

Contextualizing Gender
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Lecture - 04
Gender Perspectives in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Volume 1)


Welcome dear friends, in the previous module we had looked at the early manifestations of Beauvoir's philosophy through an analysis of some of our creative writings and essays. Today we shall begin our discussion of *The Second Sex*, the most important and still undervalued contribution of Beauvoir. It is a foundational text in contemporary feminism and queer theory. Deeply embedded in the European traditions of philosophy, especially phenomenology and existentialism.

The Second Sex rests on two connected specifically feminist philosophical innovations. Firstly, the gendering of phenomenological experience and secondly, the posing of an original and innovative question for existential ontology: What is a woman?


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THE SECOND SEX (French: *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949)

- Passionate and incendiary, *The Second Sex* defines the fundamental oppression of women by men, characterizing them, at every stage, as the *Other*, defined exclusively in opposition to men.
- Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated.
- He extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas woman is doomed to immanence, or inwardness. This distinction is the basis of Beauvoir's later arguments.



Source: Vintage classics



The Second Sex was originally written and published in French in 1949. It defines the fundamental operation of women by men characterizing them at every stage as the other and defined exclusively in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject: woman is the object the other. If he is essential, absolute and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete and mutilated.

Whereas a man extends out into the world to impose his will on it, a woman is doomed to immanence, or inwardness and this distinction is the basis of Beauvoir's arguments.

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- Two English translations:
 1. Howard M. Parshley in 1953
 2. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier in 2009.
- Howard M. Parshley, a retired zoologist, who was commissioned to do the translation, was asked to condense it. Parshley cut 15 percent of the original 972 pages.
- As Francine Du Plessix Gray comments, "... and so it was this truncated text that ushered two generations of women into the universe of feminist thought, inspiring pivotal later books like Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique" and Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics."

Two English translations of this seminal book are available to us. The first one was by Howard Parshley which came out in the USA in 1953. The second was published in 2009 by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier. Howard Parshley was a retired zoologist, who was commissioned to do the translation in a truncated form. So, he had cut down around 15 percent of the original volumes.


As Francis Gray has commented, it was this truncated text that ushered two generations of women into the universe of feminist thought, inspiring pivotal later books like Betty Frieden's *Feminine Mystique* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. In 1946, when Beauvoir had begun to write her landmark study of women, legislation allowing French women to vote was little more than a year old. Birth control could be legally denied to them until 1967.

In Switzerland, women would not be enfranchised until 1971. Such repressive circumstances account for both the fierce urgency of Beauvoir's book and the vehement controversies it aroused when it was first published in France. The Vatican placed it on the index of forbidden books. Albert Camu complained that Beauvoir made French men look ridiculous. The psychiatrist Karl Menninger found it pretentious and tiresome.


Some exceptions were also there for example, the novelist Philip Wylie eulogized it as “one of the few great books of our era”.

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- In the introduction to the book, Beauvoir points to the essentialism of women by referring to different notions and practices that reduce her to womb and try to put her within fixed categories.
- Man is considered as both positive and a universal category; while woman is thought of as a negative category.
- “In actuality the relation of the two sexes 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, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 15).



A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly.”
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)




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In the introduction to the book, Beauvoir points to the essentialism of women by referring to different notions and practices that reduce her to a womb and try to put her within fixed categories. Man is considered as both positive and a universal category while woman is thought of as a negative category. The quote from *The Second Sex* which is given below further explains it in detail.

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- *The Second Sex* identifies the ways in which the myth of woman hides the diversity of women belonging to different races and classes.
- It argues against the either/or frame of the woman question (either women and men are equal or they are different). It argues for women’s equality, while insisting on the reality of the sexual difference.
- However, she finds it unjust and immoral to use the sexual difference as an argument for women’s subordination.
- As a phenomenologist she is obliged to examine women’s unique experiences of their bodies, and to determine how these experiences are co-determined by what phenomenology calls the everyday attitude.



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The Second Sex identifies the ways in which the myth of woman hides the diversity of women belonging to different races, classes etc. It also argues against the either/or frame of the woman question; that means, either women and men are equal or they are different. It argues for equality for women while insisting on the reality of the sexual differences. She finds it unjust and immoral to use the sexual difference as an argument for women's subordination.

As a phenomenologist she is obliged to examine women's unique experiences of their bodies and to determine how these experiences are co-determined by what phenomenology calls the everyday attitude. As a feminist phenomenologist, assessing the meanings of the lived female body, Beauvoir explores the ways that cultural assumptions frame women's experience of their bodies and alienate them from their body's possibility. Woman is identified through Negation. A woman is not man, she is not this or not that; she is always defined with a lack.

Beauvoir also emphasizes that we need to recognize sexual differences and these differences exist and are part of the lived reality of women.

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- The book opens with the question, "What is a woman,"(pg.13) and defines the historicity of the question by referring to several philosophers of the Western canon.
- The introduction explores questions of *Alterity* concerning historical situations of dominance and subordination.
- Beauvoir defines *Alterity* as "the fundamental category of human thought"(p.26).
- In the conflicting sexual binary, woman is the *Other*. Beauvoir feels that it tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it.



