

Public Image of Being a Particular Sex: A Case Study of Gender Behaviour

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Abstract

The present study aims to bring out the role of biological sexes through the work of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex." How "Gender" is defined and what it signifies. The objective of the study is to bring forth who is the first sex, men, or women? To understand the masculine and feminine aspect of gender. Therefore, it is an attempt to understand the hype behind "Why Women are the Second Sex." Hence through systematic study, it aims to raise the question of importance of gender role where women as a "Gender is negligible" and yet plays a significant role in understanding the biological roles.

Key Words: Gender, Masculine, Feminine, Second Sex, Feminism.

Defining Gender: An Introduction

The term gender is used to designate psychological, social and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness. "Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relation between the sexes." and this is where Simone de Beauvoir also comes in "although even biological sex as a natural kind is now questioned by many theorists." 1949, Simone de Beauvoir is not making an argument for biological sex being natural. In fact, she is suggesting that the very fact of naming biological sex itself as male and female is tremendously arbitrary and already sort through with patriarchal power.

Generally speaking, gender, is immediate relevance to our social situations. Gender, it is a real loaded term as we sometimes enjoy gender, we sometimes suffer gender but in either case we negotiate with gender. So gender is something we negotiate with through our body, through our language, through our dress, through our embodiment.

Beauvoir's : The Second Sex

"Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relation between the sexes."

Second Sex as being a part of second-wave feminism or being a precursor to second-wave feminism with its attention to the ways in which gender works and circulates through powerful discourses about women. Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex was a remarkably influential text during

this time, where she argues, “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world.”

Pay attention to what that means, to be present in the world, there is a body through which one is present, but at the same time the body is also a point of view towards the world. One can only see the world in particular fashion, depending on the kind of body one has and the kind of body one has is not merely a biological fact, it is also a culturally embodied thing in the world. Therefore, second sex calls attention to this relationship between body and self.

So one wonders if then this might be seen as renewing this kind of contract between mind and body “I think, therefore, I am” so what do I think of my body? Can I think through it, to get to the world? And Simone de Beauvoir does not quite mean exactly that.

In the introduction, she writes, “I hesitated a long time before writing a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over:..” well, little did she know we are still talking about it. Yet it is still being talked about. And the volumes of idiocies churned out over this past century do not seem to have clarified the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? True, the theory of the eternal feminine still has its followers; they whisper, “Woman is losing herself, woman is lost.” It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold.”

I really like this excerpt because I think it captures one of the quandaries of doing this sort of work, which we will broadly call deconstruction. Every time we start looking into ideas about how is it that something like womanhood is secured bodily, physiologically, physically, psychically, etc. One also begins to want something solid to hold on to as to what is it that is certain anymore? Simone de Beauvoir is capturing precisely that kind of sentiment in the second-wave.

“Where are the women?” asked a short-lived magazine recently.” She continues, “But first, what is a woman? “Tota mulier in utero; she is a womb, some say,” meaning women reproduce. Besides that, nothing else can be known about them. “Yet speaking of certain women, the experts proclaim, “They are not women,” even though they have a uterus like the others.” So clearly, the bodily fact of having a uterus is not enough, you still have to do more.

“Everyone agrees there are females in the human species,” yes, and yet, “today, as in the past, they make up about half of humanity; and yet we are told that “femininity is in jeopardy”; we are urged, “Be women, stay women, become women.” So not every female human being is necessarily a woman.” Pay attention female human being is not necessarily a woman. See glimpses of the sex, gender framework already? “She must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity. Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it bodily? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented.” Here, she is quite mischievously, gesturing to the fact that somehow everybody seems to keep telling everybody else that one has to be a woman sufficiently enough but nobody knows exactly what this model encompasses.

Levi-Strauss at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion. “Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by a man's ability to view biological relations as series of contrasts,” biological relations as a series of contrasts. Remember the duality that we keep invoking, keep that in mind. “duality, alternation, opposition and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality. These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society was simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become clear on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed. He sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.

This may seem very opaque, but this is very important. So, in order to make her argument, Simone de Beauvoir is reading other philosophers and the anthropologist Levi Strauss, who at the end of a profound work on forms of primitive society says, "Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrast."

Man is coming to consciousness is marked by this capacity to distinguish oppositions and duality in society. And this Levi Strauss is doing by looking at a variety of texts from around the world. Simone de Beauvoir is additionally adding. She says, well, surely this cannot be explained if we look at these dualities as friendships. I mean, sure, man has a capacity to look at duality, but is he looking at these dualities as things that can exist together, that are friendly with one another, that have fellowship with one another, so that we can all form this universal pact of love and peace? Surely not.

