The Life-Experience and the Philosophical Meanings: Defining the Nomenclature of Simone de Beauvoir’s Feministic Thought

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Abstract

The pivotal theme of Simone de Beauvoir’s magnum opus, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex) is the idea that woman in relation to man has positioned herself secondarily in the lifeworld as the Other of man since the ancient times and further that this secondary position of women in the social order is imposed by the force of the patriarchal atmosphere rather than the feminine characteristics. Women’s being so defiant regarding womanhood reflects that their sense of perpetual femininity is haunting to them and they want to get rid of it; and this to Beauvoir is in no way an appropriate attitude of women. In spite of this nominalistic abstractness she directs herself to the existentialist transparency of meaning that in the facticity every human being finds himself or herself a concrete existent always a singular, separate individual. Drawing upon this existentialist notion she defines the problem of feminism in the nexus of facticity whereby she further expounds how woman being a for-itself (pour-soi) is necessarily related to the in-itself (en-soi) – the world and its past. In this argumentation she draws not only upon existentialism and feminism but also upon phenomenology and Marxism. This paper interprets the details of this argumentation by referring to these four different philosophical discourses and so it attempts to define the appropriate nomenclature of her philosophy. But throughout the argument of this paper the nexus remains a binary relationship between the life-experience and the philosophical meanings that is essential in the fold of phenomenology. The whole argument of this paper remains bipartite: Part I defines the nomenclature of Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy in terms of the mutuality of the life-experience and philosophical meanings by incorporating phenomenology, existentialism and Marxism and then in Part II it refers to the same nexus of the life-philosophy mutuality while defining the feminist traits of her thoughts.

Key Words: Existentialism, feminism, phenomenology, Marxism, life-experience
Woman’s situation of being the other of man is, according to Beauvoir, a result of men’s chauvinistic attitude throughout History intimidating women so that they have failed to claim a position of human dignity as liberated and independent beings along with men. Since her adolescence, the time when in her mind the idea of individualism was firmly rooted making her believe that each individual was responsible for securing his own, she had been of the view that if she being a woman had accepted a secondary status in lifeworld as compared to that of man, she would have been a mere parasite degrading her own humanity. She was clearheaded that she was suffering from those problems because she ‘happened to be a woman’ and she could control the situation if she was to attempt ‘qua individual’ (not qua woman) to resolve it. This justifies her deviation from the nominalistic abstractness of the meaning of womanhood to the existentialist notion of human being that defines him or her as a ‘concrete’ existent always a singular, separate individual. Her interest in existentialism sets for her the task of analysing the pivotal and ultimate problem of her feminist discourse: ‘why is woman the Other?’ Through that analysis the point she attempts to make it is that woman's existence is a human existence whose socio-historical progress in the lifeworld has to be interpreted in its entirety (rather than with reference to one particular dimension like biological, psychoanalytical or economical etc.). And in this regard she finds existentialism as the most appropriate framework, as it affords us the transcendence from the one-dimensionality of life leading us to the overall human situation which can be explained on the ground of its ‘ontological substructure’ defined by the nature of human being. Existentialism is for her the only paradigm that can show the most transparent picture of the human life, as it encompasses all categories of defining human life that separately unsatisfactorily attempts to attain the same task in the forms of the biological science, Freudianism and Marxism. From the existentialist point of view, woman’s defining trait as an existent it is that when she was to accept her biological fate to be a secondary contributor to the socio-economic life she was to do that in bad faith, as she was in fact an existent like man who could transcend that givenness of her
being the Other of man. In the face of this facticity of being in bad faith she is very much capable of showing her aptitude as an existent being free to engage in those life projects that could bless her with new frontiers in her future life. It’s all an attempt to get rid of her bad faith as “woman” who could only be a biological being-in-itself; instead she needs to realize that she is a free individual being-for-itself that can improvise the life projects to make her own what she is as an existent. Under the yoke of her being a traditional consciousness shaped through the effective history woman in bad faith accepts her role as a weak, inferior and secondary being-in-itself (which is to say that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ in the process of effective history); but she always has the aptitude of getting rid of her bad faith by transcending the facticity to realize that she is a being-for-itself who can freely deliberate to develop her own life projects.

The nomenclature of Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy is defined by her attempt to address lopsidedly the question of woman as the perpetual other in comparison with man in the perspective of Sartre’s phenomenological existentialism. One may properly term her philosophy as phenomenological existentialist feminism: feminism as it pivots around the question of woman and phenomenological existentialism as this pivoting takes its place mainly in relation to the composite perspective of phenomenology and existentialism.

