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FEMINISM... YET TO DECIPHER

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‘La pensée féministe n’a rien de monolithique’ Simone de Beauvoir

Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expressions, gender identity, sex and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activities.

(EKU.WOMEN & GENDER STUDIES)

The harmony in the beauty and nature of women has been the inspiration of human force for centuries. She has been condemned to play the roles of both boss and slave, to be the source of happiness and sorrow so that to be considered both as God and devil. But in reality, she lives in a prison which is carefully constructed based on the man-made theory that she is weak, fragile and inefficient.

A literature is the chronicle of society. It is a mirror of human activities in a particular period. On the other way a powerful literary work has a long-lasting effect on the society.

Twentieth Century French society had a remarkable influence not only because of the political changes but also because of its literary work. One such literary work which had and has been influencing the world is authored by “Simone de Beauvoir”, (1908-1986), one of the most preeminent French existentialist philosophers and writers of 20th century. This article is to explain how the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir was successful in her attempt of reanalyzing the status of women in the world.

Keywords: gender, equality, feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, philosopher

Simon de Beauvoir (1908-1986) philosopher, writer, feminist, politician and social worker born in France. She was a member of the intellectual fellowship of philosopher writers who have given a literary transcription to the themes of *Existentialism*¹. She worked with other existentialists of this period like Jean-Paul Sartre and had come out with excellent works on ethics, feminism, fiction, autobiography and also politics.

Her major work, “Le Deuxième Sexe”-The Second Sex, a classic feminist literature, was published by Gallimard in 1949 which marked the beginning of second wave feminism across the globe. The powerful arguments about the status of women in the world analyzed with the historical facts and real incidents, stunned the whole world. She assured that “Woman is not born rather becomes woman”.

¹ A philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

“On ne naît pas la femme on le devient”

She criticizes that the world as it is represented to view by us is the view developed by men through ages which is opposite to the truth. She pointed out that the society looks at women as weak, fragile, passive not as intelligent as males. Such transformation (of look) takes place based on the social constructs and ideals with which a woman is made to believe that she is a weaker sex. From her childhood such thoughts are reinforced.

She argues that females are not equal to males at any given point of time in history.

“La femme n’a été égale de l’homme à aucun moment de l’histoire”

She says throughout the history of human beings women is been considered as secondary and she is made to passively accept her roles based on her secondary status.

With the great love, care and support of a dedicated soul (mother) the human journey starts in the womb. In the long run, even the love and respect, the maternity gained is ceased out due to the fact that femininity is not much appreciated. The man ignores and restricts the search of femininity in her freedom of thoughts and actions pointing out that she has to abide by the societal norms with the lame excuse of protecting her. But this has resulted in lot of injustices to the women which obstructed her progress in all spheres of life.

Every society has its role by providing cultural traits like proverbs, rituals to make the women to completely believe that the world activates only because of men maybe with the support of women for whom he is the total guardian.

For example: Tamil proverbs give opinion that

- The women are not much intelligent (*pen puthy pin puthiye*)
--பெண் புத்தி பின் புத்தி
- They can't live without males (*aalilladha pennukku vaazhvillai*).
--ஆனில்லாத பெண்ணுக்கு வாழ்வில்லை
- They are always dependent. (*Raja mahalanalum kondavanukku pen dhan*)
--ராஜாமகளானாலும் கொண்டவனுக்குபெண்தான்.

Each and every religion repeats the same theory. During the onset of puberty, the girls undergo lot of troubles and rituals are practiced to protect them from spirits. Eg: Among the Okrika² Community of Africa the girls they have a celebration called *iria* ceremony during the onset of puberty are given rich food in the “fattening rooms” and a dark place to stay and they learn the traditional songs. Finally, they are wiped by Osokola , a male to relieve them from water spirits and also to promote their fertility. Socialization has an important role to treat women in a sub ordinate way.

A poem of *kavignar*³ A .Vennila in tamil:

*“Keeraikari vandhal amnavai koopidavum
Seidhithaal vandhal appavidam kodukkavum
Yaaram sollamale katrukolhiradhu kuzhandhai”*

“கீரைக்காரி வந்தால் அம்மாவைக் கூப்பிடவும்
செய்தித்தாள் வந்தால் அப்பாவிடம் கொடுக்கவும்
யாரும் சொல்லாமலே கற்றுக் கொள்கிறது குழந்தை”

(Child calls her mother at the sight of vegetable vendor and dad at the sight of newspaper which is not taught to her by anyone). Thus, the argument of Simon de Beauvoir is proved that a woman is not born but she learned to

² The people of okrika are a group of ijaws occupying the south eastern part of rivers state of Nigeria

³ A poet

become woman. “*Le Deuxième Sexe*”⁴ is recognized as the first major analysis of women’s oppression in the history of contemporary French Feminist thought. The book is divided into two volumes,

1. “Le Deuxième Sexe” Tome 1.Les faits et les myths
2. “Le Deuxième Sexe” Tome 2.L’expérience vécue

In the first volume she traces the history of women’s place in a society right from Bronze Age to modern society by analyzing the myths of women through ages. In the second volume she analyzes the situation of women in the contemporary world from childhood to menopause. Finally she advocates women towards their independence.

She condemns the influence of patriarchal society on women by enumerating her viewpoints. Her theory is principally based on “**other**” status of women. « *La femme se détermine et se différencie par rapport a l’homme et non celui –ci par rapport a elle est l’inessentiel en face l’essentiel il est le sujet, il l est l’absolu ; elle est l’autre* »

A woman differentiates or defines herself with reference to man and he is not defined with reference to her because he is essential, and she is inessential. He is the central figure. He is absolute where as she is the “**other**”. She means to say that she gets the status inferior to man; she is not given the equal space in a society to explore.

