

**Contextualizing Gender**  
**Prof. Rashmi Gaur**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 03**  
**Feminist Consciousness and Gendered Experiences in Simone de Beauvoir**

Welcome dear participants to today's module. In the previous modules, we had looked at the foundational development of the Concept of Gender and how the early feminist movement intersects with Gender Theory.

In today's module, we will introduce the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and her understanding of gender. Even though she herself has not used the word gender per se. Yet, no discussion of gender theories can ever be complete without incorporating her ideas. This module begins with a discussion of some of the key ideas of Beauvoir in order to emphasize on the distinctiveness of her contribution to the theories of gender, and also to prepare the philosophical ground for our study of *The Second Sex* in the next module.

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**Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)**

- The French writer and feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most important figures of the twentieth century.
  - A representative of the French post-war intelligentsia, associated with the philosophical movement of existentialism, Beauvoir has a major impact on the development of modern thought in feminist philosophy, in literary studies and in the social sciences throughout the world.
- D. Bergoffen has commented that she is a “belatedly acknowledged philosopher”. Identifying herself as an author rather than as a philosopher and calling herself the “midwife of Sartre’s existential ethics” rather than a thinker in her own right, Beauvoir’s place in philosophy had to be won “against her word”. That place is “now uncontested”.

Simone de Beauvoir

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D. Bergoffen has commented that she is a “belatedly acknowledged philosopher”, and there are several reasons for it. She had identified herself as an author rather than as a philosopher, and jokingly called herself the “midwife of Sartre’s existential ethics” rather than a thinker in her own right.

However, her place in philosophy had to be won against her words, but this place is now uncontested.

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- Since its publication in France in 1949, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has continued to shape debates and discussions around gender.
- Key feminist thinkers of recent decades, such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, have acknowledged their intellectual debt to Beauvoir's work.
- Karen Vintgesi rightly comments that Beauvoir's philosophy "already encompasses all the elements of contemporary feminism -- so much so that it can be taken as its paradigm". The extent and acuity of her insight is profoundly felt in all aspects of gender criticism today.

Luce Irigaray  
Source: Babette Babich

Judith Butler  
Source: University of California, Berkeley

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Karen Vintgesi rightly comments that Beauvoir's philosophy "already encompasses all the elements of contemporary feminism, so much so that it can be taken as its paradigm". The extent and acuity of her insight is profoundly felt in all aspects of gender criticism today.



Beauvoir had been influenced by the new Hegelian revival led by Kojève and Jean Hyppolite in the 1930s. Reading Hegel in German during the war years, she produced an original critique of his dialectic of consciousness. Its impact can be felt in several aspects of her philosophy.

Some other influences or which have shaped her understanding of issues are Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. Beauvoir developed her own existential phenomenology which was inspired by Heidegger, Husserl, and Sartre and combined with a philosophy of history inspired by Hegel, Kojève, and Karl Marx.


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Philosophical influences on Beauvoir's contribution to French existential phenomenology:


- Neo-Hegelian revival led by Kojève and Jean Hyppolite in the 1930s had influenced the French existentialist thinkers.
- Beauvoir took an historical and existential interpretation of the master-slave dialectic from her readings of Hegel.
  - Reading Hegel in German during the war, she produced an original critique of his dialectic of consciousness.
- From Kierkegaard, she retained the notion of the existing individual in pursuit of an authentic, ethical life, but transposed it to a secular context.



Alexandre Kojève



Søren Kierkegaard  
Source: La Biblioteca Real de Dinamarca




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Beauvoir had taken the historical and existential interpretation of the master-slave dialectic from her readings of Hegel. From Kierkegaard, she had retained the notion of the existing individual in pursuit of an authentic, ethical life, but had transposed it to a secular context.

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- Husserl's focus on consciousness's lived experience of the 'life-world' of perception and praxis was also influential.\*
- Heidegger's notion of the human subject as being 'Dasein' ('thrown-into-the-world'), 'Mitsein' ('being-with-others'), and as 'being-towards-death' also informed her ethics and account of gendered subjectivity in *The Second Sex*.
- Working with Sartre in the same philosophical context in the 1940s, her focus is primarily ethical rather than ontological.




Edmund Husserl  
Source: Mondadori Publishers



Martin Heidegger  
Source: Willy Prager



Jean-Paul Sartre  
Source: Moshe Milner



\* Tidd, U. (2009). Simone de Beauvoir. Reaktion Books.

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She was also influenced by Husserl's focus on consciousness's lived experience of the 'life-world' of perception and praxis. By Heidegger's notion of the human subject as

being 'Dasein' 'Mitsein' and as 'being-towards-death' also informed her ethics and account of gendered subjectivity in *The Second Sex*.


She had worked with Sartre in the same existential philosophical context in the 1940s. However, her focus was primarily ethical rather than ontological.