1. Life-Experience and the Philosophical Meanings: Phenomenology, Existentialism and Marxism

Feminism, existentialism and phenomenology all forms of her thought emerge from her life-experiences, and so it becomes an essential trait of her philosophy that it is rooted in her life-practice rather than intertextual reading. In the third volume of her autobiography, *Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir confesses that even until the postwar scenario of her life in France she
‘had no philosophical ambition.’ It is the influence of Sartre’s specifically of Being and Nothingness that she gave care to developing her philosophical insight through her mutual life-praxis with Sartre. Although she does not deny her own influences upon him what she received inversely from him was so stronger and deeper that whatever she perceived about the world with all of its ‘problems’ and ‘their subtlety’ was through his presence with her. And this impact of her life-experience with Sartre is so forceful that she directed herself to talking about that phase of her life which was mutually practiced by her and Sartre as such a ‘realm’ that must not be taken as of theirs mutually but only of Sartre’s. She confesses:

“[Sartre] found himself committed to action in a much more radical way than myself. We always discussed his attitudes together, and sometimes I influenced him. But it was through him that these problems, in all their urgency and all their subtlety, presented themselves to me. In this realm, I must talk about him in order to talk about us.”

She recalls her memories about their youth when they found themselves anarchists and so felt themselves close to the Communist version of ‘negativism.’ It seems that it was their youthful romantic longing to Communism rather than a serious thought out philosophical instance, as she explicitly clarifies that they mutually ‘wanted the defeat of capitalism, but not the accession of a socialist society’ which would have possibly ‘deprived’ them of their ‘liberty.’ This clarification also reflects that they were more strongly committed to existentialism rather than Marxism, as they were unable to sacrifice their individual freedom for the expected economic betterment of their collective lifeworld. In support of their mutual adherence to the existentialist meaning of individual freedom against their abhorrence to the Marxist meanings of the collective economic betterment, she cites from Sartre’s notebook, the entry on 14 September 1939:

“I am now cured of socialism, if I needed to be cured of it.”

Beauvoir interprets this socialism-liberty contradiction of their thought referring to their existentialist commitment to
experiencing *authenticity* of moral life. Under the dictates of circumstances in postwar France they were to become face to face with problems of poverty, injustice and deprivation which determined them to be against capitalistic structure of their social order that might be further suppressing for them. Out of this fear of economic insecurity and social injustice they found Marxist version of socialism to be an urgent solution of those problems. But this urgency of finding solution might damage the continuity of the social order to which they traditionally belonged and in the nexus of which they wished to prosper as creative writers for which the value of liberty was a prerequisite. Liberty and socialism were for them like two horns of a dilemma, and they found themselves hanging between the illusions of the former and the deceptions of the latter. At that point the shield of protection from this forceful attack of these two horns came from the existentialist ethics – ‘the morality of authenticity.’ The circumstances of life force one to submit to the facticities without leaving any room for transcendence; but from the existentialist point of view one’s freedom makes every action a project of salvaging whatever problems one is facing in life situations. They were not ready to be living with the ‘absolute’ meanings of facticity – whether socialistic or capitalistic rather they were interested in the ‘transitory’ spheres of life-experience wherein they ‘had to renounce being and resolve to do.’ Being existentialists they rebelled against ‘bourgeois humanism’ characterized by the reverence of a specific human nature that determines every act of man. Instead of this essentialist approach towards human life and act they appealed to the existentialist creativity of human action based upon man’s being condemned to be free. Out of this freedom man does not only accept the given situation subjectively, but he modifies the situation objectively ‘by constructing a future in accord with his aspirations.’ In this regard the phenomenological intuition would be heuristically significant, as to it everything in the lifeworld is immediately shown as it exists in itself and so an aspirant soul can constitute its own lifeworld freely. But still there is a difference between
phenomenology and existentialism as regards how the subjective consciousness relates to the objective world. Phenomenology defines consciousness as consciousness of something, and when it does so it takes the full presence of the world as noema being a correlate of noesis – immanently the active pole of the transcendental subjectivity. That is to say, it is the pure consciousness or the transcendental subjectivity that constitutes the world immanently within itself in the paradigm of the noema-noesis correlates which Husserl terms as the structure of intentionality. As compared to phenomenology the case of existentialism regarding the consciousness-world relationship is a little different. For Sartre, consciousness is similarly defined as consciousness of something but consciousness does not act in the field of fantasy rather within the realm of facticity. This factual consciousness receives impressions as subjective plenitude through perception of the things in the external world. And in doing so this factual subjectivity that cannot transcend itself to posit the world, rather it negates itself for the assertion that the world exists concretely as being-in-itself. Out of this assertion about the concrete world as being-in-itself what consciousness realizes about itself is that it is always of phenomenal world and without this phenomenon consciousness is only a void or an emptiness whereby consciousness implies in its being a non-conscious being "the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being."6 This experience of nihilism becomes original of existentialist conception of creative freedom that guarantees authenticity of one’s moral life. Sartre and Beauvoir share the notion of freedom not as autonomy of thinking or doing with certain a priori meanings rather the creative freedom – freedom as will to act ex nihilo. This affords an absolute guarantee to experiencing the existentialist authenticity of one’s moral life. How in their youth Sartre and Beauvoir were to experience it she describes:

