

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S THE SECOND SEX (1949): THE ADVENT OF A RADICAL CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: Postmodernism, consumerism and Post-industrial society have a cultural continuum with prominence in cultural studies across the globe. With their mutually clubbed rise directly linked to the technological changes, the accumulated impact of these trends and ideas in cultural sphere is immense. Even the literary and journalistic productions are not spared from them. Amidst its wide processes is the question of gender, construction and manipulation of female body in the digital world. The popular culture in post-industrial society appears a liberated space, more so for women who dominate advertisements as well as the whole set of virtual reality available to us. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir is a seminal text in understanding how a gendered reality along with its pre-modern cultural linkages has evolved through and made a huge formative influence on the behavioral aspect of mankind across national and cultural boundaries. But the problematic aspects are many, particularly with regard of the notions of subjectivity, identity and reality which have gained currency under its impact. It may, therefore, be appropriate to have a cursory look at the radical changes that these cultural changes have initiated and precipitated in the study of cultural studies with wide ramifications of feminist readings of popular culture. In these new contexts, there is a deep crisis of the recognizable 'authentic self' in discourse and outside in forms of praxis, the writings of Simone de Beauvoir pose a resistance to these potential dangers. This paper will cite specific examples from *The Second Sex* that foreground Simone's views on interconnections of language, gender and power and how they illustrate her positioning of resistance from the inside of Western epistemology and further cultural discourse including feminist studies.

Keywords: Consumerism, Feminism, Popular Culture Postmodernism.

Introduction: Philosophy has unavoidable ramifications towards the making and unmaking of cultural practices. Feminist thinkers have played a pivotal role in deciding the character and direction of cultural studies. Though 'Cultural Studies' in itself began with a resistance to these ideas and ideological practices. But gradually it is being acknowledged as the real thrust of this area of cultural understanding. Further, Feminist thought has also transformed the nature and direction of discourse in Humanities and literary studies. These areas are now a comparatively more open and liberal area of knowledge with particular emphasis and clarity on the rights of women. A simplistic definition of this powerful trend is: "Feminism is a recent term, coined in the nineteenth century, but its intellectual history goes back over half a millennium. Simply defined, feminism is the belief that women have the same human capacities as men... This central insight has evolved over the centuries into a variety of feminist ideas that continue to inspire political movements throughout the world" (*The Essential Feminist Reader*: 2007, XI). Along with Feminism, Postmodernism, Consumerism and Post-industrial society have a cultural continuum with growing prominence in cultural studies across the globe. With their mutually clubbed rise directly linked to the technological changes, the accumulated impact of these trends and ideas in cultural sphere is immense. Even the literary and journalistic productions are not isolated from these changes. These deeply ideological processes deal with the intricate issues of gender construction and manipulation of female body in a digital world. The popular culture in post-industrial society appears a liberated space, more so for women who dominate advertisements as well as the whole set of virtual reality available to us. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir is a seminal text in understanding how a gendered reality along with its pre-modern cultural linkages has evolved to influence the behavioral aspect of mankind across national and cultural boundaries. But the

problematic aspects are many, particularly with regard to the very notions of subjectivity, identity and reality which have been raised by various streams of feminism and also arising out of the postmodern philosophy. It may, therefore, be appropriate to have a look at the radical changes that these cultural changes have initiated and precipitated in the study of cultural studies with wide ramifications of feminist readings of popular culture. *The Second Sex* foregrounds Simone's views on interconnections of language, gender and power and how they illustrate her positioning of resistance from the inside of Western epistemology. It is a text of special cultural implications – breaking boundaries of gender as well as disciplines. Its basic vantage point is culture as praxis through the route of hard cemented consciousness perpetually self-reflexive in its male dominated discourse -- 'phallo-centric' constructions.

