

THE ARCHAIC MIND IN *THE SECOND SEX*: FEMINISM AND AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract: Simone de Beauvoir's ground breaking work, *The Second Sex*, is not just a key text for feminism but also a profound work in philosophical anthropology which explores human consciousness in its rudimentary stages. Beauvoir derives her conclusions regarding feminism from these explorations into the archaic mind. Georges Bataille was another key French thinker whose abiding interests in religion and eroticism led him to investigate the primitive operations of the human mind. In this paper, Beauvoir's foundational ideas in feminism are interpreted in light of Bataille's views about the nature of primeval consciousness and the result is a bridging of certain gaps in *The Second Sex*.

Keywords: feminism; Beauvoir; Bataille; transcendence; immanence;

1. INTRODUCTION

On the French intellectual scene of the mid-20th century, both Simone de Beauvoir and Georges Bataille were prominent figures, part of a galaxy of formidable intellects which included Sartre, Merleau Ponty and others. Beauvoir's legendary intellectual partnership with Sartre in the formulation of existentialist philosophy is too well known to need any reiteration. The comparison of Beauvoir's ideas with other thinkers is considered to be less attractive. Georges Bataille, the prolific writer and philosopher and a friend of Beauvoir is one such thinker whose ideas bear a striking similarity with that of Beauvoir in certain areas despite being very different from an overall perspective. Bataille was well known to Beauvoir and it is not unlikely that they might have influenced each other. Sartre was lukewarm in his response to Bataille's work. Beauvoir, on the other hand, seems to have been more receptive to Bataille's ideas and she does make a few references to him in *The Second Sex*. Whatever may have been the influence, it is evident that both Beauvoir and Bataille shared a common interest in exploring the mind of man in the state of nature and investigating its archaic ways of apprehending the world. Beauvoir's motive was to trace the paths of those psychological forces that have shaped the mind of a woman to its earliest origins. Bataille was more interested in pursuing the origins of religious thought but discovered interesting and unconventional philosophical insights into the primitive mind on the way. The dovetailing of many of these Bataillean insights with Beauvoir's key concepts from *The Second Sex* is what this paper intends to explore.

The paper is structured to highlight those conceptual points where Bataille has something significant to add or delete from Beauvoir's thought. The first theme I take up is the concept of the "Other", perhaps the most important philosophical concept used by Beauvoir to illuminate the predicament of Woman. Is it possible to gain a deeper insight on this point through Bataille? This is the first point of enquiry. The second point, equally significant, is the notion of the "Eternal Feminine", an invention by the myth-addicted patriarchal mind according to Beauvoir. Her rejection of the "Eternal Feminine" simply as a psychological and social fiction nevertheless leaves certain questions unanswered. I discuss how Bataille's ideas might supply the missing links on this issue.

Influenced by the Marxists theories, Beauvoir saw that there is a role that economic factors play in perpetuating the otherness of the Woman. The economic man is one who wields a tool and, in turn, inadvertently, wielded by it. Both Beauvoir and Bataille provide an incisive analysis of this dialectic and it is profitable to see how Bataille's analysis of the human-tool relationship ties in with Beauvoir's Transcendence-Immanence problematic.

Another key idea in *The Second Sex* is that of the quest for subjectivity or transcendence, the goal of all human beings but realised only by the male, as opposed to immanence, a condition of serfdom to Nature which characterises the condition of women. Immanence is a key idea in Bataille's philosophy of religion too. A synthesis of their thoughts on these key concepts leads to the emergence of a comprehensive understanding of the human project of Transcendence. Closely linked to this is the issue of authentic existence, the last topic of discussion. The quest for existential freedom, the hallmark of a genuinely authentic life in Beauvoir's thought, will be revisited in light of Bataille's penetrating analysis of deepest human needs in the untamed primitive mind and the result is that the goal of authentic existence acquires a new dimension.