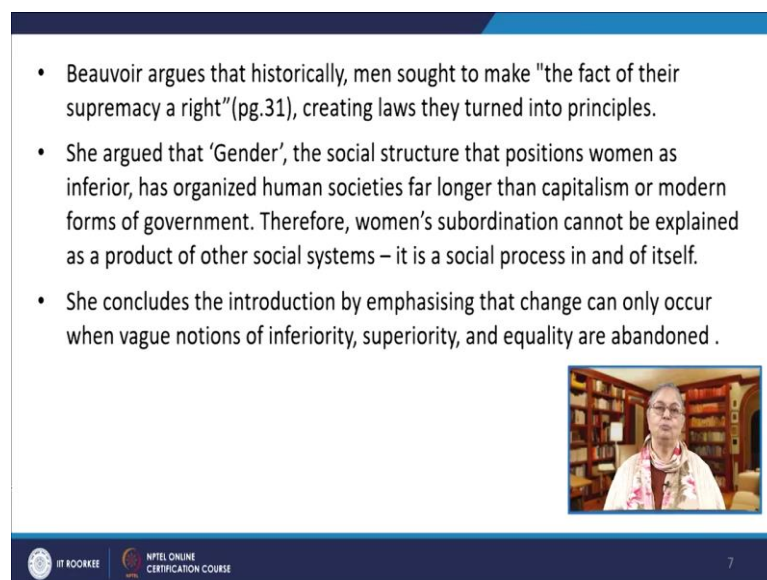
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The book opens with the question, "What is a woman" and defines the historicity of the question by referring to several philosophers of the Western canon. The introduction also explores questions of *Alterity* concerning historical situations of dominance and subordination.

Beauvoir has defined *Alterity*, as “the fundamental category of human thought”. In the conflicting sexual binary, woman is the Other and Beauvoir feels that it tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. Analyzing the philosophical traditions and also the prevalent cultural norms Beauvoir somehow feels, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman and that categories exist amongst female human beings; some of them may be considered as a woman, some of them may not necessarily be considered as a woman.

As to be so considered a female human being must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity.

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- Beauvoir argues that historically, men sought to make "the fact of their supremacy a right"(pg.31), creating laws they turned into principles.
- She argued that 'Gender', the social structure that positions women as inferior, has organized human societies far longer than capitalism or modern forms of government. Therefore, women's subordination cannot be explained as a product of other social systems – it is a social process in and of itself.
- She concludes the introduction by emphasizing that change can only occur when vague notions of inferiority, superiority, and equality are abandoned .

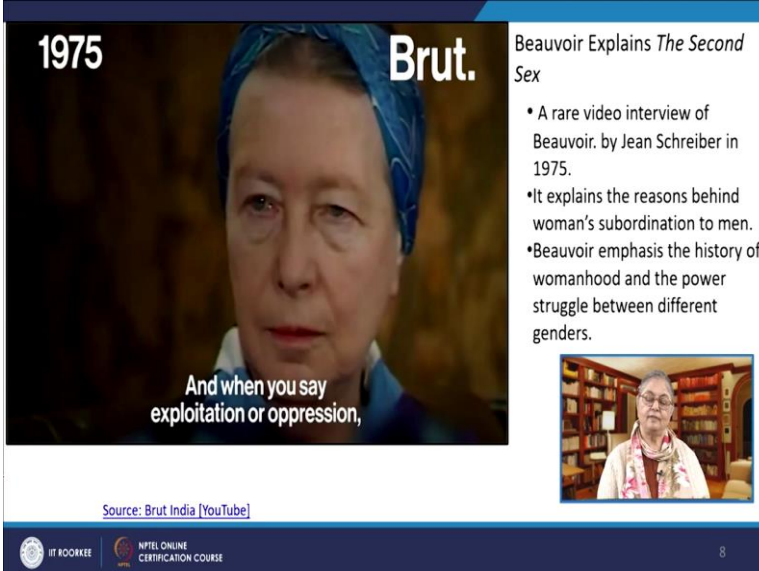
Beauvoir argues that historically, men have sought to make the fact of their supremacy a right creating laws that turned into principles. She argued that gender, the social structure that positions women as inferior has organized human societies far longer than capitalism or any other modern form of government.

Therefore, women's subordination cannot be explained as a product of other social systems, it is in her opinion a social process in and of itself. She concludes the introduction by emphasizing that change can only occur when vague notions of inferiority, superiority and equality are abundant.

This perspective was groundbreaking because it questioned the very existence of women's unequal position, rather than taking it as non-essential or an epiphenomenal outcome of other social institutions. In the next slide we have a video interview that Beauvoir gave in 1975, explaining the dilemma of women. It is a rare video interview by Jean Schreiber.

Beauvoir emphasizes the history of womanhood and the power struggle between different genders [FL].

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1975 Brut.

