

UNTANGLING THE WEB: FROM THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVE

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Through out, I tried to unravel the ambiguousness of the self and other relationship while deliberating upon different aspects associated to it. The lived experience, love, care, oppression, recognition, reciprocity, feelings, old age and many other factors play a momentous role in the evolution of the self-other relationship. It nourishes the way we comprehend the self-other relationship. While continuing the debate, I aim to critically explore concepts such as women, body and oppression in Beauvoir's philosophy. By doing this, I do not intend to discuss the limitations in her philosophy.¹ Rather, I would try to critically examine these Beauvoirian concepts from a third world perspective. As third world is in itself very colossal in nature, so to be more specific, I would be arguing from the perspective of present geo-political regime. The aim is to juxtapose these concepts as propounded by Beauvoir and re-read them in view of the contemporary geo-politics which surrounds and influences feminine existence.

Re-knowing Women

The present section aims to look into the concept of Women cited by her in *The Second Sex*, as well as to bring out the ambiguities which make it problematic in nature. How this concept has affected her as well as what she thinks about being a woman has already been discussed in the first chapter (which deals with the diaries of a philosophy student). Scholz remarks that:

1999 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of The Second Sex, a book that radically changed how women understand themselves, their relationships, and the social expectations of their gender. Even 50 years after its publication, The Second Sex remains unmatched in its scope

¹ As being a student I am learning to read Beauvoir, therefore I have an understanding of Beauvoir and I am limited by that understanding and knowledge as well.

and depth of analysis. No other book has so profoundly influenced the situation and status of woman all over the world. This monumental work on woman, grounded in existentialism, is the work of Simone de Beauvoir.²

In the same way her younger sister (Helene de Beauvoir) on asking about *The Second Sex*, concluded:

*I liked The Second Sex when I first read it. She wrote about so many things I had thought but could not express. She taught me a lot. It is a wonderful book, and it's still considered a very important book about women. Nobody has written a more important book, so modern. She said herself she was a little optimistic about a socialist world being a cure-all for women. That is not true because even if there were a perfect world for men, it would never be a perfect world for women-women have to struggle for themselves.*³

The Second Sex, not only gathered acknowledgement and appreciation but it has also gone through widespread criticism and scrutinization⁴. As previously stated, this section deals with her concept of woman, which bears close relation with essentialism and nominalism (these concepts have been discussed in the second chapter of my dissertation). Dealing with the conceptual question, In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir critiques conceptualism as well as nominalism where she holds that these two philosophical traditions fails in analyzing woman and have their own detriments. The most pertinent line which defines woman in her work is, “There is no essence that constitutes being a woman; One is not born, but rather becomes a woman⁵”. This definition is illustrated by Beauvoir in accordance to her rejection of these two philosophical concepts. “Woman have unjustifiably been designated as second, and as other than men⁶”. She clasp that women has been labeled to be the other, they are made the other. Or when she says “man is the self; woman has to be the other. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being.”⁷ Women are assigned to work as housewives, take care of children, do all the unproductive work, and therefore prone to immanence. She even quotes how Manu defines woman: “Whatever be the qualities of the man with whom a woman is united according to the law, such qualities even she assumes, like a river united with the ocean, and she is admitted after death to the same celestial paradise.”⁸

² Scholz, *On de Beauvoir*, p. 1

³ Forster, Suttons, *Daughters of de Beauvoir*, p. 11

⁴ Few of them have been bought up in the Introduction, see page no. 2

⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 293

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16

⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 92

In an interview given to Gerradi Beauvoir responds:

Through The Second Sex I became aware of the struggle needed. I understood that the vast majority of women simply did not have the choices that I had, that women are in fact, defined and treated as a second sex by a male oriented society whose structure would totally collapse if that orientation was genuinely destroyed.⁹

Here she beautifully expounds the cause of patriarchy as well as the necessity to dismantle it. After illustrating pith of Beauvoir's concept of women¹⁰. But one could question the nature of this concept as well as the approach. Here I endeavor to augment the discourse by bringing in philosophers like Judith Butler, Sharmila Rege Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai.¹¹ Here Butler talks about gender as constituted in her essay named, 'Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. Where she writes:

When Simone de Beauvoir claims, 'one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.' She is appropriating and re interpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gendered off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality.¹²

In that way if one follows Beauvoir's concept then all of us have to imbibe and learn that what it is to be a man or a woman. Butler here uses the phrase *hetero sexual matrix* which is like a frame work composed by institutions, practices and discourses. Then this becoming is never complete, it keeps on moving from one moment to the other. Following Beauvoir's view that one is not born, rather becomes a woman, our identity is very fluid in nature, the becoming gives a fixed sexual identity or orientation to one self. In this way, this becoming is never

⁹ Gerradi, 'Twenty Five Years after The Second Sex', p. 2. www.marxist.org/reference/subject/ethics, accessed on 4/07/2014

¹⁰ As it has been discussed in detail in the second chapter. See page no.5-15

¹¹ Though it won't be possible to do justice to all these renewed writers and philosophers as it's a M.Phil dissertation. Also in this regard it would be interesting to see the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article *Under the Western Eyes*, where she argues from the third world perspective of Woman.