Beauvoir and Sartre, the two philosophers who are often cited simultaneously in similar contexts had first met in October, 1929, when they were in their early 20s. They had an open relationship and were a powerful couple. They also always read each other's work and debate continues about the extent to which they influenced each other in their existentialist work such as Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Beauvoir's *She Came to his Stay* and "Phenomenology and Intent".


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### Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre

- The two philosophers first met in October 1929, but it was never a traditional relationship. They neither married nor shared the same living quarters, and famously had an open relationship. But, as de Beauvoir said, "The comradeship that welded our lives together made a superfluous mockery of any other bond we might have forged for ourselves."
- They were a powerful couple, writes Louis Menand in *The New Yorker*, "with independent lives, who met in cafés, where they wrote their books and saw their friends at separate tables... but who maintained a kind of soul marriage." The relationship worked for 50 years.



Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Beijing, 1955  
Source: Xinhua News Agency




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As Beauvoir had suggested they had a comradeship which had welded their lives together and it made a superfluous mockery of any other bond they might have forged for themselves.

Louis Menand has repented that they had independent lives. They met in cafes entertained people on separate tables, but also maintained a kind of soul marriage which continued for 50 years. Their letters and diary entries suggest that when either of them developed romantic inclination for any other partner they both felt cheated and angry.

Now, we shall play a rare clip from a 1967 documentary. It was filmed at Sartre's Montparnasse High Rise Apartment, overlooking the cemetery where the two philosophers were eventually buried [FL].

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Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir

- This footage from 1967 documentary shows the intellectual power couple, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Source: Contemporary Arts Media [YouTube]

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Let us discuss some of the key terms that Beauvoir has used throughout her literary works. First, we shall look at her concept of situation and facticity. This concept is important to understand as in the later weeks when we will discuss Judith Butler in detail, we will find that she has also explored Beauvoir's understanding of body as situation in *Gender Trouble*.

Butler addresses Beauvoir's use of the word situation to describe the body's status and social position.

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### Situation and Facticity

- In Beauvoir's thought, 'situation' refers to how a human being as an individual consciousness is engaged in the world with regard to other people, to time, to space and to other products of his/her facticity.
- 'Facticity' refers to the necessary connection between consciousness and the world of inert matter and the past.




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In Beauvoir's thought, 'situation' refers to how a human being as an individual consciousness is engaged in the world with regard to other people, to time, to his space and to other products of his or her facticity. Facticity refers to the necessary connection between consciousness and the world of inert matter and the past.


So, what are the aspects of my facticity? Aspects of my situation which I have not chosen. For example, the facts of my birth, my body, the existence of other people in my life, my death, and that I cannot choose, not to accept as part of my situation.

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- The feminist theorist, Toril Moi, explains that the concept of 'situation' enables Beauvoir to avoid having to divide lived experience up into the traditional subject/object binary – precisely because the Other, for instance (as an example of my facticity) is always already part of that situation (Moi 1999: 65).
- Beauvoir's notion of the body as a situation is, according to Moi, a crucially original and often overlooked contribution to feminist theory (Moi 1999: 59).
- Her focus, unlike Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, is predominantly ethical rather than ontological, as she sets out to examine the importance of 'situation'.



Toril Moi  
Source: Susannah B. F. Paletz



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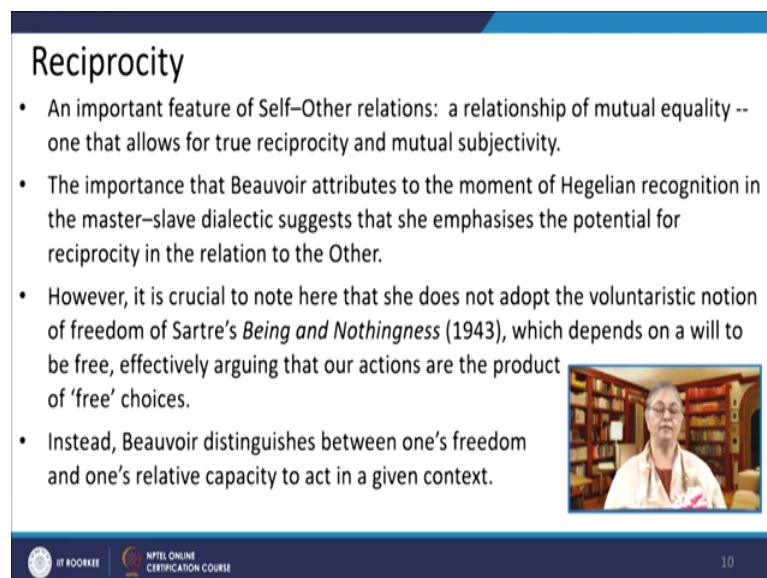
Toril Moi, the feminist theorist has explained that the concept of situation has enabled Beauvoir to avoid having to divide lived experience up into the traditional subject/object binary- Precisely because the Other, for instance is an example of my facticity is always already part of that situation.