2.THE OTHER : Beauvoir believed that the Other was a facet of human existence that is “ as primordial as consciousness itself” (Beauvoir,2009,15). Corroborating this assertion she says that “ in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality- that of the Self and the Other” (Beauvoir,2009,16). This is the basic premise on which she proceeds to construct the entire edifice of feminism with the concept of the Woman as the Other being its very foundational notion. “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other” (Beauvoir,2009,15). As to the genesis of this concept in human consciousness, Beauvoir asserts that “ it is not based upon any empirical facts.” (Beauvoir,2009,15). The *a priori* nature of this category of thought which is as primitive as consciousness itself does not blend well with the methodology that she adopts throughout the book which relies on marshalling empirical evidence to prove how gender is a cultural construct. In fact, Beauvoir herself was aware of this inconsistency. As Debbie Evans remarks, “ In the third volume of her autobiography *The Force of Circumstance*, Beauvoir reflects that the Hegelian framework of the *Second Sex* based on the *a priori* categories of the male-Subject and female-Other was too idealistic, and that with hindsight she would have introduced a more materialistic framework.”(Evans,2009). Thus, the Self-Other dichotomy is a postulate that one has to accept because it is the foundation on which her other arguments are based .But the inability to rationally account for this all pervasive and overarching theme in *The Second Sex* is a jarring note in the overall structure of the book.

Batailles’s analysis of the primitive mind in his book *Theory of Religion* on the other hand provides a different perspective on the emergence of the category of the Other in the human consciousness. The implicit argument in Bataille’s notion of Otherness is that the archaic mind formed its categories on the basis of the perception of the world it found itself situated in, rather than came endowed with the propensity to bring forth a Self-Other dichotomy in existence. According to him, it was the perception of the animal world by the primeval mind of the early humans that led to the fashioning out of the category of Otherness. Situated in a precarious relationship with the animal, the human being perceived it with a sense of affinity mingled with an awareness of remoteness. An incomprehensibility surrounded the human perception of the animal world and yet there was an undeniable intimacy. As Bataille writes, “the animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth. It is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed from me, that which deserves the name depth, which means precisely that which is unfathomable to me.” (Bataille,1989,20). In fact, he says that “nothing , as a matter of fact, is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended” (Bataille,1989,20).

The human being was not just passively aware of the animal but would also try to understand how he, the human being and the other objects of the material world are perceived by the animal because his survival depended on it. The perplexing conundrum of an animal gaze is described as a “disconcerting enigma” (Bataille,1989,20), because “in picturing the universe without man, a universe in which only the animal gaze would be opened to things, the animal being neither a thing nor a man, we can only call up a vision in which we see nothing, since the object of this vision is a movement that glides from things that have no meaning by themselves to the world full of meaning implied by man giving each thing his own.” (Bataille,1989,20) Even an event as violent as the killing of one animal by the other is devoid of all sense of subjectivity. When an animal preys upon another Bataille says that “ between an animal that is eaten and the one that eats , there is no relation of subordination connecting an object or a thing to a man, who refuses to be viewed as a thing.”(Bataille,1989,20)Man always remains aware of the fundamental duality that characterises his existence as opposed to a fused immanence in which the animal lives. He perceives himself as a part of natural existence and yet apart from it. It is through the animal reality that man is reminded of his uniqueness- the capacity for transcendence. As opposed to the human reality, “ the animal world is that of immanence and immediacy, for that world , which is closed to us , is so to the extent that we cannot discern in it an ability to transcend itself.”(Bataille,1989,23) In a poetic description of immanence, animal existence in the world is likened to “water in water.” (Bataille,1989,19)

Thus, the genesis of Otherness, the irreducible fundamental category of thought according to Beauvoir, is an empirical experience based on the experience of animal world . It brings the human out of his own immanence, for it realises within itself a power, an ability that differentiates it from the Other. As long as the ability of transcendence is merely a given, a natural ability, it is still in the domain of immanence. Only when a self-reflexive awareness of this power dawns, does it strike the human mind that even though we share certain aspects with the animal world, we can choose to be not overwhelmed by it. We are free to pursue the endless imaginations and existential projects- what, according to Beauvoir, characterises an authentic human being.

