

Biologism and the Woman in Simone de Beauvoir's Feminist Theory

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Abstract

The principal agenda of this inquiry is to disclose the inadequacies of the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir. This is pertinent owing to the subtle influx of Western feminist ideas into contemporary Africa where the plights of women are entirely also unique and distinct in their own rights. Since the analysis of de Beauvoir has usually been taken as one of the prima facie frameworks for the liberation of women from patriarchy in the world, this research interrogates De Beauvoir via the method of critical analysis. It does this at the level of her framework (biologism) and methodology (phenomenology and existentialism) and infers that the theory itself is self-defeating, biased and deficient as a liberation formula within the European context. This paper submits that the framework is not reconcilable with her methodological approach, all of which vitiates the universal application of her ideas for posterity. This is especially true for Africa where a bulk of what de Beauvoir repudiates is the bedrock upon which authentic living for the woman thrives.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, biologism, phenomenology, existentialism, feminism, Africa

Introduction

To make sense of itself as both an idea that is well-founded, seeking to cater for humanity, irrespective of philosophical place, a philosophical idea must strive to be elevated through philosophic reasoning to the realm of philosophical space (Chimakonam, 2015). This is a recent plea for methodology in Africa concerning ideas that will assist her contribution to world history and civilization. The application of this cardinal character of philosophic thoughts to the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir (1989) evinces less desirable implications within the African place. In the pages ahead, we critically engage De Beauvoir with the sole aim of revealing on then one hand, how incompatible her theory is within the pages of her *The Second Sex* and on the other hand its inapplicability to the status quo challenging women in Africa.

Feminism and the African Philosophical Place

Patriarchy, no doubt is a status quo that is not limited to the western world but extends well enough into the African space too. This is made more evi-

dent when we consider that like other places in the global south, Africa's intellectual culture and the ideology that girds it have been handed down directly or otherwise from the global south. This ideology manifests in the global south, especially Africa, a state of affairs that "patriarchal, radicalized, culturally hierarchical, Euro-Americanized, Christen-centric, anti-black and heteronormative" (Mignolo, 2000: 88). A recent addition to this long is "Islam-centric" (Oladipupo & Ofuasia, 2019: 186). And one of the perspectives that is recently been employed to tackle the patriarchal system – feminism, no doubt emanates from the global north as well.

There have been agitations and proposals from some African feminists most of whom take their cues from the Western notion of feminism and apply same to the African place. One of the first discoveries by these African feminists is the unique place or condition of the African woman which makes the wholesale application of the Western feminism untenable. For instance, while speaking on the subject of the autonomy of the woman, Simi Afonja, a prominent scholar in this connection did not mince words as she insists that "was extensive empirical data that suggested that autonomy and inequality had co-existed since pre-colonization, and that autonomy was either reproduced during the process of change or was an outcome of women's choices on account of their class, access to power, race, ethnicity or geographical location" (Afonja, 2005: 7). Afonja maintains that there are many aspects of Western terms and terminologies that distort what is experienced by the woman in Africa. She argues:

There is a new set of discourses that may not be so new after all but problematizes old discourses on gender in the search for alternatives. The contention is that gender and patriarchy originated from Western European epistemologies and misrepresented African women's realities. In place of these, seniority, motherhood and matriarchy are theorized as the basis for social organization in African societies (Afonja, 2005: 9).

The idea underpinned in the above relays that a concept as 'patriarchy' is alien to the African woman and it was a foreign import which does not correctly mirror what the African woman experiences. She proposes motherism as the basis of an African feminism. What this implies is that women all over the world face different problems. While some recognize no misgivings in their subjugation, others fight and it would be wrong to use the bearings of those who rival men to judge those who are satisfied with the status quo. The starting point of feminist discourse also matters. Most African feminist scholars adduce that the basis of their contention is inspired by motherism when

patriarchy is foreign to the African woman. In the West, there are liberal, socialist, psychoanalytic, and radical feminists, all starting their thesis from the common understanding that patriarchy is a cankerworm to be expunged. A clear instance of this is Simone De Beauvoir's feminist theory, which frowns on ideas of biological essentialism, as impediments to the natural inferiority of the woman to the man. Inadvertently, biologism is what makes African feminism and motherism more acceptable and viable for Africans.