Beauvoir's notion of the body as a situation is, as Toril Moi has commented a crucially original and often overlooked contribution to feminist theory. Unlike Sartre, her focus is predominantly ethical rather than ontological, as she sets out to examine the importance of situation.

Along with her concept of situation and facticity, Beauvoir's work explores the concept of reciprocity. As existing alone is impossible and also undesirable as far as pursuing our projects are concerned, Beauvoir asks what we can expect from other people who are indisputably in the world with us.


She explores various modes of relating to other people, such as self-sacrifice and ways in which individuals act for each other. She cites the example of the slave who obeys the master, and the woman who sacrifices her life to her husband. In Hegelian terms, it is the end to the antithesis of subject and object.



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**Reciprocity**

- An important feature of Self–Other relations: a relationship of mutual equality -- one that allows for true reciprocity and mutual subjectivity.
- The importance that Beauvoir attributes to the moment of Hegelian recognition in the master–slave dialectic suggests that she emphasises the potential for reciprocity in the relation to the Other.
- However, it is crucial to note here that she does not adopt the voluntaristic notion of freedom of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which depends on a will to be free, effectively arguing that our actions are the product of 'free' choices.
- Instead, Beauvoir distinguishes between one's freedom and one's relative capacity to act in a given context.



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However, it is crucial to note here that she does not adopt the voluntaristic notion of freedom of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which he had published in 1943, and which depends on a will to be free, effectively arguing that our actions are the products of 'free' choices.

Instead, Beauvoir distinguishes between one's freedom and one's relative capacity to act in a given context. Beauvoir's existential beliefs are key to understand her philosophical approach, a particular concept which is essential to decode her philosophy of woman is her notion of ambiguity.

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*The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947)

- Beauvoir begins her discussion by arguing that the human condition is ambiguous, by which she means that the meaning of human existence is not fixed, but must be constantly created within the parameters of seemingly opposed conditions of existence.
- Human existence is ambiguous because human beings are both free and unfree, separate and connected to each other, a subject for ourselves and an object for others, consciousness and body, alive yet born to die.

Source: Citadel

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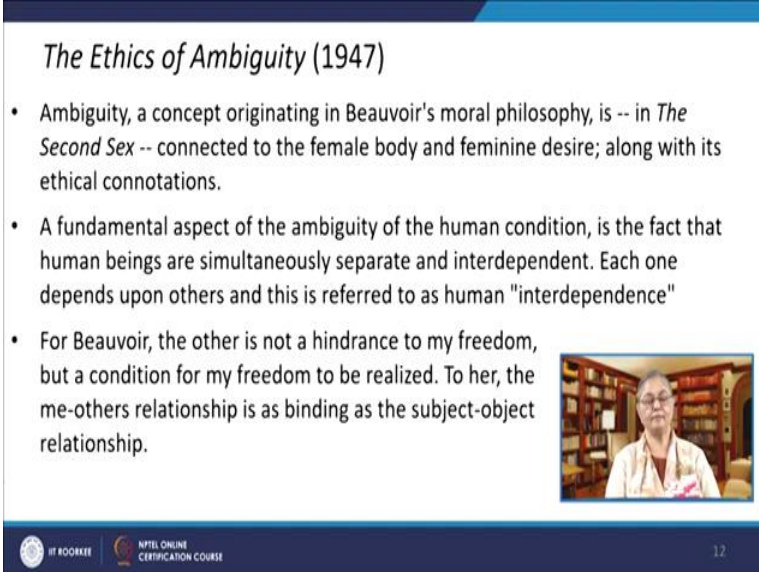
In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* which was published in 1947. Beauvoir begins her discussion by arguing that the human condition is ambiguous, by which she means that the meaning of human existence is not fixed, but must be constantly created within the parameters of seemingly opposed conditions of existence.

Human existence is ambiguous because human beings are both free and unfree, separate and connected to each other, a subject for ourselves and an object for others, consciousness and body, alive yet born to die.



*The Ethics of Ambiguity* reconsiders the idea of invulnerable freedom which had been initially presented by Beauvoir in her first philosophical essay with the title of Pyrrhus and Cineas. Beauvoir drops a distinction between the inner and outer domains of freedom and deploys a unique understanding of consciousness as an intentional activity. It is also relational.

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*The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947)

- Ambiguity, a concept originating in Beauvoir's moral philosophy, is -- in *The Second Sex* -- connected to the female body and feminine desire; along with its ethical connotations.
- A fundamental aspect of the ambiguity of the human condition, is the fact that human beings are simultaneously separate and interdependent. Each one depends upon others and this is referred to as human "interdependence"
- For Beauvoir, the other is not a hindrance to my freedom, but a condition for my freedom to be realized. To her, the me-others relationship is as binding as the subject-object relationship.