The debate initiated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* relates to the subjectivity of women striving to be independent of male-gripped cultural mindset. This work provides all possible starting points of later feminist thought and sensibility that gradually proliferate in the Twentieth Century discourse and movements of emancipation by women for women. She begins by questioning the stereotyped view that there is a pre-given essence or unchanging set of qualities of men and women. The philosophical side of Simone de Beauvoir's contentions in *The Second Sex* which was first published in 1949, emanate from her rigorously critical interpretation of cultural history of humankind:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century woman was more shamefully exploited than were male workers. Labour at home constituted what the English called the "sweating system"; in spite of constant toil, the working-woman did not earn enough to satisfy her needs... It is understandable that they made haste to get out into the factories; besides, it was not long before nothing was left to do outside the workshops except needlework, laundering, and housework -- all slave's work, earning famine wages... The employers often preferred them [women] to men. "They do better for less pay." This cynical formula lights up the drama of feminine labour. For it is through labour that woman has conquered her dignity as a human being; but it was a remarkably hard-won and protracted conquest. (1997: 144)

To extend the range of ideas and analysis, she thought it was mandatory to deconstruct Sartre's notion of intersubjectivity. She proceeds with the argument that womanhood could be understood and defined only in a rational manner, especially in the basic terms of 'Self' or 'Other'. The dialectic of self and other is at the root of the cognitive processes consciously and unconsciously leading to separate notions of male and female. These Hegelian categories of human consciousness, she thinks, are useful in understanding the male and female differentiation in the innermost zones of consciousness. Here it is held that the self and Other dichotomy in general and the Male and female binary in particular is fundamental to Western thought. It is not merely a philosophical problem, its consequences, as described in *The Second Sex*, recognizable if seen with open eyes:

Man would have nothing to lose, quite the contrary, if he gave up disguising woman as a symbol. When dreams are official community affairs, clichés, they are poor and monotonous indeed beside the living reality; for the true dreamer, for the poet, woman is a more generous fount than is any down-at-heel marvel. The times that have most sincerely treasured women are not the period of feudal chivalry nor yet the gallant nineteenth century. They are the times -- like the eighteenth century -- when men have regarded women as fellow creatures; then it is that women seem truly romantic, as the reading of *Liaisons dangereuses*, *Le Rouge et le noir*, *Farewell to Arms*, is sufficient to show. The heroines of Laclos, Stendhal and Hemingway are without mystery, and they are not the less engaging for that. To recognise in woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experiences; this would lose none of its diversity, its richness, or its intensity if it were to occur between two subjectivities. To discard the myths [of and about women] is not to destroy all dramatic relations between the sexes, it is not to deny the significance authentically revealed to men through feminine reality; it is not to do away with poetry, love, adventure, happiness, dreaming. It is simply to ask that behaviour, sentiment, passion be founded upon the truth (290-291).

Indeed, de Beauvoir further says, 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). This argument of de Beauvoir provides a crucial insight into the complex structuring of patriarchy. The dialectical process of the becoming of man and woman have always been there. She observes, "If man fails to discover that secret essence of femininity, it simply because it doesn't exist. Kept on the fringe of the world, woman cannot be objectively defined through this world, and her mystery conceals nothing but emptiness" (288).

Humankind across cultural boundaries has evolved with definite faithfulness to patriarchal or male dominated culture. The central endeavors of all cultures has been to distinguish males and females. Invested with positive qualities, considered positive of themselves, males have differentiated themselves as 'binary opposites' of women. This process of 'othering' has directly led to naturalization of the process of oppression and denigration of women at all levels. Consequently, the male - oppressor functions with an unchallengeable feeling of superiority - de Beauvoir observes agonizingly that the "most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women" (51). This dialectical tension which is utterly to the disadvantage of women has tickled down to all cultures. Patriarchal structures tend to undermine the gravity and extent of this inbuilt conflict in cultural orders. This point is further explicated and stressed in *The Second Sex* :

Furthermore, like all oppressed, woman deliberately dissembles her objective actuality; the slave, the servant, the indigent, all who depend on the caprices of a master, have learned to turn towards him a changeless smile or an enigmatic impassivity; their real sentiments, their actual behaviour, are carefully hidden. And moreover woman is taught from adolescence to lie to men, to scheme, to be wily. In speaking to them she wears an artificial expression on her face; she is cautious, hypocritical, play-acting (288).

Simone de Beauvoir here recognizes the constructed nature of the myth of male superiority. Challenge to this, also begins here. Male thinkers of all disciplines, She says, have "striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (49). In these conceptual shifts, de Beauvoir has decisively gone beyond the Marxist understanding of patriarchal culture defined at the outset of industrialization, her decoding of Western culture is essentially far deeper than the economic fixity of Marxism.

