

## Research Paper

## The image of woman in Simone De Beauvoir's novels

Dr. Gulab Jha

Dept. Of Foreign Languages  
Gauhati University  
Guwahati

## ABSTRACT

*"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman-Simone de Beauvoir: The Second Sex (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301*

*Born in the morning of January 9, 1908, Simone-Ernestine-Lucie-Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir was a precocious and intellectually curious child from the beginning. Beauvoir's intellectual zeal was nourished by her father who provided her with carefully edited selections from the great works of literature and who encouraged her to read and write from an early age. Beauvoir always wanted to be a writer and a teacher, rather than a mother and a wife and pursued her studies with vigor.*

She passed the baccalauréat examination in mathematics and philosophy in 1925. She then studied mathematics at the Institute Catholique and literature and languages at the Institute Sainte-Marie, passing exams in 1926 for Certificates of Higher Studies in French literature and Latin, before beginning her study of philosophy in 1927. Studying philosophy at the Sorbonne, Beauvoir passed examinations for Certificates in History of Philosophy, General Philosophy, Greek, and Logic in 1927, and in 1928, in Ethics, Sociology, and Psychology. She wrote a graduate diplôme on Leibniz for Léon Brunschvig and completed her practice teaching at the lycée Janson-de-Sailly with fellow students, Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lévi-Strauss – with both of whom she remained in philosophical dialogue. In 1929, she took second place in the highly competitive philosophy aggregation exam beating Paul Nizan and Jean Hyppolite and barely losing to Jean-Paul Sartre who took first. It was during this time at the École Normale where she met Sartre. For the rest of their lives, they were to remain “essential” lovers, while allowing for “contingent” love affairs whenever each desired. Although never marrying (despite Sartre's proposal in 1931), having children together, or even living in the same home, Sartre and Beauvoir remained intellectual and romantic partners until Sartre's death in 1980. “When Sartre and I met not only did our backgrounds fuse, but also our solidity, our individual conviction that we were what we were made to be. In That Frame work we could not become rivals. Then as the relationship between Sartre and me grew, I became convinced that I was irreplaceable in his life, and he in mine. In other words were totally secure in the knowledge that our relationship was also totally solid, again preordained, though, of course, we would have laughed at that word then. When we have such security it's easy not to be jealous. But I had thought that another woman played the same role as I did in Sartre's life, of course, I would have been jealous”.<sup>1</sup> The liberal intimate arrangement between her and Sartre was extremely progressive for the time and often unfairly tarnished Beauvoir's reputation as a woman intellectual equal

to her male counterparts. In 1931, Beauvoir was appointed to teach in a lycée at Marseilles whereas Sartre's appointment landed him in Le Havre. In 1932, Beauvoir moved to the Lycée Jeanne d'Arc in Rouen where she taught advanced literature and philosophy. Here she was officially reprimanded for her overt criticisms of woman's situation and her pacifism. Following a parental complaint made against her for corrupting one of her female students, she was dismissed from teaching in that school in 1943. She decided never to return to teaching.

Although she loved the classroom environment. As stated earlier Beauvoir had always wanted to be an author from her earliest childhood. Her collection of short stories on women, *Quand prime le spirituel* (When Things of the Spirit Come First) was rejected for publication and not published until many years later (1979). However, her fictionalized account of the triangular relationship between herself, Sartre and her student, Olga Kosakievicz, *L'Invitée* (She Came to Stay), was published in 1943. This novel, written from 1935 to 1937 (and read by Sartre in manuscript form as he began writing *Being and Nothingness*) successfully gained her public recognition. Following advance extracts which appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948, Beauvoir published her revolutionary, two-volume investigation into woman's oppression, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex) in 1949. Although previous to writing this work she had never considered herself to be a “feminist,” As she confessed in an Interview “In researching and writing *The Second Sex* I did come to realize that my privileges were the result having abdicated, in some crucial respects at least, my womanhood.”<sup>2</sup> *The Second Sex* solidified her as a feminist figure for the remainder of her life. By far her most controversial work, this book was embraced by feminists and intellectuals, as well as mercilessly attacked by both the right and the left. The 70's famous feminist movements considered it the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement though De Beauvoir disagreed with this idea saying “The current feminist movement, which really started about five or six

