

Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir's Defense of Female Sexuality in *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*

David Lagachu, M.A., UGC NET.

Independent Researcher

lagachu.david63@gmail.com

Abstract

Simone de Beauvoir was a French author and an existentialist. In 1949 a book titled *The Second Sex* was published in which the author, Beauvoir, discussed in length about women's precarious position in society throughout history and in her times. She took the discussion on women's liberty and sexuality forward in her treatise *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* which she wrote for an American men's magazine, *Esquire*, in 1959. Traces of *The Second Sex* were conspicuous in the essay whose subject was the rising starlet of French cinema Brigitte Bardot and the sexual, carefree image she projected on the silver screen. Bardot's turn as an object of desire for men in *And God Created Woman* (1956) coupled with a devil-may-care attitude, made Beauvoir curious to say the least. The term Lolita in the catchphrase 'Lolita Syndrome' comes from Vladimir Nabokov's genre making novel *Lolita* (1955), which deals with the risqué topic of an adult man in love with a 12 year old girl. The essay in focus here is a unique combination of feminist outlook, cinematic discourse, and literary credentials. The following paper is an attempt to revisit the essay from the point of view of contemporary times.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, Brigitte Bardot, Female Sexuality, Lolita Syndrome, *The Second Sex*.

Introduction

Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome – the name of the essay itself is a perfect synergy of real life, reel life and literature. Simone de Beauvoir was already an established writer when the task of writing a piece on Brigitte Bardot befell upon her, on the request of the American editor of *Esquire* magazine.¹ It was the perfect opportunity for Beauvoir to express her thoughts on a person who has already captured her imagination on the account of being a fellow Frenchwoman. Beauvoir was not the only creative person to be inspired by Bardot. Marguerite Duras, the French author, compared her persona to that of a queen, Pablo Picasso, the Spanish painter, used her beauty as an inspiration for his paintings and Andy Warhol once infamously

called her the first modern women. Bardot's persona might seem commonplace today but back in the 1950s, she was unconsciously ushering in an era of sexual liberation for women for whom their own sexual gratification was always secondary to that of men's.

The Lolita Syndrome

In the motion picture *And God Created Woman* Brigitte Bardot's character Juliette is on a constant mood trip of her own. She loves men without any inhibition and pursues them with even greater fervour. Roger Vadim, the helmer of the film, and her then husband, presents her as the symbol of eternal femininity. Through deliberate skin show and a flimsy storyline, the film aimed to highlight the difference between a nymphet, and its victims – men. 'That girl was made to destroy man',ⁱⁱ casually remarks one key player of the film towards the end. The main intention of the movie was to make Brigitte Bardot a star – a sex symbol like never before seen on the big screen. However, in its execution, the film accidentally creates a lead female protagonist who is unafraid to act on her whims and constantly runs away from societal restrictions of any kind. It is this free-spirited nature of Bardot's on-screen persona that struck a chord with the feminist sentiments of Simone de Beauvoir and the rest is literary history.

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is controversial for myriad reasons. Its depiction of a forbidden relationship between a 12 year old girl (nymphet) and a middle-aged approaching professor (a symbol of intellectual wisdom) is a matter of constant debates and discussions even today. The impact of the novel on our popular consciousness was such that the term Lolita became synonymous with sexual precociousness of a young girl. It is the general agreement among literary connoisseurs that the term is devoid of any negative interpretation as can be noticed in Simone de Beauvoir's application of it in her famed essay. Beauvoir was admittedly influenced by Vladimir Nabokov's bestselling novel *Lolita* in crafting the idea of a child-woman. In simplified words, a child-woman is an adult woman with the attitude of a child – going after what she wants with all guns blazing and destroying everything in its way that poses a stumbling block to the process of fulfillment of her desires.

