Exploring “Otherness” in a Dichotomized World

Everything has its counterpart, its opposite, its “other”. We have historically internalized human understanding and knowledge in binary terms. In literature, death has often been depicted as the evocation of the dark side of the imagination, the epitome of the unfathomable; while life is associated with corporeality. The moon is the champion of the night and the sun is the star of the day. God is the all-benevolent ruler of the heavens, while Satan is the dark lord of the underworld. Can sorrow truly be felt without the memory of having once experienced joy? Much of human knowledge and experience seems only to be understood in terms of its “other”. The pendulum swings back and forth from “one” to “other,” in a continuum of underlying balance. However, the question that potentially destabilizes this equilibrium involuntarily arises: how do human relations fit into this binary conceptualization? In this dichotomized universe, can man and woman equate to one another?

Such questions regarding the many forms of dualisms we often take for granted are addressed by feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her book, The Second Sex. According to Beauvoir, there is no such equilibrium between the sexes, as man is representative of the essential and all that is positive and neutral (Beauvoir 3). He is the embodiment of humanity, while woman is his correlative negation. She is the inessential, the incidental and thus confined always to exist relative to him (Beauvoir 3). Beauvoir’s assertion of women as Other raises critical questions about the essence and locality of women. In this paper, these issues will be examined to illustrate that Beauvoir was
justified in her contestation of women as “absolute Other”. What follows is a brief discussion on the notion of alterity, in order to illustrate how Otherness plays out within the social world, followed by a close reading of the introduction the *The Second Sex.*

Feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo, in her essay *The Feminist as Other* points to the many faces of Otherness in gender, religion, race, history and philosophy, to name a few. Otherness in this context stems from a dichotomy between those who occupy the position of the “essential” and the “universal” and those who are defined and reduced by their difference or divergence from that norm (Bordo 297). The latter is not necessarily always marginalized or distained. It is often the case that those who hold the position of the Other are appreciated and celebrated, but always in light of their difference (Bordo 297). Take, for example, multicultural curricula in North America. Rather than the implementation of such curricula in the name of diversification of subject matter, greater historical accuracy and confronting a largely Eurocentric school system, it is represented as an effort to cater to the special needs of particular groups (i.e.: the Other) (Bordo 198). Furthermore, Bordo points out that Otherness is perpetuated every time black authors are quoted only for their views on race. Meanwhile “general” expertise is reserved for white males, working within a broader arena of subject matter. The white male is assumed to be without race and gender, while the black author is acknowledged and valued in light of his/her Otherness (Bordo 298). One may argue that every sub-group is different and unique in their own right, but Otherness goes beyond difference. It implies an unfair
distribution of power, exclusion from dominant models and modes of thought, and
oftentimes leads subordination.