years ago, did not really know the book.” 3. In 1970, Beauvoir helped to launch the French Women's Liberation Movement in signing the Manifesto of the 343 for abortion rights and in 1973; she instituted a feminist section in *Les Temps Modernes*. Beauvoir says “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” By this Beauvoir means to destroy the essentialism which claims that women are not born feminine but are rather constructed to be such through social indoctrination. Women at each stage are forced to relinquish their claims to transcendence and authentic subjectivity by a progressively more stringent acceptance of the passive and alienation role to men's active subjective demands. Women's passivity and alienation are then explored what Beauvoir entitles her situation and her justification. Beauvoir studies the role of wife, mother and prostitute to show how women instead of transcending through work and creativity are forced into monotonous existence and being the sexual receptacles of the male libido. Men possess what Beauvoir describes as the original aspiration to dominate the other and she argues they have more than adequately demonstrated this proclivity in the past two thousand years of history. Frequently careless and uncaring in their dealings with women, men emerge as insensitive and selfish creatures, content to brutalize women and hypocritical in the moral systems which they erect to control women's behavior. Men as Beauvoir points out will frequently persuade or threaten women into adultery, abortion or moral compromise and unprincipled action, yet are the same people who construct savage laws against divorce or abortion of women's economic independence. Relation between the sexes are therefore constructed around a dialectic of male dominance and female passivity, a form of relationship which encourage men in unthinking authorization and dominance and women in passivity and deviousness. Beauvoir herself lived an independent life and rejected those relationship which constraints social action and mobility. She remained unmarried and freed herself from domestic tyranny and responsibility of pregnancy, the care of children and a life of endless household drudgery. Freeing herself from marriage and involving with Sartre as on unmarried couple, she had all the time for herself, to establish herself as an individual being. Simone De Beauvoir analyses of women as they should be in “second sex' finds an expression in her novel *The Mandarins*. She has painted her female character with the qualities to be par with men. She advocated economic independence, praised emotional autonomy and advocated against motherhood which are seen to be presented in her female characters. Beauvoir wanted women to dedicate their time and energy in developing, themselves free from household duties and responsibilities. “I am now prepared to love you for what you are and not for what I want .you have your mission and that has come above all else” 4

Beauvoir's love is pre-dominated by sexual relationship. Her novel *The Mandarins* also is plotted around the theme of sexuality. *The Mandarins* expresses a love for the body and a violation of the dominant cultural codes concerning sexual relation. In a 1978 interview Beauvoir underlined the importance of sexuality in her work by commenting that if she were to rewrite her memories; she would give a frank and balanced account of her own sexuality which she saw as not only a personal matter but also a political.4 [Schwarzer 1984-84-85]. Beauvoir in the *Mandarins* depicts the sexuality from the woman's point of view. She stresses her view all the way through the character like Anne and Nadine that sexual pleasure is as important for a woman as a man. Anne and Nadine are new women who

cross the precincts of culture and chose moments of happiness for themselves. Anne and her husband Robert share the same commitments, but she is not sexually satisfied with her husband. Robert has lost desire and both of them have liked a life of chastity for five years. But Anne's sexual desire still exists and to accept the challenge of her daughter Nadine spent one night with Scressine. Later on she is seen fulfilling her desire with Lewis Brogan. For Anne her life in Paris is as important for her as well as her desire to have sexual relation with Lewis. Throughout the novel she is seen visiting Chicago three times to satisfy her desire. But her relationship ends, as Lewis could not tolerate Anne's life in Paris. After her break up with Lewis, Anne feels that her happiness has come to an end and hopes to be happy again in life. Therefore she allows Anne to go beyond the norms of society and to make herself happy. Nadine is presented as a woman who sleeps with different person. For her to sleep with men is as indifferent as sitting down to eat. In the second sex Beauvoir argued that male sexuality is far less beset with problem than that of women: thus in her novels she gives this statement of fact a fictional expression and repeatedly suggest a pattern of sexuality in which women invariably become deeply attached to the men with whom they have sexual relations, while the man are far more inclined to dismiss sexual encounters as unimportant, or at any rate place them at a far lower level of significance than do women. This pattern reflects the common place of ideology of the west where men have natural sexual needs which have to be expressed while women's sexual needs are far more generalized than those of men, and a great deal more emotionally charged. In the *Mandarins* it seemed normal to Robert to pick up a whore in a bar and spend an hour with her. But Paula and Anne are attached with the men with whom they had sexual relation, Paula turned into insanity after her break up with Henri and Anne lost the hope of surviving after her break up with Lewis Brogan. Henri is seen switching from one women to another and has no regret at the end of any relation even the long ten years affairs with Paula. Beauvoir recalls in her memories the concept of homosexuality. She observes homosexuality can be for women a mode of flight from her situation as a way of accepting it. Women's homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh. And if nature is to be involved, one can say that all women are naturally homosexual. In the *Mandarins* the novelist does not directly reveals that Marie Agnes and Anne are homosexuals but leaves a hint on it. On the Claudie's party Anne refuses the invitation of Marie Agnes to dinner. But she regrets for it and thinks, “I would have enjoyed dinning with her, but I knew only too well how it would have turned out: she feared men, played at being the little girl: She would have lost no time in offering me her heart and her frail little body. If I turned down her invitation, it was not that the situation frightened me, but rather that I foresaw it inevitable outcome too clearly to be able to enjoy it”6. Beauvoir clearly hints here a glimpse of lesbianism. Marie Agnes in *The Mandarins* is afraid of men and so she desire to offer her frail little body to Anne. Beauvoir has advocated for free love which rejects marriage, seen as a form of social bondage especially for women. According to this concept, the free union of adults is legitimate relations which should be respected by all third parties whether they are emotional or sexual relation. Simone de Beauvoir in her second sex asserts that 'it is for their common welfare that the situation must be altered by prohibiting marriage as a carrier for women de Beauvoir asserts that “it is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the

wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim. just as he wants her to be at once warm and cool in bed, he requires her to be wholly his and yet no burden, he wishes her to establish him in a fixed place on earth and to leave him free, to assume the monotonous daily round and not be bore him; To be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; To live as one of a couple and To remain alone. Thus she is betrayed the day he marries.”<sup>7</sup> This view finds expression though the character of Henri and Paula. They are an unmarried couple who have been living together for ten years. Henri had a great affection for Paula but as the novel begins the affection has come to an end on the part of Henri. He wants a life of independence and to him independence means solitude. Paula possessed feminine quality for which love is both her life and her vocation. She no longer appeals to him as she was ten years earlier. On the Christmas day when Paula dressed herself in violet Henri says, “You are positively dedicated to violet he said smiling. But you adore violet she said. He had been adoring violet for past ten years, ten years was a long time .....it was all so useless, he told himself. In green or yellow he would never again see her the women who that day ten years earlier he had desired so much when she had nonchalantly held out her violet gloves to him”<sup>8</sup> . But Henri could not ask for total disengagement as Paula has given him the freedom which he wants and finds a trap in its. Paula could not escape herself from jealousy and forbids Henri to take Nadine with him to Portugal. Henri says to Paula on the one hand she talks of freedom and on the other imposes restriction on him. Henri agrees not to take Nadine with him on the condition that Paula should never stalk of granting him independence. Paula had no measures to defend herself and to maintain her relationship with Henri. The latter accepts the decision to take Nadine with him and says, “You see how much I respect you freedom” Though Henri's desire for Paula is no longer seen but at the same time he has sympathy towards her . When he leaves for Portugal, he knew that Paula is unhappy and shall be weeping. He therefore decides to write her as soon he reaches Portugal. Paula is aware of her position in Henri's life. Paula stays within the four walls of the house without seeing any one and going anywhere. Henri wants Paula to start her career as a singer again, and wants her to live an independent life. Henri wants Paula not to spoil the beautiful moments they shared together by sleeping again. Henri could not say himself that he won't be seeing Paula again and sends a letter. As he says to Paula “we are only hurting each other. It's better that we stop seeing each other completely. Try not to think of me anymore. I hope one day we well be able to become friends.”<sup>9</sup> Paula could not tolerate her disengagement and goes to insanity. The culture of free love generally lacks commitment. The love ends at any moment, as in the case of Henri: The one of the couple is victimized either man woman. Paula is a victim of Anne. Almost all the characters in the novel have sexual relationship with one or the other without involving themselves in social marriage. After leaving Paula Henri is engaged with Josette who has used him for making herself a successful actress. She is not at all romantically attached to him. Josette is also engaged with an American captain before she was engaged to Henri. Anne's daughter Nadine also lives as an unmarried couple with Lambert, but ends due to some misunderstanding between them.