Beauvoir Explains *The Second Sex*

- A rare video interview of Beauvoir. by Jean Schreiber in 1975.
- It explains the reasons behind woman's subordination to men.
- Beauvoir emphasis the history of womanhood and the power struggle between different genders.

And when you say exploitation or oppression,

Source: Brut India [YouTube]


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She also notes in the interview how historically women were refused power and knowledge in certain domains. For example, branded as witch by various socio-religious- legal discourses, women were prevented from practicing medicine for several centuries.

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Outline

- The book is divided into two volumes
- Volume 1 consists of "Facts and Myths," which has an "Introduction" and three parts. The first word of the "Introduction" is "I". Thus, the reader is introduced to the unconventional nature of seemingly academic work as the narrator announces herself informally in the first person. Moreover, she is identified by her sex.
- It consists of three parts and is further subdivided into chapters in these parts:
 - ❖ Part 1- Destiny (Chapter 1-3)
 - ❖ Part 2- History (Chapter 1-5)
 - ❖ Part 3- Myths (Chapter 1-3)



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The Second Sex is divided into two volumes; volume 1 consists of “Facts and Myths” which has an introduction and three parts. The first word of the introduction is I, thus the reader is introduced to the unconventional nature of a seemingly academic work as the narrator announces herself informally in the first person. Moreover, she is identified by her sex.

The first volume consists of three parts and is further subdivided in two chapters in these three parts. The first part of volume 1 is title destiny, it is further subdivided into three chapters. Chapter 1 with the title of Biological Data considers females in the animal world in order to consider the unique nature of human females.

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Part I: Destiny; Chapter 1- Biological Data

- The chapter opens with a simple definition: Woman is "a womb, an ovary." Insult or exaltation – in terms of the male version - roots woman in nature and "confines her in her sex"(p.41).
- Beauvoir concludes that sexual differentiation cannot be deduced at the cellular level, but with respect to reproduction, differentiation occurs "as an irreducible and contingent fact" (p.43).
- This section does not explain the reasons of sexual hierarchy.



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This chapter opens with a simple definition woman is “a womb an ovary”. Insult or exaltation in terms of the male version, roots woman in nature and “confines her within her sex”. Beauvoir also concludes that sexual differentiation cannot be deduced at the cellular level, but with respect to reproduction, differentiation occurs “as an irreducible and contingent fact”. This section; however, does not provide any reasons of sexual hierarchy.

Chapter 2 is titled as The Psychoanalytic Point of View, which presents Beauvoir’s criticism of the Freudian approach to sexuality in women. Particularly his notion that girls are developmentally delayed and thus prone to remaining in an infantile state or developing neurosis. One can say the triad here echoes the male tradition of philosophers of Aristotle or Saint Aquinas or the medieval scientific assertions.

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Part I: Destiny; Chapter 2- The Psychoanalytical Point of View

- Beauvoir opens this chapter by criticizing Freud who she notes “was not very concerned with woman's destiny”(p.74).
- Systematically disabling the psychoanalytic reliance on sexuality as the basis of personality and the accompanying insistence on anatomy as destiny, Beauvoir comments on the psychoanalytic recognition of difference with respect to masculine and feminine behaviours, of which, she insists, both sexes are capable.
- Finally, making a myth of psychoanalytic narratives, and preferring choice over psychoanalytic determinism, she notes that a girl climbing a tree is not emulating her father, nor is she exhibiting virile behaviour when she paints, writes, or engages in politics. These activities are not only "good sublimations," but "ends desired in themselves”.




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Beauvoir systematically opposes the Freudian notions disabling the psychoanalytic reliance on sexuality as the basis of personality and the accompanying insistence on anatomy as destiny. Beauvoir comments on the psychoanalytic recognition of difference with respect to masculine and feminine behaviors of which, she insists both sexes are capable.

Making a myth of psychoanalytic narratives and preferring choice over psychoanalytic determinism, she notes that a girl climbing a tree is not emulating her father nor is she exhibiting virile behavior when she paints writes or engages in politics. These activities are not only good sublimations as Freud has termed, but ends desired in themselves. Freud had described femininity as a dark continent and had never resolved the question of the wants of a woman.


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- Later, Jacques Lacan focused on the notion of the girl's unresolved sexuality. His positive assessment of the developmental hesitations in girls -- which Freud had labelled as "infantile" and "incomplete"-- is a significant revision.
 - He certified that those who combine the traits of "incomplete" development, more typical of girls but distributed across individuals, are capable of living in *search of values* (p.75).
- Beauvoir asserts that woman's sexual initiation begins in trauma, necessarily requiring a masculine intervention.
- Beauvoir takes up those aspects of feminine experience that remain conventionally unspoken, but are foundational to identity and perspective.



Sigmund Freud
Source: Max Halberstadt

Jacques Lacan
Source: The Australian National University



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Jacques Lacan had later focused on the notion of the girls unresolved sexuality. And his positive assessment of the developmental hesitations in girls is a significant revision of Freud who had labeled it as infantile and incomplete. Beauvoir asserts that women's sexual initiation begins in trauma, necessarily requiring a masculine intervention.

