

**AN APPRAISAL OF WOMEN SLAVERY IN
THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S
SECOND SEX**

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Abstract

Slavery is one of the humanistic concepts bothering the human society. Slavery can be seen as a state in which ones life and affairs are controlled by another; hence the slave is seen as a lesser being. Simone de Beauvoir demonstrates how patriarchy, motherhood, religion and culture enslave women. The interest of this article is on the basic ideas of Simone de Beauvoir on the inhuman treatment meted out to women who are humans too and therefore advocates for the abolishment of the traditional institution. Using philosophical analysis, it is revealed that women are indeed oppressed in nearly all cultures. The instruments of un-freedom stem from Christian, patriarchal, reproductive, marital, family, dependency and cultural orientation factors. And the conclusion is that though women are the major players that underscore their development, liberation and enhancement, especially when they do not rally round to form a formidable team, refuse to help one another and cherish being harsh and antagonistic to one another, their emancipation and liberation from serfdom or thralldom would be a mirage. That notwithstanding, women should be treated as persons, with *voluntas* and *ratio*, because when there is mutual relationship and respect between humans, there would be enhancement of values, peace and development in the society.

Keywords: Analysis, Slavery, Philosophy, Patriarchy, Religion, Culture.

Introduction

The issue of slavery is as old as human race, society and nature, hence it is peculiar to all human society; be it the black or white, the haves and the have not's. Slavery is also one of the humanistic and anthropocentric concepts bothering the human society, based on the aphorism that all human beings are born free, equal and deserve fair treatments. The ironical aspect of this aphorism is that some persons are meant if not born to serve others; hence J.J. Rousseau maintains that man is born free and everywhere in chains.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French Existentialist Philosopher and feminist in her book *Second Sex* recognizes the oppression, suppression and domination of women in the society. In other words, she observes this inequality among humans in the society; hence she maintains that women are persons and should be treated as individuals with moral capacities. The ultimate questions raised here include: who is a person? Who is a woman? Are all human beings not a source of value? How does traditional system enslave women? These questions and many of their kinds would be critically examined in this paper.

Simone de Beauvoir's Contention

Simone De Beauvoir recognizes the problems of women in our society especially their oppression which she approached from the continental traditions of existentialism and phenomenology. Beauvoir (1949: 7) in her stylish approach “*focused on the cultural mechanisms of the oppression that left women in the role of the “other”*”. She raised the question of what it meant to be a woman. According to her, the category of womanhood is imposed by civilization and the fundamental social meaning of the woman is “*other*”, which is mysterious. For Beauvoir (1949: 8) “*the woman is dominated and this domination is caused by men who have both political and social powers.*”

The *Second Sex* argues for the equality of women while insisting on

the reality of the sexual differences. She finds it unjust and immoral to use sexual difference to exploit women and also finds it un-phenomenological to ignore it. It is also a liberating tool. Like Plato, Beauvoir argues for women equality, sex is accidental quality and men and women are equally qualified to become members of the guardian class. She contends that there are biological essential features that are not part of a woman's real experienced situation. In other words, it is neither biological category that simply defines a woman; nor is nature sufficient enough to do the work of women definition because one is born a woman but becomes a woman, it is she, who defines herself and makes herself what she wants herself to be by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life; every female human being is not necessarily a woman, to be so considered, she must share in that mysterious threatened reality known as femininity.

However, Beauvoir (1949: 268) uses the terms:

“Subject” and “other” as opposed to Hegelian master- slave dialectics. Subject is the absolute, the essential while the other is the inessential, the object. Subject is man while other is woman. The woman is referred to as the other this is because they lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with correlative unity. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of proletariat. They live disperse among the males...as such they are passive, lost, ruined and become henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in their transcendence and deprived of every value. Others are mysterious. Men set up women as others because men have the political and social powers, women come to see themselves as others, and as such they become alienated from themselves. She elaborates on the

problems with viewing women as other and also reveals that women are nothing other than what they make of themselves

She outlines the following as the barriers as well as factors that enslave women and their development:

Christian Factor

Simone de Beauvoir considers Christian religion as the first instrument of the oppression of women. According to this analysis, there is a basic enmity between traditional Christian moral teaching and the personal aspirations of women. The church by its doctrine implicitly conveys the idea that a woman is naturally inferior. In pagan religions of antiquity, the mother-goddess was worshipped.

