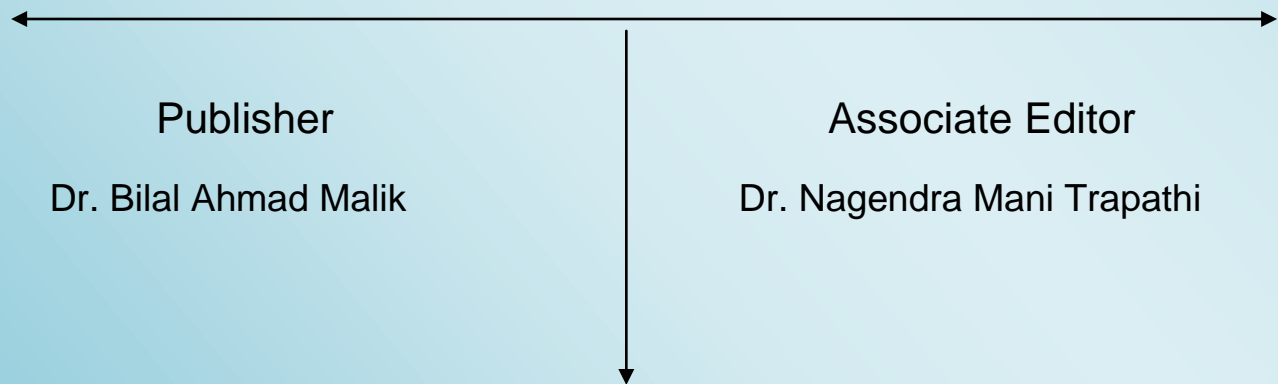


North Asian International Research Journal Consortium

*North Asian International Research Journal of
Social Science & Humanities*

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NAIRJC JOURNAL PUBLICATION

North Asian
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ISSN NO: 2454 - 9827

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OPPRESSION IN SELF/ OTHER RELATIONS: LOOKING FROM SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S PHILOSOPHY

RICHA SHUKLA*

***Research Scholar, Centre for Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi -110067, India**

On the basis of the discussion of the gendered self in the previous section, I wish to take up the concept of *Oppression* which is an important concept in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and later in *The Second Sex*. In the previous section I focused on *gendered self* and its repercussions in the form of *lived experience*. How body becomes a form of oppression could be seen in film like *Matrubhoomi*,¹ where the central character named Kalki, is facing genealogy of subjection because of her body alone. Here patriarchy situates itself in her body which results in the form of forced sex as well as marital rape. This movie showcases beautifully the relationship the trio that exists between body, oppression as well as patriarchy. How body becomes a form of oppression which gets situated in the hand of patriarchy. This could be very easily seen practically in the cases of rapes, acid attacks where it's solely girl's body where the oppression gets situated itself. Whether it is the 16th December gang rape case² or the recent acid attacks where it was at the easiest for the others to fore play with women's life. Or recently where in Pakistan a woman named Farzana Iqbal whose family stoned her to death in the name of honor killing.

Not only this but the incident when in West Bengal a girl was kidnapped and brutally gang raped and left at the outskirts of the city when the parents approached the police they initially refused to file a complaint and the parents were forced to sit all night in the police station. After a prolonged struggle the FIR was registered. While heading back, the girl was kidnapped again by those goons and gang raped again. Again the police refused to file a complaint. Once when they found the girl to be alone in the house, they burnt her alive. Here it's important to diagnose this incident from two perspectives as firstly that girl lost her life because of patriarchy and oppression as well as the attitude that persists from the police too is full of misogynistic oppression. All these

¹ This Indian movie was made in the year 2003 by Indian filmmaker Manish Jha, produced by Patrick Sobelman and Pankaj Kharbanda.

² 16th December 2013 was the date when in New Delhi a girl was gang raped near a place named Munirka in a moving bus. She was gang raped by 5 people of whom two were minor. After resisting and fighting for 10 days she couldn't survive and died.

instances points towards gender, oppression as well as patriarchy. Also is it not oppression which a woman faces as daughter-in-law, with her mother in law when she is burnt alive for dowry? What about the female face in patriarchy? It is this oppression which I would try to address in this section of my present chapter.