Beauvoir too repeatedly compares the immanence of woman with animality. She says, “The female to a greater extent than man is a prey of the species.” (Beauvoir,2009,86). But to her, the animal is already a degraded mode of existence, an inferior realm of being, even to the primitive mind. She calls it a woman’s “misfortune to have been biologically destined for the repetition of life.”

(Beauvoir,2009,85). She doesn't trace the roots of human consciousness including its ability to posit of the Other to the remnants of the archaic mind's empirical experience and perception of the animal world. The notion of Otherness appears from vacuum, an a priori quality of consciousness. This is at odds with the positions that she takes with respect to other categories of thought, especially her denial of the "Platonic essences" of the "Eternal Feminine" and the like. Since the whole concern of Beauvoir is to show the contingent nature of women's subjugation and rid it of any legitimacy that it can possibly derive from appealing to any such myths of "essences", it becomes imperative that the Self-Other schema too is shown to have an empirical basis rather than a primordial essence. Bataille's analysis of this problem gives us another perspective, an empirical one, to account for this seemingly mysterious category of thought.

THE NOTION OF THE ETERNAL FEMININE: As mentioned earlier, having proposed the innateness of the Self-Other duality, Beauvoir goes on to reject the myth of the "Eternal feminine" which she considers to be a fabrication of the patriarchal mind. Beauvoir does a scathing analysis of the origin of this idea and its role in the suppression of women. She treats the idea of "Eternal Feminine" as simply an anthropological fiction disregarding completely the idea that there could be something more fundamental about it. What is puzzling is that on the one hand Beauvoir readily subscribes to the fundamental reality of the mythological and cosmological polarities of ancient deities like " ...Varuna-Mitra , Uranus-Zeus,Sun-Moon..."(Beauvoir,2009,17) etc. while on the other hand she rejects the notion of Eternal feminine as a patriarchal invention devoid of any fundamental significance. It is well known from anthropological works that the idea of a Sacred feminine was as much a part of the archaic mind as these mythic polarities of deities which, according to Beauvoir, are a representation of the Self-Other schema. The anomaly encountered here is the reverse of that problem discussed earlier with regard to the genesis of the Other. Here, the myth of the Eternal Feminine is presented simply as an empirical reality borne out of historical and sociological contingencies. In fact, she equates the notion of Eternal Feminine with distorted historical constructs like the "Black soul" and "The Jewish character" on the basis of what one writer has called the "competing frameworks of oppression"(Gines,2014) Beauvoir was selective in her approach towards the ethnographic findings of her time because many of the primitive cultures had a definite notion of the "Sacred feminine" which she blithely ignored. The pervasiveness of this notion of Sacred Feminine necessitates a deeper exploration of its origin than believing it to be a social construct or historical accident. While a lot of the mystery surrounding the notion is indeed cultural accretion, the residual element cannot be explained away entirely through an evolutionary analysis of culture over the ages. In fact, Beauvoir herself recognises an ultimate distinction, not just physiological or functional between man and woman when she asks the question, "If her functioning as a female is not enough to define a woman, if we decline also to explain her through "the eternal feminine" and if nevertheless we admit provisionally that women do exist, then we must face the question: What is a woman?" By answering that the woman is "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential"(Beauvoir,2009,15) she succeeds in merely pushing the question a little further.

Thus her explanation of the idea of the Eternal feminine presents us with two problems; one, it is at odds with her uncritical acceptance of other elements of primitive culture, the aforementioned polar opposites in mythological deities. Secondly, by accepting that there is an ultimate differentiating factor after all between the man and the woman, she allows the principle of the Eternal Feminine a backdoor entry into the discourse, albeit in an attenuated form.