Bardot's child-woman aura is also beautifully put together in words by her first husband Roger Vadim as – "Like a child she demanded too much from those she loved. If one failed to pay attention to her for one moment, she would be filled with anxiety."ⁱⁱⁱ

In Beauvoir's view Bardot is impulsive and yet in total control of her life decisions. Of course, this image of the star is completely based on her career making role of Juliette in *And God Created Woman*. In her portrayal of a sexually opinionated young woman, she knowingly or unknowingly paved the way for sexual liberation of women in France and the rest of the world, one impulsive action at a time.

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The essay was originally written in French, but it first came to public notice when it appeared in the popular American men's magazine *Esquire* in August 1959. It was translated into English by Bernard Frechtman. Its impact was such that many prestigious publishing houses such as Reynal & Co. gave it the shape of a book by implementing a few minor changes to it. Initially the essay was condescendingly left out of academic discourses and researches but on the eve of the 30th death anniversary of Beauvoir in 2016, the duo of Margaret Simons and Marybeth Timmermann dug the text out of its anonymity in their collection *Simone de Beauvoir: Feminist Writings* (2015). The essay closely analyzes the French starlet Brigitte Bardot and the on-screen sexually carefree image that she projected in her career defining film *And God Created Woman*. The film which was directed by her husband Roger Vadim, carefully constructed the image of a sexually liberated child-woman who captivated the imagination of the world and Simone de Beauvoir in particular by daring to place female sexuality on the same level as that of male sexuality.

For the longest time, Beauvoir's essay on Bardot was unequivocally ignored by curators of canonical literature. However, once out of the woods, the text gained tremendous response from readers and critics alike. In fact, today it has become a sort of companion text for Beauvoir's seminal book of the second wave of feminism titled *The Second Sex*:

“...it deals with one of the most important contributions of *The Second Sex* to contemporary feminism - the concept of the Eternal Feminine as the socio-cultural embodiment of gender inequality....”^{iv}

Bardot as an Autonomous Woman

Not sure whether it was her feminine instinct or feminist instinct, but Beauvoir jumps into a defense of the reigning sex symbol of France right from the outset, in the essay. She makes no bones about the fact that both women and men envy her in varying degrees. The essay begins with Beauvoir describing Bardot attending a TV event in France, on a new year's eve. The author was also among the audiences and leaves nothing to the imagination in describing how the latter invokes extreme reactions from both men and women. If the women folk were visibly jealous of her “*The men couldn't keep from devouring her with their eyes...*” (5)

Expressing and displaying her sexuality is as normal as the act of breathing for Bardot and this quality of hers is exactly why men are intimidated by her and women never miss a chance to berate her and blame her for every wrong happening in the society. That her sexuality was threatening was evident in the numerous letters that paranoid mothers wrote to “*newspaper editors and religious and civil authorities to protest against her existence.*” (6) This preposterous act urged Beauvoir to comment that: “*It is no new thing for high-minded folk to identify the flesh*

with sin and to dream of making a bonfire of works of art, books and films that depict it complacently or frankly.” (6)

It is quite conspicuous that in her act of defending her subject of interest, she sometimes goes overboard, such as trying to brush under the carpet Bardot’s lacklustre acting skills by calling her indifferent to reality: *“She is without memory, without a past, and, thanks to this ignorance, she retains the perfect innocence that is attributed to a mythical childhood.” (8)* Her husband and director Roger Vadim also echoes similar sentiments. And coming from the horse’s mouth – *“I wasn’t acting, I was the person I was embodying.”^v*

About her sex-appeal and the numerous intellectual talk about her ushering in an era of sexual freedom for women, Bardot cheekily says – *“That’s a load of absolute rubbish... women didn’t wait for me to come along to liberate themselves.”^{vi}* This statement of hers further consolidates the idea of an adult child-woman who is unaware of her effect in contributing towards the act of women breaking away from restrictions, be it sexual or societal.