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The concept of ambiguity which has originated in Beauvoir's moral philosophy is later on connected to the female body and feminine desire along with its ethical connotations in *The Second Sex*.

A fundamental aspect of ambiguity of human condition is the fact that human beings are simultaneously separate and interdependent. Each one depends upon others and this is referred to as human "interdependence".

For Beauvoir, the other is not a hindrance to my freedom, so to say, but a condition for my freedom to be realized. To her, the me-others relationship is as binding as the subject-object relationship.

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- The concept of ambiguity is applied to the female body and also to the female desire in *The Second Sex*.
- Beauvoir does not view the body as something dominated by and subordinate to consciousness. She maintains that the body "is a situation" and the human being "a historical idea" thus that the biological nature of humans is never experienced apart from a second social nature.
- Body, as well as body-consciousness, is thus always historically mediated. Differences between the sexes are also dependent on historical situations.
- However, woman has a special relationship to her body.



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The concept of ambiguity is applied not only to the female body, but also to the feminine desire in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir does not view the body as something dominated by and subordinate to consciousness. She maintains that the body “is a situation” and the human being “a historical idea” thus that the biological nature of humans is never experienced apart from a second social nature.


So, body, as well as body-consciousness, is always historically mediated. Differences between the sexes are also dependent on historical situations. However, a woman has a special relationship to her body. For instance, when she is pregnant, she is herself, is still also experiences herself as alienated as the species has taken hold of her.

Her body is something other than herself. There are those differences between the sexuality of men and women. But she assumes nevertheless that inter subjectivity in heterosexual love is possible. In Beauvoir’s opinion, a woman embodies the ambiguity of the human condition more explicitly than the man, being separate as well as interdependent, body as well as consciousness and it also applies to the notion of feminine desire.

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- In Beauvoir's opinion, woman embodies the ambiguity of the human condition more explicitly than the man, being separate as well as interdependent, body as well as consciousness. It also applies to the notion of feminine desire.
- Beauvoir rejects Sartre's view presented in *Being and Nothingness* of human beings as autonomous, separate subjects with instrumental and conflictual relationships to each other. As Eva Gothlin comments in her article, "Simone de Beauvoir's Notions of Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity and their Relationship to Jean-Paul Sartre's Notions of Appeal and Desire", Beauvoir does not repeat Sartre's dualistic image of the consciousness-body relationship but instead replaces it with a notion of a fundamental ambiguity, i.e., of human beings as at once separate and interdependent.\*

\*<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3810828.pdf>




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Beauvoir has rejected Sartre's view which was presented in *Being and Nothingness* of human beings as autonomous, separate subjects with instrumental and conflictual relationship to each other. Rather, she does not repeat Sartre's dualistic image of the consciousness body relationship, but replaces it with a notion of a fundamental ambiguity, that is of human beings as at one separate and interdependent.

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- Eva Gothlin also finds certain commonalities between Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, and Irigaray's analysis of differences between the sexes in relation to the body and sexuality. Irigaray has illustrated these ideas in *This Sex Which Is Not One* and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.
- Beauvoir, combining her notions of ambiguity with femininity, takes up a position which opposes essentialism. Ambiguity, connected to women, is positive for Beauvoir. As woman is more complicated and ambiguous than man, she is closer to Beauvoir's conception of human nature.



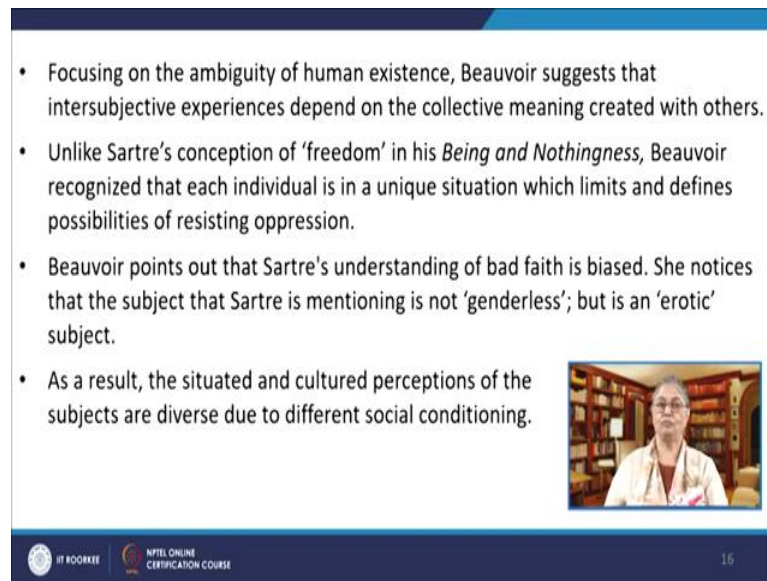
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I would refer to Eva Gothlin here, who in her essay also finds certain commonalities between Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity and Irigaray's analysis of differences between

the sexes in relation to the body and sexuality. Irigaray has illustrated these ideas in her work, *This Sex Which is Not Done* and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