Judaism and Christianity represent a reaction against this. It was as mother woman that she was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved. This enslavement was accomplished symbolically in the cult of the virgin Mother of God, who is glorified only in accepting the subordinate role assigned to her; Women are encouraged to identify with this image of Mary, and to do so have devastating effects.

Harmful moral teaching is another element according to De Beauvoir (1949: 680) where she buttresses her point by saying *that "this is exemplified by the orthodox Jewish Morning Prayer: 'thank God that he did not create me a woman' and an Ancient Greek Philosopher; Plato, have uttered a similar prayer. Hebrew tradition and Greek Philosophy are two main sources of catholic misogynic moral theology.*

As regards Hebrew tradition, she asserts through St Paul, that in the Jewish tradition, savagery anti feminist, was affirmed'. As for Greek philosophy, De Beauvoir (1949; 681) makes it clear that:

This lent special support to the idea of feminine inferiority. The Aristotelian idea of fixed 'natures',

as well as its view of woman as having only a minor role in procreation, that of merely supplying the matter whereas the male supplied the form, was taken over by St Thomas Aquinas. Thus woman's place is fixed by 'nature' which she has. This idea served the patriarchal institutions which the church perpetuates and reflects: the male could lay claim to his posterity by claiming a major role in procreation. The idea of woman's special sinfulness, stemming from commonly held interpretations of the Bible, combined with a notion of her inferior 'nature', affirmed in Aristotelian philosophy, thus made it seem that the sociological fact of woman's subordination was inscribed in the heavens.

De Beauvoir maintains that Christian anti-feminism has always been linked to anti sexuality. In fact, in a religion that holds the flesh accursed, woman becomes the devil's most fearsome temptation; since woman remains always the other, it is not held that reciprocally, male and female are both flesh; the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile other is precisely woman. In her De Beauvoir (1949: 680) chastises religion by arguing that “*the Christian finds incarnated the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. All the fathers of the church insist on the idea that she led Adam into sin*”. The church's exclusion of women from the hierarchy is another element. This exclusion of women contributes significantly to the process of inculcating inferiority feeling and that causes psychological confusion, and in the words of De Beauvoir (1949: 167) for:

God's representatives on earth: the pope, the bishop (whose ring kisses), the priest who says Mass, he who preaches, he before whom one kneel sin the

secrecy of the confessional-all these are men. The catholic religion among others

exerts a most confused influence upon the young girl. The effect of this is to

imbue the girl with a sense of specific inferiority. "The church also enforces

passive role, which is mutilating; and women have been encouraged to

acquiesce in it through the inculcation of a pie-in-the-sky mentality fostered by

the church. They are prevented from full personal development through genuine

participation in the societal affairs as such; they have not achieved full

adulthood".

This woman's situation is like that of one who has been duped, which is in line

with Joan Chittister (1990: 5) who likened a woman's situation to the suffering of

the Biblical Job where she argues that:

The sacred writer views Job as the innocent one whose suffering is not the plan or will of God. Today in our time, job is a woman. The voice of universal suffering fits female picture of all too perfectly. Job's story is indeed, the story of any woman in the world today who suffers the arbitrary judgment of

femaleness, who bears oppression in her body, as such, is deficient, morally deformed, spiritually inadequate.