Free love opposes the idea of forceful sexual activity in a relationship and advocacy for women to use her body in any way that she pleases. Most of Beauvoir's female

characters find satisfaction and pleasure in free love. Anne finds herself a new woman in the arms of Brogan, as Robert had no desire for her and lived a life of chastity for five years. So, also Nadine removes her loneliness by engaging herself in free love with Lambert and Henri. But this culture of free love at the same time opens the way for female unhappiness and destruction. Women generally possess feminine quality which they cannot dispose off. Women those attached with men through sexual relationship find themselves attached to them and cannot be unfaithful towards them. But women to men are mere sexual object, though sexually related to them, can break their relationship at one's desire, and find happiness in new women. Henri says to Paula, “May be its different with a women but it is impossible for a men to desire body indefinitely. You are as beautiful as ever but you have become familiar to me”<sup>10</sup> . The long ten years of attachment and affection comes to an end only because of men's desire to involve themselves with unfamiliar women. And women again become the prey to men's desire. Francis Barry was also a prominent advocate for the free love movement in the middle to late 19th century. He agreed that marriage socially bound women to men and that women should be free. Although this movement largely concerned women, the chief organizers were mostly men, one of them being Francis Barly. “This helped foster a male ideology, and proved to women, such as Mary Gove Nichol's and Victoria Wood hull that men were just as serious were about this issue. Although men were the main contributors to the organized and written part of the free love movement, the movement was still associated with loud and flashy women. There were two reasons for why free love was more agreeable to men. The first reason was that woman lost more than men did, if marriage were to become 'Undermined'. The second reason was that free love 'rested' on the faith in individualism a quality most women were afraid or unable to accept.”<sup>11</sup>

Due to the culture of free love and open marriage, there is a lack of family bonds in the novels of Beauvoir. In the Mandarins almost all character except Paula hankers after their satisfaction and pleasure. The characters do not have any bond between them. It is only to achieve their goal or to satisfy themselves that they are bound by one another. Anne and her daughter Nadine do not possess the affection which is generally seen between the mother and her daughter. In fact Anne never wanted her; it was Robert who wanted to have a child right away. A child is seen as making the relationship much stronger. But such relationship is not seen in Anne and Nadine. The whole responsibility of making the relationship only a formal one lies on Anne who does not possess much affection towards her daughter. Anne says “I have always held it against Nadine that upset my life alone with Robert. I loved Robert too much and I was n't interested in enough in myself to be moved by the discovery of his features or mine on the face of the little intruder. Without feeling any particular affection, I took notice of her blue eyes, her hair her nose. I scold her as little as possible but she was well aware of reticence to her.”<sup>12</sup> Anne's lack of affection towards her daughter makes her stubborn and a spoiled child who is not at the control of her parents. When Nadine began seeking and fleeing Diego in bed after bed, Anne wanted to do something she has tried to take with her, she ran away. She did not return to the flat until the next morning. The next day Nadine disappeared leaving a note which said, 'I am leaving'. Robert searched her all that night, the next day and all of another night. At five 'O' clock in the morning a bartender in one of the Montparnasse cafes

