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**SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: TRANSGRESSING IMMANENCE,
MOTHERHOOD AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS**

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*“One cannot start by saying that our earthly destiny has or has
not importance, for it depends upon us to give it importance”*

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

“Aut viam inveniam aut faciam!”

Hannibal, 218 B.C.

Abstract: *The thesis of the present paper is to investigate the reasons why it may become difficult for the 20th century Western woman to avoid feeling trapped within her status of motherhood and to transcend her immanence as a woman. Simone de Beauvoir argues in The Second Sex, Part V, chapter XVII (“The Mother”) that the modern Western woman proves unable to transgress her own immanence. What are the three factors that stand in the way of the woman’s existential telos? What is the natural consequence of her Snow White-type of imprisonment? Will she impose the same pattern of panoptic surveillance upon her own offspring?*

Key words: *existential ethics, immanence, motherhood, spiritual flatness, transgression.*

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir sharply criticizes the three main factors that contribute to the modern Western woman's spiritual flatness and to the violation of the existential ethics that presupposes freedom and *mutual* respect and responsibility. The three factors identified by this French Existentialist philosopher are: Western society, the Western husband and women's own compliance. Naturally the first two are closely interconnected, as the latter is the representation of the former, though on a smaller, miniature scale, and is also transposed within the private sphere.

Body

According to Existentialism, human beings are thrown into their Procrustean existence at birth, trapped and imprisoned within their human condition: incessant facticity, given-ness and immanence, fallibility and the consciousness of death. However, Reason and Consciousness operate as the two paramount elements that distinguish the human from the rest of the Chain of Being (animals, plants, minerals). It is only humans who are endowed with these two epistemological instruments, which they should deploy when attempting to transcend and to become spiritually enhanced and elevated: "Shut in the home, woman cannot herself establish her existence; she lacks the means requisite for self-affirmation as an individual; and in consequence her individuality is not given recognition" (de Beauvoir 1993:553).

Consequently, Reason and Consciousness represent humans' main epistemological and ontological weapons in their battle to transgress their

Procrustean existential condition and immanence. As both the quotations at the head of the present article suggest, we are all restricted to our condition, constrained between birth and *thanatos*. Nevertheless, according to Existential ethics we should at least attempt to transcend these limits. It is up to each of us to use our unique existential and ontological instruments and to choose whether to live in authenticity or in bad faith, whether to adopt a constructive existential ethics of fulfilling our *telos* (target, goal) or to resign ourselves to immanence. This *telos* is precisely the goal that the Existentialists (and thus de Beauvoir too) underline, namely each individual's capacity to attempt to transcend their immanence, given their reason and their consciousness of death (de Beauvoir 1976:9-30).

De Beauvoir's prime argument is that the 20th century woman is more than ever restricted to the private sphere, totally confined in it and without any permission to 'trespass' into the phallocratic public sphere (de Beauvoir 1993:553). Thus the woman is not permitted any access outside her private realm and as a natural conclusion social power remains within the heteronormative male sphere (*ibid.*). Consequently, de Beauvoir announces the first object of her criticism as being the mother's / the woman's compliance, resignation and submissiveness towards the heteronormative and phallocratic society.

This recalls Sandra Gilbert's criticism and her theory of the "revisionary imperative" (Gilbert 1985:31-32), whereby she argues for the woman's absolute need and capacity to revolt and to deconstruct the patriarchal canonical social norms (*ibid.*). According to Gilbert women must come out of their privacy carapaces and struggle *together* for a better human condition. This is precisely what the Existentialists term 'transcending'.

Not only are women often complacent and resigned, but sometimes they even self-victimize themselves and thus become accomplices of their own victimizers: the phallocratic society, represented on a small scale by their husbands. In addition to their “submissiveness” (de Beauvoir 1993:xxiv), there are also other socio-historical factors that contribute to this condition in women: they lack unity, a common history, a sense of belonging, tradition, religion, culture, and a dependable social movement (*ibid.*). De Beauvoir did not foresee that the thesis of her own groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* would soon become the fundamental rallying-cry of a historic movement, namely the Second Wave of Feminism.