“We had no external limitations, no overriding authority, no imposed pattern of existence. We created our own links with the world, and freedom was the very essence of our existence. In our everyday lives we gave it scope by means of an activity which assumed considerable importance for us – private fantasies…We embraced this pursuit all the more zealously since we were both
active people by nature, and for the moment living a life of idleness. The comedies, parodies, or fables which we made up had a very specific object: they stopped us from taking ourselves too seriously. Seriousness as such we rejected no less vigorously than Nietzsche did, and for much the same reason: our jokes lightened the world about us by projecting it into the realm of imagination, thus enabling us to keep it at arm’s length.”

But from the ethical point of view one should not take this existentialist practice of life as merely nihilistic though this paragraph may reflect such meanings. Sartre and Beauvoir were accused of being quietists or nihilists but they refused to accept such labeling. Beauvoir clarifies that instead of ‘being a quietism or nihilism, Existentialism’ was to define man in terms of action. Although it condemned man ‘to anxiety it did so only insofar as it obliged him to accept responsibilities. The hope it denied him was the idle reliance on anything other than himself; it was an appeal to man’s will.’ An existentialist does not act in accord with moral principles but in the light of ends. Beauvoir while recalling her memories when she started publishing as a writer and Sartre was contributing to the cinema and the theatre explains this trait of existentialist ethics. She justifies that she and Sartre had always pooled their earnings, and so she was not obliged to bother about her daily expenses. This act of her seems to be against her feminist orientation, as she being a feminist advises women to be independent of their male cohabiters and that independence begins with economic freedom. She explained this attitude appealing to existentialist meanings of morality. She had taken a leave of absence from the University in order that she could focus her reading and writing. She could assure her economic autonomy ‘since if the need arose’ she could always get back to her teaching position in the University. To her it seemed ‘stupid and even criminal’ that in order to prove her economic freedom she would sacrifice her precious time that she was spending in her creative work. So in that sense her act might be in aberrance with the principles of feminism but it was in accord with the existentialist commitment with the ends of act that motivate her for that action. Being a writer she found creative writing as a
‘demanding task’ that motivated her to do plenty of things and she could not afford to spend her time in making money. Thereby she guaranteed her ‘moral autonomy’ in existentialist sense; ‘in the solitude of risks taken, of decisions to be made,’ she made her freedom more real than by accommodating herself to ‘any money making routine.’ For her, her reading and writing were a genuine satisfaction, and as such they freed her ‘from the necessity to affirm’ herself in any other way.9 Being authors and thinkers Sartre and Beauvoir deeply related their consciousness to life-experience, and that phenomenological trait of their intellectual orientation was so significant for them that at times they found themselves ready to repudiate the label of existentialism for the sake of their affinity with life-experience. When Beauvoir published her second novel, Blood of Others it was an instant success. Critics labeled it an ‘Existentialist novel’ which was not astonishing, as an affixing of such a label on works of Beauvoir’s or of Sartre’s was more than obvious. But surprisingly Sartre was to refuse out of irritation to allow Gabriel Marcel to label him with the adjective – existentialist during a discussion which the Cerf publishing house was to organize for Beauvoir’s novel. Sartre said abhorrently and Beauvoir shared his irritation: ‘My philosophy is a philosophy of existence; I don’t even know what Existentialism is.’ Beauvoir furthered this abhorrence by adding that she had written that novel long before she had come across with the term – Existentialism. She explained that for that novel her inspirations came from her own ‘experience, not from a system’10 whether philosophical or social.