telephoned and said that he found Nadine, dead drunk and with a black eye stretched out on a seat on one of the berths of the bar. Robert says to Anne to give her freedom and it would be worse if they try to restraint her. Anne disapproves of Nadine conduct but she is forced to give her freedom against her will, Anne accepts that had I loved her more their relationship might have been different. Nadine though she lived with her parents, finds herself lonely after Diego's death. Anne is aware of her daughter's loneliness but she could not hold her and convince her that she is not lonely. Anne says to Robert the reason that Nadine grabs one man after another is that she does not feel she is alive. The affection and love which should be seen between a mother and a child is absent much of their time is seen to be devoted to their personal pleasure. Both Anne and Robert have lost the desire for each other. The bond of husband and wife is absent in them. They are attached with each other as intellectuals sharing their views and feelings. Anne would not have thrown herself in the hands of Brogan, if Robert would have fulfilled her desire and would have shown the affection which is to be present between husband and wife. To change herself and to live a life of happiness Anne chooses to indulge in adultery, which is solely due to the lack of bond in her family. When Anne's relationship with Brogan ends she feels lonely and almost lost the hope of surviving. Nadine loves Henri. I am no important to her. Robert has been happy with me as he would have been with someone else or none. Give him paper, time and he lacks for nothing. He'll miss me, of course; but he is not given to sorrowing and besides, he too will soon be under the earth. Lewis has needed me though. "It's too late to start, too late to start over again; I gave myself reasons, all my reason have left me, he doesn't need me anymore."<sup>13</sup> Anne though being with her family suffers from loneliness. Beauvoir's characters are more attached by emotional autonomy rather than by emotional attachment. Anne and Lewis Brogan has had affair which means a lot to both of them. But such attachment has no place before emotional autonomy and independence. Anne acts like a selfish woman who wanted both her life in Paris and Brogan at the same time which was not accepted. The never ending love which they seem to develop comes to an end without any regret on the part of Lewis. The Relationship of Lambert and Nadine is not based on love and bond for each other. Nadine wanted to escape herself from loneliness, and lives with Lambert. But the relationship without love cannot be a permanent one; as a result some misunderstandings occur and end the relations. Later on Nadine Marries Henri only to remove her boredom. Nadine is not sure whether Henri really loves her or not. Though he tries to convince her but she is not seen to be convinced. The characters of Beauvoir are free from the bond of love and affection and do not find solace in one another. Due to lack of bond all the characters are unhappy in one way or the other and hanker here and there for happiness. In The Mandarins Anne's adultery is due to her husband Robert. He has lost his desire and does not think about his life. He permits her to do as she likes without any interference. Anne breaks the conventional law of the society; she does not forbid her daughter Nadine also. Anne has no regret at her conduct she had a desire to continue her adulterous relationship with Bogan which was not liked by him. He wanted Anne to have either Robert or himself. Beauvoir says that woman should be independent to identify her as an individual being. But this independency of a woman brings a lack of motherhood in a woman. Anne in The Mandarins is a mother possession an independent

identity as a psychoanalyst but is a woman devoid of motherhood. She says I had not wanted her (Nadine); it was Robert who wanted to have a child right away. "I have always held it against Nadine that she upset my life alone with Robert. I loved Robert too much and I was not interested in enough in myself to be moved by the discovery of his features as mine on the face of that little intruder. Without feeling any particular affection, I took notice of her blue eyes, her hair, and her nose. I scolded hers as little as possible, but she was well aware of my reticence; to her. I've always been suspect. No little girls have ever fought more tenaciously to triumph over her rival for her father's heart. And she's never resigned herself to belonging to the same species as I. and at the same time it is also true that she has a concern for her daughter" <sup>14</sup>. Anne knew that Lambert loved her daughter and would have kept her happy and so invented Nadine to marry him. But could not force her daughter as the gap between them is so much that Nadine does not obey her mother. She gave her total independence not due to willingness but due to the gap which is between them. Anne's such attitude towards her daughter makes her a rebellious and a stubborn daughter. She feels herself lonely after Diego's death and to remove her loneliness throws herself to any man. Not only Anne is responsible for her daughter's rebellious nature, so also her father Robert. Throughout the novel there is no scene of lovely conversation between the father and the daughter. He is so busy in his works that he does not have a single minute for his daughter. Anne acts as the mediator between the father and the daughter, though it was he who wanted her. Nadine too does not possess much affection towards her parents. Henri is of the view that Nadine's relationship to her is very strange. "Why strange? Nadine said annoyed. I'm very fond of her, but she often gets on my Nerves. I suppose it's the same with her. There's really nothing unusual about it; that's the way family relationships are" <sup>15</sup>. In fact Beauvoir wanted woman to take away power from the men only to establish equality as she says to John Gerassi: "I had accepted the male values and was living accordingly. Of course, I was quite successful, and that reinforced in me the belief that man and woman could be equal if the woman wanted such equality."<sup>16</sup>

#### References

1. Interview by John Gerassi in Society (January-February 1976
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. De Beauvoir Simone. The Mandarins, pg 137
5. De Beauvoir interview with Schwarzer
6. de Beauvoirs Simone, second sex, pg 500
7. Nena O Neil and George O Neil. Open marriage 1972
8. de Beauvoirs Simone, second sex, pg 500
9. ibid pg 536
10. ibid pg, 379
11. Spurlock John. A Masculine view of Womens freedom, free love in the 19 th Century International Social Science 69.314(1994)26 ibid pg
12. Simons A Margaret(ed) Feminist Interpretation of Simone de Beauvoir page-82
13. ibid pg, 759
14. de Beauvoirs Simone, second sex pg, 82
15. ibid. pg, 724
16. Interview by John Gerassi in Society (January-February 1976