A careful glean at the primary contention of African feminism shows that it does not tackle the prime focus of feminists of the global north, but rather uses it to validate the expected gender of the woman. This is further compounded by the fact that the contention of women in Africa would pass as validation for the subjugation of women for the Western feminist. It is pertinent to understand that women in Africa have the capacity to even play the social roles of men since gender expectations of the sexes is fluid. Take for instance the case of the traditional Yorùbá where a woman may be addressed as though she were a man/husband by other women. Oyeronke Olajubu (2004: 48) who shares her experience makes this more comprehensible:

Specifically, I am a wife in some contexts, but at other times I am a husband to other women. Whereas my position as a wife is based on my biological anatomy (in relationship to one male) and marital affiliation (my relationship to male and female members of my husband's extended family), my role as a husband is informed by my natal affiliation (my relationship to wives of male members of my natal family), which is independent of class or status.

The point is that whereas biologism plays an essential role in African feminism, it has served as a basis for extended face-off in the global north. Our contention however, is that it is nearly impossible to strike out biologism from the discourse on feminism, as Simone de Beauvoir attempts unsuccessfully.

Biologism and Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenologic-Existentialist Assessment of the Women

It is important to understand that for Simone de Beauvoir, biologism accounts as a critical impediment to the actualizations of the plight of the woman. Before engaging on the reason that she thinks this is the case, it will be helpful to first commence with a clear notion of biologism.

According to Rodier (2007: 10), "biologism is the view that human behaviour and social situations can be causally explained by an appeal to the physical mechanisms at play in the organic biological processes of the human body." In other words, biologism may be seen as "a certain kind of essentialism that locates women's "natures" in the cycles of menstruation, reproduc-

tion, lactation, and other bodily processes" (Rodier, 2007: 10). The implication is that for one to be a woman, such must experience these natural occurrences when a man does not. This, in the words of Michael Foucault is "being by nature" (Foucault, 1990: 68).

Biologism plays itself out in the proposal of Simone de Beauvoir when one begins to glean some passage of *The Second Sex*. Some of these passages bear the connections she draws between biological essentialism on one hand and patriarchy, sexual desires, maternity and the existential dread of women for being women, on the other hand. For instance, in one such instance, she indicates that "the female is the victim [*proie*] of the species. During certain periods in the year, fixed in each species, her whole life is under the regulation of a sexual cycle" (De Beauvoir, 1989: 20) and further, "the bond that in every individual connects the physiological life and the psychic life is the deepest enigma implied in the condition of being human, and this enigma is presented in its most disturbing form in woman" (De Beauvoir, 1989: 257) are clear cases of biologism in her scheme. Patriarchy was another prime target of hers: "Since he did not accept her, since she seemed in his eyes to have the aspect of the *other*, man could not be otherwise than her oppressor. The male will to power and expansion made woman's incapacity a curse" (De Beauvoir, 1989: 78). Regarding sexual desire:

Feminine sex desire is the soft throbbing of a mollusk. She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous: thus, at least, she vaguely feels herself to be. After the first coition a woman is often more than ever in revolt against her sexual destiny (De Beauvoir, 1989: 386).

One can easily understand that these qualities are the facticity of the existential reality of women. These are what she calls "the givens of Biology" (De Beauvoir, 1989). This is further escalated and limiting when one recalls her reflections on maternity:

She feels it as at once an enrichment and an injury; the fetus is part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it. Ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stockpile of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument (De Beauvoir, 1989: 495).

The assessment of the biological girding of the reality of women is informed by the analysis that springs from her existentialism and phenomenology (Andrew, 2003: 24). At this juncture, it is therefore important to turn to how these 20th century continental ideas influenced De Beauvoir's feminist theory.

We shall begin with phenomenology. The term derives from two Greek

words 'phenomenon' and 'logos', meaning physical and study respectively. It is an idea that is popular with Edmund Husserl. Meanwhile, in his *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Dermot Moran sees phenomenology as "a radical and anti-methodological style of philosophizing which aims to get to the truth of matters, in so far as allowing things to show themselves to the experienter" (Moran, 2000: 4).