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- Focusing on the ambiguity of human existence, Beauvoir suggests that intersubjective experiences depend on the collective meaning created with others.
- Unlike Sartre's conception of 'freedom' in his *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir recognized that each individual is in a unique situation which limits and defines possibilities of resisting oppression.
- Beauvoir points out that Sartre's understanding of bad faith is biased. She notices that the subject that Sartre is mentioning is not 'genderless'; but is an 'erotic' subject.
- As a result, the situated and cultured perceptions of the subjects are diverse due to different social conditioning.

Carrying forward her idea of the ambiguity of human existence, Beauvoir also suggests that intersubjective experiences depend on the collective meaning created with others.

Unlike Sartre's conception of 'freedom', Beauvoir recognized that each individual is in a unique situation which limits and also defines possibilities of resisting oppression. Beauvoir points out that Sartre's understanding of bad faith is in faith biased. She notices that the subject that Sartre is mentioning is not 'genderless'; but is an 'erotic' subject. As a result, the situated and cultured perceptions of the subjects are diverse due to different social conditioning.

Beauvoir's arguments at this point are closer to those of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, we can refer to Butler's argument that all desire is culturally constructed. Philosophical understandings of Beauvoir are reflected in her critical as well as creative writings.

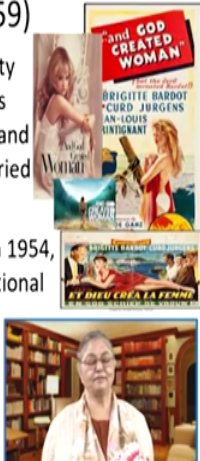
I would refer to her short essay, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* and later on to a novel, *She Came to his Stay* to elucidate it Further. The essay was published in 1959, 10 years after *The Second Sex* and is taken as a continuation of her arguments. It deals with the concept of the eternal feminine as a socio-cultural embodiment of gender inequality in the form of sexually ideologized and ideologizing discourse about woman and sexual difference.

A component of gender essentialism, drawing on her work on myth from *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that the famous French actress Brigitte Bardot constitutes literally a new embodiment of the old myth of the eternal feminine.

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**Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome (1959)**

- Consisting of thirty-seven pages and accompanied by seventy photographs, Beauvoir's essay centres on the French actress Brigitte Bardot and the creation of her persona by her husband and film director, Roger Vadim (1928-2000), whom she married when she was eighteen.
- Vadim directed the famous film *And God Created Woman* in 1954, in which Bardot represents the modern version of the traditional myth of all that is, and will always be, feminine.
- Envisaged as a continuation of the study of myths in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir considers that Bardot replaces the model of the femme fatale by that of the child-woman.




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Beauvoir's essay consists of 37 pages and 70 photographs and centres on the French actress Brigitte Bardot and the creation of her persona by her husband and film director Roger Vadim, whom she had married when she was 18 years old.


Vadim had directed the famous film *And God Created Woman* in 1954, in which Bardot represented the modern version of the traditional myth of all that is and will always be feminine. Envisaged as a continuation of this study of myths in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir considers in this essay that Bardot replaces the model of the femme fatale by that of the child-woman.

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- Beauvoir uses the example of Brigitte Bardot in French cinema of the 1950s to analyse how the myth of the 'eternal feminine' was revived.
- The 'Eternal Feminine' is foremost that body of myth which speaks of 'woman' as Other.
- It represents a collective imaginary relation to woman and common heritage, its images and discourse call up heavily coded and generally agreed upon sets of presuppositions concerning woman and male/female relations.
- Beauvoir in the essay poses the question of representation, of the meaning of the resurgence of the child-woman, who is "triumphing not only in the movies," but in the theatre and especially, notoriously so, in Nabokov's *Lolita* (pg.10).



Source: Arno Press



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The eternal feminine is foremost that body of myth which speaks of woman as other. It represents a collective imaginary relation to woman and common heritage, its images and discourse call up heavily coded and generally agreed upon sets of presuppositions concerning woman and male female relationships.

In this essay Beauvoir poses the question of representation, of the meaning of the resurgence of the child-woman, who is “triumphing not only in the movies,” but in the theatre and especially, notoriously so, in fictional works like Nabokov’s *Lolita*.

Traces of *The Second Sex* are conspicuous in the essay. Commenting that the director of the film had launched a new type of eroticism by projecting the sexual carefree image on the silver screen. Beauvoir explores the disruptive erotic power of Bardot as a combination of femme fatale and the nymphet.