Julia Kristeva (1989:203) states (in her masterpiece *Women’s Time*) that heteropatriarchy offers women no sympathy for their gender-specific needs. In *A Question of Subjectivity* (1986/1996:131) she further argues that this total absence of support may constitute a major cause of women’s neuroses, of their incapacity to adapt and to enjoy life. The Western female-hostile society disempowers the woman through its patriarchal social norms and language, thus preventing her from fulfilling her *telos*.

More than this, Jan Burkitt (1999:88-89) argues that each individual’s gender is to a large extent a social construct. We are the result of what society shapes us into, yet women do not dare rebel. In the late 1940s, the point when de Beauvoir was finishing *The Second Sex*, the woman was still tightly penned up and enclosed within the golden cage of “waxed floors” (de Beauvoir 1993:553), within her triple role as housekeeper, wife and mother (*ibid.*). In other words, each woman was / is a victim and a product of the oppressive male, phallocratic society, as this society produced, normed and superimposed upon her its own restrictive and traumatic roles (*ibid.*:516). With this we touch upon the second element

that victimizes the woman: the masculinist society, in close relation with the oppressive, gender-blind husband.

This is the same theory that the celebrated feminist philosopher Helen Longino argued for in the 1990s. Longino criticizes knowledge and canonical social norms in general as being heteropatriarchal, male-centred, phallocentric, gender oppressive and gender blind. These norms are totally monopolized by men and exclude women and their gender-specific needs (Longino 1993:103). Women are marginalized and if they dare take up arms, they are accused of what Showalter calls “fraudulent power” (1993:169) when seen by the masculinist eye, since power belongs solely to men.

The women of the 1940s did not dare fight back against the oppressive patriarchal society. Thus de Beauvoir anticipates bell hooks’ theory of the marginalized privilege, which states that those producers of knowledge who hold political, social and scientific power are usually heterosexual white males (Longino 1993:103-104). Their epistemological standpoint is distorted because they lack and neglect the pain and trauma experienced by the marginalized, in this case women. If all decision-making positions are oppressive, male owned, it is only to be expected that the mainstream social norms are also male biased and margin-blind, that is gender-blind.

As mentioned above, women are the socio-epistemological products of the social education/inculcation they receive, in accordance with the masculinist phallocratic norms. The above-mentioned power inscriptions upon people’s minds and bodies stand as proof of Jan Burkitt’s theory of “inscriptions on the body through the social habitus” (1999:88). Burkitt argues that social and political power (the masculinist, oppressive and

gender blind social norms, legislature and education) works through human bodies and stamps the individual's mind, knowledge, behaviour, abilities and disabilities (*ibid.*:87). Most importantly, it also defines the restricted self-sufficiency, self-confidence and transcending of the individual, in our case the woman.

Applying this theory in the case of the women of the 1940s, we may infer that to a large extent they were indeed shaped and educated in the spirit of the patriarchal habitus: although abortion was still prosecuted as a crime, women were expected to secretly terminate any unwanted pregnancy so as not to jeopardize the career or reputation of their male partners, while the woman's ultimate mission remained motherhood and homemaking (de Beauvoir 1993:509-518).

To take the argument one step further, this golden cage human condition automatically inflicts frustration, unhappiness and trauma upon the victimized woman. The woman becomes a *quasi*-servant in her own house, silenced and deprived of any self-empowering instruments (553). This status leads to frustration and even self-hatred.

One of the first elements of frustration is pregnancy and closely linked to it the controversial and then forbidden issue of abortion. De Beauvoir criticizes the hypocrisy of her society, which considers abortion a terrible crime and thus something illegal. She adopts a gender sensitive point of view, highlighting that it is the man who devolves all responsibility upon the woman, and again that it is men who take a stand against abortion, while always being ready to seduce a woman and enjoy sexual pleasure. Most importantly, it is the man who demands that the woman get rid of the foetus in order to save his reputation, thus showing himself to be utterly

indifferent to her physical and psychological trauma, self-determination or agency (509-516).

