ARTICLES

Muzaffar Ali

Woman as a Relative Being: Critical Reflections from French Feminist Philosophy

It is well known that French philosophy has a form of radicalism that stretches to the Late Enlightenment thinkers. The past century has had its share of radicalism, be it Henri Kojve, Jean Paul Sartre, Henri Lefebvre, Jean Hyppolite, *et al.*, where the dialectics of the self that Hegel had penned in his *Phenomenology of Mind* takes central place in philosophical reasoning. In a certain way thinkers like Louis Althusser, Jacques Rainciere, Lyotard and Alain Badiou form the concrete genealogy of this stream of thought. Probably the most known yet ironically the least studied in present time is the legendary Simone Beauvoir. This essay is a reflection on her thoughts.

It has been said that "binarism" is a basic characteristic of human beings be it on any frame; ontological, metaphysical, ethical, and axiological. The concept of the self and the other, along with other binaries: right and wrong, good and evil, being and non-being have since primordial times been our way of understanding and grasping things. It was Claude Levi Strauss who had located this structural binarism in the "savage mind", whilst it was Aristotle who was the first thinker who laid the philosophical basis whereby the formal logical system emerged. What has not been recognized—usually when one is blinded by postmodernity—is that it was Hegel, especially in his Science of Logic followed by Karl Marx who thoroughly critiqued binarism.

It was then Jacques Derrida who showed how Plato's arguments throughout his philosophical endeavours depend on simple clear cut binary distinctions.[1] The amazing part of this binarism or "either-orness" however has been that both the opposites are necessary and essential for each other's existence and meaning. "Self", for example, is a not-other, right is that which is not wrong. The two sexes, man and woman too have developed under the banner of binarism, but of a different sort. In other cases negotiation and reciprocity is at the centre of binarism. In the peculiar case of man and woman this binarism has been one-sided and essentialistic; essentialistic for it staticness, fixedness and stagnancy.

In what follows I will argue the situation which has led this peculiar binarism to perpetuate and made the concept of woman not only a permanent "Other" but also ambiguous, inferior and subservient; that which has exhorted the feminine to "be women, remain women, become women".[2] Debating Simone de Beauvoir, I will argue how feminine subjectivity has been not only male-centric but male-defined. While questioning the notion of gender equality I will emphasize that the notion of feminine subjectivity can only be developed and cultivated by moving beyond.

I

Subjectivity as it can be loosely defined is the "perspective" and "orientation" through which a human being makes sense of the world—acts and deliberates on his projects in the world. An individual's subjectivity thus is (becomes) his/her vantage point of viewing, understanding and interpreting both the nuances of his/her existence and this concrete world. Subjectivity as Sonia Kruks writes, "is never pure or fully autonomous but inheres in selves that are shaped by cultural discourses and that are always embodied-selves that are thus gendered".[3] The shaping does not in any way d(econ)struct the subject till it is negotiable and a process of engagement with these overarching discourses keeps going on. If however these shaping discourses become any sort of control or coercion, then the whole process of engaging within this world becomes contended. It not only affects the cultivated notion of subjectivity but also the agency and freedom of the subject. It rather makes subjectivity an "effect" of a causality on which the individual

(as a product) bearing it has no control. "Oppression can permeate subjectivity to the point where consciousness itself becomes no more than a product of oppressive situation. The freedom... can in a situation of extreme oppression, be wholly surpassed, even though it cannot be definitively eliminated."[4] Feminine subjectivity as it stands even today is not only doped by male domination but is rather defined by it. The historical research provides us with enough philosophical and factual materials which show that in a man's world woman has always been *seen as relative to him.* Man has always posed his self as a normative, as an essential and an Absolute and constructed a cultural and social situation which "defines woman not in herself but as relative to him."[5] This "malely" created situation is aimed to hijack the "absolute subjectivity"[6] of woman and make her the inessential as opposed to the essential (male) and an object as opposed to "The Subject". It is aimed to make woman the permanent Other of the One. Her subjectivity, agency, physiology and overall her "womanhood" is defined and redefined by this situation to which paradoxically she is subjected without any real engagement. But where is the locus of this created situation—probably in history. Going deep into the archaeology of the feminine situation where she is the one guarding the kitchen, bringing the children up, etc. Beauvoir attempts to find the locus. "What transcendence is possible for a woman locked up in a harem?"[7] asks Beauvoir.

