Simon de Beauvoir: Mother of Modern Feminism?

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The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the role the French author and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir has played in the development of women's movement in general and feminist intellectual achievements in particular. To this end, this paper explores Beauvoir's intellectual struggle to urge women to get rid of the manacles of the patriarchal system, which has long imprisoned them within its norms and values, denying them the freedom and autonomy they deserve as equal human beings. To show Beauvoir's significance in this respect, the paper traces her influence on feminist academics and authors, with special emphasis on the notable feminist critic Kate Millet for the simple reason that many critics consider the latter's masterpiece Sexual Politics as the foundation of what is called radical or second wave of feminism, minimizing or even ignoring Beauvoir's effect.

Feminism is a discourse that involves various movements, theories, and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender difference, the advocacy of equality for women, and the campaign for women's rights and interests. In short, feminism can be defined as the belief that women have equal political, social, sexual, intellectual and economic rights as men do.

Most feminists and critics divide the movement historically into three waves. The first wave, referring to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was originally interested in the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women. This wave focused later on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage. Almost after achieving these goals by the mid of the twentieth century, joining the personal and the political, the second wave took a new track, emphasizing on women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, abortion and reproductive rights, including access to contraception and quality parental care. So, feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. In brief, it can be said that the second wave of feminism began with a radical view towards matters related to woman's position, while the first wave was mainly interested in civil rights. In her "Radical Feminism and Literature: Rethinking Millet's Sexual Politics", Cora Kaplan sees that patriarchy, according to radical feminists, was a "political institution' rather than an economic or social relation and political institutions were in their turn conceived as hierarchical power relations" (157).

Beginning in the early 1990s, third-wave feminism emerged as a response to what was considered failures of the second wave. Beginning in the early 1990s, third-wave feminism emerged as a response to the over emphasis of the second wave on the experiences of upper-middle-class white women, ignoring the more oppressed women such as women of color and of the working class.
Throughout years of development, a variety of movements have emerged from feminism, most important of which are socialist and Marxist feminisms, radical feminism, liberal feminism, black feminism, psychoanalytical feminism, postcolonial and third-world feminism, post-structural and post modern feminism. At another level, feminist theory is an extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields, encompassing work in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art history, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Regardless of all differences and trends in feminism, it is almost certain that feminist theories have become of the most important in the field of literary

criticism. In an article in Modern Age, Anne Babeau Gardiner writes, "according to one Modern Language Association survey, feminist criticism in recent times has had 'more impact on the teaching of literature' than any other school. It is claimed to be 'already an indispensable part of the study of literature' in universities in Britain, Canada, and the United States" (1). It was during the second wave that feminists started to show interest in women's literature, noticing how this literature was ignored and shunted off the mainstream despite the fact that among women writers were some of the most important of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Consequently, feminist academics and thinkers turned their interest not only towards analyzing male's literary works in innovative ways but also shedding light on women authors and the literature they produced, re-evaluating in the process the preconceptions inherent in a literary canon dominated by male beliefs and male writers.

Although it was published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's masterpiece The Second Sex, together with her other writings and activities, was a source of aspiration for radical feminism, which started to crystallize in the 1960s. In fact, the remarkable role Beauvoir has played in the history of women's emancipation is undeniable, despite the neglect and harsh criticism she has undergone for a long time, and the attempts to restrict discussion to her relationship with her close lifetime friend, Jean Paul Sartre. The Second Sex, which is a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism, has always been considered the bible of women's movements all over the world and has placed Beauvoir, according to The Guardian, as the "mother of modern feminism and a champion of sexual freedom (1). In Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader, Elizabeth Fallaize sees that Beauvoir's name "has come to be synonymous with the feminist voice of the twentieth century" and that "her life and writing have continued to inspire passionate debate" (1). In his The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Vincent B. Leitch thinks that "While Beauvoir's argument that in patriarchal cultures man is the norm and woman the deviation has become a commonplace of feminist theory, in 1948 it was revolutionary" (1404). In an article in The Independent, Gemma O'Doherty quotes a newspaper headline in 1986 reading, "Women, you owe her everything!", asserting that The Second Sex, "an encyclopedic analysis of women's oppression, is still considered the greatest feminist tract of all time" (1). According the Guardian, The Second Sex "catapulted the writer to worldwide fame and spurred a feminist revolt within the French middle classes that spread to the United States and as far as Japan" (6)