Existentialism on the other hand has been conceived as "concerned with man and his existence" (Oyeshile, 2011: 25). "Existentialism as a philosophical movement was something of a direct reaction to perceived social ills and was embraced by artists and writers as much as by philosophers per se" (Moore & Bruder, 2011:158). Existentialism as a philosophical movement is usually said to commence with the thoughts of French scholars like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, de Beauvoir, Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel etc.

It is the position of this long essay that Simone De Beauvoir's feminist reflections is a product her engagement with the basic ideas of existentialism and phenomenology. She started by reacting to the extremities in Sartre's existentialism. She is more acute with her criticisms because both were submerged in Husserl's phenomenology.

The emphasis by Jean-Paul Sartre concerning absolute freedom, De Beauvoir and some other existentialists, found to be highly problematic. The affinity between authentic living and freedom, which is the hallmark of every existentialist is not absent in the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre. Thomas Flynn notes this when he writes that "while the supreme value of existentialist thought is commonly acknowledged to be freedom, its primary virtue is authenticity" (Flynn, 2006:13). This is why Sartre's ascription of 'bad faith' to someone who does not live according to the freedom and consciousness of being-for-itself (what Heidegger calls inauthentic; Nietzsche calls it herd morality) has raised brows in some quarters on the charge of vagueness. One of the critics of Sartre in this direction is Alvin Plantinga who insists that "...the arguments by which he supports this radical theory of freedom are inconclusive in that they rest at worst upon puns and at best upon ambiguities" (Plantinga;1958). Alvin Plantinga's assessment appears to be the case and it is an open secret that Simone de Beauvoir explores this ambiguity in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*. As a result, she proceeded to formulate her own existentialist ethics. For her:

Ethics appears to existentialism not as the formal respect of eternal and supraterrrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history, such as it unfolds on our earth...In other words, the task of man is one: to fashion the world by giving it a meaning. This meaning is not

given ahead of time, just as the existence of each man is not justified ahead of time either (Beauvoir, 1947: 325).

In all of her writing, regardless of genre, Simone de Beauvoir seeks to establish a meaning to human existence; a meaning that is the particular creation of each individual, but that also acknowledges the ambiguity that characterizes the human condition (O'Flynn, 2009: 67). Her understanding of subjectivity and the duality of self and Other is always from an ethical and, consequently, from a relational perspective; the ethical interpretation necessarily emerging from her interdependent understanding of self/other (O'Flynn, 2009: 67).

This struggle to equate existential particularity with the inherent bond that de Beauvoir envisages as integral to the self/other relationship is evident in all of her work but this paper will focus on the period of her philosophical writings up to and including *The Second Sex* (O'Flynn, 2009: 68). The notion that the creation of a meaning to existence is inextricably tied to an ethical response to the other is addressed by de Beauvoir in the philosophical essay *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and again in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This general exploration of the possibility of an existential ethics is given a particularity and a concrete dimension through her exploration of the place of women in society in *The Second Sex* (O'Flynn, 2009: 68).

The phenomenological method is what specifically allowed her to be able to come up with the distinction between the self and the other. It is this distinction between the self and the other as well as her obsession with the "the consciousness of the other" (O'Brien, 2013: iii) that paved way for her feminist reflections.

Having been able to disclose the foremost attentions given to the plight of women from using biology as a facticity and the methodology of existentialism and phenomenology, the remaining part of this paper will be committed to showing that her explorations of biologism is not in tandem with her phenomenological and existentialist orientation. More so, we poke the question of universality in her ideas by insisting that most of what puts forward as her brand of feminism, do not pass muster for the African woman. We also express some issues raised against the work as highlighted by other scholars too.

Methodological and Universality Issues in De Beauvoir's Feminist Theory

First of all, it is important to commence with the idea that "Early receptions of *The Second Sex* carved four deep paths of criticism: 1) that it lacks sufficient

strategies for liberation; 2) that it is ethnocentric; 3) that it is androcentric; and 4) that it focuses too heavily on the situation of bourgeois women" (Mahon, 1997: x). As a way of expatiating upon these receptions, Carol Mcmillan (1982: 117) relays that "The idea of biology as a mighty tyrant against whom woman is continually struggling recurs with persistence through Beauvoir's book; every physical phenomenon she discusses is seen to vindicate the thesis of her basic schema." It is in a related version that John Leighton (1975: 118):

It does not seem unsporting to talk disparagingly about women's animality while devoting almost an entire volume to the minutiae of woman's erotic life. It appears that Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist bias makes her regard the natural and the physical as somehow demeaning since they involve immanence...*The Second Sex* is a long and dolorous lamentation about woman's woes but also a diatribe against the female sex (Leighton, 1975: 118).