The Ethics of Ambiguity dawns with the concepts like freedom, transcendence. “Because this essay comprises the formulation of her ethics, its main claim is not that the human being is transcendence but that he or she should be. Beauvoir equates transcendence with the will to disclose being and to confirm oneself as freedom, the authentic as opposed to the inauthentic seeking of being.”³ Before trying to understand Beauvoir’s concept of oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, it becomes essential to comprehend why this oppression occurs? This always happens when one’s freedom and space is sabotaged by another, humans nature lies in oppressing the other selves around. But she believes that “my freedom in order to fulfill itself requires that it emerges into an open future, it is other men who open the future to me, and it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future.”⁴ In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues that the very condition of human existence is ambiguous in nature. Here she endeavors disclosing freedom and situation by citing examples of different human beings. She impels the situation of a child, as they live in the world which doesn’t give them any liberty to change what they don’t like. In this way, they lead quiet a protective life, as he does not have to face the repercussions of his decision as neither he/ she takes the decision, neither need to face the heat of it. As she explicates:

*The child’s situation is characterized by his finding himself cast into a universe which he has not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without him, and which appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit. The world in which he lives is a serious world, since the characteristic of the spirit of seriousness is to consider values as ready-made things. He feels himself happily irresponsible. The real world is that of adults where he is allowed only to respect and obey.*⁵

Similarly she argues that there are certain groups of people in society who are obliged to live in an infantile world because they have been kept in a state of slavery and ignorance, such as black slaves in the Southern American States or woman in patriarchal societies. The difference that persists between the situation of a child and a western woman, it lies in while the former is forced to do what others say, where as the latter choose or gives their consent to, their situation. She writes, “The child’s situation is imposed upon him, whereas the

³ Gothlin- Lundgren- Eva, *Sex and Existence*, p. 32

⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 82

⁵ Ibid, p. 35

woman chooses it or at least consents to it.”⁶ Though, this cannot be compared to the situatedness of a black slave in the 18th century and the Muslim woman forced to remain in a harem. They lack means to challenge their oppression. “The Negro slave of the eighteenth century, the Mohammedan woman is enclosed in a harem have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them.”⁷ While analyzing about human relationships, she holds that they are inter- subjective in nature it is inter dependence which calls upon oppression in human life. She writes, “To will oneself free and to will that there be *being* are one and the same choice, the choice that man makes of himself as a presence in the world.”⁸ It is these inter dependence which results in oppression as well. According to Tidd:

*Beauvoir observes that it is the mutual dependence within our relationships with others which explains how oppression exists at all, and why it is unacceptable. Oppression creates two classes of people- those who parasitically depend on the oppression of the other, and who forge ahead in spite of itself.*⁹

It is always through others that one can attain freedom; it is by them as a means that one can attain the end. She comments as well:

*It is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved, then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing.*¹⁰

The moment these others try making me an object and forces me fall to immanence, violence becomes essential. At times violence is required as well as essential to regain my freedom. This transcendence is given to us all, but not all are able to get it or exercise it, and therefore lack to realize their aims; “Every man transcends himself. But it happens that this transcendence is condemned to fall useless back upon itself because it is cut off

58. Beauvoir de Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.38

⁷ Ibid., p. 38

⁸ Ibid., p. 70

⁹ Tidd, *Gender and Testimony*, p. 28

¹⁰ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 83

from its goals. This is what defines a situation of oppression.”¹¹ Each and every individual is immanence as well as transcendence, the moment one is oppressed, then transcendence is “condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals.”¹² The relation between the oppressed and the oppressor lies in one regulating the other, the oppressor always tries to make the oppressed believe that the state (to which he is accustomed right now after being oppressed) is perfectly habitual. Recently one of the Member of Parliament gave a statement on moral policing of women; he said that women shouldn’t step outside their home after 10, as they might get raped. As Sally writes, “When the oppressed sees their situation as natural, the oppressor has succeeded in *mystifying* them, through degradation of the oppressed, the oppressor gains strength. Mystification keeps the oppressed from wanting liberation because he or she cannot see it as an option.”¹³

So, the demystification is the key to freedom and liberation, in this way all the oppression, exploitation as well as suppression would be subverted. In, this course of de- mystification Beauvoir doesn’t portray ‘others’ as hell to selves, paradoxical it may sound but for her our freedom is defined by the other’s freedom:

*“A freedom is interested only in denying freedom must be denied....[To] be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom.”*¹⁴

Here she tries to argue that the individual is hence and forth oppressed her/ his acts would be blocked or hampered by the outside world. As “Mystification is one of the forms of oppression”¹⁵. While discussing oppression, she brings in the concept of *lived experience*, as she believes that one has a firsthand experience of the emotions going through which would always be asymmetrical to others. In this way, one would always have superiority over others when it comes to their situatedness. As she gives the example of a Jew or a Black, they would be able to empathies with the genealogy of subjection they are going through because they have the lived experience of being oppressed and dominated by which others won’t have.