The Second Sex was published in 1949 in two volumes and was so controversial that the Vatican put it, together with her novel, The Mandarins, on the Index of prohibited books. Analyzing women from a variety of perspectives, including the biological, psychoanalytic, materialistic, historical, literary and anthropological, Beauvoir contends in the chapter entitled "Facts and Myths" that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. In the second book, she examines women from their own lived experience, showing the processes through which women internalize the ideologies of otherness that relegate them to immanence and to the position of being man's other.

In the introduction, she tries to find a definition of woman according to the above mentioned fields to conclude that none of them is sufficient. Some, she says, consider woman as a womb, while they describe certain women as not women just because they don't share "in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity"

(Second Sex 2), although biologically they are. Criticizing women who would like to behave like men and deny their womanhood and feminine weakness, she criticizes the notion that considers woman a mystery and asserts that this gives man a justification to evade facing his ignorance of what a woman really is. Indirectly referring to the image given to woman in literary works, she wonders whether woman is an angel, a demon, or an actress. Her answer is that a human being is to be measured only by his acts, so a peasant woman is described a good or a bad worker, and an actress has or does not have talent. The relation "of the two sexes", Beauvoir argues, "is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative" (3).

In a historical preview, Beauvoir shows how the ancients believed that the absolute human type is the masculine, whereas woman was imprisoned in her body, which has always been seen as a hindrance. Beauvoir supports her perspective referring to ancient philosophers and thinkers. Aristotle, for example, considered that the "'female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities'", while St Thomas saw that woman is an "imperfect man" (3). Plato, she says, thanked God for two things: being free and being a man, not a woman. Beauvoir continues her reasoning to conclude with her brilliant, innovative idea that woman has always been "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other" (4). It is worth remembering, as Lisa Appignanesi says in her "The Heart of Simon de Beauvoir", that this term, "the other", coined by Beauvoir, and The Second Sex "served as the source for those discourses of the "other" which shaped the identity and orientalist politics of the 1980s and 1990s." In his groundbreaking book, Orientalism, Edward Said clearly refers to Beauvoir's notion to describe how Western thinkers and writers have always seen the East as the primitive, weak, and feminine "Other", juxtaposed with the civilized, strong, and masculine West. Comparing women to other minorities like Negros, Jews, or even proletarians, she argues that, unlike these groups, women's subjugation to men isn't a result of historical event or a social change. It has always been there. Women's situation is much worse as "legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth" (qtd in Selden 535).

In a lengthened analysis of biological and scientific studies of human beings ─ males and females ─ and animals, Beauvoir asserts the negative and incorrect concepts adopted by many philosophers that even by nature, a female is the other. According to Hegel, for example, she says, "the two sexes were of necessity different, the one active and the other passive, and of course the female would be the passive one" (Second Sex 18).

Concerning psychoanalytic point of view, Beauvoir criticizes Freud's view, which she believes is based upon a masculine model, arguing that if it is true that woman envies man his penis and wishes to castrate him, she may do that "only if she feels her femininity a mutilation; and then it is a symbol of all the privileges of manhood that she wishes to appropriate the male organ" (57). Similarly, in another chapter, Beauvoir explores the point of view of historical materialism, showing that although the socialist theory has given women a chance to get rid of the oppression they have long undergone, she still believes that the theory has failed to explain several important concepts, which underlie the theory such as the origin of the family or the

institution of private property. At the same level, Beauvoir is not convinced of Engels' attempt to reduce antagonism of the sexes to class struggle; nor does she accept regarding woman simply as a worker, or even bringing the sexual instinct under a code of regulations. Beauvoir concludes that "we reject for the same reasons both the sexual monism of Freud and the economic monism of Engels" (54).