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- In the article titled “Beauvoir on Bardot: The Ambiguity Syndrome”\*, Denise Warren suggests that for Beauvoir, the Eternal Feminine is a discursive structure which refers to and encompasses the culture's collective and particular myths about women.
- Beauvoir views it as an anaphorization -- a rhetorical figure of speech which alludes to a known, implied and legitimized totalization which is not specifically articulated and need not be.

\*<https://www.istor.org/stable/pdf/40836365.pdf>



Source: Arno Press



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In the article titled “Beauvoir on Bardot: The Ambiguity Syndrome”, Denise Warren has suggested that for Beauvoir, the Eternal Feminine is a discursive structure which refers to and encompasses the culture’s collective and particular myths about women. Beauvoir views it as an anaphorization, a rhetorical figure of speech which alludes to a known, implied and legitimized totalization which is not specifically articulated and need not be.


So, what are the examples of anaphors? “You know how woman are!” and “Oh, that’s just like a woman!”. These are the examples. Everyone understands the implications of these statements in the context in which they have been uttered. The anaphor creates a common space and a complicity in an agreed upon knowledge in which everyone participates even though many of them may not know much about it.

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- It is with irony that Beauvoir looks at the revival of the child-woman as a remedy to a flagging male eroticism in response to increased gender equality.
- She has commented in the essay that an adult woman inhabited the same world as the man, but the child-woman moved in a universe which he could not enter: “The age difference re-establishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire”.
- Although Bardot’s possibilities of genuine sexual autonomy in post-war French cinema are contested by more recent feminist film critics, Beauvoir was correct to identify her subversive erotic power, even if it is a power contained and manipulated by the patriarchal gaze both on and off screen (Hayward 1993: 177–178).



Source: Arno Press



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It is with a sense of irony that Beauvoir looks at the revival of the child-woman as a remedy to a flagging male eroticism in response to increased gender equality.

She comments in the essay that an adult woman inhabits the same world as the man. She takes up all the responsibilities which a man of her age group shoulders. For example, she can drive, she can go to the office, she can earn money, she can trade in shares, but the child-woman moved in a universe which the adult man could not enter: “The age difference re-establishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire”.

Although Bardot’s possibilities of genuine sexual autonomy in post-war French cinema are contested by more recent feminist film critics. Beauvoir was correct to identify her subversive erotic power, even if it is a power contained and manipulated by the patriarchal gaze both on and off screen.

The eternal feminine is at the heart of woman’s ontological dilemma. All aspects of the myth of femme fatale whether positive or negative exclude her from the society of man and define her as outsider to the masculine norm.

To refuse its terms is to go against the collective sexual imperative. Similarly, to choose relegates woman to otherness. In both *Ethics of Ambiguity* and her essay on Bardot, Beauvoir introduces and reinforces her key concepts, such as the other ambiguity,



situation and myth. These concepts were developed within the context of gender relations in *The Second Sex*.

Let us now briefly look at Beauvoir's first novel. She had close relationship with Sartre. Traditionally, Sartre scholars have tended to treat Simone de Beauvoir only as an eyewitness to the life of her man. But Beauvoir wrote most of all of her first novel *She Came to Stay* before Sartre had even begun to write *Being and Nothingness* and many of the philosophical ideas credited as originating with *Being and Nothingness* did not appear in Sartre's journals and other writings, until after he had read the second draft of *She Came to Stay*.

The novel which was published in 1943, marks the beginning of critical engagement with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that reappears in Beauvoir's two major philosophical writings. Firstly, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* published in 1947 and *The Second Sex* published in 1949.

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**SHE CAME TO STAY (1943)**

- Beauvoir's first published novel is a fictionalised account of a triangular relationship indicating the one between Beauvoir, Sartre and Olga Kosakievicz.
  - Set in the Paris theatre circle of late 1930s, the action centres on the three-sided relationship between Françoise Miquel, Pierre Labrousse and Xavière Pagès, a young provincial woman from Rouen.
- Dealing with the concrete threat posed by a third party ('the problem of the Other' in existentialist terms) to an established heterosexual relationship, Beauvoir's novel is a dense evocation of sexual and moral dilemmas in existentialist Paris.\*

\*Simone de Beauvoir - 1st Edition - Ursula Tidd - Robert Eaglestone - (routledge.com)

Source: W. W. Norton & Company

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Beauvoir's first published novel is a fictionalized account of a triangular relationship indicating the one between Beauvoir herself, Sartre, and Olga Kosakievicz. Dealing with a concrete threat posed by a third party, the problem of the other in existentialist terms to an established heterosexual relationship, Beauvoir's novel is a dense evocation of sexual and moral dilemmas in existentialist Paris.

