prelude: the becoming of beauvoir's existentialist feminism

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir's profound influence to feminism has traversed many literature and historical undertakings, earning her both critiques and compliments, and according her the reputation of being renowned in this area of discipline. As greatly influenced by staunch supporters of existentialism, Beauvoir has also earned her identity as an existentialist and has flourished her to developing a distinctive feminism propounding existentialism. This paper is an exploration of existentialist feminism, a (rather) establishing faction of feminism usually ascribed with Beauvoir. This paper is also focused on delineating a background on feminism as it also presents some issues generated in existential philosophy largely on the ideologies of Simone de Beauvoir in respect to the *other, freedom* and *ethics*, towards existentialist feminism. Apparent in her feminism, Beauvoir's philosophy aims at achieving a transcended status of woman in society furthered by necessary socioeconomic changes which also requires the cooperation of free agents among themselves, *other* women and men included.

Keywords
Feminism, existentialism, other, freedom, ethics

Suri § Volume 6 No. 2 (2017): 140 - 148
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http://suri.pap73.org/issue9/Opiniano_SURI_2017.pdf

Introduction

At the onset, feminism was established as a kind of politics engaged at amending the normative power relations of men and women not only in society but in all aspects of discourse. Since its establishment, existentialist feminism, one that has developed and continued to subsist in the modern world, is directed at changing contemporary ideas on sex and gender as groundwork for fundamental issues in Philosophy primarily in existentialism. Many of these issues on feminism in existentialism preludes from Simone de Beauvoir's magnum opus, *The Second Sex*, where she "argued that Western culture regarded men as normal and women as an aberration and she called for the recognition of the special nature of women." One of her main concerns was women's roles primarily on forced maternity and ambiguities of freedom and existence. "The writing of *The Second Sex* in some ways emerged inevitably from Beauvoir's prior formation, and personal, first-hand experiences. Her early analysis of patriarchal attitudes was arrived at largely in isolation – deprived, indeed of contact with the key thinkers that would form Marxist and feminist thinking through the last century"(Ferrier, 2000, p. 197). Although details of the whereabouts of Beauvoir's conversion to feminism has been undisclosed, she was greatly influenced by the 'second wave' movement involving Marxist philosophy, Beauvoir's works, like *The Second Sex*, have had profound influence upon generations of readers: the latter offers an interdisciplinary mix of sociology, anthropology, political theory, history and literary criticism, that during its first release, it was mistaken as a biology book; her works offer, in the frame of fiction, accounts of women struggling for greater freedom – often of a freedom of the mind or imagination," and traversing through the facets of historical discourses.

For one to conduct a thorough demonstration of Beauvoir's works and her influence on feminism, this paper is focused on delineating a robust background on feminism as it shall also present some issues generated in existential philosophy largely on the ideologies of Simone de Beauvoir in respect to the *other*, *freedom* and *ethics*.

Feminism, which initially began as a response to gender inequality primarily in social and political concerns matured in stages where the first wave, second wave and third wave comprised its commencement. The 'first wave' feminism concerned itself with matters pertaining to women's right to suffrage,

equal status for men and women as citizens, equality in rights to education, citizenship and property. "In England, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she demanded equality and better education for women, and made the first sustained critique of the social system which relegated women to an inferior position. In the early 19th century, a small group of middle-class women in the United Kingdom began to call for better education, improved legal rights (especially within marriage), employment opportunities, and the right to vote. Equal-rights feminism was given theoretical justification by John Stuart Mill, who wrote *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which was partly influenced by his wife Harriet Taylor. From the 1850s onward, the campaign for equal rights for women became focused on winning the right to vote (women's suffrage), and suffragist movements appeared in New Zealand, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Sweden" (D'Souza, 2005, p. 7). The 'second wave' feminism prevailed focus on "the physical and psychological differences between women and men. Some feminists criticized traditional psychoanalysis, notably the work of Sigmund Freud, for assuming that all people are, or should be, like men. They became concerned with ways in which women's perceptions were determined by the particular nature of the female body and the female roles in reproduction and childbearing. This strand of feminism, which became known as cultural or radical feminism, focused on differences between women and men that they believed make women superior to men, and advocated female forms of culture" (p.9). They, unlike their first and third counterparts are more concerned with economic and social factors. The 'third wave' feminism dealt with more receptive issues associated to diverse topics such as gender, race, social classes, ethnicity and sexuality.

"Feminist theorizing at this stage became more varied and forceful than ever. For example, Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist writer, in her book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) voiced against the dominating and violent aspects of porn while Carrol Giligan, a Harvard psychologist, in her celebrated book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) returned to the debates regarding the essential gender differences. Around the same time, Rianne Eisher in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) rejuvenated the importance of maternity to feminism (D'Souza, 2013, p.9). Much has been said that "third wavers are much less likely to use the homogeneous category 'woman', and have a more sophisticated understanding of differences between women that produce fluid and contradictory identities.