In the face of their mutual irritation and protest against the epithet – Existentialists – which people were using for them, it became a readymade label available to be put on everything came from their mouths or their pens. After Beauvoir’s novel during the course of a few months Sartre published The Age of Reason and The Reprieve, and gave a lecture – Is Existentialism a Humanism? Beauvoir also gave lectures on her novel and on metaphysics as well as her play – Les Bouches inutiles opened for public, and simultaneously the first few numbers of Les Temps Modernes11 also appeared. And so they caused a sudden uproar in cultural and literary circles of
France. They both were pushed out into the limelight: Sartre was vehemently flung into ‘the arena of celebrity’ while Beauvoir was identified as an ‘associate’ of his. The newspapers and the magazines discussed their works and thoughts and there appeared gossips about their life and particularly about their cohabitation everywhere. The paparazzi started to take their candid shots intrusively and the strangers rushed up to talk to them. They were so much popular that when once Sartre was invited to give a lecture, so many people gathered at the place that they all could not enter the lecture hall, and there was that much rush that some women fainted. This cultural uproar created by their philosophy and literature is what Beauvoir negatively terms as an ‘Existentialist offensive.’ Beauvoir analyzes how Sartre suddenly turned out to be an existentialist hero in the post World War II France and why he was welcomed as a new ideologist by not only the literary people but by the public and not in only France but the whole world. According to her, the social scenario of the post World War II France happened to be in favour of Sartre’s philosophy, as there was a ‘remarkable’ symmetry between what the public wanted and what Sartre was offering to them. The French middle class, which was the main addressee of Sartre’s works, had lost its faith in ‘peace’ and ‘progress’ and they felt tiresome due to the permanent givenness of ‘unchanging essences.’ They needed an ideology which could guide them to surging up these problems without denouncing the traditional meanings they adhered to. Sartre’s Existentialism was striving to establish a harmony between the facticity of life and what was morally required in order to transcend the unwanted elements of factual life. Striving for the compatibility between the historicity of life and morality, Existentialism authorized the people ‘to accept their transitory condition without renouncing a certain absolute, to face horror and absurdity while still retaining their human dignity, to preserve their individuality.’ The people thought that through the Existentialist heuristics they could educate themselves how to surge up their problems and that surging up seemed to be
closed to something they dreamed of. But it might be their bad faith under the yoke of which they thought so, as according to Beauvoir Sartre’s Existentialism did not offer such heuristics. She saw an ‘ambiguity’ between what the new ideological recipe was offering and what the people ‘were starved for.’ She found an element of intellectual seduction in that offer, as the world he was creating in his novels or presenting in his philosophical writings afforded certain space in the nexus of which man being an individual had to maintain a particular level of morality. They could not accept the Existentialist morality, as it was altogether different from the morality they were practicing in their facticity; and so they rejected Sartre’s offer and ‘they accused him of sordid realism, of ‘miserabilism’.’ The moral choice Sartre offered them was grounded upon the freedom that implied tedious responsibilities that might turn ‘against their institutions’ and ‘mores’; it could ruin that lifeworld which they found secure in moral terms. One more element in Sartre’s philosophy which might be threatening to the freedom they were practicing as bourgeois was Marxist dialectic; they were dubious about whether it was safe to be marching along the Communists into the new phase of History for which Sartre was inviting them. Beauvoir clearly understood the dubiousness of attitude of those came to Sartre for ideological guidance and their half-hearted attachment with Existentialism and Sartre’s apparent influence that could not be penetrated into that culture. She judges:

“In Sartre, the bourgeois recognized themselves without consenting to the self-transcendence he exemplified; he was speaking their language, and using it to tell them things they did want to hear. They came to him, and came back to him, because he was asking the questions that they were asking themselves; they ran because his answers shocked them.”

Sartre found himself ‘a celebrity and a scandal’ simultaneously, and this simultaneity loaded with a huge fame was absolutely unexpected for him and it did not in any way match with what he being a writer had ever dreamed of. Beauvoir reports about Sartre that he considered literature divine, sacred and eternal, and this eternity lied in its being alien and misunderstood in its facticity and in its transcendence of the epoch in which it was
created to be properly understood and admired in the future. Sartre imaginatively aligned himself with great genii like Baudelaire, Stendhal or Kafka whose works did not reach more than a very small group of admirers in their lifetime; but the meanings they created were to transcend that facticity to become eternal in their impact when in the coming generations they found a hugely wider audience to appreciate them. Sartre’s becoming a scandalous celebrity in a younger age robbed him of that fateful solitude necessarily belonged to a genius and which had to be transcended by the future generations interpreting the meanings with the due attention. This loss of eternity of meanings for Sartre, estimates Beauvoir, ‘was truly the death of God, who up till then had survived under the mask of words.’ This was completely catastrophic for Sartre but for Beauvoir while in this regard she compared herself with him it was not so horrible, as she had never believed in the divinity or eternity of literature. She explained that for her ‘God had died’ when she was fourteen and then nothing (even literature) ‘had replaced him.’ She appeared to be more intense existentialist than Sartre, as she experienced the meaning of the death of God in her teens while Sartre had to be matured enough to experience the same. Besides this for Sartre the absolute or the sacred was reincarnated in the form of literature whereas for Beauvoir ‘the absolute existed only in the negative, like a horizon forever lost in view.’ She confesses that she had a fantasy of becoming a legend like Emily Bronte or George Elliot, but this fantasy was absolutely mundane without even any traces of divinity, as she was ‘firmly convinced’ that once she died nothing would exist to embrace such fantasies. She wished to succeed as a writer in her lifetime, she ‘wanted to be widely read,’ ‘to be esteemed, to be loved,’ as she believed that once she closed her eyes all meanings would perish with the age she lived in. If seen from existentialist point of view, Beauvoir appeared to be more contented both as a writer and as a social being; and she was less deceived than Sartre ‘by the illusion of being,’ for she ‘had paid the price of this renunciation during’ her adolescence. Being a true existentialist
she was more able than he to enjoy ‘the transitory,’ ‘the immediate’ – like ‘the pleasures of the body, the feel of the weather, walks, friendships, gossips, learning, seeing.’ Sartre was saturated by his fame as a scandalous celebrity and by his success as a writer, but she was able to be everlastingly unsaturated by success and she could infinitely enlarge the horizon of her hopes as an ever prosperous writer. She explicitly declared that she might be ‘satisfied’ as a creative writer but never ‘satiated.’ That was the genuine form of existentialist freedom or liberation that one could experience with that much richness and depth in such explicit terms.