Otherness thus creeps into many different disciplines and conceptual categories
and has very serious implications in concrete reality. Beauvoir’s work, while identifying
and contesting Otherness in the context of the gender divide, also fell victim to the very
construct she wished to overturn. Consequently, her profound philosophical contribution
was undermined by its classification as a gendered narrative “about women”. For one,
the chosen person to translate The Second Sex was a zoologist, rather than a philosopher.
This conveys the lack of acceptance Beauvoir faced in the world of philosophy,
especially in light of the historical exclusion of women in this discipline. Moreover one
central category of phenomenological philosophy which Beauvoir employed in The
Second Sex, L’Experience vecue – lived experience, was interpreted by critics as
“women’s life today” (Bordo 298). The implication here is that “only men do
philosophy; women are fit to write, if at all, about the facts of their own condition”
(Bordo 298). This type of attitude followed the book throughout its marketing and
critical reception into intellectual circles and institutions. For example, Time headlined
its review of The Second Sex with a birth announcement: “Weight: 23/4 Lbs,” implicitly
(although perhaps unconsciously) associating the book with the materiality of the
feminine body and women’s “natural” role of child bearing (Bordo 298). All of these
factors served the unintended, yet intelligible, consequence of marginalizing Beauvoir’s
work as the work of the gendered Other.
While *The Second Sex* seems only to be appreciated in its peripheral place and in light of its exclusion from our narratives of philosophical history, the marginalization of her work ironically validates her philosophical insights into women as “absolute Other”. Beauvoir is not interested in simply explaining women’s subordinate position. Her work is a phenomenological explanation of Otherness that includes a radical problematizing of femininity. To begin with, Beauvoir opens *The Second Sex* by contextualizing the problem. She does this by posing a fundamental question about the existence of women, “Are there women, really?” Such a straightforward question may illicit an equally simplistic response, by pointing to the obvious fact of the physical existence of women on Earth. However, Sara Heinämaa elucidates Beauvoir’s use of this question by interpreting it in a philosophical sense. Beauvoir employs a phenomenological approach to the question of women’s existence by differentiating between meanings of being and reality (Heinämaa 122). In other words, Beauvoir asks the reader to critically examine the constitution of the meaning of reality. It becomes clear that to confirm women’s existence in terms of experience and history alone is not sufficient for answering this question. Rather, Beauvoir is asking us to examine the ways in which women exist and what is meant by reality in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the “woman question” (Heinämaa 122). Beauvoir does not directly define her subject matter. Instead she makes a distinction between three different female conditions: femaleness, femininity, and womanhood. The former two conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, to subsume the latter (Heinämaa 122). Again, Beauvoir does not seek to strictly define these conditions; she wants to ontologically explore these conditions and the ways in which they are presented to us in concrete reality (Heinämaa 122).
Beauvoir proceeds to systematically refute the idea that to be a woman means to embody some kind of mysterious feminine essence. In support of this refutation, Marion Young asserts that, “[w]e reduce women’s condition simply to unintelligibility if we explain it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence” (Young 36). Also, by discrediting essentialist notions about women, Beauvoir assures that nominalism is not the correct answer to the “women question”. To employ a nominalistic approach would mean, “deny[ing] the real differences in the behaviour and experiences of men and women” (Young 36). In many respects, Beauvoir’s argument, in regard to what constitutes a woman, can be seen as an attempt to reconcile universalism and particularism in favour of a more mediatory position. Her notion of femininity, then, encapsulates a dynamic femininity, a femininity that is not loaded with unchanging, platonic universalism. Nor does her conception of femininity run the risk of falling onto the slippery slope of nominalism. Rather, Beauvoir famously proclaims that, “to be a woman is to have become a woman” (Heinämaa 122). This “becoming”, so to speak, implies a distinction between “femininity” as a social structure and “women” as a biological entity. Her task, then, is to explore the world of feminine existence, as opposed to the concept of woman (Heinämaa 123).

In accordance with Beauvoir’s phenomenological approach to the question of women’s existence, the feminine body can be understood not as a thing, but as an instrument for relating to things (Heinämaa 123). It follows that the lived body exists as an ambiguous, malleable state; neither rigidly determined by its past nor future experiences (Heinämaa 123). This allows for variations, modifications, and diversity in
the human condition. As such, femininity and the lived body can be viewed as a swell in
the ocean whereby each successive wave is determined by a number of different
meteorological variables. Lived bodies develop in accordance to their specific location
and the variables to which they are subjected. This calls for a conscious construction of
one’s own identity out of the sociohistorical environment within which one lives (Vintges
139). The last remark must not be interpreted as a move towards complete individualism.
Even though Beauvoir has rejected the essentialist argument, she supports the idea that
there is a common thread that links individualized female existence (Yonge 36). The
following quotation illustrates this clearly:

The situation of women within a given sociohistorical set of circumstances,
despite the individual variation in each woman’s experiences, opportunities and
possibilities, has a unity that can be described and made intelligible. It should be
emphasized, however, that this unity is specific to a particular social formation
during a particular epoch (Yonge 36).

Women are thus compelled to act in good or bad faith, to be inclined to search for truth or
remain in denial of their situation (Beauvoir 10). To summarize, Beauvoir rejects the
“eternal” feminine in favour of a more dynamic feminine model. Furthermore, she
differentiates between “femininity” and “woman” by proclaiming that to be a woman is a
becoming and not an automatic given. Finally, Beauvoir’s notions of the lived feminine
body implies that the body is “a situation” whereby ideas that are generated are
historically mediated (Gothlin 84).

At the core of Beauvoir’s thesis of women as the absolute Other is the notion of
reciprocity, or lack thereof. One of the main themes in Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity is
that of human interdependence (Gothlin 84). One must not internalize interhuman
relationships as an obstruction to one’s independence and freedom; rather, human
interdependence facilitates an individual’s realization of his/her freedom (Gothlin 84). Instead of viewing other people in terms of objects that must be subjugated, authenticity and valuation of interhuman relations lies in the acceptance of the freedom and diversity of others (Gothlin 84). According to Beauvoir, this form of reciprocity is almost non-existent in the relationship between the sexes as, “[m]an can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man” (Beauvoir 3). Both in an ideological and sociological sense, women do not exist independently from men. Woman is man’s antithetical counterpart, always to be measured and evaluated relative to him. Man dictates a historical narrative as though it encapsulates the whole of humanity, while women’s voices remain mute (Heinämaa 124).¹