Can Bataille's analysis of the archaic mind provide a better ground for rejecting the idea of the "Eternal feminine"? As previously explained, Bataille conceives of the primitive mind as a field of awareness populated by animals , things and human beings. Thus, the human being was only aware of two principles outside itself, the world of animals and the world of things-especially of those things which he himself created-the tools. The key insight that Bataille provides us is that to the archaic mind, this division of the world into animals and tools got translated into polarities of the Sacred and the Profane. The world of animals was perceived as a sacred world because of its continuity with the human existence whereas the world of tools became the realm of the Profane, owing to its discontinuity with human consciousness. Bataille remarks that the animal world "derived its significance from the contrast it formed to the world of things"(Bataille,1989,19) The fundamental categories, Bataille proposes, the dualities of the Sacred and the Profane- are the lenses through which the world is perceived. Combining Beauvoir's idea of the biological servitude that the woman's body entails and its greater preoccupation with the natural processes through which she prepares for the perpetuation of the species with the Bataillan notion of the sacred derived from the animal world allows us to see how the idea of the "Sacred Feminine" could have been born. This also explains why in all primitive cultures, where man's existence was tied to the animal existence, the Sacred Feminine notion is found. Does this mean that the notion of the Eternal feminine is a "Platonic essence", a universal law of the universe ? It seems to be a hasty conclusion to draw. Being reducible to the more fundamental idea of the Sacred, it loses its status of a Platonic Idea. As the foregoing analysis shows, what explains the "Eternal Feminine" as a pervasive

feature in most primitive cultures is the fortuitous combination of the notion of Sacred with the Female borne out of the conditioning of the archaic mind by its circumstances. There is nothing even remotely “essential” or “Platonic” about it. Resorting to a spiritual essence is made redundant by the adoption of the Bataillan approach which has the further advantage of enabling us to adequately explain the anthropological reality of preponderance of the feminine element in ancient cultural practices.

THE WORLD OF THE TOOL : Influenced by the Marxist analysis of human nature, Beauvoir sees the industriousness of man as an expression and fulfilment of his urge for transcendence. She calls the attempt by the primitive, nomadic man to fashion tools and augment his power to hunt and prey, a means of achieving “self-realisation”. Beauvoir writes: “In this activity he put his powers to test; he set up goals and opened up roads towards them; in brief, he found self-realisation as an existent.”(Beauvoir,2009,95) Driven by his tool making capacity to survive rather than by his biological endowments alone, man overcomes his animal nature. The great upheaval in the consciousness that results from the capacity to make tools is the opening up of the future possibilities through human endeavour. For Beauvoir, the goal of transcendence is inevitably linked with our inherent sense of futurity that is the distinguishing mark of a human. Transcendence in Beauvoir’s sense is realised when we “embrace our freedom and situate ourselves around other free beings by propelling ourselves into the world in constructive or self expressive projects.” (Veltman,2009) The dawning of the capacity to wield tools enables man to engage in these “self-expressive projects.” It is through these constructive movements and self-expressive projects that the possibilities of a culture are opened before us. Beauvoir’s classic statement, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” is applicable from this stage on. As Judith Butler remarks, “To be a gender, whether man, woman or otherwise, is to be engaged in an ongoing cultural interpretation of bodies and, hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities.”(Butler,1986). A tool or an artefact is the link that awakens those dormant potentialities that lead to the formation of a culture. Thus according to Beauvoir, technology has an emancipatory effect on man but at the same time augments the remoteness or the Otherness of the woman. But is it the only way that man’s relationship to the tool can be viewed?

In Bataille’s case, using a tool entails a metaphysical realignment of the human consciousness. As mentioned earlier, the presence of the tool creates a division in the mind between the sacred and the profane world. While a tool operating man is able to subdue nature, Bataille says that it also makes man aware of the loss of his immanence. He wakes up from an animal slumber, marvels at his creation and the powers that it confers on him, but it also ruptures his continuity with Nature and makes a thing, a tool of his own mind and body as well. Bataille says that “to subordinate is not only to alter the subordinated element but to be altered oneself.” (Bataille,1989,41). It is this alienation that distances man from his immanent nature. Thus while tools are a source for transcendence both in Beauvoir and Bataille, it is a mixed blessing according to the latter because of its alienating effect. This has an important bearing on how a human being can achieve authentic transcendence.