II

The situation of a woman is coincident with the evolution of humanity itself. Beauvoir argues that in the nomadic days the natural physiology of a woman made her at times wholly dependent on man. Other than struggling for life, a woman had to frequently attend to her physiological functions; man got the high end and became supporter of life in "totality". It was peculiarly this effort of man which made him the essential of humanity and subdued woman to a life of immanence and subordination. Woman while attending to maternity and perpetuation of species was equipped to do petty natural chores and remain locked therein. Rather than balancing and compensating the oddity of the situation, man took an advantage of it and thus began the domination which was made

to root itself in the physiology and physical weakness of a woman. The emerging situation naturally gave rise to the sexual inequality and biology of the female became a manifest determinant for it. The situation was destined to be identified with her body; her body becoming the marker of the self and subjectivity she will carry.[8] As Beauvoir writes:

> The support of life became for man an activity and a project through the invention of the tool; but in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body, like an animal. It is to say- that confronting woman, man assumes mastery.[9]

The situation thus created had to be idealized in a Platonic sense so that the subordination of women could continue. For this the constructed situation though the historical had to be shown *ahistorical* and thus immutable and eternal. It had to be shown to a woman that the situation which defines her is not only "a given" but one which cannot be transcended. The boundaries of the situation had to be tuned in such a way that woman gets imprisoned in it for eternity. The limits of the situation had to be shown as ontological and therefore unconquerable. The situation had to be structured, that it appears natural to the woman who lives it. After all according to Beauvoir, "one cannot revolt against nature".[10]

Since man had already set himself to transcend his animal nature, he took help of the tools in his hand and prefaced the social and cultural institutions on the sexual inequality which had deduced from the situation. Institutions became the carriers of determining feminine subjectivity. They alienated the woman and the girl child from realizing their agency and freedom and thus coerced them to the immutability of the situation. The institution of marriage demanded strict fidelity from woman only, laws and rights were male oriented and women were held either ineligible for any rights or the rights provided were abstract and lacking any materiality. Her testimony was not accepted by any court for "she is ceremonially unclean, surrounded with taboos."[11] Roman law says Beauvoir, limited the rights of women asserting that woman by nature are stupid and instable.[12]

Religion being one of these institutions was according to Beauvoir invented by men to subvert woman and to dominate her. Man used it to fix-for-ever the situation around the female and

decided the nature of gods. Women just worshiped in reverence. Priests she writes "have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in the heaven and advantageous on earth."[13] With religion were born mythologies which while supporting the institution of religion strengthened female subordination. The myths were more dangerous than the institutions as they not only subverted the feminine subjectivity as inferior to males but made woman an ambiguous and a confused concept. The institutions of the society established the inequalities while the myths gave them the godly and eternal declaration; together both divided the humanity into two classes of creatures who shared a common world but were "situated-differently" and "distanced-unequally" from each other. Woman, with the birth of the mythologies, was no longer a situation, but a creature without any constancy; a contradiction. Take the case of the myth of the biblical 'fall': in the name of Eve, the 'woman' is presented as an occasional creation who beguiled Adam to do sin and who thus is the origin of Sin, i.e. the idealized 'Sin', the Platonic 'Sin'. She then gets her existence from man's *nafs* (soul, body) [*The Holy Quran*, Chapter 4 Surah Nisaa verse 1]. In almost the same genre it was Aristotle who said: *Femina est mas occasionatus*; "the female is a defective male", a phrase that was later endorsed by Aquinas.[14] Continuing this same narrative: in the Name of Mary she is "above the women of all worlds...worthy of regard in this world and thereafter".[15] She is here the one who gave existence to the prophet of Christianity. Hot and cold, pure and impure, felon and estimable she is made into a purely "impersonal opposition" in her-self. Kierkegaard writes, " to be a woman is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one will like to use are so contradictory that only a woman can put up with it."[16]

The ambiguity and vagueness in these myths while affecting the conceptual schema of 'woman' and 'womanhood' affected the customs and conducts of folklore. The ambiguities it loaded with the word 'woman' were transferred to the characteristics of subjectivity—transcendence, freedom, agency, responsibility and so on. Transcendence now means for 'man' bursting the present and opening the future. It is a possibility to be actualized. It means for man to set up projects in the temporal order of life and actualize

them. For woman transcendence like a static myth remains contained in her embodied existence. It does not mean opening the future but securing the future by perpetuation of species. Thus making her body as one of the indispensable fundamentals of her situation and as a site to determine it. Here "transcendence turns on to biology...which makes the achievement of subjectivity more difficult because the strength of woman's involvement in the natural world makes her liable to succumb to a physiological destiny".[17] *The agency of the male was to be underwritten by the meaning of transcendence and freedom, his situation allowed him to have; that of possibilities, opportunities and openness. The situation of a female which was fundamentally determined by her physiology should have been of immanence, darkness and closure.* Since her agency was underwritten by her static biology, was determined and defined by male she (as a subject) should not have been held responsible for the projects she was destined to undertake. "If a woman is oppressed to the point where her subjectivity is supressed, then her situation is de facto her 'destiny' and she ceases to be an effective or morally responsible agent."[18] For Beauvoir since for woman transcendence is reduced to immanence, her existence is degraded into the existence of Sartrean being-in-itself; of subjectivity into objectivity and of an agent into an event.[19] But ambiguously the immanence in which a woman is incarcerated is the transcendence for her and the "effect" which she is of the imposing situation is the only agency she carries. She lives in a bad faith not by rejecting her freedom and escaping responsibility but by embracing responsibility while living in immanence; an incarcerating and imposing situation. She is in bad faith because living a life which falls somewhere in between "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself", she believes herself to be a for-itself. This belief again rather than being innate in her existence is the product of the situation and circumstances in which she is immured.

