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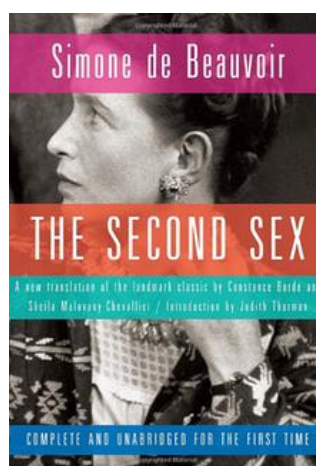
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Myth and Reality in *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir

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Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a great work of anthropology, sociology, biology and psychoanalysis. It is a path breaking work and a landmark in the history of feminism. She has brought about a change in the social relationship of man and woman. She examines the fundamental issue – What is a woman in its entirety? Simone builds her treatise on the theory that woman has always been treated as the 'other.' The title of the essay "Myth and Reality," indicates that there are two views about "the second sex" – the mythical view and the realistic view. The essay explains who women actually are, and what are the facts and fiction about them invented by "the first sex." She tries to project the truth about the myth of the woman in this life, and to find,

"To what extent does it affect the customs and conduct of individuals? In replying to this question it will be necessary to state precisely the relations this myth bears to reality" (*The Second Sex* 282).

Myths

For Beauvoir, myth is a story which serves to explain why the world is as it is, and why things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observations. Myths are culture specific and are taken to be true and naturally existing. Myths primarily are representations of reality. In the process of representing reality the myths happen to overtake reality itself, and are transformed into absolute truth. Myths, actually, are not the truth, absolute, real or authentic; rather they are just the conceived facts, given the shape of truth to work out self-vested purposes. Myths, for women, are cages that keep them in bonds. Balzac's statement in "Physiology of Marriage," proves this when he says:

"Pay no attention to woman's murmurs, her cries, her pains, nature has made her for our use and for bearing everything: children, sorrows, blows and pains inflicted by man. Don't accuse yourself for hardness. In all the codes of so called civilized nation man has written the laws that ranged woman's destiny under bloody epigraph: vae-victis! Woe to the weak!" (Loftson 447)

Beauvoir means to defend against such pathogenic misogyny which flourished like a weed in the patriarchal family structure.

Woman: A Social Constructed Phenomenon

Simone de Beauvoir, in this context, gives a very famous statement in which she defines that to be a woman, is a social constructed phenomenon:

“One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman.” (Simone 160).

Beauvoir further says: “As group symbols and social types are generally defined by means of antonyms in pairs, ambivalence will seem to be an intrinsic quality of the Eternal Feminine” (*The Second Sex* 284). It always serves man’s cause. If he is deceived – she is mean and deceiver, if he is impotent – she is “Praying Mantis” (*The Second Sex* 284). It is man who disguises woman with myths, not she herself.



Courtesy: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/>

Woman as 'Other'

Man is 'the centre' or 'the self' and in order to acquire his absolute and unified identity, he requires the 'other,' which is, woman. Woman fits into the role of an 'other' for the reason that "she opposes him with neither the hostile silence of nature nor the hard requirement of a reciprocal relation" (Pattison 211). Simone writes:

"She is all that man desires and all that he does not attain" (Evans 48).

Women exist only as they are conceived by men, they have no existence of their own.

Simone believes, "Essence does not precede existence" (Evans 104).

Woman as Mysterious Being

For Simone de Beauvoir, a man or woman should not be measured by Myths. They should be judged by their acts. Simone says: "Of a peasant woman one can say that she is a good or a bad worker, of an actress that she has or does not have talent; but if one considers a woman in her immanent presence, her inward self, one can say absolutely nothing about her, she falls short of having any qualifications (*The Second Sex* 287). Myths have made woman, "a beast of burden" (*The Second Sex* 285). Myths have succeeded well in attributing mystery to women. "Woman is mysterious," is another myth which Simone wants to demolish. She says that if woman is 'other' for man, then, man is also 'other' for woman. In fact, everyone is mysterious to everyone else. She says:

"The truth is that there is mystery on both sides: as the other who is of masculine sex, every man, also, has within him a presence, an inner self impenetrable to woman; she in turn, is in ignorance of the male's erotic feelings" (*The Second Sex* 286).

Stereotypes of Women in Literary Works

The various stereotypes of women are attached to her in the old literary works also. The traditional views and the essential stereotypes that have been used to define woman and represented her in various works of literature, have become so strong that it is quite difficult to liberate the woman from these shackles. The traditional view is that "the female is a female by

virtue of a certain lack of qualities,” said Aristotle: “we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.” And St. Thomas pronounced woman to be an ‘imperfect man’, an ‘incidental’ being. Plato thanked God for not making him slave and a woman. The problem is that if a living woman reacts against these myths, she is not treated as feminine at all. For instance, in Shashi Deshpande’s novel *That Long Silence*, Mohan Says:

“Anger makes a woman unwomanly” (*That Long Silence* 83).

Woman has to fit into this structural frame of society. The major reason why woman believes in these myths is that she uses it for her own advantages. Man occupies a privileged position and in marrying him, a woman acquires social standing.

Concept of Myth is Mirage

Simone de Beauvoir accepts that woman is, for biological and psychological reasons, more enslaved in nature than man. Margret Atwood in her novel, *Surfacing*, has explained that man wants to tame woman as he does nature. Woman’s comparison with nature makes it easy for man to take many of his traditional privileges and advantages for granted and to take refuge from responsibilities for much of the wrong that is done to woman simply because it is all meant to be intended by nature. Simone de Beauvoir asserts:

“The myth is in large part explained by its usefulness to man. The myth of woman is a luxury” (*The Second Sex* 289).

Simone believes that mystery belongs to the slave in the privileged classes who dominate over the lower strata of society. Those who are thought to be mysterious are given the stamp of being ‘absolute.’ Simone says: “Mystery is never more than a mirage that vanishes as we draw near to look at it” (*The Second Sex* 289).

Woman as Lost Sex

Myths are deliberately used by patriarchal society for imposing its laws and customs upon individuals. They believe that the true woman is one who accepts herself as “the other.”

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Today women are referred to as the “lost sex” because of their position and situation. The men with patriarchal notions ask:

“Woman is lost. Where are the women? The women of today are not women at all” (*The Second Sex* 291).

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir, in this celebrated work, calls for real relationship between men and women, which is important for their independent existence and their liberation, which must be founded on truth and reality rather than myth, on sincerity rather than mystery. This would also mean that each of the two is a subject as well as object. Women can be made free from the cages of myth when,

“the men for their part will unreservedly accept the situation that is coming into existence; only then will women be able to live in that situation without anguish” (*The Second Sex* 292).

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