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSCENDENCE: As a normative idea, the notion of Transcendence is the most important theme in Beauvoir’s philosophy, an absolute existential need for a subject, which allows him to experience the true splendour of being human. It consists of “a continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future.” (Beauvoir,2009,28) Though it is an equally persistent urge in both male and the female, the thwarting of this existential need is the misfortune of woman alone because of the fact that she has been compelled to accept the position of the Other which condemns her to stagnation and immanence. Various ideologies like biological determinism, psychoanalytic determinism, historical materialism etc only serve to lend further credence to the view that the woman is doomed to remain immersed in immanence since transcendence is inherently out of her reach.

As mentioned earlier, the philosophical roots of this subversion can be traced to the fact that man, considering himself to be the standard, essential core of humanity, casts the woman as the inessential, the Other. This in itself would not have been problematic had the woman too responded in kind by establishing her subjectivity and affirming man as the Other. But the fact remains that woman has internalized its destiny of immanence, a state of servitude to forces beyond her control to such an extent that it appears to her to be the only choice in life. It means a giving up of one’s freedom, objectifying oneself. Once this fate is accepted, a self-fulfilling prophecy comes true, a vicious circle from which it is impossible for the woman to break free.

Beauvoir also delineates how man escapes this servitude and assumes the role of the Master in this dialectic. The mind of man seeks an Other to establish its subjectivity but discovers that neither nature nor his fellow men can provide him the secure otherness that he craves. With Nature, it is the inertness and with other men, it is the assertion of sovereignty that makes the possibility of transcendence difficult. In woman alone he finds true alterity- true otherness. She is the ideal being because “she is the wished for

intermediary between nature, the stranger to man and the fellow being who is too closely identical ” (**Beauvoir,2009,172**) And thus begins the odyssey of self-denial for the woman which ultimately leads her to an inauthentic existence in perpetuity.

Unlike Beauvoir who projects the human goal as transcendence or the freedom and determination to unfold one's own destiny in a way one chooses, Bataille believes that true freedom for a human being consists in an alternation between immanence and transcendence. He explains the dilemma as the constant problem posed by the “impossibility of being human without being a thing and of escaping the limits of things without returning to the animal slumber”(Bataille,2009,44). Bataille points out the fact that the materiality of our consciousness, the mutual dependence between the body and the mind, inevitably makes a human being a nature-spirit complex and a betrayal of any one of them would be an inauthentic way of existing. On the one hand is Beauvoir's notion of transcendence as an escape from the clutches of nature or immanence. On the other hand, Bataille, while not denying that we cannot be truly human unless we escape the constant immanence of nature, also says that we cannot be truly human if we do not have the freedom to embrace nature and immanence and yet remain inwardly free to escape whenever we want. Bataille's freedom is about free to be a slave as well as a master of nature. One who achieves freedom while perpetually being haunted by a possibility of relapsing into bondage is not yet free in the true sense of the word. Beauvoir's existentialist goal of authentic living in freedom is complemented by Bataille's insistence on the role of immanence in transcendence. This brings us to our last point as to what prevents this true authenticity of existence, whether in the sense of Beauvoir or Bataille, from happening and whether it is only the woman who is condemned to lead an inauthentic life.

A RECIPROCAL ALTERITY : As previously mentioned, the transcendence of a human being is the subjectivity that he gains by positing the Other, an incontrovertible fact of human existence. Even though the alienation can be achieved by seeking the Other in nature as well as fellow men, the true affirmation of the Man depends upon the Woman, identical in spirit and yet different in a fundamental way. Only by perpetually keeping the female in a state of immanence can man's transcendence be secured and this project has been accomplished by man throughout history by way of ideology, myth, institutions etc. The woman finds herself situated in a condition where she is equally complicit in not asserting her rights of her own transcendence in exchange for certain comforts that this self-denial confers on her. Beauvoir calls it a moral fault, an example of “bad faith” on the part of the woman. She exhorts her to make the effort to realise the entrapments that have let her accept this compromise.

