an equal vocation for man and woman founded on a common structure of their being, independent of their sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most influential feminist theorists and writers of the twentieth century, whose works continue to impact and shape views of the modern public on different political and social matters. In the introduction to her book titled *The Second Sex*, she discusses the topic of women’s position in the world and presents a historical perspective, tracing the two sexes’ hierarchical relations to ancient times.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is known primarily as a feminist text, it is Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy that influenced Beauvoir’s writings. As existentialists, these philosophers argue that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject and not the thinking subject alone. Sartre argues that philosophical thinking starts with the acting, feeling, living human individual. It is the individual and not society that determines and is responsible for the meaning of their own life. Beauvoir takes existentialist philosophy and transforms it into a discussion on feminism, racism, motherhood and many other topics. In this essay, I will show how Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy influenced Simone de Beauvoir’s theories on feminism.

Beauvoir and existentialism are laid out and offer a good understanding and interpretation of *The Second Sex* and its role as a feminist and existentialist text. When reading *The Second Sex*, one can discern that the text is simply an expression about this sample of Sartre an existentialism in the form of the question of women, displaying Beauvoir as a philosopher first, and secondly as a feminist as she transforms Sartre’s philosophy and creates her own. Beauvoir puts a lot of thought into the human struggle for freedom. *The Second Sex* lays out the groundwork for the second wave of feminism. The second wave is concerned with sexuality, family, and reproductive rights, among other things.

One must recognize Beauvoir as a philosopher along with being a feminist. A man who is limited to the knowledge of being a man is more likely to see Beauvoir as an imitator of Sartre. Beauvoir writes, “man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male” This again provides an existentialist reading of the text, as the men are taking on the role of telling the woman how she should and should not be; this gives the woman the sense that she is not in control of who she is. This shows that if someone is taught her entire life that to be a woman, she has to act or look a specific way, be submissive, and work only certain jobs, it is going to affect her sense of freedom and authenticity.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." This line captures the existentialist notion that existence precedes essence, meaning individuals are not born with a predetermined identity; instead, they create themselves through their actions and choices. Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism similarly emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of individuals to define their essence through lived experiences. In the real world, women often

find themselves confined by societal expectations that dictate how they should behave, think, and even feel, much like the social constructs de Beauvoir critiques.

Beauvoir took the form of literature; Beauvoir was among the first to view feminism in a philosophical manner. It is this form that Beauvoir takes that distinguishes her from her contemporaries, including Sartre. Beauvoir not only examines existentialist theory but takes it and applies it to the question of women. Simons is saying that Beauvoir is creating a new way to discuss feminism that must be read and understood differently than a work of literature.

“The Second Sex is important not only for its contribution to feminist philosophy, but for its more general contribution to existential moral and social philosophy and to our understanding of the social construction of knowledge” The Second Sex is the combination of existentialism and feminism. Beauvoir shares that the self needs someone acting “the other” in order to define itself as a subject. By saying this she says it is necessary for the constitution of the self as a self. She is examining the entire world of existentialism and human existence and takes these thoughts and turns them into a conversation on feminism. Through understanding Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy, understanding Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophical writings, and being able to view the differences, one can conclude that not only is Beauvoir’s writing her own but it takes the influence of Sartre’s thought and transforms it into a new while still maintaining the foundations of Sartre’s philosophical thought.

This distinction is important to understand because it provides Beauvoir with not only the mind of a woman writing on feminism but the mind of a philosopher writing on the thoughts of all human beings. Feminism through the philosophical view of existentialism provides a unique understanding of the problem. This is the understanding that the individual woman should be able to decide her own fate. Beauvoir portrays that throughout the history women were perceived as the Other in contrast to the men, the Self.

‘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 is a social construct in which different societies have different views and thoughts about which roles a man and a woman should fulfil. 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. 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.

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 truer than with gender in which men stereotyped women and used it as an excuse to organize society into a patriarchy.