Beauvoir acknowledges that it is more appropriate that black people struggle for other black people, Jews for Jews, women for other women, and so on. To belong to an oppressed group is to have lived experience f

¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.81

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81

¹³ Sally, *Existential Ethics*, p. 38

¹⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 91

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98

oppression that cannot be shared by an individual who chooses to express solidarity with the struggle of another oppressed individual.¹⁶

She holds that freedom lies both at the individual as well as at the collective level too, with freedom comes responsibility, “to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future.”¹⁷ It is basically universal solidarity about what she is pondering over.

To will man free is to will there to *be* being, it is to will the disclosure of being in the joy of existence; in order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness.

The way oppression is being seen in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a way different than seeing in *The Second Sex*. Where as in *The Second Sex*, the mode of oppression as well as the way it operates has been gendered by Beauvoir. Carol explains it: “Within *The Second Sex*, a strong, angry pen describes the plight of women at times seeing to grind them down in a one- dimensional oppression, as if the degree to which she had not measured her own hurts is balanced by the weight of her argument about the hurts of other women.”¹⁸ While closely observing Beauvoir’s concept of oppression as propounded in *The Second Sex*, one could see many concepts intervened with each other, i.e. firstly she tries seeing it that why woman has become the *other* which doesn’t give a cogent answer. It is here that she talks about concepts like transcendence as well as immanence which rest it on the gender stereo typical roles as propounded by the society. She explicates, “I have already stated that when two human categories are together, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other.”¹⁹ This illustrates how oppression operates as well as how hegemony is very much part of our everyday relationships with the others. She considers these three as sources of woman’s oppression, though they shouldn’t be considered solely as the sole oppressions, though they fail to address the cause as why woman is the other. Biology which deals with women’s body and forces her to be in immanence (has been discussed in the previous section).

¹⁶ Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 42

¹⁷ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p.91

¹⁸ Carol, *A Life of Freedom*, p. 130

¹⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 91

She concludes her chapter named *Destiny* by holding that: “so it is that we reject for the same reason both the sexual monism of Freud and the economic Monism of Engels.”²⁰ As a psychoanalyst the interpretation would be based on two factors, firstly taking woman as a phenomena and secondly and this presumption based itself on masculine protest. Whereas for the Marxist, sexuality more or less signifies economic situation.

Engel’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* discusses the development of the state and class society. Engel’s argument about the oppression of women rests itself on the premiss which sees the oppression of woman as a historical event but not as a natural occurrence. He argues that primitively, the society was matriarchal in nature therefore it doesn’t have patriarchy as its nature and characteristic. Therefore the nature and culture of society was not patriarchal in nature as always illustrated by main stream authors, and propounded by myths where as patriarchy came when economic factors started flourishing and coming in that era, i.e., emergence of private property. He holds that in primitive societies the division of labor was based on equality, as man was held accountable for activities like hunting and fishing whereas woman were held accountable for gardening and household works. Problem arises when: “Private property appears: master of slaves and land, man also becomes the proper tier of the woman. This is the ‘great historical defeat of the female sex’. It is explained by the disruption of the division of labor brought about by the invention of new tools.”²¹

This not only raised the rift but also “created a stimulus to utilize this strengthened position in order to overthrow the traditional order of inheritance in favor of his children.”²² Beauvoir critiques Engels for giving this one sided understanding of the oppression of women where he is over glorifying the cause of economic factor is not worth it. The argument put forward by Beauvoir lies itself on the fact that Engels lacked in explaining the origin of this private property, as well as for him the cause of this oppression lies in division of labor and the surplus released. Beauvoir critiques this notion of Engels which first rests itself only on the basis of economic factors. She tries making a relationship between creative labor and individualization on the one hand whereas drive for personal possession. Though, she never debunked the idea of economic factor, though she has disagreements of taking it solely as the cause of women’s oppression. She writes: “....Saw clearly that woman’s muscular weakness became a real point of inferiority only in its relation to the bronze and iron tool; but he did not

²⁰ Ibid.,p. 92

²¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 64

²² Ibid., p. 65

see that the limitations of her capacity for labor constituted in themselves a concrete disadvantage only in a certain perspective.”²³