For them the most suitable practical social framework for exercising such a form of freedom was democracy to which they felt adherence, but the complementary part of that social structure was socialism to which they hitherto felt abhorrence due to their fear of being lost in the collectivity having deprived of their individuality. But in any case they hitherto saw both democracy and socialism as humanity’s only chance of giving rise to social justice and as a necessary condition of their own fulfillment.

In spite of this intellectual confusion of identifying themselves as half Marxist and half petite bourgeoisie, both Sartre and Beauvoir convincingly found certain notions of phenomenology and existentialism as absolutely meaningful for human lifeworld like ‘the concepts of negativity, of interiority, of existence and of freedom elaborated in Being and Nothingness.’ Like socialist-democrat they knew the significance of the idea of praxis in human life, but they were not ready to abandon their commitment with the existentialist ethics or the morality of authenticity in life. This phenomenological-existentialist meaningfulness primordially defined the mold of their existence on the ground of which they later chose to be Marxist or petite bourgeoisie or both simultaneously. They tore the element of ‘humanism from the clutches of the bourgeoisie’ and sincerely tried to make it a value for the Marxists. In Beauvoir’s words, it was an attempt ‘to bridge the gap between the intellectual petite bourgeoisie and the Communist intellectuals.’
2. Life-Experience and the Philosophical Meanings: Feminism

As I mentioned above of Beauvoir’s belief that her version of phenomenological existentialism is not a matter of intertextual study rather of reflection on experience while interacting with friends, people, ideas etc. in one’s lifeworld; in her case the most important life-experience in this respect is her life-long companionship with Sartre. Being a genuine phenomenologist she is convinced with the view that the philosophical meanings whatsoever one comes across with should not be separated from one’s life-experience. Like phenomenology, existentialism and Marxism her notion of feminism can also be traced back in the nexus of her relationship with Sartre. The pivotal theme of Beauvoir’s magnum opus, *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* is the idea that women in relation to men have placed secondarily in the lifeworld since the ancient times and further that this secondary position of women in the social order is imposed by the force of the patriarchal atmosphere rather than the feminine characteristics. She argues that this situation is a result of men’s chauvinistic attitude throughout History intimidating women so that they have failed to claim a position of human dignity as liberated and independent beings along with men. Although she wrote that book when she was a mature woman (the year of publication was 1949) the idea had been there in her mind since she was in her early twenties.

In *The Prime of Life*, she recalls her memories of those days when she was struggling to become a writer and she had to begin her career as an independent individual not only socially and economically but intellectually as well. She quarreled with her childhood friend, Herbaud who accused her of having betrayed that notion of ‘individualism’ which had previously won her his esteem; and he then did not only condemn her for that betrayal but also broke off their childhood friendship. In the mean Sartre was also to show his anxiety that he felt about
her. He told her that she not only ‘used to be full of little ideas’ which was jeopardizing for her as a budding writer; he also warned her that she under the yoke of that orientation might become a ‘female introvert’ possibly leading her to turning into ‘a mere housewife’ rather than a creative writer. Reacting to that anxious feeling of Sartre’s and accusation of Herbaud’s, she confesses that she was not ‘a militant feminist,’ as she ‘had no theories concerning the rights and duties of women.’ As during her adolescence she ‘had refused to be labeled “a child,”’ so then during her youth she did not think of herself ‘as “a woman.”’ She explains that she had been reluctant to have ‘the notion of salvation’ in her mind since it lost ‘the belief in God’ while she was only fourteen. This was the time when in her mind the idea of individualism was firmly rooted making her believe that ‘each individual was responsible for securing his own.’ She furthers that being a woman if she had accepted ‘a secondary status’ in lifeworld as compared to that of man, she would have been a mere parasite degrading her own humanity. She was clearheaded that she was suffering from those problems because she ‘happened to be a woman’ and she could control the situation if she was to attempt ‘qua individual’ (not qua woman) to resolve it.  