She takes up those aspects of feminine experience like frigidity that remain conventionally unspoken, but are foundational to identity and perspective. Chapter 3 criticizes historical materialism; which opposes the defining of woman as a sexed organism only. And puts forward the argument that women's work and the society's economic structure determine her identity.


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Part I: Destiny; Chapter 3-The Point of View of Historical Materialism

- Beauvoir points out that historical materialism refuses the definition of woman as a sexed organism.
- Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) chronicles the importance of women in the Stone Age. A primitive division of labour meant equality between the sexes, which led to discovery (of metals) and inventions (plough, private property, slaves); also gradually led to "the great historical defeat of the female sex" .
- Gradually changes occurred: women's restriction to housework, domination by man, the replacement of maternal right with paternal, and the transmission of property from father to son rather than woman to her clan.



Friedrich Engels
Source: Panorama del Henares




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Beauvoir refers to Engels's argument presented in his 1884 publication *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*. Wherein he has chronicled the importance of women in the stone-age. A primitive division of labor meant equality between the sexes which led to discovery for example, of metals and inventions, for example the plough, private property and slaves. However, it also gradually led to what has been termed as the great historical defeat of the female sex by Engels.

Gradually, after the invention of private property changes occurred. Women were restricted to housework dominated by men, the replacement of maternal right with paternal also came across. As well as the transmission of property from father to son rather than from woman to her clan.

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- But, as Beauvoir points out, woman is not simply a worker, and there are times during which her ability to reproduce is as important as her ability to produce.
- Engels wanted to eliminate the family in a socialist state, enabling women to work.
- However, Beauvoir has dismissed this theory as being superficial because it does not account for how these values developed in the first place.
- She points to factors shaping women's condition that lie outside labour distribution; for example, childbirth and sexuality. Because these are not accounted for by historical materialists like Engels, she believes it is necessary to go beyond this theory in order to fully explain women's condition in society.



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But, as Beauvoir points out, a woman is not simply a worker, and there are times during which her ability to reproduce is as important as her ability to produce. Engels had wanted to eliminate the family in a socialist state enabling women to work. However, Beauvoir has dismissed this theory as being superficial as it does not account for how these values developed in the first place.

She points to factors shaping women's conditions that lie outside labor distribution for example, child birth and sexuality. Because these are not accounted for by historical materialists like Engels, she believes it is necessary to go beyond this theory in order to fully explain women's condition in society.

Beauvoir however, says that it is impossible to deduce women's operation from private property, she sees a chain reaction citing the imperialism of human consciousness. She posits that equality between the sexes necessarily begins in the shared enterprise of meaningful work.

Thus, we see that Beauvoir rejects Freud's sexual theories and Engels economic theories on almost the same basis. As psychoanalysts have based everything in sexuality whereas, historical materialists have based everything in economic situation. Beauvoir believes that the real answer lies somewhere in the middle.


We will look at the second part of volume 1 now. Part II with the title of History consists of five chapters. The first chapter discusses the pre-agricultural world where presumably women worked as hard as men. Beauvoir begins this section with this statement that this world has always belonged to males and none of the reasons given for this have ever seemed sufficient.

By writing this she retreats her central thesis that men have controlled women's narratives. She also takes a stronger stance in this section on previously cited explanations for gender dynamics. Whereas the first section considered alternative explanations for differences in gender, this section dismisses earlier theories as being insufficient. Rather Beauvoir intends to provide her own take on history without consulting others work as much as she did in the previous section.


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Part II: History; Chapter 1

- Part II begins with Beauvoir's speculative account of women's roles in the pre-agricultural world: carrying heavy loads and accompanying men in battle.
 - Physical strength—a key value for survival—was, however, limited for women by the reproductive demands placed upon them. It resulted in women's continued dependence on men for protection and sustenance.
- Motherhood left woman "riveted to her body" like an animal and made it possible for men to dominate her, and also Nature.
 - Women's lives are characterized as repetitious throughout their childbearing years, while men's lives are creative.
- To be biologically destined to repeat life, or to live life within the confines of a procreative life – living inside - is termed as immanence.



Painting from the burial chamber of Sennedjem, c. 1200 BC.
Source: The Yorck Project



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Beauvoir speculates that in the pre-agricultural world women must have worked as hard as men and also accompanying them in battle. However, physically strength which was a key value for survival was limited for women by the reproductive demands placed upon them. It resulted in their continued dependence on men for protection and sustenance.

Motherhood left women riveted to her body like an animal and made it possible for men to dominate her and also later on to dominate nature. Women's lives are characterized as being repetitious throughout their childbearing years; while men's lives become creative.


To be biologically destined to repeat life or to live life within the confines of a procreative life that is living inside is termed as immanence.

The second chapter explores women's roles in the agricultural world in which women perhaps had certain stature because of their child bearing capacity. As there was a need for large number of children to work the land.