Third wavers adopt a plethora of cultural practices, in contrast to second wave feminists' interest in the crude weight of economic or political inequality. Third wavers are also more optimistic and relaxed about sex, claiming that heterosexual sex need not be oppressive" (Bulbeck, 1999, p.6).

The Factions of Feminism(s)

With the introduction of the three feminist movements came the various feminist factions which include Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, and Postmodern Feminism. Liberal Feminists demand equal political rights for women and desire to abolish gender discriminations and be provided with equal benefits for women in terms of economic and social freedom. "Liberal Feminists include all those who campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state, arguing that the theoretical basis on which the state is built is sound but that the rights and privileges it confers must be extended to women to give them equal citizenship with men. In short, what liberal feminists want to do is to show that the justification and arguments against women are totally wrong and mistaken" (D'Souza, 2013, p.10). For the most part, Marxist Feminism as the name implies, was more concerned in the assimilation of women in society, class struggle and overthrowing capitalism. "For Marxist Feminists, the first step for the working class women in entering the arena of struggle is to leave the isolation of homes and enter the social arena of production. Marxist and social feminists link gender inequality and women's oppression to the capitalist system of production and the diversion of labour consistent with this system" (p. 10). It puts the blame on the capitalist system that oppresses the woman in work force, among other aspects of existence. Radical Feminism on the other hand, resulted from the adversity of Marxist Feminism and its failure to sustain. For radical feminists, women's liberation relied on the dissolution of patriarchy, sexual crimes and slavery.

In this variant, it is patriarchy and not capitalism that serves as the antecedent for female oppression. In an attempt to incorporate the idea of Marxist Feminism and Radical Feminism, Social feminism sought to be the anti-

patriarchal and anti-capitalist sect. As liberal advocates, they defend "that what they are advocating is the total liberation for women. Social feminists have spent much time thinking about issues leading to the development of a rich body of feminist thought and practice. Six of the central features of socialist feminism are—*capitalism/class*, *revolution*, *patriarchy*, *psychoanalysis*, *subjectivity and difference*" (p.10). Furthermore, Postmodern Feminism proceeds from modern feminist theories and 'postmodern structural thought'. Their main contention is to expose the inadequacies of modern and traditional feminist theories, female identity and deconstruction of gender ideas. For these feminists, "the last thing a 'girl' should want is to be tied to an identity, whatever it is. In many ways postmodern feminists do not care what that identity is. Unlike Beauvoir's endeavor to address the question what is woman, a postmodern feminist exposes the *power/truth/knowledge* game that defines what woman is.

Existentialist Feminism

As a result of the widespread impact of feminism in political, social, psychological, and existential thought, it brought about theories and principles that encouraged the advancement of philosophical discourse. Simone de Beauvoir entered the arena as the prominent feminist philosopher who in her *Ethics of Ambiguity (1948)*, critiqued G.W.F Hegel in a desire to redefine the source of meaning of an individual, his or her freedom and a contemporary ethical framework. Throughout her *Ethics of Ambiguity (1948)*, Beauvoir disclosed the relation of ambiguity and freedom then apposes (sic) one's freedom and the Other's through the association of this ambiguity to liberation. The primary claim of her proposal is that a person's freedom relies on another's. She argued that as one satisfies the purpose of our existence, one cannot help but fulfill the Other's. Beauvoir contended that a person must assume her/his freedom, the freedom of the Other and deny injustice to oneself and others to attach value to what s/he approves thereby fulfilling her/his existence.

While others claim that her existential ethics is an attempt to pacify the paucity of Jean-Paul Sartre's supposed ethical framework, one can only wonder as to the implications her individualistic structure might present. Beauvoir (1948) began her proposal by stating that a person is free yet this freedom calls for a

paradox where one is both a subject and an object. The ambiguity stems from the fact that one is the subject who controls and at the same time the object controlled by another and in this sense, beings are both free and enslaved; transcendence and facticity will always collide. As such, Beauvoir's description of ambiguity reflects the conflict of transcendence and facticity, and since it is "given that each individual is responsible for providing meaning to his or her existence, it follows that there is no human essence or human nature. Existence precedes essence and any talk of the latter assumes the active participation of the individual existent. Thus, there can be no such thing as a fixed identity for individuals. Individuals create an identity through choosing a project" (Scholz, 2000, p. 20). However, despite Beauvoir's idea of freedom and individual responsibility, the problem occurs when one recognizes the Other. It is highly conspicuous that her ideas in *Ethics of Ambiguit*y rub off the concepts developed in her *The Second Sex*. Moreover, one can anticipate the feminist issues concealed in her ethics. As one approaches the question of the Other in one's individual freedom, one may liken the idea to the patriarchal society where men are the primary individuals and the women, the Other. If man is ready to admit to this individual freedom, then he must also grant the freedom determined to the woman for in accepting his freedom, the freedom of the other is inevitable. "Moral freedom must be valued as an end[s] (*sic*). The individual does so by positively assuming his or her project. That is, humans are attracted to bad faith by the lack of deep identity ontologically. The authentic person rejects bad faith by choosing freedom as an end. One cannot will oneself not free" (p.32). One does not allow herself to allow false values and in favor of societal forces thereby abandoning one's freedom.