To conclude, society and the husband/the partner condemn abortion in far too gender-blind a manner, completely leaving out the actual agent in the scenario, the woman. This increasingly leads to her entrapment within immanence and to her living in bad faith. Consequently, she may resort to suicide or to illegal abortions, even though such clandestine abortions cripple her physically and emotionally and stamp her for the rest of her life (513-518).

Later, the woman immerses herself in a false state of transcending, imagining herself to be a real, empowered agent who is equal to men, at least during the nine months of her pregnancy; after all, it is she, the woman, who is now the centre of attention, who is ‘producing’ something unique, a baby, and then giving birth to it. Simone de Beauvoir continues her line of argumentation that this is a false illusion as follows (522). The husband’s gender blindness or his failure to share responsibility equally and to show tenderness towards the pregnant woman and later towards the baby will soon lead to her self-alienation and to a sense of emptiness or worthlessness. Thus crises may appear, for example neuroses and even marital or sexual crises.

In conclusion, the patriarchal society and the husband’s/the partner’s gender role disempower the woman, denying her any opportunity to transcend, even during that span of time when she is closest to transcending: pregnancy (509, 521). What is more, even after her delivery the mother is once again victimized by the two factors mentioned above.

The husband does not treat his wife and her new “burden” (the baby) with equally shared responsibility, as the mother does. This is a violation of

existential ethics, which presupposes freedom but at the same time demands equality and equal responsibilities. She therefore feels neglected, empty and worthless. Given this violation of ethics, the young mother has few options but to devote all her attention to her newborn infant.

Without realizing it, she starts to propagate the very same oppressive patriarchal system that she herself was once subjected to, on a double level. In the first place, she prefers a baby son to a baby girl. The powerless, domesticity-restricted mother imagines her son becoming a/her potential hero, a/her strong saviour, a conqueror, a leader, someone who will always be there to protect and cherish her, since she cannot obtain these things from her oppressive normative husband (543).

However, bitter disappointment soon awaits her at the point when she discovers that whether it is a boy or a girl, her baby is going to follow its own trajectory in life, often disregarding its mother's restrictive, domesticity-stamped way of reasoning. This therefore leads to a second step in the promotion and reiteration of the oppressive socio-cultural and educational system. The mother takes over the pattern promoted by the Western heteropatriarchal society and by her omnipotent husband (whose prey she once became) and superimposes this pattern upon her own offspring; she imagines herself to be becoming a self-empowered agent, provided she exercises complete surveillance over her own child's existence, totally castrating the young human (539-545).

We thus arrive at a junction point where hooks, Longino and Burkitt interrelate with Elizabeth Grosz's concept of the explicit sexualization of reasoning (Grosz 1993:188). Grosz argues that knowledge is related to "sexually specific bodies" (*ibid.*), hence the concept of "sexed corporeality" (*ibid.*). Men and women adopt different epistemological standpoints and

therefore produce different knowledge, based on their sexual differences. Consequently, if sex plays such an important role, gender will not play a lesser one. Thus the central, heteropatriarchal, normative community will produce a type of knowledge that will be substantially different from that produced by the marginalized, domesticity-restricted mother.

If we consider Grosz's theory we will comprehend why the patriarchal society and its singular product, the husband, take it for granted that the woman's place should be restricted to the private sphere. At the same time, the woman is suffocated within these concentric panoptic circles of her domestic prison.

She is restricted to waxing floors and scrubbing dishes, while both her husband and her children enjoy a public life. It is natural that she should break out; after all, it is she who experiences the pregnancy, endures the pains of delivery, nurses the baby and raises it. In addition, she performs all these domestic chores largely alone, without her husband's equal participation. She spends most of her years in solitude, within the walls of the household, while her husband is the only one entitled to access the public, socio-economic domains.

