

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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The Second Sex (1949)

Provides the theoretical basis for emergence of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and North America.

“One is not *born*, but rather *becomes*, a woman.”

Beauvoir inaugurates the social constructionist critique of essentialism that occupied feminist literary theory in 1980s and 1990s.

Uncompromising rejection of any notion of a female nature or essence.

This finds echoes in the writings of later feminist theorists like Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler.

The Second Sex is a multidisciplinary essay that draws on and critiques

- History
- Biology
- Anthropology
- Literature
- Psychoanalysis
- Marxism
- Existentialist philosophy

Throughout history women have been reduced to objects for men

Women relegated as “Other” and therefore denied subjectivity

In a patriarchal culture man is the norm and woman the deviation



Such fundamental assumptions dominate social, political and cultural life and how women have internalized this ideology

So women live in a constant state of “inauthenticity”

In essentialist term, patriarchy constructs

- Woman as immanence – stagnation and immersion in nature
- Man as transcendence – continually striving for freedom and authenticity

It impedes women’s struggle to achieve existential freedom and autonomous subjectivity

In first part of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir examines women “objectively” – i.e. as object of analysis

The focus is on various cultural lenses

- Biology
- Psychoanalysis
- Marxism
- History
- Literature
- Myth

Critique of these cultural lenses

In second part she examines women “subjectively” – from the perspective of their own lived experiences

Identifies the processes through which women internalize the ideology of otherness that relegates them to immanence and a position of being man’s Other

Chapter XI

Significance of myths on the daily life of women

Myth of the Eternal Feminine vs. the lived experience of the woman

Essence does not precede existence – i.e. human being is neither less nor more than the sum total of her/his acts

The myth of the Eternal Feminine, takes the values, beliefs, practices, and institutions of women's life and projects them into the Platonic form of timeless and unchanging essences

The myth becomes the only reality – and contrary facts of experience are laid impotent

Woman is thus defined as the absolute Other of man and woman denied any subjectivity

There are also partial myths about femininity – each claiming to be totalizing explanation – which are contradictory

This leads to the biggest myth – women are mysterious, incomprehensible, therefore the Other

Both men and women have the potential for transcendence and immanence

Patriarchy relies on woman's essential immanence and her otherness in constructing male subjectivity

Strategy

Beauvoir's strategy involves complete blurring of fictional and autobiographical ways of knowing the world and gaining a voice as a woman

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir does not distinguish between literary accounts, anecdotes, and more "expert" discourses about women such as psychoanalysis and biology

This technique is central to her project of de-essentializing (tearing down) patriarchal myths

Influenced second wave feminists to construct new discourses about women to counter those from which women's voices had largely been excluded

Criticism

Beauvoir has been accused of masculinist bias in the text

Beauvoir tend to show what men do as transcendent and what women do – childbearing, motherhood, housework – as immanent

Economic independence is seen as the cornerstone of women's liberation, whereas motherhood is shown to be inauthentic

Julia Kristeva points that Beauvoir fails to see that even motherhood can be an active and authentic choice and even a form of transcendence

Writes for the white, middle class, well educated European women

Conclusion

Mainly based on Sartrean existentialism

The Second Sex was revolutionary in its own time

The issues connected with the feminine – child bearing, motherhood, housework – cannot be active choice in the absence of economic liberalisation

Offers a powerful analysis of the status of women

Remains a foundational text for feminist theory