The role assigned to women, as conceived by men, is that of absolute sex, thus implicitly associating women with the immanence of female materiality (Beauvoir 3). Beauvoir brings up sexual difference in relation to phenomenological philosopher, E. Lévinas, and his work on sexual difference. For Lévinas, femininity is representational of the absolute Other in that sexual difference is a specific relation (Heinämaa 125). This relationship is marked by a certain lack of identification with the Other (Heinämaa 124). According to Lévinas, the Other is not perceived as a material object; however, in this relationship there is no common thread with which one can identify (Heinämaa 124). The feminine is thus experienced not as an alter ego but as a qualitative other (Heinämaa 124). Beauvoir rejects Lévinas’ argument, as she believed that “women and men are two variations of human embodiment” (Heinämaa 124). This human embodiment is

¹ Martha Nussbaum charged the development of western notions of rationality as an “assault on reason” as those notions have largely developed around the exclusion of qualities associated with the feminine.
constitutive of the thread that binds us together. The ambiguity of the human condition, although variable, is not biologically specific.

This underlying lack of reciprocity is what leads Beauvoir to question the subject-other relationship and the nature of subordination. She asks why it is that women have accepted this subject-object dichotomy and why it has not been disputed: “No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; is it not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One” (Beauvoir 4).

Beauvoir does not explain the subordination of women as cause and effect, a great historical watershed that changed the course of history, or even a gradual move from one paradigm to another. Subordination did not historically occur (Beauvoir 4). Instead, she explores women’s subordination as a reality which women have internalized. Beauvoir asserts that women have never fought back in the way that other marginalized groups have; as a result they have gained only what little men have allotted to them (Beauvoir 5). Accordingly, women live not only in man’s shadow, but in complete subordination to him. She is incapable of reconciling this dichotomized relationship of man and woman and so entombs herself within the confines of the oppressed. Nor can she comprehend severing the unity of the couple, even if this sexual structure is organized along the same dichotomized lines (Beauvoir 5). Beauvoir sums up this internalization in the following quotations: “[h]ere is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.” (Beauvoir 5).

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2 The historical timeframe within which Beauvoir was writing should be kept in mind here. Her work was published before second wave feminism swept through the west and it is easy to see why many postmodern feminist would disagree with Beauvoir’s arguments. However, I argue that Beauvoir’s arguments are still relevant within this postmodern paradigm, as women are still struggling to be included, to be heard, to be equals. Equality is still, for a large part, measured not in accordance with intrinsic values, but measured in relation to men.
The way this internalization has manifested in concrete reality is that women have been unable to partake in the world in the same way that man have because they have not shared the same equality (Beauvoir 5). As such, Beauvoir’s writing becomes multi-layered, as she is writing about subordination in philosophical and social terms. While a woman’s rights may be recognized in the eyes of the law, they are void in the eyes of those who hold true to the ideology of subordination. Equality rights can, therefore, never reach their full potential because of long standing conventions, customs and beliefs that embody the ideology of the Otherness of women (Beauvoir 5). In addition, men monopolize the economic, industrial, and political spheres, so that, as already noted, women only receive and do not take (Beauvoir 5-6). To renounce this patriarchic structure of society and refuse to be subjugated would entail leaving behind a life of receiving (Beauvoir 6). Although clinging to the alliance between the dominant sex and the subordinate sex may appear appealing, as it may offer protection and certain socioeconomic advantages, to forgo one’s liberty and turn one’s back on the chance for a more authentic existence would be a far greater loss (Beauvoir 6). The theme of imminence and transcendence is important here, as to choose to adhere to and internalize the construct of femininity is, in a sense, choosing to be an accomplice in one’s own victimization. By recognizing that femininity is a construct, one is freed from such self-imprisonment and able to transcend in a way that is both meaningful and empowering.

In such a way, women can attain some measure of freedom – freedom in a sense that by making a choice, a conscious inner choice to question the authenticity and legitimacy of the masculine/feminine polarities and other such binary hierarchies, women will not longer be bound to their overbearing constructs. Women can then move towards
an auto-induced, self-determined process of achieving consciousness and “becoming” the origin of one’s own freedom. Overturning society, so that it shows no preference towards males, is not sufficient for eradicating the subject-other relationship. Nor is a cleavage of society along the lines of gender (Beauvoir 5) a soluble option. Rather, both men and women have to change the way they view and internalize the sexual divide (Vintges 134). If men sacrifice their desire to be and women realize and renounce the degradation of their object status, a positive dualism of the sexes can be realized (Vintges 134). Through conscious construction of one’s own identity, woman can rid herself of her object status.
Works Cited:


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