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Text & Ideas Final Essay, Prompt 7

The concept of women's identity has been a subject of significant debate and analysis in social discourse. At the heart of this discourse is Simone de Beauvoir's interpretation of women's status as the Other. This concept raises a compelling question: what exactly does it mean for women to be perceived as the Other? And is women's status still like this? In this essay, I will delve into Beauvoir's diagnosis and expand upon it, arguing that women continue to be treated as the Other in contemporary society: Despite the material progress made by previous feminist struggles, women's given desires and values are still being relegated to a secondary, particular position in today's culture. Moreover, our educational and media institutions perpetuate such a cultural inequality. By examining these aspects, this essay focuses on the persistent condition of women: being the Other.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women's status as the Other is due to a male-centric perspective that dominates social norms. She states this concept: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."(P) This powerful statement summarizes one of Beauvoir's core theories – women are defined not as entities in their own right but as counterparts, or opposites, to men. Men are seen as the creators, the movers, the individuals whose actions and decisions shape the world. In contrast, women are often assigned to the role of the object or the Other—not the primary actor, but rather the secondary. They are

assigned to a restricted role which is attached to men and exist as a by-product without the freedom to choose.

To further understand this concept, Beauvoir delves into the historical context. She argues that this division of roles and perceptions dates back to prehistoric times when roles were divided based on biological differences. Men were associated with activities beyond mere survival – hunting, exploration, and leadership – innovative activities that were perceived as adding value to society. Women, on the other hand, were closely tied to the roles of childbirth and nurturing – essential for the continuation of the species, yet considered less significant and unchanging in the broader context of social development. She notes, "By transcending Life through Existence, men guarantee the repetition of Life: by this surpassing, he creates values that deny any value to pure repetition."(P6) This denial of pure repetition directly points to women's role in fertility, devaluating their value. Women only creates human beings, making sure the existence of a species, but men create things that are last longer, transcendent, and passed by generations.

These historical roles have deepened social norms. At the same time, this condition is reinforced since women themselves accept their condition. Beauvoir emphasizes this through her observation: "But it is an easy path: the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence are thus avoided. … because she often derives satisfaction from her role as Other."(P10) This indicates that not only has society imposed these roles, but women have also accepted them, finding a sense of identity within this framework. They are raised to believe it's not their role to make choices but rather support men's choices in which they find value and satisfaction. Women also believed that if they change to masculine roles, it will bring stress and uncomforting, leaving

their comfort zone of the supportive roles. This belief resulted in a prolonged lack of will to change the conditions.

Having delved into Beauvoir's analysis of women's role as the Other, we now turn our focus to the contemporary landscape. While Beauvoir's ideas offer valuable insights, it is important to examine whether the status of women as the Other has persisted or evolved in modern society. I contend that despite material progress in 20th-century feminism, contemporary womanhood retains the status of the Other in a substantial sense.

First, we need to take a look back at 20th-century women's roles to recognize the transformation in the social perception of women. In most parts of the world, women's roles were primarily defined by domestic responsibilities and obedience to men. This was before the first wave of feminism when women were largely confined to the home, with limited access to education and employment. The perception of women as the Other was entrenched in social norms, where men's perspectives were considered universal. Then, multiple feminist movements have reshaped social views to a considerable extent so that women can participate in all areas of public life, including politics, science, and business. These movements challenged the idea of women as the Other by asserting women's rights as citizens and their capability to participate in the public sphere. As the century progressed, the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the deeply ingrained social norms that Beauvoir critiqued. The movement brought issues like reproductive rights, workplace equality, and legal inequalities to the forefront, dismantling the notion of women as secondary to men. However, in many non-Western societies, traditional perceptions persist due to cultural, religious, and economic factors. For instance, in the Middle East and parts of Asia, women's roles are still the same.

Compared to the 20th century, our era has witnessed significant changes in women's social status, especially on an economic level. Women now have the right to vote, receive education, and pursue diverse career opportunities. Policy changes regarding women's rights have also shown a positive direction towards greater gender justice. However, true gender equality, or the overcoming of the woman's status as the Other, requires not only material equality but also equality on the level of subconscious perception. Thus, progress in economic equality, however significant, has not put an end to the widespread perception of women as the Other.

This perceived otherness is starkly evident in the realm of media, which we can tell through the lens of the Bechdel test. Originating from Alison Bechdel's comic strip, this test gauges the representation of women in film and literature based on three criteria: the presence of at least two women, who talk to each other, about something other than a man. Astonishingly, a significant portion of contemporary media fails this test. A study in 2022 analyzed the representation of women in popular movies over the past four decades and found that only about half of these films passed the Bechdel-Wallace Test. It indicates a persistent trend in popular media, reflecting not just a difference in representation but also the depth and autonomy of female characters. These women's portrayals are secondary or male-dependent roles, mirroring the perception of women as the Other in real life.

In real-life scenarios, when we are talking about a successful person these days, we tend to refer to those who are educated, wealthy, and powerful – qualities often associated with men. Rarely do we consider one successful for achievements like childbirth or family maintenance, roles traditionally associated with women. We never treat these traditionally feminine roles as equal to men's values. This is what is happening in the current society. We encourage women to

pursue their dreams, to be successful, and to be successful like men. However, it was men who defined the ability to pursue power and wealth as primary goals in society. They elevated their particular values to a position of universality, laying a claim of otherness on women whose given desires and projects fall outside of their purported values as such. We automatically use this parameter to weigh the value of every person, ignoring gender differences, and this is what makes women the Other.