French Men vs. American Men

Upon its release *And God Created Woman* received cold response from the native French audiences but when it was exported to the US it became a landmark success. It was a success that introduced a new type of French eroticism to international movie goers. The American men clearly had no qualms about opening their hearts to an actress for whom sexuality is a tool for her own benefit and gratification than for the opposite sex. In the climactic Mambo dance sequence in the film she dances like a free spirit without pandering to the male gaze. And this seeming act of rebellion irks the French men who are *“unwilling to give up their roles of lord and master” (28)* as Beauvoir observes in her text. According to her American men are more accustomed to the concept of sexual equality than their French counterparts.

Conclusion

In the final section of *The Second Sex*, enthusiastically titled, *Toward Liberation/Vers La Liberation*, Beauvoir doesn’t hold back her disappointment while commenting that civil liberties for women are an illusion: *“...civic liberties remain abstract if there is no corresponding economic autonomy; the kept woman – wife or mistress – is not freed from the male just because she has a ballot paper in her hands...”^{vii}*

She further illustrates her point by stating that it is only through work that women can fill the literal and metaphorical gap between them and their male counterparts: *“The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite; there is no longer need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe.”^{viii}*

Beauvoir who once compared Bardot to the Renault automobiles as a great French export to the world, narrates an incident in her book about a study of the working conditions of women in a Renault factory. The general consensus among the workers was that if given a chance they would rather stay at home as even though work guarantees financial freedom, they are still not free from the clutches of domesticity that awaits them once they reach their respective homes.^{ix}

Bardot probably recognized the grueling demands of a glamorous career which prompted her to give it all up one fine day. Apart from being an established individual in society, economically, she also most importantly had the courage and the whimsical autonomy to listen to her heart and follow it through. It is perhaps this very quality of Bardot of being a master of her own thoughts and actions that fascinated the writer and the critical thinker in Beauvoir. The latter knows it very well that what Bardot dares to do is a rare phenomenon; an act of rebellion that French women of the 1950s could only dream about.

Throughout her entire career Brigitte Bardot suffered from the image of being an ‘immoral’ woman – one who doesn’t care about her effect on men, simply, because her existence is independent of the opposite sex’s desire or repulsion. And that is what makes her so modern. She is a woman of her own emotional components – “*Good and evil are part of conventions to which she would not even think of bowing.*” (22-24). In her display of sexuality she doesn’t invite lust but rather strives for respectability – something which she achieved towards the fag end of her career, when in 1969 she became the first flesh and blood woman to be the face of Marianne: the official symbol of the French Republic. In the last line of the essay, Beauvoir wishes: “*I hope she will mature, but not change*” (60) and this line beautifully sums up the courage and the nonchalance required for women to be their true selves in a world where man as well as women are constantly resisting change – two qualities that Brigitte Bardot had in abundance in her salad days.

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Notes

ⁱ The challenges of writing “by demand” and the effort of demystification in Simon de Beauvoir’s thought. Magda Guadalupe dos Santos. <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6894-0654>

ⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/And_God_Created_Woman_\(1956_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/And_God_Created_Woman_(1956_film))

ⁱⁱⁱ Bardot, Deneuve, Fonda. Author: Roger Vadim. Pp. 64. www.archive.org.

^{iv} Beauvoir on Bardot: *The Ambiguity Syndrome*. Author(s): Denise Warren. Source: Dalhousie French Studies, Fall-Winter 1987, Vol. 13, SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR ET LES FEMINISMES CONTEMPORAINS (Fall-Winter 1987), pp. 39-50. Published by Dalhousie University. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40836365>

^v <https://www.vogue.fr/vogue-hommes/culture/diaporama/interview-with-brigitte-bardot/15418> Culture. *An Audience with Brigitte Bardot*. Olivier Lalanne. August 2015.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} The Second Sex. PP. 813. Chapter 14. *The Independent Woman*.

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Ibid PP. 814

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David Lagachu, M.A., UGC NET.

Independent Researcher

lagachu.david63@gmail.com

Address:

Nakari, Ward No. 1

P.O.: North Lakhimpur, District: Lakhimpur, Assam, India, PIN: 787001

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