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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The "Feminist" Existentialism of Simone De Beauvoir

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Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir is known worldwide primarily for The Second Sex, a book that has long been a staple of any discussion of feminism. But a glance at the bookshelves of recent years reveals publishers increasingly returning to her prose. The French thinker's novels lack feminist slogans and offer little hope, but instead offer honest discussions of topics that remain relevant for decades. Simone de Beauvoir's story is still sometimes retold as an appendix to the biography of Jean-Paul Sartre, and this is perhaps one of the main paradoxes of her reputation, despite the fact that in her lifetime she won the Prix Goncourt and was one of the most prominent figures on the French intellectual scene.

KEYWORDS

Existentialist movement, absurdity, life experience, personality, existential feminism, women's place and role in society, "women's lot," women's emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

The existentialist movement, which emerged in the mid-20th century, established itself as a philosophical and literary movement focused on the human condition, freedom, inner experiences, and the absurd.

Existentialists sought to capture the inner experience of the individual confronted with an external world devoid of absolute reference points, where humanity finds itself free yet responsible for its own destiny. Existentialism as a literary movement is inseparable from philosophy: its origins go back to Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who laid the foundations for a philosophy of existence centered on the individual and life experience.

But above all, this movement was embodied by 20th-century intellectuals confronted with world wars, a crisis of values, and the upheavals of modernity. Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and writers such as Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka have voiced these questions of meaning, freedom, and the absurd.

Simone de Beauvoir, an intellectual collaborator of Sartre, developed feminist existentialism. In The Second Sex (1949), she questions the social construction of femininity, arguing that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." In her novels (The Mandarins, She Came to Stay), she explores the contradictions between desire, freedom, and social relations. Her work combines introspection and social critique, revealing the existential dimension of the female condition.

Simone de Beauvoir was first and foremost an intellectual, the author of a major work read worldwide, The Second Sex, in which she paints a sociological portrait of women throughout history, addressing such themes as financial independence, the division of domestic labor, and the objectification of women.

Driven by a strong spirit of rebellion that compelled her to defend the communist ideal even in its most extreme forms, Simone de Beauvoir understood very early on the role she would play in history. In an interview, she confessed: "I really

wanted to write when I was about fifteen. At that time, it was the only way I saw to become famous. To become somebody."

Simone de Beauvoir was born on January 9, 1908, in the chic Paris of the Belle Époque. Her father was a lawyer, a worldly and eloquent figure, and her mother was a devout Catholic from the wealthy bourgeoisie of Verdun. The family lived off their investments and arranged marriages. They lived in a luxurious apartment in Montparnasse, above the Café de la Rotonde.

At the age of five, she entered the Cours Désir, a Catholic school for "good families." Even then, young Simone showed a keen intellect. At age seven, while playing in the Luxembourg Gardens, a woman stopped to compliment her on her beautiful calves. She indignantly replied, "I'm not my body, I'm me." She attended the Cours Désir for her entire education, graduating with honors in 1924. A brilliant and gifted student, she had a keen interest in philosophy and elementary mathematics. During her studies, she often competed for first place in the class with her classmate, Elizabeth Lacuin, known as "Zaza," who later became her best friend. Zaza challenged her, offering a critical perspective on bourgeois life and social conventions.

Simone was raised Catholic and was deeply religious in her youth. Even after she abandoned religion, she retained this binary vision of the world, divided and torn between good and evil. She and Zaza read Proust, fascinated by lost time, emptiness, and, above all, nothingness.

In love with a young man her parents forbade her to marry, Zaza fell ill and died at the age of 21. Beauvoir would never forget her and would believe that the foundations and dogmas of the bourgeoisie had killed her childhood friend. This was the beginning of a rejection that fueled her struggle. Rejecting the narrow vision of the housewife, she took a stand against the example of her mother, a woman devoted to her husband who spent years managing the household. She was convinced that the sense of sacrifice imposed on her only brought resentment. "I will find a strength in which I will always find refuge; I want to live the great adventure of being myself," she wrote.

Simone de Beauvoir drew this strength from her capacity for thought. In 1925, she entered the Sorbonne and earned several degrees: literature, mathematics, Latin, Greek, philosophy, and sociology. For four years, she found solace in knowledge, spending long evenings in the Sainte-Geneviève library. One of her friends at the École Normale Supérieure nicknamed her "La Beaver" because, like her, "beavers live in packs and possess a creative spirit," she explains in her memoirs. This nickname was also bestowed upon her by Jean-Paul Sartre, then a student whom she met while preparing for her philosophy exam in 1929. To pass this exam, Simone de Beauvoir had to stage a silent protest against her parents' opposition. This was especially difficult because she received no assistance with her exams, as the École Normale Supérieure was closed to women at the time. Ultimately, Sartre placed first, Beauvoir second.