De Beauvoir maintains that religion (Christianity) is not only an instrument of oppression but also deception; religion is less an instrument of deception and this form of deception takes the distraction of woman's attention from present injustice to promises of rewards in an afterlife. Christianity has deceived women in another, though in a closely related way and that creates the delusion of equality already attained. Thus according to De Beauvoir (1949: 137) *Woman is asked in the name of God to accept her inferiority as to believe and thank Him....she is equal of the Lordly male: even the temptation to revolt is suppressed by the claim that the injustice is overcome. Woman is no longer denied transcendence, since she is to consecrate her immanence to God.*

This equality which women have attained through Christianity is in fact insubstantial. On the other hand, there is simple evidence that woman is despised as a sexual being, yet at the same time, she is exalted in an unrealistic way. De Beauvoir maintains that this pseudo-exaltation is a result of guilt feeling: It is Christianity which invests woman a new with frightening prestige: fear of the other sex is one of the forms assumed by the anguished of man's uneasy conscience. The pseudo-equality conferred upon on the woman by Christian ideology is not a genuine acceptance of her as person and partner. In other words, Christianity has contributed to the paralysis of her will to strive for genuine equality. De Beauvoir (1949: 67) as a result suggests that *“there must be religion for women; and there must be women, “true women”, to perpetuate religion”*.

Patriarchal Factor

De Beauvoir sees Patriarchy as another instrument of oppression. For, Beauvoir (1949:12):

Humanity is a male and male defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. Man can think of himself without woman, she cannot think of herself without man. She is simply what decrees, thus she is sex, absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential.

Men unquestionably occupy the most advantageous places, hold the most important posts. In Western religion, God the Father is a man, an old gentle man having a specifically virile attribute, a luxuriant white beard. For Christians, Christ is still more definitely a man of flesh and blood, with a long blond beard. Angels are pure spirits and have no sex, according to theologians; but they have masculine names and appear as good looking young men. We encounter this inextricable confusion between man and God in many devotees. The confessor in particular occupies an ambiguous place between earth and heaven. He listens with mortal ears when the penitent bares her soul, but his gaze envelops her in a supernatural light; he is a man of God, he is God incarnate in human form.

The exclusion of women from the hierarchy has psychological meaning, distinct from her exclusion from other authoritative groups and the effects are to be seen in many pious women and alleged female mystics: she, De Beauvoir, recalls that in the Middle Ages, men held a rather unfavorable opinion of women. The writings of bourgeoisie inspiration, which attacked women with malignancy: fables, comedies, and lays, charged them with laziness, coquetry and lewdness.

De Beauvoir (1949: 430) further states that:

Investigations make it clear that the majority of parents would rather have sons than daughters. Boys are spoken to with greater seriousness and

esteem, they are granted more rights; they themselves treat girls scornfully. It is not the women but men who control the world...through the discovery of the penis and those women in most part of the world are still in a state of subjection. It follows that woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her. She is therefore; what-in-men's-eyes-she seems- to-be.

Reproduction, Marriage and Family Factors

De Beauvoir sees mother hood, child care (pregnancy), marriage as well as the upkeep of the home as hindrances to feminism as well as anti- feminist tradition, which reduce women to the condition of beast of burden. One of the most basic problems of women is the reconciliation of her reproductive role and her part in productive labor. The fundamental fact that from the beginning of history, women are inextricably tied to domestic work and prevented from taking part in being architects of their destiny and helping in the shaping of the world was her enslavement to the generative function. Instruments of reproduction cannot make women transcend their situation as such but doomed to misery and death and in the words of De Beauvoir (1949: 430):

With Contraceptives (such as potion, suppositories and vaginal tapers) and legal

abortion, the pain of child birth as well as on the painful burden of pregnancy:

'five minutes' pleasure: nine months' pain' and it goes in easier than it comes, an

amusing contrast" are on their way out hence a woman is no longer limited to the

reproductive function and it would permit her to undertake her maternities in

freedom.