¹² Butler, *Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, p. 1- 2

complete in nature. Butler writes: “there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denote a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety.”¹³ Beauvoir’s concept of woman suffers from the same impediment. She assigns this term to all the women without even considering the discrepancies among them. In that way, it would be to put all of them on the same scaffold. Though in *The Second Sex*, she does talk about African, Negro Women. But does this womanhood could be applied to the present geo-political regime, to India? Would it be justified to make this concept homogeneous in nature? As the very concept of woman is so heterogeneous in nature? As this concept is unsettled in nature, also because multiculturalism has been ignored. I aim to explore these horizons by bringing in Contemporary Indian Writers like Guru, Sarukkai as well as Rege. As illustrated above, this concept of woman carries the possibility to have a re-reading from a third world perspective.

The way caste, and gender is intertwined in India, it would be engaging to see the intersection that lies between them in the present geo political regime notably in the light of Beauvoir’s concept of woman. Woman as a heterogeneous category becomes as heterogeneous as it never was when it gets painted with the colors of caste, class, race ethnicity. Here I would be bringing the discourse of a dalit women. As they face jeopardy of triple oppression in her life. Though Beauvoir sees as well as discusses oppression in literature, mythology but she lacks in discussing the eventual possibility of this concept. According to Sonalkar, “Pranjali Bandhu quotes Ruth Mano-Rama characterizing dalit women as being thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class, and gender.”¹⁴ So there are contemporary works which have exhibited this heterogeneity of woman, as when not only because of gender but because of caste and class as well. Beauvoir’s work suffers from this limitation as she didn’t go beyond certain categories in womanhood, therefore when it comes to future discourse then it became quite limited and rigid in nature. According to Khare:

*R.S. Khare clearly argued that Dalit women gear not only the personal and social dishonor but as well as the physical safety. Within the home, Dalit Women often suffered from verbal and physical abuse at the hands of their fathers and brothers, raped by their father-in-law, or brother-in-law, forcefully subjugated to fulfill the pleasure of their husband, domestic and sexual violence.*¹⁵

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 6

¹⁴ Sonalkar, ‘Towards a Feminism of Caste: Gender and Caste’, p. 2. Accessed from www.oldhimalmag.com on 10/07/2014

¹⁵ Tomar, ‘Dalit Feminism: A transformation of Rejection to Resistance’, p. 1. Accessed from www.thecriterion.com on 15/07/2014

The lines written above clearly exhibits the place of dalit women in Indian society and this is just one among the many who are still invisible as well as silent. Renowned Dalit Feminist Sharmila Rege¹⁶, raised the same problem which the main stream feminism is going through. In her book, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* she talks about this oppression that a Dalit woman faces, she talks about ‘genderless caste’ and ‘casteless gender’, the “problem of invisibility of a dalit women.”¹⁷ It is this problem that she addresses in her book, when she takes up the testimonies. It dealt with innumerable aspects of oppression that a dalit woman goes through. But it still remains invisible. And these are just few cases which have come to be known still many are unknown and so is their oppression. When Beauvoir illustrates her concept of woman which puts all the woman into one category. After reading her concept from the present regime a further re reading is possible.

Not only this, As in *The Cracked Mirror*¹⁸ a flawless example is given when Guru gives the example of Dalit women who faces tripartite oppression by her family members, other Brahmin women (where she works) as well as in the community as whole. Here he has illustrated an example that how a dalit women who works as a domestic worker in an upper caste family goes through oppression, by her master who is an upper caste Brahmin woman. There are enough cases to justify this argument as like when two dalit women were raped and later on murdered and hanged on the tree.¹⁹ It would be apt to bring in the reporting of Sabrina’s Buckwalter she writes about the incident that happened in Khairlanji, near Nagpur-

*This place has an unremarkable settlement of brick huts and cement houses. There was always a gaping silence in this village, even before September 29 when an upper caste mob according to eye witnesses, paraded a mother, and her 17 year old (Buddhist family) daughter naked, raped and killed them. Two other members of the family, brothers aged 19 and 21 too were murdered. Their bodies were dumped in canal.*²⁰

It is all these incidents which makes the concept of woman swank in nature which Beauvoir lacks. This can also be depicted from the movie named *The Help*²¹. This movie was based on the 2009 novel named *The same name*. Though covering many themes it gives prominence to the relationship between a journalist, a white woman (who

¹⁶ This book was written by Rege in 1999. This book is divided into two parts. This book features the testimonies of eight dalit women. These testimonies bears the deprivation a dalit women faces which starts from poverty, hunger, domestic violence and above all untouchability.

¹⁷ Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s testimonies*, p. 3

¹⁸ *The Cracked Mirror* is a book written by Gopal Guru and Sunder Sarukkai, which focuses on the debate between theory and experience.

¹⁹ This incident happened in June in Badau, in Uttar Pradesh.

²⁰ This article was published in the newspaper *The Times Of India*, on October 29, 2006

²¹ This movie was an American movie which came in 2011, which was written and directed by Tate Taylor. It stars Emma stone, Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer and many others. It carries the line saying change begins with a whisper.

wants to write a book on the condition of the black maids working in white families) and two black maids. This movie exquisitely brings in the relationship between different women and how power relationship works within them. How far would it be justified to screen all of them as women. This movie not only discusses the oppression that a black woman faces but also showcases and highlights that how this concept of Woman is so profound and therefore hegemony in this is bound to occur. Beauvoir's position is legitimate when she holds that the very concept of Women is ambiguous in nature and one should try not to define it but this concept suffers from some limitations in itself which I have tried bringing here in the present section.