The problem is twofold; the various means and avenues through which man seeks to impose a destiny, which, in some ways, nature has already written for the female by biologically appointing her as the chosen vehicle for the perpetuation of the species. The fecundity of woman, which is the source of all human life, at once terrorises, fascinates and is repulsive to man. Bound by the placenta, a bondage in the womb, whose vestigial memory he still retains in his consciousness, man strives to snap this umbilical tie by almost reversing the situation in world as if to compensate for the lack of freedom suffered in the womb, he denies her freedom in the world. Only by recognising the deepest truths about her situation can a woman regain her authenticity and demand a reversal of situations. Beauvoir says that the transcendence of a human being depends on an authentic reciprocity, the One affirming his existence through Her- the Other, while in turn, the Other would achieve her subjectivity as the One by receiving a similar affirmation. This is the normative model for emancipation that Beauvoir proposes.

If we incorporate Bataille's ideas about immanence in this, one gets a slightly different version of the human condition and its route to emancipation. In Bataille's analysis of the archaic mind, the human being seeks both modes of existence, immanence and transcendence, a desire for unity with Nature along with a simultaneous need to be independent of it, an ambiguous aspiration that keeps him in a state of anxiety. In fact, Beauvoir too hints towards this ambiguity when she says that man “aspires in contradictory fashion both to life and repose, to existence and merely being.” (**Beauvoir,2009,172**) In pursuit of this aim, man posits the woman as the Other and subdues her. Is authentic transcendence thus achieved by man ?

The implications of the path proposed by Bataille leads us to view the issue of the dialectic of Transcendence in a modified manner. If man denies woman Transcendence by keeping her in state of immanence, woman too denies man authentic immanence by refusing to embrace her possibilities of transcendence. In the paradigm that Bataille constructs, the inescapable conclusion is that both man and woman rise and fall together. It might appear that by determining his existence on the facade of the Other, man achieves his freedom. But by denying her transcendence, he moves further in the world of Things and ends up alienating himself to the extent that all hope of his return to “immanence” is lost. The more the woman acquiesces in her immanence, the less is the possibility of authentic attainment by man. By subduing nature and by subduing woman, he has gone so far in manipulation that the whole existence has become a tool for him and there is no possibility of an experience of the unity with nature. Only the woman, by achieving her own transcendence by a self-willed transformation of her being, can impart to man the opportunity to touch the depths

of his immanence and attain wholeness, which is freedom. A reciprocal alterity, as Beauvoir demands, is an imperative for both of them.

CONCLUSION : A reading of Beauvoir with Bataille significantly enriches our understanding of the human condition, especially in the exploration of the deepest recesses of our consciousness where we still retain remnants of our archaic past. Beauvoir's insights acquire a different dimension when seen through the prism of Bataille's exploration of primitive mind. Moreover, some of the missing links in Beauvoir's account of the human condition is amply complemented by Bataille's insights in the nature of primeval human consciousness.

The Second Sex remains an illuminating and comprehensive text that can be read in myriad ways profitably. A breath-taking range of ideas that have dominated world history stretching from the earliest man to the modern era has been covered. One of the criticisms of *The Second Sex* is that Beauvoir was unduly influenced by Sartre in the formulation of her ideas while writing the essay. Whether or not Sartre had anything to do with the essay, it is worthwhile to recall Sartre's advice regarding a fruitful appraisal of a text which requires readers to proactively participate in a creative experience with the author. Reading Beauvoir with Bataille is one such exercise that a serious reader of *The Second Sex* can undertake to further enrich an understanding of the celebrated essay.

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