Although the concern of female autonomy may appear to have been resolved such that if man is willed to be free, then so should the Other, one is faced with the question of morality or working ethics. Considering that an individual is indeed liberated from passivity, one might suppose that man is free to choose the faith of the other and with the pretense that he does not entitle the Other their freedom and choose to act otherwise. Suppose that one occludes an absolute being in the system, one must also consider as Beauvoir reiterates, that because one rejects an absolute being to which our actions and fate is held responsible, one is left accountable for the appropriate consequences of both our successes and failures that a person alone must

witness and dismantle. The goal, according to Beauvoir's version of existentialist ethics, is for two consciousnesses to exist in perfect reciprocity. This is in contrast with Sartre's emphasis upon the fact that one consciousness necessarily makes the other consciousness an object in its own attempt to assert subjectivity. The genuine moral attitude is characterized by the effort to exist, actively disclosing the world while simultaneously embracing freedom (p. 36) and necessitating the other consciousnesses to also embrace freedom towards a reciprocal recognition of freedoms. Moreover, if one argues that nothing justifies his existence quite in this manner, Beauvoir would contend that one is being dishonest in the notion of freedom.

It is apparent nonetheless that the other or otherness commits to two possible connections. First is that the individual may consider another a social equal. Second is that the individual may consider the Other as submissive or unequal (pp. 36-47). Beauvoir's ontology and ethics come together with her discussions of oppression and oppressed groups; in particular, in *The Second Sex* her discussion of the Otherness of woman illustrates Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel's master/slave dialectic for the situation of woman, and her ethical solution of reciprocity" (p. 41). Throughout her ontology she discusses the predisposed notion of man as the One and woman as the Other[1] which ensues from the social assumptions forcibly imposed on women of which men are the essential absolute. "In defining themselves as the norm or the absolute human type, men have created the category of woman. Beauvoir's analysis of woman's oppression is social constructivist. She argued that woman becomes what she is through learning the expectations and assumptions about her gender. The 'eternal feminine' is the set of characteristics and attributes used to create woman. Man sets up the category of woman in part according to that which he fears in himself. Man seeks to unite the *for-itself* and the *in-itself* in uniting with women. Woman becomes the in-itself for man's for-itself" (p. 42).

[1] "Beauvoir used Sartre's existentialism to produce a distance from 'women (other women, that is)' which enabled her to 'regard women as the Other.' Beauvoir took up the position of the transcendent self, as an honorary man, to describe woman as the other. But 'woman can only be the Other for men; for women, it is man who is the Other'. Indeed, Beauvoir wrestled with a construction of woman as both object and subject: woman is 'an object paradoxically endued with subjectivity' – she sees herself as both self and other" (Bulbeck, 1999, p.15).

In her *Being and Doing: A Cross-Cultural Examination of the Socialization of Males and Females*, Nancy Chodorow (1972) describes the impending sex-role construct plaguing society in the present day as if to echo what Beauvoir has been emphasizing in previous decades; "the tragedy of woman's socialization is not that she is left unclear, as is the man about her basic sexual identity. This identity is ascribed to her, and she does not need to prove to herself or to society that she has earned it or continues to have it. Her problem is that this identity is clearly devalued in the society in which she lives. This does not mean that women too should be required to compete for identity, to be assertive and need to achieve – to 'do' like men. Nor does it suggest that this is not crucial for everyone, men and women alike, to have a stable sexual identity" (Chodorow, p.193). If this is so, it suffices that until a system of identity does not depend on the male role as being the One and refraining from taking the woman as the Other, the task at hand to overthrow the past ideologies is ambiguous. But it is not for one to say that Beauvoir's efforts are to no avail, in so far as there exists some form of awareness in the female spirit that one must strive to diverge from coercive societal norms, and compulsory motherhood one might say that feminist movements and philosophical discourse on gender roles may perpetuate into the system and optimistically alter their devalued position.

Beauvoir concludes in her lengthy study with the vision of the society, disalienated and free of oppression, that she hopes can be furthered by necessary socioeconomic changes which also required the cooperation of free agents among themselves, the legacy which many staunch supporters and believers of Beauvoir hitherto continues.

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