My claim is not that women can only be valued on traditionally feminine, domestic grounds, nor that women are less competent in achieving traditionally masculine values. Rather, I claim that many women's given desires and values, though contingent and inessential as Beauvoir demonstrated, are still excluded from the realm of the universal by men and women today. In contrast, the putative universality of men's given desires was not only unchallenged but even validated, reified, and naturalized by past feminist efforts.

Critical feminist Nancy Fraser explains that true gender justice requires a two-dimensional approach in current society: recognition and redistribution. There is a shift going on from quasi-Marxist, labor-centered views to more cultural and identity conceptions, meaning from a focus on redistribution to recognition. Redistribution here refers to economic restructuring, such as access to resources. This is what women were trying to achieve historically and have succeeded to some degree. Now, what about recognition? Women have biological differences from men. They are not determinative of women's values, but they do shape the circumstances in which women acquire values and thereby indirectly shape women's values. Insofar as the value differences subsist on circumstantial differences induced by biological differences, women have given values that they cannot easily – and perhaps do not want to – change. Thus, the true claim of equality by actually existing women demands that their values,

taken as is, be recognized as universally desirable to the same extent that men's values are. Recognition is acknowledgment and appreciation of women's unique and diverse identities, contributions, and experiences taken as is, not in an idealized, potential form. Recognition is about seeing actually existing women as individuals with their own distinct values and roles in society. It is this lack of recognition that continues to confine women to the position of the Other in contemporary society.

Why do women tend to focus on the equality of economic resources instead of the recognition of their own values? In the context of capitalism, the emphasis on material wealth shapes social norms. People use wealth to determine their status. Therefore, at the start of gender equality movements, women focused on the right to economic distribution, for example pay gap issue. This is a tangible goal that can be measured and can be solved directly through policy changes, like equal pay for equal work. Achieving this kind of economic equality is seen as a direct and realistic way to enhance women's status and power within a capitalist society. Indeed, women succeed in pursuing this measurable equality during the past decades. People like Ruth Bader Ginsburg played a pivotal role in establishing legal precedents for equal rights and pay for women, marking crucial steps towards the solving the gender pay gap.

In contrast, recognition is even much harder and requires more work. It is intangible and elusive. People cannot set policies or rules that are clear enough to describe and regulate it. Even if laws can compel the verbal acknowledgement of female contributions, what is the value of coerced recognition? Most importantly, it is hard to change. The instilling of cultural inequality has been in our society for a long, long time. Beauvoir's later words of her book also supports this: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that

elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine" (P283). The historical entrenchment of traditional norms has shaped women into who they are now. No matter how much you believe in equality between men and women, the subconscious undervaluation of women permeates everyone's psyche.

One obvious example of this subconscious influence is what most people have been through in education, where social bias is found and built. From a young age, students are influenced by a curriculum that often emphasizes male achievements. In history classes, the narratives focus on male leaders, while scientific discoveries are almost exclusively attributed to men. Literature courses frequently spotlight male authors and protagonists. More importantly, these are indeed facts of the development of our society. This gender bias is not just in the content of what is taught, but also in the way students are treated and perceived. Teachers may unconsciously have expectations for boys to be good at subjects like science and mathematics, perpetuating the stereotype of male intellectual superiority. The impact of this kind of bias is profound. It shapes students' perceptions of their own abilities from a young age, influencing their self-esteem, subject choices, and future career paths. This gender bias in education is not limited to the classroom; it extends beyond it, affecting all aspects of life. From the lessons we learn at home to the messages we receive from friends and the wider society and the male-centric media industry, we are continuously shaped by these influences. As we grow, we constantly absorb and learn from our surroundings, making us susceptible to the biases that pervade our daily interactions. This ongoing learning process means we are always exposed to, and potentially influenced by social gender biases.

That's why the women's status is not a reflection of innate preference but rather the result of deep-seated social conditioning. Many women who grow up in this society never have a

chance to fight for gender justice because they treat reality as norms and unchallenged status quo. Women may not even be aware of the concept of gender justice since they don't know what other status they can choose.

But it is this lack of recognition that led to the status of women, no matter the economic equality we are fighting for. Both recognition and economic redistribution are necessary, but without gender recognition and the appreciation of women's value, how can we expect people to treat women equally? Economic equality may guarantee women's participation in society as equal producers and consumers, but it cannot guarantee men's and women's sincere appreciation of women's equal values.

How can we balance this recognition of women's value with the redistribution of resources? Fraser states an ideal structure in another essay "I conclude, accordingly, that feminists should develop a third model—"Universal Caregiver"—which would induce men to become more like women are now: people who combine employment with responsibilities for primary caregiving. Treating women's current life patterns as the norm, this model would aim to overcome the separation of breadwinning and care-work. Avoiding both the workerism of Universal Breadwinner and the domestic privatism of Caregiver Parity, it aims to provide gender justice and security for all." This seems to be a possible solution to achieve gender justice when women's current value is also the norm of a society. Although it seems utopian and unrealistic, it reveals the truth of what gender justice demands: recognizing and valuing differences in gendered experiences and contributions.

In conclusion, the persistence of women being perceived as 'Other', as Simone de Beauvoir articulates, remains a critical issue in contemporary society. I argued that despite material advancements, the underlying view of women as secondary persists and maintains an

inequality of recognition. True progress lies not only in policy changes or economic redistribution but also in transforming how everyone perceives and values women's roles and identities. Only then can women overcome their Otherness and realize themselves as sources of universal values.

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