Marriage, motherhood and prostitution in which she strives to explain the cause of women’s situatedness into immanence as well as the reason for their oppression. She sees marriage as an institution which traps a woman to oppression. The repercussions of marriage varies from male to female, for a male marriage is never a destiny, whereas for a female it is made to be her destiny, an end in itself. As there is nothing reproductive or creative in the role assigned to her as a housewife, so dignity and respect becomes a utopia for her. “The young girl’s freedom of choice has always been much restricted; and celibacy- apart from the rare cases in which it bears a sacred character- reduced her to the rank of parasite and pariah; marriage is her only means of support and the sole justification of her existence.”²⁴ Marriage is nothing apart from enslavement for a woman, she is just been employed as a commodity whose life is confined only to certain roles and duties which are assigned to her by this institution. She is thwarted by doing household work, gratifying her husband’s sexual needs and rendering the role of a mother. She further explains it:

*Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co- operation in the building of the collective future: he incarnates transcendence. A woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home- i.e. to say, to immanence. The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time, to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while inter- communicating with others it should find self- confirmation.*²⁵

Unfavorable profiteering happens in arranged marriage “she is married, given in marriage by her parents.”²⁶ Not only has this but marriage acted as consent for woman a permission which she gets from the society which permits her for sexual activity. “Social mores are such that premarital or extramarital sexual inter course is viewed as acceptable or even expected for men but not for women. Because of the connection between the erotic function and the reproductive function in woman, a connection not found in men, marriage lends an ethical status to woman’s erotic life and thereby intends to suppress it.”²⁷ She construes marriage as something which “obscene

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 66

²⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 67

²⁵ Ibid., p. 430

²⁶ Ibid., p. 437

²⁷ Scholz, *On De Beauvoir*, p. 63

in principle in so far as it transforms into rights and duties those mutual relations which should be founded on a spontaneous urge; it gives an instrumental and therefore degrading character to the two bodies in dooming them to know each other in their general aspect as bodies, not as persons.”²⁸ But, the marriage is transformed when economic equality comes as well as when men starts participating as well as probing into the domestic sphere.

Beauvoir juxtaposes marriage with prostitution. While arguing this the eminence of Engels in her argument could be witnessed, as this argument rests itself economically as well. As a married woman sells her body throughout life to her husband, where as it's the same for a prostitute as well, with the difference being conversion of human beings, but still there persists a difference. Though the wife who is married and is legally a wife, is oppressed as a married woman is still respected as a human being but its not the case with a prostitute. As previously said, her concept of oppression as elucidated in *The Second Sex*, is intervened with quiet a couple of concepts among them transcendence and immanence resides. Tidd comments:

*Beauvoir argues that man has assumed the position of universal subject, and woman is positioned as relative 'Other', or objects of male consciousness. Society is consequently structured to perpetuate patriarchal ideology and woman is maintained in an inferior position. This persistence of patriarchal ideology throughout history has enabled men to assume that they have a right to maintain woman in a subordinate state and woman have internalized and adapted to this oppressive state.*²⁹

Now, the question arises, what led woman to fall in this sphere? Where always they are at the receiving end. Beauvoir traces the cause in the historical background of woman, which commences from their body to the gender roles that are assigned. Women is wrecked to immanence, she is assigned this place, the passive one. Whereas men always belonged to transcendence. This hegemony has been exercised almost everywhere. The exemplar has always been set up by men and it is the women who are forced to follow them. She holds that transcendence and immanence is dyadic in nature. As firstly, Beauvoir discloses it as the role it plays in the oppression of women, secondly not only she critiques it but also sees it as part of the situatedness of a woman. These both have to be seen as the one invigorating the male and the other as infirming the female.

Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interests to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co- operation in the building of the collective future: he

²⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 433

²⁹ Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 51

incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home- that is to say, to immanence.³⁰

She discusses the relationship between mother and her daughter, in which also one form of oppression comes as she argues, the mother doesn't like when her daughter wears short dress or roams out accordingly as even she didn't got freedom to explore this.

The approach taken by Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as well as *The Second Sex*, in regard to oppression is different from the way it gets apprehended. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* oppression is seen as well as taken universal in nature, i.e. the fight against oppression won't be possible unless and until universal solidarity wont exists. It is over here that they *lived experience* is considered and analyzed. Where as in *The Second Sex*, the oppression is gendered in nature; it has been aimed by Beauvoir to demystify the myths associated with it. Also to trace the historicity of ideas which are related to it.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 419

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