Législateurs, prêtres, philosophes, écrivains, savants se sont acharnés à démontrer que la condition subordonnée de la femme était voulue dans le ciel et profitable a la terre

She opposes the view of legislators, priests and the others that support the subordinate position of women and according to them her position is defined in heaven and is advantageous on earth. She argues that it’s one and only because of the injustice done to women who are denied means of expression that there is few women genius in the past.

“Elles (Rosa Luxemburg⁵, Marie Curie) démontrent avec éclat que ce n’est pas l’infériorité des femmes qui a déterminé leur insignifiance historique qui les a voués à l’infériorité”

According to her if the women were given equal chances there might be more number of women genius like Marie Curie. But she also accepted the fact that women are unable to realise herself as equal to men because such facts are not even recognised by the society as well.

“Il est très difficile à une femme d’agir en égale de l’homme tant que cette égalité n’est pas universellement reconnue et concrètement réalisée”.

She expresses this as master slave relationship. She assures that a girl can explore this world to reach her destiny only through the eyes of men.

“C’est à travers les yeux des homes que la fillette explore le monde et y déchiffre son destin”.

She argues that women have been prevented from taking active control of their lives since their lives are designed according to the wishes of male dominated world where she is made to believe that man is the subject and she is subjected to man who partly with women’s consent has made her an extension of himself.

Simone de Beauvoir’s views on marriage and maternity:

‘L’amour n’est qu’une occupation pour l’homme mais un destin pour la femme’

⁴ Translated as the second sex in english

⁵ Rosa Luxemburg was a polish and naturalized –German revolutionary socialist, Marxist philosopher and anti war activist(1871-1919)

'Le principe du mariage est obscène par ce qu'il transforme en droits et devoirs un échange qui doit être fondé sur un élan spontané'

Beauvoir claim that due to the secondary position of women in the society love and marriages are more advantageous to men. The marriage bonds are on the basis of passive nature of women to make it as their destiny. But absence of love is found in most cases when a woman is expected to lose her freedom to depend on a man in the institution of marriage, there is no chance of pure love between the couple.

"La femme ne peut pas s'accomplir si elle se borne à être épouse et mère"

She criticised the institution of marriage as she witnessed with some couples. Too often they joined in their weakness rather than in their strength each asking from the other support instead of finding pleasure in giving. She condemns the belief that child is the ultimate aim of woman as it precisely giving a value that women is created only for that purpose. Beauvoir opposes all the myths related with maternity. She condemns that women are treated as a child producing instrument.

Le renversement du droit maternel fut la grande histoire du sexe féminine. Même à la maison ce fut l'homme qui prît en main le gouvernail, la femme fut dégradée, asservie, elle devient esclave du plaisir de l'homme et simple instrument de reproduction'

She is criticised as she is against the maternity and child birth but she gives a prompt answer that *"I simply asked that women should experience them, freely and truth fully without any fear."*⁶

Beauvoir's some other works:

- **L'Invitée** Her first novel (she came to stay) -1943 analyses the relationship of a couple and she advises to be conscious in choosing the relationship to get it succeeded.
- **Le sang des autres**-1945 (Blood of others) analyses the human psychology in relation to humanity she argues that it is women's behaviour in relation to sex that poses real threat to her authenticity.
- **Mandarins** (1954) her best novel for which she is received *le prix Goncourt* (literary award) in which she discussed about the human responsibility in a society as the background of this novel is set after Second World War.
- **Les bouches inutiles** is the only play she wrote in which she showcased an ideal society where sacrifice of some souls lead to the better life of others in the society.
- **Memoirs d'une jeune fille rangé** (1958) is an autobiography where she discussed about the effects of religion in the life of children and condemned the social expectations about children in a society.
- **Un mort très douce** (1964), **la vieillesse** (1970) these books analysed the problems of aging and the negligence of elders in a society.

Beauvoir -A woman of action:

Beauvoir's powerful thoughts challenged the societal norms and expectations of her time. After analysing the status of women she proposes some measures to modify the structure of the male dominated society. She took steps to emancipate women. She advises women neither to be afraid of violence against them nor to be fooled by the praises.

⁶ An autobiography Force of Circumstances Volume 3, Simone de Beauvoir 1963

- She calls the women for economic activities; she believes that the economic stability and independence can change her status.
- She confirms that through the availability of contraceptives and access to paid work women on a large scale would have the chance to develop their status. (Women were not given the freedom to use contraceptives and do abortion till 1975 in France).

She has prepared a petition "*Manifesto*⁷ of 343" which was published in *Le Novel Observateur*⁸ on April 5th 1971. In which 343 women from all walks of life including the popular figures in French society to declare that they have undergone abortion in their life time. It was an act of civil disobedience since abortion was illegal in France. The manifesto called for the legalisation of abortion and free access to contraceptives. Throughout the world women supported such liberation movement. This debate echoed in the government. Finally in January 1975 women were given sanction to go for abortion up to 10 weeks of pregnancy and abortion was legalised.

Conclusion:

To conclude Feminism is not trying to encourage women to be like men; it's about valuing women for being women. Feminism rejected neither marriage nor motherhood but instead it strives to reclaim femininity as a valuable construct that should be respected. Right from 1848, when the first women's rights convention started till date so many women had worked and are working for the emancipation of women. Of course the great souls like Simone de Beauvoir succeeded in their attempts to enact laws in favour of women which had great impact on the lives of women. But the real problems still remain. Women continue to face discrimination and harassment in her domestic as well as working place. Feminism ... yet to decipher?

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⁷ A written statement by a political party that explains what it hopes to do if it becomes the government in future.

⁸ L'Obs previously known as Le Nouvel Observateur, is a weekly French news magazine.