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Part II: History; Chapter 2

- When agricultural settlements came up, legal and social structures also developed. Women were still valued, largely because children were needed to work the land. Without knowledge of the father's role in procreation, many tribes remained matrilineal, recognizing the importance of the mother in birth and care of children.
- Beauvoir however believes, like Lévi-Strauss, that for men, women are not peers. In their mystery, women are Other, and always under men's guardianship.
- As man gains land, wealth, and slaves, woman is deprived of her domestic duties also, making her gradually redundant. By dominating the world, man triumphs over woman. Women and children become possessions, like the land.
- Beauvoir claims that the story of the "devaluation of woman represents a necessary stage in the history of humanity" (p.109).



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During this era many tribes had also remained matrilineal as they recognized the importance of the mother in the birth and care of children and also because they did not have much knowledge of the father's role in procreation.


However, Beauvoir believes like Levi-Strauss, that for men women are not peers. In their mystery, women are Other, and should always be under male's guardianship according to the patriarchal logic. As men gains land wealth and slaves, women are gradually deprived of their domestic duties also, making them gradually redundant.

By dominating the world men, triumphs over woman. Women and children become possessions like the land. Beauvoir also claims that the story of the devaluation of woman represents a necessary stage in the history of humanity. The third chapter is speculating on women's loss of prestige with the advent of private property. This chapter also lists the shifts in woman situation as patriarchy makes adjustment to local customs and laws.

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Part II: History; Chapter 3

- According to Beauvoir, "once woman is dethroned by ... private property, her fate is linked to it for centuries"(pg. 117).
 - Owning nothing, she is hardly a person. She can be disowned at will, male prenuptial chastity is not a value, and a husband's adultery is not judged severely. The advent of private property helped men to define women as property, which led them to value sexual fidelity.
 - Beauvoir raises questions of women's right to private property and inheritance as patriarchy makes adjustments to local custom and law. A problem, for example, for societies founded in agnation, is the family without a male heir.
- Beauvoir compares the position of women in Greece, where women did not have any freedom; and Rome, where despite freedom, women did not have any means of employment, often resulting in hedonism and gluttony .
- Beauvoir concludes that happiness is not the necessary component or condition of freedom.



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Beauvoir holds that once woman is dethroned by private property her fate is linked to it for centuries. Owing nothing she is hardly a person at this stage she can be disowned at will, male prenuptial chastity is not a value and a husband's adultery is not judged severely. The advent of private property helped men to define women as property which also led them to value sexual fidelity, as they wanted their own children to be the possessors of their worldly gains. Beauvoir raises questions of women's right to private property and inheritance as patriarchy makes adjustments to local custom in law.

A problem for example, for societies founded in agnation had been the family without a male heir. Beauvoir compares the historical positions of women in Greece, where women did not have any freedom; and Rome, where despite certain freedom women did not have any means of gainful employment often resulting in hedonism inner vacancy and gluttony.


Beauvoir thus concludes that happiness is not the necessary component or condition of freedom, value in life is a matter of surpassing freedom by transcending life through existence. Freedom begins in individual choice. Women need to have the courage, imagination and also proper legal circumstances in order to find their proper place in the world.

The fourth chapter of part II, demonstrates further instability in women's standing and Beauvoir notes the role of Christianity in further diminishing women's position in marriage and also in the church.


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Part II: History; Chapter 4

- Beauvoir suggests that Christianity has abetted the subordination of women:
 - Saint Paul writes: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church".
 - The story of the Virgin birth acknowledges that the woman's body is dirty and a place of sin.
- During the medieval ages, women's situation remained stagnant, though cultural norms sometimes gave certain relaxations. Beauvoir cites the example of German families.
- She also points out that with the abolishment of serfdom, rural communities developed in which spouses lived on equal footing, each doing work to sustain the family.



Source: Edmund Leighton



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Beauvoir suggests that Christianity has further abetted the subordination of women. For example, Saint Paul writes that for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church. Also, the story of the virgin birth acknowledges, that woman's body is dirty and a place of sin. During the medieval ages women's situation remained stagnant though cultural norms sometimes gave certain relaxations.


And Beauvoir has quoted the example of German families, where after marriage, within the marriage women have certain rights and certain semblance of independence. She also points out that with the abolishment of serfdom rural communities also developed in which spouses lived on equal footing, each doing work to sustain the family.

The fifth chapter remarks, that economic independence is a necessary condition for women's equality with men. She begins by citing individual efforts of women during the French revolution and records that in 1791, a French writer Olympe de Gouges proposed a declaration of the rights of women and the female citizen. She had also founded a newspaper which was able to print a certain number of additions.


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Part II: History; Chapter 5

- Beauvoir says that in the 19th and 20th centuries, "participation in production and freedom from reproductive slavery ... explain the evolution of woman's condition"(p.171).
- Notes that 1890 onwards women have rallied for reproductive rights, divorce initiated by women and suffrage. Also notes that it was in 1897 that the French women won the right to testify in court.
- She regrets that women's history has been written exclusively by men. Throughout history, women mostly could not or would not act for their own benefit.
 - She condemns anti-feminism's false conclusions about history: that "women have never created anything grand" or "woman's situation has never prevented great women personalities from blossoming" (p. 185).