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On this slide, I have summed up the plot of the novel. As we can note, the novel is an excellent illustration of concepts and themes associated with existential phenomenology.


- The heroine of the novel, Françoise Miquel, is a young writer who has lived with Pierre Labrousse, a talented actor and director, for eight years. They feel that their relationship is ideal because it allows them both a great deal of freedom.
- Françoise befriends Xavière, a young woman disenchanted with provincial life, and invites her to Paris, where she will help Xavière find work. Once in Paris, Xavière makes demands on the couple and is openly contemptuous of their values.
- Pierre becomes obsessed with Xavière; Françoise, trying to rise above the jealousy and insecurity she feels, struggles to keep the trio together.
- Out of resentment, Françoise has an affaire with Gerbert, Xavière's suitor.
- The novel ends as Xavière recognizes Françoise's duplicity; Xavière has now become the critical Other. Unable to live in her presence, Françoise turns on the gas and murders her.



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- The novel is an excellent illustration of concepts and themes associated with existential phenomenology.
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty terms it as a philosophical novel. He says that 'the tasks of literature and philosophy can no longer be separated' and asserts that Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay* signifies "the development of a metaphysical literature and the end of a moral literature" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 28).
- The British philosopher and writer, Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), interprets Merleau-Ponty's assertion as a recognition that "in an existentialist novel the interest is focused upon the ambiguity of the characters' situation and upon how the characters choose to resolve this" (Murdoch 1999: 188).




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Iris Murdoch, the famous British philosopher and writer has interpreted Merleau-Ponty's assertion as a recognition that in an existentialist novel, the interest is focused upon the ambiguity of the characters situation and upon how the characters choose to resolve this.

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- The novel is a meditation on the Hegelian problem of the existence of the Other.
- It plays out the psychological effects of jealousy and questions the extent to which coexistence is possible.
- Critics such as Hazel Barnes and Carol Ascher have noted the close ties between Beauvoir's first novel and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* published in the same year (1956). Both texts deal with the central existentialist theme of letting others absorb one's freedom.
- Beauvoir cites the epigraph from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – 'each consciousness pursues the death of the other'.




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- Beauvoir identifies three fundamental “procedures” or “attitudes” that one may take up regarding the subjectivity or consciousness of the Other.
- Persons may seek to experience themselves as the Other’s object; they may seek to guard their subjectivity by making the Other their object; they may seek a reciprocity with the Other, whereby each treats the other as both subject and object, as equal freedoms and sources of value.
- Most scholars identify the dialectic of lord and bondsman and Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of this dialectic as a formative for Beauvoir – that is, as the basis for the model of intersubjective reciprocity that informs both her ethical and feminist writings.



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- For Beauvoir, the struggle between master and slave, man and woman is, crucially, an historical one and, hence, subject to change. In this way, her notion of 'becoming woman' draws on the Hegelian notion of subjectivity as dialectical – a subject-in-process.
- She emphasises, like Kojève, the possibility of reciprocal recognition between master and slave, man and woman, as a solution to the struggle for recognition which is fundamental to and recurrent in history (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996: 70–71).
- For Beauvoir, as for Hegel, self-consciousness is a result of the self–Other relation. In other words, we need other people to become ourselves.



Hegel  
Source: Jakob Schlesinger



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Beauvoir's novels are grounded in a training as a philosopher and also in a sociological and feminist concern. Novels like *She Came to Stay*, *The Blood of Others*, *All Men are Mortal* and *The Mandarins*, revolve around the questions of freedom and responsibility and try to define the proper relationship between the individual and society.


Her characters search for authenticity as they attempt to shape the world around them, without any doubt, she is a feminist thinker for the 21st century. Her concept of the self is relevant and influential in the light of the postmodern critique of the essential unitary self and also of the multiculturalists critique of the autonomous self.

I will now briefly refer to some aspects of Beauvoir's thinking which in my opinion are relevant in the context of many current philosophical debates. And outline our interpretation of Beauvoir in relation to contemporary feminism.

Especially, in relation to its logic of equality and difference, and to its themes of identity and diversity. We will conclude with how Beauvoir's thinking gives us important clues as to how to solve some of the apparent dilemmas of contemporary feminism and how to conceive of a feminism or a gender conceptualization for the 21st century.

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- Beauvoir's study of the situation of women, provoked much dispute and discussion at the start of the second feminist wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
- Exploring the historic situation of women, Beauvoir concluded that women have been prevented from taking active control of their lives. Woman has been the Other throughout culture; man has been the Self, the subject.
- Woman has been subjected to man, who, partly with woman's consent, has made her into the negative of himself: "passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order"(Beauvoir 1984, 112).



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Beauvoir's perspective about the situation of woman, provoked much dispute and discussion when the second wave of feminist was started in the late 60s and early 70s. Beauvoir had concluded after exploring the historic situation of women, that women have been prevented from taking control of their lives. Woman has been the Other throughout culture and man has been the Self, the subject.