The phrase ‘qua individual’ needs here to be explained further referring to Beauvoir’s theorizing concerning feminism. This phrase may afford some space to be occupied by the meaning of ‘nominalism’ which she renounces, for she finds it disproportionate regarding her notion of feminism lopsidedly defined by existentialist phenomenology. In The Second Sex, she begins her feministic theorizing by putting to criticism certain nominalistic remarks by Dorothy parker: “I cannot be just to books which treat of woman as woman….My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, should be regarded as human beings.” According to Beauvoir, it is an ‘inadequate doctrine,’ as the antifeminists can easily falsify it by showing that ‘women simply are not men.’ It is more than evident that ‘humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different’ and this truth demonstrates itself to one in one’s everydayness without investing one’s intellect.
Woman’s repudiating her eternal femininity is to Beauvoir like a Jew’s denying his Jewishness or a Negro’s denying his Negritude that cannot liberate a woman or a Jew or Negro to surge up, rather an escape from reality. So women’s being defiant regarding womanhood reflects that their sense of perpetual femininity is haunting to them and they want to get rid of it; and this to Beauvoir is in no way an appropriate attitude of women. In spite of this nominalistic abstractness she directs herself to the existentialistic clear-headedness that in the facticity every human being finds himself or herself a ‘concrete’ existent ‘always a singular, separate individual.’

Being a true existentialist Beauvoir first define the problem of feminism in the nexus of facticity whereby she expounds how woman being a For-itself is necessarily related to the In-itself – the world and its past; then she attempts to afford a morality of freedom by virtue of which an autonomous subject can transcend the given projecting her existence beyond the facticity. Drawing upon Lévinas’s idea of Otherness,21 Beauvoir defines feminine as the Other of the masculine. The humanity is compartmentalized in the masculine, the male and the feminine, the female; and the former being the self-sufficient subject, the autonomous and the essential defines the latter as the object, the incidental and the inessential – the Other. This meaning of the Otherness of woman’s being contains certain connotations of the secondariness, the inferiority and the humility, and so the meaningfulness of the Otherness absolutely remains one-sided in its effect which is to say that it is only woman that is the Other of man not the vice versa. The negligence of the element of relativity that is obvious in one’s considering somebody as an Other contributes to the humility of the feminine, as for Beauvoir ‘the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim.’ For every native a foreigner is a stranger, an Other, but when a native is to travel abroad he finds that the natives of the country he is traveling consider him a stranger, a foreigner, an Other; and so a native’s experience of being regarded as an Other by
the Others forces him to realize the reciprocity of the meaning of Otherness. Beauvoir tempts to let women be aware of their collective deprivation of the sensibility of this reciprocity in the meaning of Otherness; this sensibility is the key to understand that it is the chauvinism and the sovereignty of the masculine that he absolutely defines himself as the One, the subject, the essential forcing the feminine to submit to be the Other, the object, the inessential. Beauvoir’s feminism tasks to convince women to renounce this submissive attitude to be the Other, the object, the inessential and to attempt to regain the status of being the One, the subject, the essential.

‘Whence comes this submission’ of the feminine? While seeking the answer to this question, Beauvoir compares women as a class of individuals with other such classes of the submissive individuals exemplified in the nexus of History and culture. Such classes include the American Negroes, the Jews, the Proletarians and the Colonized nations suppressed to be the Other by the American racist Whites, the Nazis, the Bourgeois and the Imperialists respectively. But the case of women is the worst among all. The Negroes said “We” as the subject, the One, the essential when they struggled for their constitutional rights in America. The Jews said “We” while convincing the whole world that they were subject to the extreme suppression by the Nazis and so they translated the word Nazi into an abusive term. The Proletarians said “We” while revolutionizing certain nations by eliminating the bourgeois regimes. And the Colonized nations said “We” when they finally dragged the Imperialist forces out of their homelands. ‘But women do not say ‘We,’” complains Beauvoir, ‘men say “women,”’ and women use the same word [as a term of objectification] in referring to themselves.’ By not saying “We” women show that they are unable to ‘authentically assume a subjective attitude.’ They do not will to assert in order to regain the status of the One, the essential, the subject rather they are satisfied with gaining only what men are willing to grant; ‘they have taken nothing, they have only received’ from men. ‘The reason of this,’ explains Beauvoir,
“is that women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the Proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and the social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but women cannot even dream of exterminating the males.”

