Simone de Beauvoir - The Second Sex

Introduction:
Simone de Beauvoir, French modern feminist philosopher and novelist, was born in Paris in January 1908 into a middle class milieu. At early age she studied philosophy and was educated at the Sorbonne. The publication of her book, *The Second Sex*, in 1949, a philosophical and a feminist accomplishment, made of her an eminent figure in the history of women’s emancipation. She died in 1986.

1- Simone de Beauvoir: Historical and philosophical context:
- Feminism:
  Political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing more rights and legal protection for women. It involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender differences, women’s rights and interests.
- Socialist and Marxist feminism:
  Connect the oppression of women to Marxist ideas about exploitation, oppression and labor. See the relation between class oppression and gender oppression
- Existentialism:
  Man’s existence defines his essence.
  A human condition into which man and woman are thrown equally into existence without self definition, they realize their being through their engagement in the world.
  Freedom, choice, and responsibility.
  Anxiety, fear, death.
  Women should engage themselves.

2- The Second Sex: The central thesis:
Women have been always forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men “the whole feminine history have been man made. *(The Second Sex).*

3- De Beauvoir’s story in The Second Sex:
What is a woman?
“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”
Sex and Gender.
To what extent is the “construction of gender a self reflexive process”?
In what sense do we construct ourselves, and in that process become our gender?

4- Woman’s situation:
The other- inessential.
Master – Slave dialectics
Reciprocity and oppression *(Mitsein)* (Being with).
Why are women’s otherness and inequality possible?
Why has not women’s otherness resulted in “reciprocity”, but has enabled man to objectify her?
Why is it that the males find in women more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed?
In revealing that women have become “other”, is de Beauvoir pointing to a path of self recovery?

5- The philosophical framework of the Second Sex:
Three philosophical distinctions and a philosophical anthropology.
- Distinction between subject and other:
  Man: subject, absolute, transcendent.
  Female: submissiveness, dependence, immanence, subordination.
- Actions and functions:
  Actions: means where one sets goals, creativity and self realization. Mainly male category.
  Functions: vital processes and instinctual forms of behavior- mostly female category.
- Transcendence and immanence:
  Transcendence: activity, freedom from biological life, burst out from the present into the future. Freedom: A human being as a conscious being chooses and makes himself whatever he becomes. Human existence is freedom.
  Love: “Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other: neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For the one and the other, love would be revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world”. (The Second Sex).
  Immanence: passivity, submission to biological facts, restriction to situation.
  Narcissism: escaping the anguish of freedom.
  A woman giving herself supreme importance when unable to fulfill herself through projects and activities.
  Mysticism: Seeking to be the supreme object of a supreme subject
- Philosophical anthropology:
  What is a human being?
  Free and autonomous being.
  A historical reality.
  Having a body to negotiate the world and to step to the future. “The body is not a thing, it is a situation”
  The female body.
  Limits woman’s transcendence.
  Saps her potentials for engaging in creative activity.
  Marriage.

Is Beauvoir under evaluating that element of freedom which can be present in parenthood and the activities associated with it? Should woman be understood on the basis of her limitations or possibilities?

6- Male’s supremacy and grandeur:
Man’s superiority.
Historical tradition: “Historically the specific difference between men and women is that the female has been the victim or prey, of the species, destined to produce, but not to create, to repeat, but not to invent, to suffer but not to subdue…” (The Second Sex).
Why have men been able effectively to deny women their subjectivity and impose upon them conditions where free transcendence is not possible?
Is de Beauvoir’s description of women’s situation still relevant in the 21st century?
Has Women’s internalized idea about male grandeur and superiority disappeared?
Has women’s education and entry into the public sphere obliterated her adherence to the neo-patriarchal mentality?
Conclusion:

The legacy of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second sex*:
De Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born a woman” laid important roots for modern feminist study of gender.
De Beauvoir’s message in the second Sex:
Woman’s oppression cannot be overcome completely, except within the framework of human oppression. The situation of women may have been made such that they are unable to recognize that they are oppressed.

Is it true that had the female principle not been subordinated to the male principle, society would not have developed?
Does the devaluation of women represent a necessary stage in the history of humanity?”
“All oppression creates a state of war”... Only when oppression ceases, will genuine solidarity be possible between men and women.

De Beauvoir’s last words in *The Second Sex*:
“...It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given. To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation, men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.”

Selected Bibliography

Feminism

The Feminist Mystique

equality

unfulfilled

liberation

mistake

Simone De Beauvoir

THE SECOND SEX

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