Source: Benjamin Moran Dale



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Beauvoir said that in the 19th and 20th century participation in production and freedom from reproductive slavery explained the evolution of woman's condition. She also notes that after 1890s, women have rallied for reproductive rights, divorce initiated by women and suffrage. She also notes that it has been a long and arduous battle for women and records that it was only in 1897, that the French women were able to win the right to testify in court. She also regrets that women's history has been written exclusively by men and throughout history, women either could not or would not act for their own benefit.


Beauvoir recognizes the significance of industrial revolution in providing women an escape from their homes, is still she finds that they were paid little. She also relates the history of women's suffrage and writes that women like Rosa Luxemburg and Mary Curie, brilliantly demonstrate that it is not women's inferiority that has determined their historical insignificance; rather it is their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority.

The third part of volume 1 is titled Myths, it consists of three chapters. In the first chapter Beauvoir establishes her central theories regarding how men have mythologized women. She begins by reiterating that men established women as the other in order to subjugate her economically and also that it suited their ontological and moral ambitions.

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Part III: MYTHS

- *The Second Sex* makes a clear distinction between myths (mythologization) and facts with respect to women's situation.
 - The first volume of her autobiography, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, had also critiqued some of the oppressive myths which dominate women's lives.
- The philosophical tradition, which is supposed to be crucial for men, creates 'others' for itself - women, the masses, children. Beauvoir says that historically men have always controlled all powers, and “since the earliest days of their patriarchy, they have thought it best to keep woman in a state of dependence” (p.159).
- There are governing myths: cultural beliefs transmitted through familiar stories—legends, fairy tales, folk tales—that convey certain beliefs/mental habits to posterity.




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The first volume of Beauvoir’s autobiography *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* had also critiqued certain oppressive myths which have dominated women’s lives. However, in *The Second Sex* she makes a clear distinction between myths and facts with respect to women’s situation. The philosophical tradition which is supposed to be crucial for men creates others for itself, women, the masses, children. Beauvoir says that historically men have always controlled the powers and since the earliest days of their patriarchy. They have thought it best to keep women in a state of dependence.


There are governing myths, cultural beliefs, transmitted through familiar stories, legends, fairy tales, folktales that convey certain beliefs and mental habits regarding the inferiority of women to posterity.

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- Men have written the history of women, and have also defined the mythological substructure of their inferiority. It is crucial in forcing women into a coagulated inessential object position.
- Inescapable is the governing myth of Judeo-Christian culture, the story of Eve, who was never Adam's equal; since the very beginning, Eve's potential as an individual is irrelevant.
- Eve is a convenience for Adam: a thing, an object.
- Twenty years later, Kate Millett echoed it by commenting that patriarchy has God on its side (*Sexual Politics*, 1970).



Source: Jacob Jordaens



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Men have not only written the history of women, but they have also defined the mythological substructure of their inferiority. It is crucial in forcing women into an inessential object position. Beauvoir refers to the most dominant biblical myth, the story of Eve who was never an equal for Adam. Since the very beginning we find that Eve's potential as an individual is irrelevant.


She is only a convenience for Adam: a thing, an object. Twenty years later, we find that Kate Millet has echoed similar sentiments commenting that patriarchy has God on its side in her work *Sexual Politics* which was published in 1970. Beauvoir postulates that the subordination of women serves the economic interest of men and also suits their moral ambitions and myths have supported such ideas.

The objectification of women and the generalizations that define them are common in myths across human culture. Beauvoir investigates certain myths including the myth of women as nature inner roles as mother, spouse and idea.


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The Myth of Woman as Nature

- Nature is both Life and Death. Nature is the fertile material source from which man's existence emerged, is sustained, and which man transforms in his image at will to suit himself.
- Through man's projections, woman comes to embody Nature "as Mother, Spouse, and Idea" and each takes on the duality and contradictions that man perceives in his own existence.
- Woman, like Nature, is ambiguous. She inhabits contradictions; she is both the solidified immanence and the Nothingness of existence that allows for transcendence. Woman's ambiguity makes her seem magical



TV Tropes




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Nature is both life and death. Nature is the fertile material source from which men's existence emerged, is sustained, and which is transformed by man in his image at will to suit himself. Through man's projections woman also comes to embody nature as mother, spouse or idea and each takes on the duality and contradictions that man perceives in his own existence. Like nature, woman is ambiguous.


She inhabits contradictions, she is both the solidified immanence and the nothingness of existence, that allows for transcendence. Woman's ambiguity makes her seem magical.

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- Mother Earth is both life and death—and the oft-cited masculine fear of the feminine is rooted in such myths of power and loss of control.
- The Myth of Woman as Nature- Spouse: In this version of the myth, nature is seen as a spouse by man. He finds that all natural objects - shining stars, moody moon, sunlight, the darkness of caves, wildflowers – have feminine essence.
- This myth is man's projection of woman as a magical and sexed object – suitable to be conquered and possessed through man's virility.