Why women, as compared to the Negroes, the Jews, or the proletarians, are unable to unite themselves against their oppressors, men. The nature of bond, according to Beauvoir, that unites women to men is unique and so transcending all other bonds between the oppressed and the oppressors. The women-men sexual divide is not an historical event, but rather ‘a biological fact.’ The masculine and the feminine ‘stand opposed within a primordial Mitsein,’ and the latter is unable to break with it. The man-woman espousing is the fundamental institutional act that webs the whole lifeworld as a unit and then keep it so intact; thereby splitting a social order ‘along the line of sex is impossible.’ This natural mutuality of man and woman genuinely defines the mutual Otherness between them that both are the One and the Other simultaneously ‘in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.’ Out of this reciprocity women should have asserted to be a free individual – the one, the subject, the essential, but men distorting the meaning of man-woman mutuality parenthesized them as the object of fulfilling their sexual need and the desire of offspring. So women remain failure in safeguarding their social
emancipation through man’s dependence on them rather that dependence makes the male define the female as an object of satisfaction whose readiness for the coupling is determined not by her but by the male appetite. As a result of this fruitlessness of the reciprocity of the Otherness, ‘the two sexes have never shared the world in equality.’ The burden of this fruitlessness or failure is not only on the male chauvinism but rather equally on the female potentiality to act as an accomplice in the process of parenthesizing herself as the Other. If women had raised her voice against that suppression, they would have faced the loss of ‘the material protection’ provided by men. So in a bad faith she is contented to be an inauthentic existent remaining incapable of showing the moral urge of transcending that facticity of being ‘the creature of another’s will,’ though she may be frustrated to be a ‘passive, lost and ruined’ self ‘deprived of every value.’ Thus, concludes Beauvoir, woman has failed to lay claim to be the subject, the One preferring to play the role of the object, the Other because of her being short of ‘definite resources’ that leads her to feeling contentment and pleasure with ‘the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity.’

Beauvoir condemns in this regard the process of history and tradition that has made woman deprive in absolute term of the urge of transcending the state of the secondary being. It has been the process of the millennia that men – ‘legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists’ – have firmly been struggling to establish that ‘the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth.’ The religions, philosophies, sciences and arts all have been contributing to this menace characterized by the unjustifiable male domination and female subordination. The female consciousness as an outcome of this traditional process is effected to be an historical consciousness ascribed with the meanings of inferiority and humility. But for Beauvoir all these meanings are prejudiced and biased attempting lopsidedly to convince woman to feel contented with the stagnant and static life. The key to rejection of this notion is the existentialist ethics – the view that man/woman is condemned to be free and he/she has to play his/her role in life by projecting freely his/herself through the
mode of transcendence. One may genuinely experience the real meaning of freedom through a ‘continual reaching out toward other liberties.’ And if in that process of the projecting and surging up of the for-itself there arises any ‘degradation of existence’ coming across with the in-itself and if so one finds threat to one’s freedom owing to an existential downfall that ‘spells frustration and oppression,’ then ‘it will be an absolute evil.’ In order to assert the authenticity of one’s existence one has to transcend the stagnation of the facticity by engaging oneself in ‘freely chosen projects.’ If one undertakes the particular situation of woman as an individual in the perspective of the existentialist ethics one may propose that she has to transcend her stabilizing and static role as the Other, the object, the inessential ascribed to her by men through history. The transcendence is possible if she in good faith freely engages herself in projecting life beyond these false meanings attributed to her by men and that have overshadowed the real meanings of her existence as the subject, the One, the essential.

**Conclusion**

Our argumentation shows validly that Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism is not a matter of the intertextual study rather of reflection on experience while interacting with friends, people, ideas etc. in her lifeworld; the most important life-experience in this respect is her life-long companionship with Sartre. Being a genuine phenomenologist she is convinced with the view that the philosophical meanings whatsoever one comes across with should not be separated from one’s life-experience. We have thus tried in this study to trace her feminism back in the nexus of her relationship with Sartre. The pivotal theme of Beauvoir’s magnum opus, *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex)* is the idea that women in relation to men have placed secondarily in the lifeworld since the ancient times and further that this secondary position of women in the social order is imposed by the force of the patriarchal atmosphere rather than the feminine characteristics.
This paper has construed a two-fold argument. First, it has shown how Beauvoir construes her philosophical task in the existentialist mold by incorporating phenomenology and Marxism and then how she expounds the possibility of expounding the main course of her feminist philosophy in the nexus of her eclectic approach to these three philosophical spheres.

Under the influence of Sartre, she directs herself in order to grasp the meaning of femininity to the nexus of phenomenology and existentialism. In the perspective of existential phenomenology, the death makes man’s life finite but before that he projects life through time creating behind him the infinite past and before him the unlimited future; and in this perpetual progress of human species man and woman both take part as correlatives and so this perpetuation of the species does not necessitate sexual differentiation.