It is true that feminist discourse and its practical implications are now not restricted to philosophical positions initiated in *The Second Sex*. Simone de Beauvoir clearly stated that there is no single unitary experience of women. This has proved valid as Feminist trends have shown the plurality of patriarchal contexts and the specific forms of feminist resistance emerging therein. Western Culture in the 1960s is said to have entered a qualitatively new era, known as the Post- Industrial phase. This is also the age of revolution in Information and Technology. Consumer society is its another title or description. Its impact on all spheres of human experience and relationships is immense. While defining consumption, Jean Baudrillard says, 'It is defined, rather, by the organization of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption is the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse. If it has any meaning at all, consumption means an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of things' (*The System of Objects* 2005: 217-218). To understand unresolved linkages of Post-industrial society and consumer society, it is important to view how Raymond Williams explores the elements of consumer culture as evidenced in his book *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980):

The popularity of the 'consumer' as a way of describing the ordinary member of modern capitalist society in a main part of his economic activity is very significant. The description is spreading very rapidly, and is now habitually used by people to whom it ought, logically to be repugnant. It is not only that, at a simple level, 'consumption' is a very strange description of our ordinary use of goods and services. This metaphor drawn from the stomach or the furnace is only partially relevant even to our use of things. Yet we say 'consumer' rather than 'user', because in the forms of thinking which is almost imperceptibly fosters, it is as consumers that the majority of the people are seen. We are the market, which the system of industrial production has organized. We are the channels

along which the product flows and disappears. In every aspect of social communication, and in every version what we are as a community, the pressure of a system of industrial production is towards these impersonal forms. (187)

This historical phase is clearly organized through 'systematic manipulation of signs' and for profit, the co-modification of human beings. The radical agenda of de Beauvoir here touch problematic grounds. Cultural attitudes emerging from this new reality are confronted with the long term implications that the consumerist culture has on the human sensibility and human relations. Such a notion of the individual's role in society tends to preclude the possibilities of an act or gesture which can ultimately assume a subversive character.

The very notion of 'consumer' undermines the dimensions of interventionist intellect in favour of a passive reception and celebration of market sponsored products. The liberated zone of glamour and overt freedom provided to women in market space is restrictive towards the emancipatory agenda for women as *The Second Sex* proposes. It is at this juncture that *Second Sex* regains its unique position to revive authentic subjectivity. In fact, this impact of Critical Theory is already there on literary studies as well as other spheres of knowledge. The ideology of post-structuralism and postmodernism, as Patricia Waugh contends, seem 'to carry beneficial insights as well as dangerous tendencies' (73). Rather than dismissing these influences, it is better to confront, understand and, perhaps, identify and negotiate with the liberating connotations of these changing positions on literature/s including literary criticism. The active role of a 'centre' as the controlling agent and human subject from outside language as undermined in the system of 'signification' variously reflected in the ideological formations of consumer society, postmodernism and post-industrial society, *The Second Sex* offers ample insights to resist and counter these cultural forms. The relevance of this book of Simone De Beauvoir is essentially to stay and enthuse current and arriving forms of Feminisms across the globe. Times have gone when feminism was treated as a single and homogeneous pattern of ideas and assumptions. Its earlier restricted loyalties to white, educated and bourgeois sections of Western women and their experience has now yielded greater liberalism and flexibility to include other experiences and histories. As Ross C. Murfin has been cited in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, the "evolution of feminism into feminisms has fostered a more inclusive, global perspective" (1992 (2007): 222). The era of recovering women's texts has been succeeded by a new era in which the goal is to recover entire cultures of women. This credible and resistance generating force of feminisms owes immensely to the inherent scope of *The Second Sex*. The Post-Industrial phase in human history – the contemporary cultural space of our own times, needs the ideological insights of Simone De Beauvoir. Betty Friedan rightly observes, "Who knows what women be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? Who knows of the possibilities of love when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfilment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are? It has barely begun, the search of women for themselves. But the time is at hand when the voices of the feminine mystique can no longer drown out the inner voice that is driving women on to become complete" (*The Essential Feminist Reader* : 281-82).

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