Of all these, Susan Heckman's objection is the most penetrating since it calls attention to the tune that there is lack of balance between the first parts of the book, where De Beauvoir (1984) explores the biological givens of women and the second part of the book where she explores the existential condition of the woman. As Susan Heckman (1990: 76) puts it:

The source of the problem is that there is a contradiction between the first and the second parts of her [de Beauvoir's] book. In the first part she defines woman the other as primordial and necessary. In the second part of the book, however, she takes an entirely different tack. In her analysis of how woman is made, woman becomes a socially constituted being that can, by implication, be constituted differently if different social practices were instituted

Clearly, we admit that there is a lack of connection between the biological nature of a woman which makes her condition inferior to the man as De Beauvoir strongly argues and the insistence that gender ascription to women is socially constructed. In other words, the conditions she hinted as limiting factors for the woman, in the first part, she takes as primordial. In the latter pages of the work however, she proceeds to pitch her tenet with other feminists insisting that gender – the roles expected of the woman is a social construct. Our suspicion has been further validated by Sara Heinemaa (2003: xvi) who she cautions that [a]s long as we interpret her claims within the sex/gender framework or within the framework of Sartrean philosophy, the book seems self-refuting..."

Aside the foregoing problem, we also tender that the feminist theory

of De Beauvoir is not universal or cannot speak for the plight of women in the global south, Africa especially. It is pertinent to highlight some of the socio-political influences on African women which makes feminist theories in general impregnable. It will be realized that for traditional African women, (i) she is made whole by her being committed to a man; and (ii) she has the tendency to even take up masculine role where and when such arises (see Olajubu, 2004: 47 above).

The African woman is told to be chaste while the husband can hang around with as much men. This is not the case in a Western society where there is a level of secularism and women can apply for divorce when the situation becomes unbearable. This is why we believe that the realities faced by the African woman is way different from the Western folks and some of the germane issues that need be treated in the African set up may be absent in the Western analysis. Granted that this is not unconnected in most cases to illiteracy, the level of exposure to contemporary demands and burdens of women in the global north is higher than their counterparts in the global south. Clearly, illiteracy plays a major role in the continuous subjugation of the woman to the man.

Regarding the charge that her philosophy may not be universalizable, Dennis Otto and Jim Unah (2011: 8) seem convinced that De Beauvoir's project was meant for neither her nor her generation of women alone. It was a project meant, especially for posterity. She tried to satisfy her yearning for change of societal status quo concerning patriarchal mistreatment of women so that posterity can be filled with liberated, independent, "equal-Subject" women. While she may have only hoped that society would grant her wish at her lifetime, she was more convinced that if her project were appreciated; if the type of struggle she advocated endured, women of the future would live to experience better lives of equality with the men than women of her time (Unah & Otto, 2011: 9). Beauvoir personally confirmed this position in 1976—twenty five years after *The Second Sex* was written—in an interview conducted by John Gerassi (Unah & Otto, 2011: 9). When asked about her optimism concerning the actualization of the changes she had been struggling since she admitted not to be looking forward to the actualization of this feat, in her lifetime. Regardless of state of affairs, she was, however, convinced that women will definitely triumph in the long run (Gerassi, 1976).

Conclusion

Two thematic issues informed this inquiry concerning the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir. Firstly, it established the non-applicability of the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir within the African template, where most

of her ideas concerning the biological inferiority of women will sound both absurd and alien. The second establishment is that there is a lack of coherence in the work itself – *The Second Sex*. The first talks about biological facticity when the second part talks about gender as a social construct. The second part suddenly becomes silent the earlier notion of biological inferiority as a primordial given. If we are determined biologically, then social construct does not matter. On the other hand, if social construct of gender does, then biological essentialism needs to be dropped. The essential deduction then is that the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir cannot serve as a basis for the discourse on African feminism which has its own special and unique motivations and agitations with a different conception of reality vis-à-vis the mainstream and dominant versions of feminism.

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