Notes


3 Sartre did not totally abandon his commitments to Marxism though this notebook entry reflects such meanings. Beauvoir on the same page clarifies about their confusion regarding the meanings of socialism and liberty: “Yet in ’41, when [Sartre] was forming a Resistance group, the two words he brought together for its baptism were: socialism and liberty. The war had effected a decisive conversion.” See *Ibid.*

4 It reflects their old romance with Marxism and their perpetual detestation for capitalism. Beauvoir in the second volume of her autobiography recalls those memories of their youthful days when they were to dream of the ruining of capitalism. She says: “We counted on events turning out according to our wishes without any need for us to mix in them personally. In this respect our attitude was characteristic of that general euphoria affecting the French Left during the autumn of 1929. Peace seemed finally assured: the expansion of the German Nazi party was a mere fringe phenomenon, without any serious significance. It would not be long before colonialism folded up: Gandhi’s campaign in India and the Communist
agitation in French Indo-China were proof enough of that. Moreover the whole capitalist world was, at that time, being shaken by a crisis of the utmost gravity; and this encouraged the assumption that capitalism as such had had its day. We felt that we were already living in that Golden Age which for us constituted the secret truth of History and the revelation of which remained History’s final and exclusive objective.” See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (New York, Paragon House, 1992), p. 18

5 Beauvoir explains their attitude referring to the influences they experienced at that time through reading both Heidegger and Saint-Exupéry who taught them the ‘meanings came into the world only by the activity of man, practice superseded contemplation.’ *Op. Cit.*, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 13


7 *Op. Cit.*, *The Prime of Life*, p. 20

8 This clarification is not of Beauvoir’s rather of Sartre’s. Actually, certain Marxists at that time were criticizing Sartre for being influenced by Heidegger and so gone astray being a Marxist. Francis Ponge who ran cultural section of *Les Lettres françaises* told Sartre and Beauvoir about a huge number of articles against Sartre that he was receiving for publication. When he published some of those articles, Sartre was to reply ‘with a *Mise au point* (Definition of Terms).’ This clarification is a part of that reply to the Marxists. On this see *Op. Cit.*, *Force of Circumstance*, p. 16

9 *Ibid.*, p. 21

10 *Ibid.*, pp.45-6. On another occasion Beauvoir expresses her unqualified faith in life experience as the most important trait of the art of writing. She said: “I want to write: I want to put down phrases on paper, to take elements from my life and turn them into words.” She further clarifies her ambition as an author more precisely: “I shall never be able to give myself to art excepting as a means of protecting my life.” On this see *Op. Cit.*, *The Prime of Life*, p. 26

11 Beauvoir and Sartre mutually published this periodical as an organ of existentialism. Its first number appeared in October 1945. The title of the journal was inspired by the Chaplin film – Modern Times. The editorial
committee was comprised of Raymond Aron, Michel Leiris, Merleau-Ponty, Albert Ollivier, Jean Paulhan, Sartre and Beauvoir. See Ibid., p. 22. This magazine was to play the major role in making Existentialism a worldwide movement in culture and literature; this new ideology of liberation and individualism was projected by Sartre and Beauvoir right from the first number of this periodical. While writing its preface he showed how that new ideology would dwell ‘not only on responsibility in literature, but on the concept of each man as a totality. By implication, not solely in France and its citizens, but people everywhere were to be the concern of the new existentialist periodical. This program [had] been carried out by the magazine to such a degree that literature [had] never attained the importance accorded to political, economic, and sociological matters, both in France and abroad.’ On this see Kenneth Cornall, Les Temps Modernes: Peep Sights across the Atlantic, in Yale French Studies: Foray through Existentialism (No. 16: Winter 1955), pp. 24-28

12 Ibid., p. 46
13 Ibid., p. 47
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 48
16 Ibid., p. 54
17 Ibid., p. 55
18 Actually Beauvoir cites from Sartre’s work, Les Communistes at la paix (1952). His exact words are: “Coming from the middle classes, we tried to bridge the gap between the intellectual petite bourgeoisie and the Communist intellectuals.” See Ibid., p. 15

19 In this part of the article, I shall take the “Introduction” to Simone de Beauvoir, Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex), trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, Vintage, 1989) as a reference and guide, submitting its principal theses to my interpretation. I shall give the other references, if any, accordingly.

20 Op. Cit., The Prime of Life, p. 54
21 Lévinas thinks that the feminine represents an absolute caricature of the otherness (altérité) as the contrariness of the masculine, “this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and
thus remaining absolutely other. Sex is not a certain specific difference … no more is the sexual difference a mere contradiction … Nor does this difference lie in the duality of two complementary terms imply a pre-existing whole … Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.’ See Op. Cit., The Second Sex, n. 3 on p. xxii

22 Beauvoir’s argument is in opposition to that of Gadamer’s. The latter while construing his hermeneutics of tradition, argues that the tradition is not a dead past rather a living continuity, a flow of ‘effective-history’ that not only encompasses the past but also the relevant present. So the functionality of human consciousness cannot in any way transcend the process of history and tradition, on the contrary it is continued through the very process. On Gadamer’s theory of tradition see Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method), trans. G. Barden and W. G. (New York, Crossroad, 1975) specifically Part II