Similarly, Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It has always been a very different thing, both to man and woman. Marriages are not founded in love but are instruments of slavery; it enslaves a woman to a man, she is and remains a servant of her father, of her brothers, or of her brother-in-law. The woman's body is something he buys. This poor predicament and degradation of women is best depicted by De Beauvoir (1949: 679) in these well argued thought provoking words:

Marriage enslaves her, making her absolutely passive; she is married. She takes

his name, she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family,

and she becomes his 'half'. She follows wherever his work calls him and

determines their place of residence...becoming attached to her husband's

universe, she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being

required.

Marriage is intended to deny women their liberty; but as there is neither love nor individuality in order to assure herself the lifelong protection of some men, Balzac recognizes that marriage and love

have nothing in common, but he finds it repugnant to equate a respectable institution with a simple business deal in which woman is treated as a thing, while Kierkegaard sees love as spontaneous; marriage as a decision. The privilege of marriage makes women to please men as such put her in a state of subjection. This situation is in-line with Roman law that places the wife in the husband's hand *locofiline*, in the position of a daughter. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home, that is 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 towards the future it must integrate the past while inter-communicating with others, it should find self confirmation.

Idleness or Dependence Factor

De Beauvoir (1949:272) *“considers Idleness as a barrier to women liberation, hence a woman supported by a man-wife or courtesan is not emancipated from the male because she has ballot in her hand.... Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe, there is no longer a masculine mediator”*.

When the woman is productive and active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as; in connection with the aims she pursues, with money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility.

Custom or Orientation Factor

De Beauvoir (1949: 273) sees custom as another instrument of oppression. According to her:

The oppression of women has the family and patrimony/ custom as its causes. “There are different customs, which existed from the classical antiquity;

Arabian, Hebrew/ Jewish, Levities, Greek, Moslem where girls are drown into ditches as soon as they were born, put wholly at the man's mercy, reduced to a semi slave without the liberty of complaint and as well remains totally submerged and inferior to men respectively.

Arguing further De Beauvoir (1949: 272) states in no uncertain terms that:

From infancy, there is no difference between the boy and the girl but the boy or male is given the orientation or impression that he has an alter ego in whom he sees himself, he is superior, swollen with pride in his manhood, which is a symbol of autonomy, transcendence and power, while the girl begins to feel inferior, frustrated, passive, a vicious circle is formed hence penis envy is manifested in diverse way and different cases.

These customs are opposed to treating girls like boys and she is deprived of happy freedom. The situation of the female sex and her value compared to the male is like that of the slave's, compared with the free man's, hence masochistic. She observes that women exploitation is historical and therefore amenable to change. Liberation must be the task to be done by women, and rightly so. It is not a matter of appeal to men to give them freedom but a matter of women discovering their solidarity, rejecting bad faith. Little wonder, Mary Wollstonecraft (2000: 20) borrowing the words of J.J. Rousseau, asserts that “*the woman is free and everywhere in chain, (Sic) but I will show her a way to liberation*”.

Valuations and Conclusion

The above, made an analysis of the De Beauvoir's concept of feminism. Her philosophy is a philosophy of discovery, a comparative analysis of the life of women. The nature of a woman is not fixed and sex as an accidental quality is not and should not be a

barrier to women empowerment, development and actualization. A woman is a person, who is not born but becomes one, as such, she is but what she makes of herself. Patriarchy, Christianity, idleness, reproduction, marriage and customs are the constraints of feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir, has explained how patriarchy, religion, culture as well family- hood un-liberate and enslave women. It is worthy to note that patriarchy, religion and so on are not the only factors that hinder women empowerment and development. Women are also the major factors that affect women development and enhancement. This, they do through their actions and activities such as prostitution, widowhood, modes of dressing, gossip and so on. Women should therefore help one another as persons, rather than being harsh and antagonistic to one another and wherever there is mutual relationship and respect between humans, these will definitely lead to the enhancement of values, peace and development a that society will definitely thrive or abide.

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