Source: Pinterest



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Mother earth is both life and death and the oft cited masculine fear of the feminine is rooted in such myths of power and loss of control. In the myth of woman is Nature is Spouse, nature is seen as a spouse by man. He finds that all natural objects have feminine essence this myth is man's projection of woman as a magical and sex object. Suitable to be conquered and possessed through a man's virility. In each of these myths the woman as a bringer of life and death represents the hopes and fears of men.

As a bringer of Life, she is a symbol of hope. She is the mother who births men in physical, as well as, existential sense. She is the material source that brings the nothingness of existence into this world and, along with it, the possibility of transcendence. As a Spouse, she is the material source on which men act to achieve transcendence. As a bringer of death, she is a symbol of fear, and as a spouse she reduces man to finite flesh.

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Myth-making and Existential Morality

- Woman, in these myths, is entirely denied the Subject status, as well as the ability to transcend beyond herself.
- Locked into immanence, into her facticity, her situation created through man's transcendence; she is all of nature's passive and inert objects that man can act on and transform at will.
- Man transcends beyond himself in creating the Myth of Woman as Nature (as Mother, Spouse, Death). Woman has no myths of her own. Beauvoir asserts that these myths are world-making.
- For Beauvoir, a woman is "all ... which is inessential: she is wholly the Other." Her stories, her mythic identity, have been constituted by him.



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In these myths woman is entirely denied the subject status as well as the ability to transcend beyond herself. Locked into immanence into her facticity, her situation created through man's transcendence; she is all of nature's passive and inert objects that man can act on and transform at will. Man transcends beyond himself in creating the myth of woman as Nature in different manifestations.


In contrast woman has no myths of her own, Beauvoir asserts that these myths are world making. For Beauvoir "a woman is all... which is inessential wholly the other'. Her

stories, her mythic identity have been constituted for her by him. In the second chapter of part three, Beauvoir analyzes five major novelists. To show how most tend to mythologize women and reinforce her status as Other. The list includes contemporary writers Montherlant, D H Lawrence Claudel and Breton, the one exception to this list is slightly older writer Stendhal, whom she credits for depicting women as true human beings.


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Chapter II: The Myth of Woman in Literature

- Beauvoir compares the representation of women by Henry-Marie-Joseph-Millon de Montherlant, D. H. Lawrence, Paul-Louis-Charles-Marie Claudel, André Breton and Stendhal (born Henri Beyle).
- These writers have represented women as a reflection of collective myths. The only exception is Stendhal. Others show men as the destiny of women. She is required in every case to forget herself in her love to a man. The other or woman is shown as a reflection of the ego and ideas of man.



Montherlant D. H. Lawrence Claudel André Breton Stendhal




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Beauvoir believes that with the exception of Stendhal, these writers have represented women as reflection of collective myths. They show men as the destiny of women, a woman is required in every case to forget herself in her love to a man. The other or woman is shown as a reflection of the ego in ideas of man.

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- Montherlant's work reduces women to objects of masculine disgust.
- While elevating the masculine, Lawrence—in contrast to Montherlant—has enduring faith in the feminine. Still, women are subjugated by the male virility.
- Claudel's women are loyal, faithful, sweet and humble—in other words, resigned.
- Breton also does not speak of woman as subject.
- Beauvoir calls Stendhal (1783–1842), a "tender friend of women," capable of creating women characters whose identities are made by their specific experiences and needs. He avoids the mythic woman "disguised as shrew, nymph, morning star, or mermaid."
- Beauvoir concludes that "in defining woman, each writer defines his ... ethic and the ... idea he has of himself."



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For example, Montherlant's work reduces women to objects of masculine disgust. Lawrence while elevating the masculine also has enduring faith in the feminine. Still, women are always subjugated by the male virility. Claudel's women are loyal, faithful, sweet and humble- in other words resigned. Breton also does not speak of woman as a subject. Stendhal in comparison has been termed as a "tender friend of woman" by Beauvoir. He is capable of creating women characters whose identities are made by their specific experiences and needs.

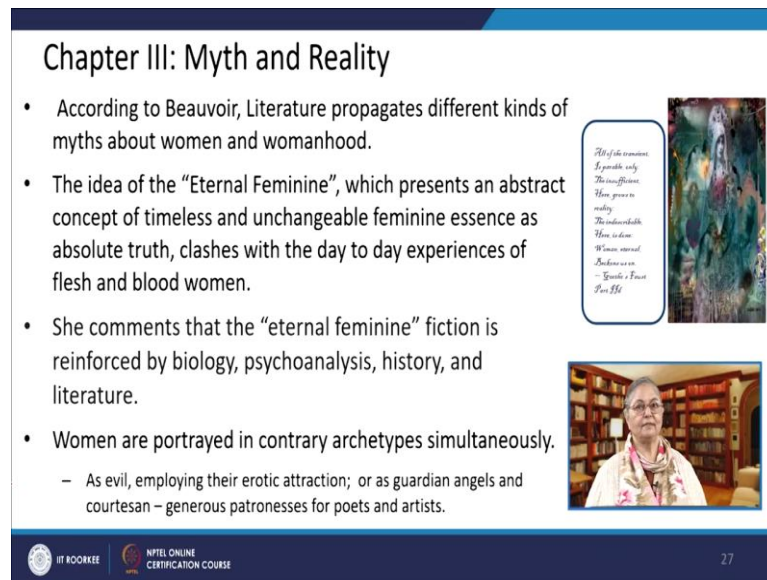
He avoids the mythic woman disguises shrew, nymph, morning star or mermaid. These writers expect women to be altruistic in ways that are not required of men. She concludes that these male novelists tend to depict a woman as a privileged other. In the third chapter, Beauvoir considers how these myths affect everyday life.