According to women's image in literature, Beauvoir believes that "Literature always fails in attempting to portray 'mysterious' women" (qtd in Leitch 1412). Under the influence of the mysterious image fabricated about women in reality and in some theories, novelists have usually tried to show women as "strange, enigmatic figures", although at the end of a novel, it appears that they are rather "consistent and transparent persons" (1412). Such images, or myths, are to Beauvoir the production of patriarchal society for purposes of justification, no more or less. To support her point, she quotes the French poet, Jules Laforgue, saying "Mirage! Mirage! We should kill them since we cannot comprehend them; or better tranquilize them, … make them our genuinely equal comrades, our intimate friends" (1413).

For Beauvoir, to see woman equally as a human being doesn't necessarily impoverish man's experience, make her less romantic, or destroy the dramatic relationship between the sexes; "it is not to deny the significance authentically revealed to man through feminine reality, it is not to do away with poetry, love, adventure, happiness, dreaming. It is simply to ask that behavior, sentiment, passion be founded upon the truth" (1413). In this respect, Beauvoir attacks those who think that modern, liberated women are not women at all, because to be a true woman, she has to be the "Other", as patriarchy wants her to be. Even those men who claim to be open-minded and liberal may accept woman to be equal, still they want her to stay inessential. In short, Beauvoir criticizes those who can't "contemplate woman as at once a social personage and carnal prey" and tells them that only when they "unreservedly accept the situation into existence, only then will women be able to live in that situation without anguish [and only then] Laforgue's prayer will be answered" (1414).

In a clear call for action, she emphasizes that "society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority" (Second Sex 57). According to psychoanalysts, Beauvoir argues, woman tries to drag man into her prison by keeping his symbol of masculinity under her control. Now woman endeavors to escape from this prison, to end her immanence, and to emerge into the light of transcendence. It is now man's battle not to let her go and keep her under his sovereignty. The solution, she believes is in recognition of each other as equal or the struggle will go on.

Interestingly enough, Millet's most famous work, Sexual Politics, which brought her to fame in 1970, and which offers a comprehensive critique of patriarchy in Western society and literature has, in fact, striking similarities to Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Vincent Leitch sees that the selection from The Second Sex which he includes in his anthology "heavily influenced Kate Millet's 1970 feminist classic, Sexual Politics"(1405).

A close look at Millet's Sexual Politics shows that even the divisions and subtitles of the book are in more than one way similar to those in The Second Sex, with some additions such as ideology, sociology, and class. In her attempt to prove that the

relation of the sexes is a political one, Millet takes races, castes, and classes as examples of how relationships are power-structured and how one group is controlled by another. Except perhaps for directly considering this "politics", her discourse is not much different from Beauvoir's comparison between the sexes and the blacks or the Jews, where as Millet says, such relationship "involves the general control of one collectivity, defined by birth, over another collectivity, also defined by birth" (Sexual Politics 2). As Beauvoir traces patriarchal culture starting from Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas, Millet also sees that the relation of the sexes throughout history, and even "super natural authority, the Deity, 'His' ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and out of our culture ― its very civilization…is of male manufacture (3).

Again like Beauvoir, Millet criticizes theories that consider biological differences and physical strength naturally lead to man's supremacy, arguing that the point lies "in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological" (5). She adds that "Endocrinology and genetics afford no definite evidence of determining mental-emotional differences …[which] even raises questions as to the validity and permanence of psycho-sexual identity" (6). To Millet, this identity is, therefore, postnatal and learned; in other words, it is the result of "socialistion" and "the conditioning of early childhood" (9). Isn't this the core of The Second Sex that "one is not born a woman"? Similar to Beauvoir's view of the role of religions in reinforcing patriarchy referring to St. Augustine's writings, Jews' prayers, and others, Millet discusses "the Catholic precept that 'father is head of the family,' or Judaism's delegation of quasi-priestly authority to the male parent" (10). In addition, Millet criticizes the courtly and romantic love which has granted characteristics on women such as virtues and confined them within narrow spheres of behavior, while Beauvoir contends that "The times that have most sincerely treasured women are not the period of feudal chivalry nor yet the gallant nineteenth century" (qtd in Leitch 1413).