She seems to believe not only that only men and women exist, but also that they are naturally different and are destined to live together in harmony. At the same time, *The Second Sex's* most famous line, 'one is not born but becomes a woman,' is commonly interpreted as a sign that Beauvoir invented the distinction between sex and gender, showing that what it means to be a woman is the product of socialization, not of a feminine essence. When it came upon the scene in the late sixties, it was an idea whose time had come. What does the concept of "an idea whose time has come" really mean? It means that an ideal of behaviour becomes widespread at a time when social and economic conditions allow behaving that way. The idea of the woman's fulfilment does not come from motherhood or marriage but from her individual actions, goals, and purposes could not change society until it was articulated in an economic and political context in which such actions, goals, and purposes were possible.

Small fraction of privileged women could manage to educate themselves, and a smaller fraction could find a congenial circle of like thinkers willing to talk to them. Instead of being women in the Woman Movement, the feminists encouraged everyone to call them "girls," because they thought of themselves as eternally young. Moi also discovers that if "society" has certain false attitudes and norms about what women want and what abilities they have, women themselves have internalized these same attitudes. Many of the women have never discussed sex with their husbands until after they talked about it in the group. Consciousness-raising for women doesn't seem to be very big in the world today.

This constraint can make it challenging for women to assert their own identity outside of these imposed roles. De Beauvoir also explores the concept of the "eternal feminine," an idealized and mythical image of what a woman should be—nurturing, passive, and self-sacrificing. She writes, "The woman who is not a mother is a monster, an abnormal being." This reflects a societal expectation that equates femininity with motherhood, pressuring women to conform to roles that may not align with their true desires.

In real life, many women struggle with this expectation, feeling torn between societal pressures to conform and their existential freedom to define themselves outside of these norms. This tension often leads to an internal conflict, as women navigate the space between societal expectations and their authentic selfhood. Jean-Paul

Sartre's idea that "man is condemned to be free" is particularly relevant here, as it underscores the weight of this freedom. For women, this freedom can be both empowering and burdensome. On the one hand, they have the agency to define themselves outside of traditional roles; on the other hand, this freedom requires them to constantly negotiate their identity in a world that often resists change.

The reality for many women is that this freedom is limited by external forces—social, cultural, and economic—that restrict their ability to fully exercise their autonomy. Despite these barriers, some women strive to create their own identities, rejecting the "eternal feminine" in favor of a more authentic existence. De Beauvoir's exploration of the concept of "bad faith" is another crucial point of intersection with Sartre's existentialism. She argues that many women live in "bad faith" by accepting the roles imposed upon them without question, thereby denying their own freedom. In the book, she writes, "To be feminine is to make oneself weak, it is to renounce aggression, to be submissive." This quote reflects how women are often conditioned to embrace submissiveness as part of their identity, perpetuating their own oppression.

This manifests in various ways, from the glass ceiling in professional environments to the unequal distribution of domestic labour. Women who refuse to live in bad faith and instead assert their freedom are often met with resistance, illustrating the ongoing struggle to redefine what it means to be a woman in a society that clings to outdated norms. Lastly, de Beauvoir critiques the lack of consciousness-raising among women, noting that many have internalized societal norms without questioning them. She observes, "Consciousness-raising for women doesn't seem to be very big in the world today." This lack of awareness can prevent women from recognizing the ways in which they are oppressed and limit their ability to resist these conditions.

In conclusion, *The Second Sex* and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism offer powerful frameworks for understanding the complex realities that women face in their journey to self-definition. Simone de Beauvoir's insights into the social construction of femininity and the internalization of oppressive norms reveal how societal expectations limit women's freedom to define themselves authentically. Sartre's existentialist ideas further illuminate the weight of this freedom, emphasizing the responsibility women have to create their own essence despite the constraints imposed by society. However, as more women engage in self-reflection and challenge these roles, they begin to reclaim their agency, moving towards a more authentic existence that transcends traditional gender norms. The struggle to break free from these constraints is ongoing, but it is through this struggle that women can fully embrace their freedom and define their identities on their own terms, paving the way for a future where individual autonomy is prioritized over societal expectations.

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