She defines the difference between static myths and concrete reality. Static myths provide a certain idea to man, who then attempts to project it onto different situations. In concrete reality, women cannot be encompassed by a single idea. They manifest themselves in numerous ways.

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Chapter III: Myth and Reality

- According to Beauvoir, Literature propagates different kinds of myths about women and womanhood.
- The idea of the “Eternal Feminine”, which presents an abstract concept of timeless and unchangeable feminine essence as absolute truth, clashes with the day to day experiences of flesh and blood women.
- She comments that the “eternal feminine” fiction is reinforced by biology, psychoanalysis, history, and literature.
- Women are portrayed in contrary archetypes simultaneously.
 - As evil, employing their erotic attraction; or as guardian angels and courtesan – generous patronesses for poets and artists.




The slide features a list of four main points. The first point states that literature propagates different myths about women. The second point discusses the 'Eternal Feminine' as an abstract concept that clashes with real-world experiences. The third point notes that this fiction is reinforced by biology, psychoanalysis, history, and literature. The fourth point states that women are portrayed in contrary archetypes simultaneously, with a sub-point listing 'As evil, employing their erotic attraction; or as guardian angels and courtesan – generous patronesses for poets and artists.' To the right of the text, there is a painting of a woman in a blue and white dress, and a photograph of a woman in a white jacket standing in a library. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for IIT ROORKEE and NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE, and the number 27.

Beauvoir feels that literature propagates different kinds of myths about women and womanhood. The idea of the eternal feminine which presents an abstract concept of timeless and unchangeable feminine essences as absolute truth, clashes with the day-to-day experiences of flesh and blood women. She comments that the eternal feminine fiction is reinforced by biology, by psychoanalysis, history and literature. Besides women are portrayed, in contrary archetypes simultaneously.


They may be evil employing their erotic attraction, or guardian angels, or courtesans being generous patronesses for poets and artists.

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- Beauvoir argues that there is no secret essence of femininity. It does not exist. Human Beings in their real essence cannot be defined in objective essence.
- Beauvoir also opines that the myth is in large part explained by its usefulness to man.
- Myths help in the self-justification of regressive customs and social mores. It further imbues the psyche through movies, religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, and other social institutions.
- Further, people belonging to the working classes do not have the luxury to embellish their womenfolk with images and ornaments.
- Contemporary myths to propagate patriarchal values



The Myth of Disney Princess
Source: Cosmopolitan



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Beauvoir asserts that there is no secret essence of femininity, it simply does not exist. Human beings in their real essence can never be defined in objective essence. She also opines that the myths in large part are explained by their usefulness to men. They help in self justification of regressive customs and social modes.

And further imbue the psyche through movies, religions, traditions, languages, tales, songs and other social institutions. We can also refer to the contemporary myths to propagate patriarchal values as displayed in this photograph of the myth of Disney Princess.

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- Beauvoir also refers to women's relation to means of production. They are owned by men -- imparting a dominance to them, enabling them to look at the Other from an exalted position.
- The oppressed—women—learn to hide their real feelings, and are "taught from adolescence to lie to men." Thus, women live between their subjectivity and their otherness. Essentially, facing oneself as Other, and accepting the bargain with experience is the beginning of relief.
- Beauvoir concludes, quoting Laforgue, that woman will become fully human only "when woman's infinite servitude is broken."



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Beauvoir refers to women's relation to means of production. Means of production are owned by men and it imparts a dominance to them, enabling them to look at the other from an exalted position. The oppressed women learn to hide their real feelings and are taught from adolescence to lie to men. Thus, women live between their subjectivity and their otherness. Essentially facing oneself as Other, and accepting the bargain with experience is the beginning of relief.

Beauvoir concludes quoting Lafarge, that woman will become fully human only "when woman's infinite servitude is broken". Beauvoir notes that disabling the myth of woman is not a panacea for an androgenous future. Given the realities of embodiment, there will be sexual differences. She hopes that these differences will not be used to justify the difference between a Subject and his inessential Other.

The goal of liberation, according to Beauvoir, is our mutual recognition of each other as free and as other. In the next module we will discuss the second volume of *The Second Sex*. In it, Beauvoir analyzes the socialization of men and women, in the context of her discussion of the myths that we have discussed today.

Thank you.

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