"My first twenty years were spent between Notre-Dame-des-Champs and Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and nothing special happened to me...," wrote Simone de Beauvoir. But 1929 marked a turning point for the future writer: in Sartre, she found an intellectual soulmate, a traveling companion, gained financial independence, and was freed from the constraints of family life. In 1931, she was appointed professor in Marseille, while Sartre was appointed in Le Havre. She refused his marriage proposal to be closer to him. In 1932, she was appointed to Rouen, closer to Sartre.

In 1933, she visited Sartre in Berlin. He had replaced Raymond Aron as professor at the French Institute. However, unlike Aron, neither Beauvoir nor Sartre foresaw the looming danger, despite the widespread propaganda of fascism. Beauvoir considered herself a pacifist and even admitted to feeling relief after the Munich Agreement. A year later, war was declared. Simone de Beauvoir's life changed dramatically: Sartre was captured in Germany, and she, a professor in Paris, witnessed the catastrophe of June 1940 alone. When Sartre was liberated in 1941, they did not join the active Resistance but focused on survival, meeting every morning at the Café de Flore to write and create. While all of Beauvoir's manuscripts were rejected, she became increasingly integrated into the literary and artistic life of Paris. She and Sartre became friends with Camus, Giacometti, Picasso, and Hemingway.

In 1943, Gallimard published her first novel, "The Invited One" ("L'Invitée"), which was a success. But now she wanted to engage in political activism. After the war, she created a vast collection of works: novels, essays, and plays (All Men Are Mortal, Useless Mouths, Pyrrhus et Cinéas). In 1954, she won the Prix Goncourt for her novel Les Mandarins. She became one of the most widely read writers in the world. Together with Sartre, she founded the journal Les Temps modernes. Its goal was to have a real influence on the political and

ideological decisions of its time. They surrounded themselves with great writers and friends such as Camus, Aron, and Mauriac. Simone de Beauvoir's fame was so great that she was invited on a lecture tour of the United States. She discovered New York: "There is something in the air that makes "The dream is meaningless," she observed. Invited to a meeting with the communist writer Nelson Algren, she discovered Chicago.

Back in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir began her autobiographical project. To complete it, she needed to understand what it meant to be a woman. This process led to the publication of The Second Sex in 1949. The book's release was controversial; she was called a "cold spinster," and her relationship with Sartre was often reduced to a simple reflection of her life. She was nicknamed "Sartre's Mother of God" or "the Great Sartre." Communists were also outraged. Most men accused her of "ridiculing the French man," to use Camus's words. The book became a worldwide bestseller, translated into 121 languages.

The onset of the Cold War radically changed Simone de Beauvoir's life. Her hatred of 1950s America, the witch hunts, and the consumerist world led her to support the Eastern Bloc and the communists. Along with Sartre, she chose the side of revolution and the proletariat.

The couple never wavered from their communist ideals, despite the Soviet advance on Budapest, the suppression of the Prague Spring, and mass atrocities. Having become global symbols of leftist consciousness, the couple were invited to Moscow and met with Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong. Simultaneously, Simone de Beauvoir became involved in the decolonization movement, advocating for independence during the Algerian War. In the early 1970s, feminist movements emerged advocating for women's emancipation, which Simone de Beauvoir ardently supported. The women's liberation movement chose her as its leader. As part of this movement, Simone de Beauvoir called on women of her time to free themselves from certain restrictions: marriage, childbearing, and the role of housewife. These positions were undoubtedly shocking for the time.

Together with lawyer Gisèle Halimi, she founded the movement Choisir la cause des femmes (Choose the Cause of Women), which fought for the decriminalization of abortion. Simone de Beauvoir fought in the last years of her life alongside Sartre, who was almost blind and exhausted by life. In April 1980, her lifelong lover died. Simone de Beauvoir was devastated; she could not imagine outliving him: "His death separated us. My death will not reunite us. That's how it happened; it's already wonderful that our lives were in harmony for so long." She died six years later, exactly one day after the death of her comrade, on April 14, 1986. She was buried in Montparnasse Cemetery.

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