Woman has been subjected to man, who, partly with woman's consent, has made her into the negative of himself: "passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order."

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- Beauvoir wrote in 1949 that for the first time in history, through the availability of contraceptives and access to paid work, women have the chance to develop into a Self as well. *The Second Sex* is a passionate appeal to women to take this chance.
- Twenty years after the book's appearance, it was discovered by the new feminist movement. This movement focused on the liberation of female sexuality and on socioeconomic autonomy for women.\*
- Its most influential works were by Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, and Shulamith Firestone, all of whom admitted—in the case of Millett and Friedan only many years later—that Beauvoir's works started them "on the road" (Dijkstra 1980,293).

\* Beauvoir, S. D., & Simons, M. (2005). *Philosophical writings*. University of Illinois Press.




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Beauvoir had written in 1949 that for the first time in history through the availability of contraceptives and access to paid work, women have a started to have a chance to develop into a self as well. *The Second Sex* can also be read as a passionate appeal to women to take this chance.

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- In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir advocates living as a unity of body and consciousness. Her philosophical framework in this respect is the phenomenological perspective that approaches humans as situated and incarnated beings, or “living bodies” (pg.5).
- She argues that the human condition is “ambiguous”: we are both empty consciousness and incarnated beings.
- The ambiguous elements of our human condition are not merely set alongside each other, but are placed in a specific hierarchical order.
- She wanted women to become selves, but in contrast to Sartre, it is the situated, sensitive self she pursues for women and, also, for men.



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In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir has advocated living as a unity of body and consciousness. Her philosophical framework in this respect is the phenomenological perspective that approaches humans as situated and incarnated beings or living bodies.

She argues that the human condition is “ambiguous”: we are both empty consciousness and incarnated beings. The ambiguous elements of our human condition are not merely set alongside each other, but are placed in a specific hierarchical order. She wanted women to become selves, but in contrast to Sartre, it is the situated, sensitive self she has pursued for women, and also, for men.

Identity is much criticized in postmodern feminist thinking. During the 1970s feminist theory emphasized either equality or difference. During the 80s, a different perspective emerged in this context. Postmodern thinkers such as Derrida or Foucault have attacked the supposed unity of the subject and have formulated the need for an escape from the restrictions of the fixed unitary self. Other forms of subjectivity have to be developed that no longer imprison us in a restrictive identity.

Feminist theoreticians such as Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti, two philosophers whom we shall discuss in complete detail elaborate on this view with respect to the feminine subject. There is a need to unravel and deconstruct fixed meanings of womanhood, so that an open space is created to permit the shaping of new ways of thinking and living.




Postmodern feminism with its suspicion of an essential subject woman expresses the political mood of the feminist movement today and has also influenced our understanding of the term gender in today's concept. In today's context, Beauvoir's concept of the self-figures and anticipates the postmodern and multiculturalists critique on the essential autonomous self. For this we will again turn to her thinking on ethics.

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**Postmodern and Multiculturalist Critiques**

- Seeing our human condition as ambiguous, Beauvoir, in opposition to abstract moral theory, introduced ethics of ambiguity.
- Our ambiguous condition, especially our element of separated-ness, is the reason why universal positive moral laws cannot exist, for in the end, we can never speak for another person.
- However, the concrete existence of the situated human being can certainly be the locus of an ethical dimension.
- In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, ethics comes forward as an attitude of "willing oneself free," which comes down to constantly freely shaping oneself into a specific subject in the world by taking responsibility for specific values.




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- She adds that by willing ourselves free we commit ourselves to freedom as such and therefore to the freedom of everyone: "To will oneself free is also to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person concrete action to be achieved" (Beauvoir 1948, 73).
- People can lack every chance to shape themselves as ethical subjects. We therefore have to intervene into power relations that impede them to do so, and thus politics immediately comes into the picture.
- Her emphasis on ethics as art of living, or as a whole way of life, once more underlines that her concept of the self is not the Western, Cartesian, pre-given self that is externally related to its body and to the world, but a sensitive self embedded in context: a unity of head, heart, and soul.



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She also says that by willing ourselves free we commit ourselves to freedom as such and therefore, to the freedom of everyone. People can lack every chance to shape themselves as ethical subjects. And we have to intervene into power relations that impede them to do so, and thus politics immediately comes into the picture.

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In conclusion, Beauvoir's thinking already contains some crucial elements for such a global feminism. She also combine theory with activism. She was one of the first French intellectuals who oppose the French wars in Vietnam and Algeria. Her discussions started the conversation on the difference between sex and gender.

The early works we discussed in this module provide the psychological corollaries to the philosophical discussions which are presented in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir's Magnum Opus which we shall discuss in the next module.

Thank you.

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