In another striking similarity to The Second Sex, we read in Sexual Politics that "Patriarchal Legal system in depriving women of control over their bodies drive them to illegal abortions" (Sexual Politics 19) ― a view that was considered scandalous when Beauvoir wrote it twenty years earlier. It is needless to say that Millet's discussion of what she calls "a fear of the 'otherness' of woman" (21) is clearly Beauvoir's innovative term. Even Millet's discussion of Freud and his theory of "castration" echoes Beauvoir's detailed analysis and criticism of psychoanalysts' views towards women. Millet's discussion that the "uneasiness and disgust female genitals arouse in patriarchal societies is attested through religious, cultural, and literary proscription" (22) is just a part of Beauvoir's lengthy analysis of the difference between myth and reality concerning the feminine body (qtd in Leitch 1408). Even the "Myths" of Pandora and Eve, which Millet discusses in page 25, are referred to in The Second Sex such as in the introduction (Second Sex 8).

Another point that shows Beauvoir's influence on Millet's Sexual Politics is political and economic position of women. In the introduction to The Second Sex, Beauvoir writes that men still "hold the better jobs, get higher wages, despite a few rights achieved by women, and have more opportunity for success that their new competitors. In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolise the most important posts…they enjoy a traditional prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support, for the present enshrines the past

– and in the past all history has been made by men" (marxists.org 7). Millet, in her turn, shedding light on the same point, cites examples and statistics to illustrate man's dominance" in such fields (Sexual Politics 16). In The Second Sex, also, Beauvoir explains the common use of the terms "man" and "woman" where the former designates human beings in general, and the latter represents only woman (qtd in Selden 533-534). Millet explains this idea of patriarchal language considering that "despite all the customary pretence that 'man' and 'humanity' are terms which apply equally to both sexes, the fact is hardly obscured than in practice, general application favors the male far more often than the male as referent, or even sole referent, for such designations" (Sexual Politics 29).

A final similarity worth mentioning between the two books is the image of women in literary works. It is true that Beauvoir, unlike Millet, doesn't muse on this issue with detailed examples, as Millet does, yet, she discusses it enough to make her point. Criticizing the unrealistic image given to women in the "gallant" nineteenth century, Beauvoir criticizes "the savage indictments hurled against women throughout French literature. Montherlant, for example, follows the tradition of Jean de Meung, though with less gusto. This hostility may at times be well founded, often it is gratuitous, but in truth it more or less successfully conceals a desire for self-justification" (qtd in Selden 535-536). Echoing Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own and "Professions for Women", while exploring women's literature in the West, Beauvoir tries to unearth the reasons why no woman has written books such as The Trial, Moby Dick, Ulysses, or Seven Pillars of Wisdom in a patriarchal society. She reasons that "Women do not contest the human situation, because they have hardly begun to assume it" (536). What limits women to be as great as the few rare male artists is not a special destiny; it is rather lack of liberty. To Beauvoir, "Art, literature, philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator" (536), so she wonders how someone who is deprived of liberty, restricted by education and custom, and whose attempts to find one's place in this world are too "arduous" would be able to achieve such a task of recreating the world. Beauvoir calls this "the free spirit" women is denied, and that's why "in order to explain her limitations it is woman's situation that must be invoked and not a mysterious essence" (537). To be free, to use Virginia Woolf's words in "Professions for Women", women need to kill their angels, or phantoms, so that they can write, not depend on their charm for a living, and reject their sole role to soothe, flatter, and comfort males. Undoubtedly, Millet's discussion of this issue is so comprehensive while criticizing Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and D.H. Lawrence, trying to illustrate men writer's use of sex to degrade and undermine women. In a rare reference to Beauvoir, and while discussing what she calls Lawrence's insistence on "celebration of the penis" and "on inherent female masochism", Millet says, "It is no wonder Simone de Beauvoir shrewdly observed that Lawrence spent his life writing guidebooks for women" (qtd in Eagleton 137).