III

Gender equality is what has been proposed by many feminists as the fitting solution to displace this ambiguous and imposing situation of woman. "Woman should be treated as an equal of male", say some. "Women and men should be given/provided equal opportunities",

say others. Both these shades of gender egalitarianism, I propose are deeply flawed, rather patriarchal. While trying to rescue woman from the marginality and suppression she has been experiencing, gender equality forces her into a different sort of male domination; as this is an equality which rather than bridging the distance of the situations of the two sexes is grounded on difference itself. It is instrumental in making man a permanent normative for woman under disguise. It aims at "masculinization" of woman. The first shade I talked about makes the situation of man the destiny for female. It aims to bring woman out of her body-determined situation and imprison her yet again in a situation of which male is the only directive or way. It aims to make male as the eternal ideal where a woman has to reach. There is no other way rather than considering the status of equal-to-male for a woman. In other words, a woman is again not free to choose her way, to choose her ideal. Only the male as a normative is a way forward. The second while talking about equal opportunities overlooks the bare fact that the projects for which equal opportunity is demanded are designed by the Absolute and the One; male. Female has had no role in shaping of these projects—which are a product of male-defined history—as her situation is a hook on which she remains hanging. "It is the technological evolution accomplished by men" says Beauvoir "that has emancipated the women of today…and partially freed her from bondage of maternity."[20] This evolution while claiming to emancipate women has done nothing to the situation which affects her subjectivity. Rather than returning the ""absolute subjectivity" to the women it has yet again subjectified her in an alternative way. The means and markers may have changed, but for women the outcome remains the same; man remains (is kept) seated in her mind as a platonic essence.

The absolute subjectivity of the female can only be re-instated by levelling the situations of male and female. The situations of both the sexes need to be "distanced-equally" from each other and (from the in-itself). The one sided binarism bearing the signatures of male dominance needs to be relooked at. To cultivate a subjectivity of her own (not as male's other) man and woman ought to existentialize their situations through engagement, recognition, reciprocity and negotiation. The Essentialized Other of female subjectivity needs to be loosened, so that room for a subjectively

shared world is made. Beauvoir writes, "it is possible to rise above this conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner."[21] For all this woman and philosophy have to come forth. If the ideas of truth, goodness and beauty are to be seen glittering in the three fold domain of human activity (knowing, feeling and willing), then philosophy ought to not only empower women but assist them find the situation which they deserve. To quote Beauvoir, "in order to change the face of the world, it is first necessary to be firmly anchored in it."[22] It is through philosophy, I suppose that we can plausibly attempt to attain such a situation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Derrida has showed and attacked the binary oppositions constructed by Plato in on one of his early essays entitled, "Plato's Pharmacy". He argues that this whole binarism is a "logocentricism" wherein preference is given to one of the opposites while its other is made an 'anti'.

2. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p.

3. Kruks Sonia; "Gender and Subjectivity: Simone De Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism" *Signs*, University of Chicago, Vol. 18, Number 1, Autumn 1992, p.91

4. Ibid, p. 100

5. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 16

6. It is important for the reader to note here that by absolute subjectivity I do not mean a Sartrean type of subjectivity which grounds itself in the violence of interpersonal relations and where the other is a hell for the subject. I rather mean a situated subjectivity where the subject and its other are equals and their situations are structured by reciprocity rather than by deprivation.

7. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter G. cleaveland; World Publishing, 1962, p. 34.

8. Thus gendering of the self based on biology of the feminine gender started which made the situation of the female turn into coercion. It was from here that for woman the interaction was only between a gendered self and a gendered world; two different sort of entities.

Even more often the gendered self of other woman was for woman an external other rather than an internal one.

9. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 97.

10. Beauvoir, Simone de; *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. B. Frechtman, Citadel press, 1967, p. 83.

11. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H.M. Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 116.

12. Beauvoir talks about this in the introduction of second sex citing both the Roman law and religion (especially Christian priests of medieval times) as examples. On page 22 of the Harshely translation she writes, "the Roman law limiting the rights of women cited the imbecility, the instability of the sex... St. Augustine declared that woman is a creature neither decisive nor constant".

13. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 22.

14. Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* argues about it while dealing with the creation of the world. He asks whether God should have created woman at the beginning of the world. Although the manifest answer to this is Yes, Aquinas nevertheless states some objections to this answer. The first objection is that Aristotle has said that the female is an "unintended" *(occasionatus)* male, and what is "unintended" is defective. It follows that woman is defective. Now God should not have made anything defective at the beginning of the world, and consequently He should not have made woman.

15. Mishra Anil Dutta ed.; *Women and Religion*, Regal Publications, New Delhi, p. 48.

16. Kierkegaard, Soren, *Stages on the Road to Life*, quotation taken from Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 175.

17. Atkins Kim ed.; *Self and Subjectivity*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005, p. 240.

18. Kruks Sonia; "Gender and Subjectivity: Simone De Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism" *Signs*, University of Chicago, Vol. 18, Number 1, Autumn 1992, p. 102.

19. She writes that "this downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil", p. 29.

20. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H M Parshley, Vintage, 1997, p. 160.

21. Ibid, p. 172.

22. Ibid, pp. 162–163.