Meanwhile, she is at home, shut in under a glass ceiling. Now, when she has failed on all levels of self-empowerment due to the social norms of her times, she considers her child to be her only escape, the only thing that might give some meaning to her existence. This is why all the long repressed discouragement erupts and she aggressively takes possession of her child, smothering it with her over-protectiveness. She needs one last spark of hope that she will finally feel worthy and empowered, but she is searching for it in the wrong place.

But the mother is prone to overlook this and by taking control over her child she again slips into bad faith, by robbing him of his empowerment and agency – in very much the same way as she was robbed of her own agency by society and by her husband. Yet she seems to be blinkered and can only see her own tragedy: robbed of her youth, of mutual and equal respect, chained to the role of housewife, she sacrificed her life and any limited career opportunities for the sake of her child. Continuing this line of reasoning, she angrily asks herself what she will get in return from her child.

The answer will probably be ‘nothing’, as she fails to see that she is robbing her own children of their liberty, agency and self-empowerment, precisely because they refuse to obey her as she obeyed her panoptic masters.

This is the core of *The Second Sex* and especially of this chapter: if the mother fails to transcend, at least the younger generation is trying to, by rebelling against matriarchal omnipotence. Even if rebellion is misdirected, even if the child rebels against their own mother and hurts her, the mere fact that the young generation dares to rebel and dares to reject surveillance is a paramount first step towards social change. It may be a small, uncertain step, but by no means is it unimportant.

I argue that this is one of the most subtle messages of *The Second Sex*: if the woman of the 1940s-1950s was still not strong enough to transcend, her children may and will do so, due to their novel sense of freedom, education and the widening range of opportunities they enjoy in the public sphere. In other words, Simone de Beauvoir conveys the message that the future of bringing improvement to the condition of women lies with the younger generation. Genius as she was, de Beauvoir was able to predict

the grand deconstruction of socio-political and educational norms that would follow within two decades, with the Second Wave of Feminism.

The present grand change stemmed from the self-empowerment that the marginalized accessed from their subversive topos. Marginalization is not exclusively evil. It may create a space of relaxation, of non-harassment, where the marginalized individual(s) may recollect themselves and self-empower themselves for “oppositional struggle” (hooks 2004:153). Thus they create a marginal sphere where they are enabled to fight the mainstream patriarchal discourse by deconstructing and (re)inventing it. Thus marginalization may equal action, fight and “resistance” (159).

I strongly believe that this is one of the most important arguments of *The Second Sex*, namely the weakness and lack of concerted action of women as they face the phallocratic normativity of the society they live in. To be sure, one should not dehistoricize this social frame and should not forget that the patriarchal social norms were much stronger in the late 1940s and in the 1950s.

In his celebrated novel *The Hours* (1998), Michael Cunningham offers a sample of contemporary mimetic literature that discusses the issue of transcending. His character Laura Brown manages to transgress the limits superimposed by the social norms, following a long period of self-torture and of being torn between craving for liberty and family/domesticity. Special attention should be given to the symbolism of her name as well as to the colour brown, as metaphors of self-empowerment. Brown is a secondary color, situated between black and white. Laura carries ‘brown’ in her name as a symbol of her being suspended between her *black* immanence (family, restriction to the private domain, unhappy marriage, the fear of social stigma

if she divorces) and *white* (which represents the purity of the transcendence that she craves).

In her case this white-ness represents independence, happiness, divorce, building her own private and public realm, her identity, her self-esteem and her self-confidence. That is why she is usually represented as wearing brown clothes, as in Stephen Daldry's film version of *The Hours*.

Conclusions

On the basis of all the above-mentioned evidence we may argue that the Second Wave of Feminism is an appropriate example of a marginalized social sector (women) which used its marginalization as an effective boomerang against the central patriarchal normative discourse, engaging in a fruitful counter-hegemonic struggle. Thus we may also comprehend and accept Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of women's compliance in their failure to transcend towards self-empowerment and self-liberation.

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