However, though remarkable, groundbreaking, and unprecedented, The Second Sex has caused ambivalent response in France, as it was attacked by some feminists as masculinist, especially in relation to its controversial accounts of biological sex and motherhood. In an article in Simone de Beauvoir Studies in 2008, Ursula Tidd believes that Beauvoir was cast off adrift as a "first wave" feminist because the 1970s and 80s French feminism mainly depended on psychoanalysis and semiotics, the negative effect her intellectual and personal partnership with Sartre has brought about,

and the bad English translation of Beauvoir's The Second Sex. However, Tidd assures that the "discovery in the early 1990s of Beauvoir's phenomenological approach to understanding gender, combined with a recognition of her original syntheses of existentialism, Hegelianism, Marxism and anthropology in Le Deuxieme Sexe, has led to a major re-evaluation of her contribution to feminist thought" (2). So, according to Tidd, this has led to acknowledgement of her importance and influence. The psychoanalytic Writer Elisabeth Roudinesco, for example, asserts that Beauvoir is "the first thinker in France to link explicitly the question of sexuality with political emancipation" (qtd in Tidd 3). Through her two books Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an intellectual Woman and Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir, the well-known feminist Toril Moi has highly contributed to this recognition of Beauvoir's achievements and her influence on radical and on contemporary feminism. Tidd quotes Moi arguing that "Beauvoir's concept of the body as situation is a crucially original and often overlooked contribution to feminist theory" (5). On celebrating Beauvoir's centenary in January 2008, Moi writes in The Guardian that Beauvoir, "the greatest feminist thinker of her century, is a phenomenal achievement" (1). Moi argues that although The Second Sex was a source of inspiration and insight for countless women even before the women's movement, "major writers of the women's movement – Betty Friedan, Kate Millet and Germaine Greer ─ barely mention Beauvoir, as if to deny the influence of a threatening mother figure" (1), while other dominant "French theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray were openly hostile to Beauvoir" (2). In this respect, Alison Holland quotes Moi writing, "By becoming intellectuals, such women have made themselves the true daughters of Beauvoir: no wonder that many have felt the need to separate themselves from such a powerful mother imago" (9). Briefly and directly Moi insists that "Everyone who cares about freedom and justice for women should read The Second Sex" (2).

In an interview in Society with John Gerassi in 1976, Beauvoir mentions the neglect she receives from some feminist writers, and she mentions Kate Millet as an example. Without showing any blame or anger, She modestly says that such feminists "may have become feminists for the reasons I explain in The Second Sex; but they discovered those reasons in their life experiences, not in my book" (1). Surprisingly enough, in Beauvoir and The Second Sex, Margaret A. Simons quotes Millet saying nineteen years later that "She 'couldn't have written Sexual Politics without [The Second Sex]'" and that "'Now I realize that I was probably cheating all over the place'" (145).

The purpose of showing the influence of Beauvoir on Millet's Sexual Politics is not to underestimate Millet's remarkable work, or to cast doubts on her artistic talent and potential, as the role she has played in the development of the feminist movement and feminist literary theory is undeniable. What this comparison is trying to do is to show that Beauvoir's innovative ideas and her monumental analysis of women's conditions, aggressively though criticized by some feminists and other critics, have definitely, as Romain Leick says in "A fresh Look at Simone de Beauvoir", "established the theoretical underpinning of modern feminism" (1). If this and many other similar testimonies mean something, it is that Beauvoir's influence is not limited to Kate Millet, but it extends to other feminists of various trends and interests. Despite all criticisms, Vincent Leitch asserts that "The Second Sex, revolutionary in its own time, offers a powerful analysis of the status of women and remains a foundational text for feminist theory" (1405).

No matter how positively or negatively Beauvoir's role in feminist movement and feminist literary criticism is seen, hardly is there a serious academic study on feminism without acknowledging Beauvoir's essential role as a turning point not only in academic and literary studies but in the position of women as well. After Beauvoir, it would not be that easy to ignore women's writings again and shunt them off the mainstream. Nor would Shakespeare's sister of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* have gone mad or killed herself without being able to write any word as she would in a misogynistic patriarchal world of the past.

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