

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR THE SECOND SEX (1949)

“Introduction”

"What is a woman?" is the principal question posed by Simone de Beauvoir in a book that is widely seen as (one of) the most important starting points of all Feminist inquiry in the Twentieth Century. To answer this, she begins by noting that the "biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro" (42). In other words, there is no pre-given essence or unchanging, universal definition of femininity. Gesturing towards Sartre's notion of intersubjectivity, De Beauvoir suggests that in order to define the nature of womanhood, one must conceptualise it relationally, i.e. in terms of the Self/Other dialectic which defines, according to Hegel, human consciousness. She argues that the Self/Other dichotomy in general and the Male/female binary in particular is fundamental to Western thought. "Otherness," she asserts, is a "fundamental category of human thought" (44) because "no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself" (44). Indeed, the "subject can be posed only in being opposed--he sets himself as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (45). According to Hegel, she reminds her readers, there is in consciousness a fundamental hostility towards other consciousnesses: the "subject can be posed only in being opposed--he sets himself as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (45). It is not the "Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One" (45).

In so arguing, what De Beauvoir provides here is a crucial insight into the precise structure of patriarchy, to be precise, the dialectical nature of the relationship between male and female. (Human civilisation has historically been patriarchal or male-dominated.) Males have historically sought at all costs to distinguish themselves from females, predicating certain qualities deemed positive of themselves and their *binary opposites* of women in a process that has been termed '*othering*.' One of the most important "benefits" (51) that such a process of "oppression" (51) "confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to feel superior" (51) and the "most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women" (51). Men profit from the myth of their superiority which arises from the "otherness, the alterity of woman" (52). It is little wonder, then, that so many men in all the various disciplines have "striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (49). (What De Beauvoir offers here is evidently a far cry from the Marxist definition of patriarchy as side-effect of the economic structure of society.)

Woman is accordingly "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" (44). Man discursively constructs woman as his binary opposite. Where she is the "incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential" (44), he is the "Subject, he is the Absolute--she is the Other" (44). Man "represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (43). Woman is defined by her Woman's ovaries, her uterus, "imprison her in her subjectivity" (43). Man's anatomy does not impinge in the same way upon his conception of his own subjectivity: he "thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (43).

In short, De Beauvoir writes, humanity is "male and man defines woman not in

herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (44). This poses a problem for women. How can woman step outside this dialectic and envisage herself and the world in ways not constrained or dictated by male perceptions of women? Every individual, she writes,

concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects. . . . [W]hat particularly signalizes the situation of woman is that she--a free and autonomous being like all creatures--nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. . . . The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject--who always regards the self as the essential--and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. (55-6)

Accordingly, she points out, the crucial questions which present themselves to women are: "How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? . . . How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency?" (55-6). To put this another way, how can woman redefine herself (in other words, how can she revolutionise her self-perception) in the wake of centuries of misogyny in ways untainted by dominant male perceptions? 'How can she find her own voice?' is a question endlessly taken up by other Feminists subsequently.

De Beauvoir avers that there are deep similarities to be discerned between the oppressed situation of the female and those of the Jew and the negro. She contends that whether

it is a race, a caste, a class, or a sex that is reduced to a position of inferiority, the methods of justification are the same. 'The eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul' and to 'the Jewish character.' (50)

This is a point which Fanon develops in his The Wretched of the Earth.