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REDEFINING WOMANHOOD

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Abstract:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman – this thought provoking statement of Simon de Beauvoir in her book The Second Sex is the starting point of this paper. What goes into the making of a woman, what factors are at work in the conceptualization of womanhood? The paper critically focuses on the various modes of woman identity and sternly advocates the sexual autonomy for woman in order to achieve a conclusive woman identity.

KEYWORDS:

Sexuality, Gender, Subaltern, Self, Other.

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.
Simon de Beauvoir

(The Second Sex)

INTRODUCTION:

What is WOMAN? – Well, this unanswerable question has been asked many a time by many writers, particularly by those belonging to the feminist coterie, irrespective of time and space. Whatever the answer might be, one thing is obvious from Simon de Beauvoir's avowal that no one is a woman by birth, being a woman is a matter of varied experiences, broadly grouped into Sexual and Social. Simon de Beauvoir also seems to imply these two broader aspects of womanhood when she distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. While sex is often understood to be the invariant, anatomically discrete aspect of the female body, gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires. Thus, remarkably two distinct beings exist in a single female body – the sexual body which is biologically innate and is not subject to the oddities of time, space, race, culture or ethnicity, and the social/cultural body which is acquired when the sexual body enters into social intercourses, and, hence, is subject to the changing facet of socio-cultural requirements.

If 'being a woman' is the cultural aspect of 'being a female', then it appears that the female body is the arbitrary locus of the gender 'woman'. This limitation restricts sex/gender distinction which implies a radical departure of natural bodies from the constructed gender. Consequently, 'being female' and 'being woman' are two different sorts of beings. Significantly, the term 'female' designates a fixed and self-identical set of natural corporeal facts and the term 'woman' designates a variety of modes through which these facts acquire cultural significance. To be a gender, whether man, woman, or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies.

As social existence stipulates an unequivocal gender affinity, it is not feasible to exist, in a socially meaningful sense, outside of established gender norms. If existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside the established gender is, in some sense, to put one's own identity into question. Thus, being a

woman means becoming a woman, and so is in case of a man. Besides these two genders, the aberrant sexual manifestation of body such as eunuch becomes social outcast and is forced to live a stigmatic existence. Here, it appears that the sexual body, though a biological phenomenon in itself, must receive social recognition for its own augmentation and maturity. Moreover, the sexual body of woman, qualifying for the social one, must have certain nuts and bolts like apposite vaginal passage, womb and breast, which not only distinguishes it from its male counterpart, but also from the aberrant sexual body like eunuch.

The social body of a woman is born with the first socialization of the sexual one which gradually compels the latter to grow in clandestine under the cover of societal rites and canons. With the growth of her senses, she is compelled to realize the vital lack of penis which is prominent in her male counterpart. This lack relegates her to the secondary position and affects her entire upbringing. Her upbringing is done under parental restrictions and in delicate manner. The doll that she is given to play with, the dresses that she is given to wear, and the things that she is taught -- all contribute to the delicacy of her physicality as well as constraints on her thoughts and deportment. The delicate physique and the social constraints on her freedom relegates her to the position of 'Other' or the Subaltern as she has to struggle at every phase of life to show her worth and existence often denied by the male congested society.

The sense of being 'Other' escalates when the social body of women attains menstruation, which further makes her sexually vulnerable with the threat of rape, molestation and assault. This makes her dependable on her male counterpart for security. In fact, it is the security of various kinds that constraints much of her freedom in social interaction. Before marriage, she seeks security in the arms of her father or brother, and after marriage in her husband. No doubt, on the wake of women emancipation and their constitutional reservation, there emerges a coterie of new women – self depended and employed, living the life of their choice. At present, in every arena of man's activities, we find women creating a niche of their own, even excelling too, but they are not devoid of the feeling of being Other or the Subaltern.

It appears that the socio-economic achievements are not enough to make the woman live an independent existence. Her existence is put under constraints by Nature herself. The physiological structure of her sexual body interferes in the independence of her social body. Apart from being physically delicate, her biological inheritance of vagina – often thought to be hidden and receptive – becomes the most vital factor for her being Other. The seeming enlargement and strengthening of male phallus makes a woman feel the passivity and fixity of her own phallus which becomes more painful than the childhood feeling of the lack of penis. Consequently, most women show, at some stage, tendency to don themselves in the male apparel as an effort to experience the phallogocentric position. In the inherently phallogocentric universe, the woman derives the essence/substance of her being from man (?) or rather from being Other to man.

However, there is other facet of the phenomenon of the 'man – woman' as 'subject – other'. The subject – other relation can not be conceived in the sense of absolute 'contrast', but rather in the sense of correspondence or 'reciprocity'. In fact woman exists in reciprocal to man and so is vise-versa. But, unfortunately, the history reveals that men have always kept in their hands all the concrete power, and have thought best to keep woman in the state of dependence; their codes and laws have been set up against her, and, thus, has established her as Other. But, it must not be forgotten that there can be no Other without the presence of Self. This Self (man) – Other (woman) conflict can be resolved if both recognize each other in reciprocal manner. The reciprocity of man-woman existence is well illuminated by Michel Carrouges in his 'Les Pouvoirs de la femme':

“Woman is not the useless replica of man, but rather the enchanted place where the living alliance between man and nature is brought about. If she should disappear, men would be alone, strangers, lacking passports in an icy world. She is the earth itself raised to life's summit, the earth becomes sensitive and joyous; and without her, for the man the earth is mute and dead” (quoted in Simon de Beauvoir's “The Second Sex”, pp. 172).

Despite the above stated reciprocal existence of man-woman, woman has frequently been relegated to the position of Other. According to Simon de Beauvoir, the fact of woman becoming Other also points towards a path of self-recovery:

“Woman is enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently, to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration, but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the Other -- and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation.... The true problem for woman is to reject these flights from reality and seek fulfillment in transcendence” (quoted in Judith Butler's “Sex and Gender in Simon de Beauvoir's The Second Sex”, pp. 43).

Thus, it appears that the true essence of woman can not be realized in constructed reality: neither by playing the role of man nor of woman as both attempt to conceal the very essence of her being. Consequently, the only alternative left before her is to look above the phallogocentrically constructed reality while living in the same to seek fulfillment of everything that she thinks to be her. Hence, what woman is can not be understood within the parameters of constructed reality as it presents her relatively (often the

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sub-ordinate of man) ignoring the autonomy of her existence. Unless the autonomy of Woman, both sexual and social, is not recognized, her true essence can not be realized.

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