Things become clear, if following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility, meaning in order to be conscious, you have to embrace a fundamental hostility and hostility over here, read it loosely, read it as the fact of opposing oneself to something else, I am that which that is not and ideally, I have to be better, or I am that which that is not, and if I am not as good as that I need to be better. And this is the driving force of consciousness, according to Simone de Beauvoir, reading Levi Strauss, and Hegel. "The subject can be posed only in being opposed. He sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object." So I am the subject, the human, that, is the object.

And in suggesting this, Simone de Beauvoir wants us to pay attention to how this maps onto the question of man and woman. The ways in which man is set up as mind, woman is set up as nature and man's capacity to be man depends on objectifying and opposing himself to woman who is set up as that which is not as good as man.

She continues. "Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers. She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female. This word is enough to define her," as if the word itself has meaning prior to itself. "From a man's mouth, the epithet female sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear, he's a male. The term "female" is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him."

Pay attention to where is it that the author roots this hostility. She says that it is because man in many ways is closer to culture, and woman to nature. Therefore, woman has sex, she is just a basic sexual being. She has an identity because of her sexuality as a woman, because of her capacity to reproduce, just like everybody else in nature.

"Nevertheless, he wants to find a justification in biology for this feeling. The word "female" evokes a saraband of images. An enormous round egg snatching and castrating the agile sperm; monstrous and stuffed, the queen termite reigning over the servile males; the praying mantis and the spider, gorged on love, crushing their partners and gobbling them up; the dog in heat running through back alleys, leaving perverse smells in her wake; the monkey showing herself off brazenly, sneaking away with flirtatious hypocrisy. And the most splendid wildcats, the tigress, lioness, and panther, lie down slavishly under the male's imperial embrace, inert, impatient, shrewd, stupid, insensitive, lewd, fears and humiliated."

Now, do not read this as mere evidence. Read it the way the author means it, which is to evoke a set of images that draw this clear distinction between culture and nature. And how is it that females are part of the nature side of the binary, and man part of the culture side? And once that binary becomes clearer, think then also as to how the male side of the spectrum is constantly both drawn to, as well as scared by this nature side of the binary.

“Man projects all females at once onto woman.” You are just like all other women, or if you have heard the compliment given by some men, you are not like women at all, you just not like any other woman, as if that is a compliment. “And the fact is that she is a female. But if one wants to stop thinking in commonplaces, two questions arise. What does the female represent in the animal kingdom? And what unique kind of female is realized in a woman?”

“Males and females are two types of individuals who are differentiated within one species for the purposes of reproduction; they can be defined only correlatively. But it has to be pointed out first that the very meaning of division of the species into two sexes is not clear.”

What is she saying here? She says, man projects all females at once onto woman. However, two related questions. What is it that the female represents in the animal kingdom, if you say that women are close to nature? And secondly, what unique kind of female is realized in woman? How do you make these continuous assertions? And then how do you try and understand the female body within these assertions?

Conclusion

Thus, she is making a very interesting argument that male and female are two types of individuals who can only be defined in relation to one another, in relation to each of their reproductive functions, none of which makes sense without the other. But to begin with, the division of the species into two sexes itself is not very clear. She is in fact gesturing to the arbitrariness of this kind of division.

“It does not occur universally in nature.” For anybody who keeps saying that male and female, these are natural biological divisions, pay attention. “In one-celled animals, infusorians, amoebas, bacilli, and so on, multiplication is fundamentally distinct from sexuality, with cells dividing and subdividing individually. For some metazoans, reproduction occurs by schizogony, that is dividing the individual whose origin is also asexual, or by blastogony, that is dividing the individual itself produced by a sexual phenomenon. The phenomenon of budding or segmentation observed in freshwater hydras, coelenterates, sponges, worms, and tunicates are well-known examples. In parthenogenesis, the virgin egg develops in embryonic form without male intervention.” Lest you think you walked into the wrong class, this is not biology.

But Simone de Beauvoir is bringing together all these forms of evidence to suggest that what we understand about sexuality itself as a given, as a natural processes, as always defined by male and female, are all a large set of discursive myths. And by myth, we are not saying false, we are saying that these are arrangements that are arbitrary, they do not necessarily mean as much as you think they do.

“Opinions about the respective roles of the two sexes have varied greatly; they were initially devoid of any scientific basis and only reflected social myths. It was thought for a long time, and is still thought in some primitive societies based on matrilineal filiation, that the father has no part in the child's conception: ancestral larvae were supposed to infiltrate the womb in the form of living germs. With the advent of patriarchy, the male resolutely claimed his posterity; the mother had to be granted a role in procreation even though she merely carried and fattened the living seed: the father alone was the creator. Aristotle imagined that the foetus was produced by the meeting of the sperm and the menses: in this symbiosis, woman just provided passive material, while the male principle is strength, activity, movement, and life.”

Therefore, how beautifully she gathers different kinds of material to make this argument not just of arbitrariness but to show that in the process of arbitrary assessment how is it that power accrues to the male and passivity to the female.

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