

The Second Sex

Author's Introduction

by Simone de Beauvoir

For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in the quarrelling over feminism, now practically over, and perhaps we should say no more about it. It is still talked about, however, for the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? Are there women, really? Most assuredly the theory of the eternal feminine still has its adherents who will whisper in your ear: 'Even in Russia women still are *women*'; and other erudite persons – sometimes the very same – say with a sigh: 'Woman is losing her way, woman is lost.' One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in the world, what their place should be. 'What has become of women?' was asked recently in an ephemeral magazine.¹

But first we must ask: what is a woman? '*Tota mulier in utero*,' says one, 'woman is a womb.' But in speaking of certain women, connoisseurs declare that they are not women, although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest. All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by the ovaries? Or is it a Platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination? Is a rustling petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women try zealously to incarnate this essence, it is hardly patentable. It is frequently described in vague and dazzling terms that seem to have been borrowed from the vocabulary of the seers, and indeed in the times of St. Thomas it was considered an essence as certainly defined as the somniferous virtue of the poppy.

But conceptualism has lost ground. The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any characteristic as a reaction dependent in part upon a *situation*. If today femininity no longer exists, then it never existed. But does the word *woman*, then, have no specific content? This is stoutly affirmed by those who hold to the philosophy of the enlightenment, of rationalism, of nominalism; women, to them, are merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word *woman*. Many American women particularly are prepared to think that there is no longer any place for woman as such; if a backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to be psychoanalyzed and thus get rid of this obsession. In regard to a work, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which in other respects has its irritating features, Dorothy Parker has written: 'I cannot be just to books which treat of woman as woman . . . My idea is that all of us, men as well as women, should be regarded as human beings.' But nominalism is a rather inadequate doctrine, and the antifeminists have had no trouble in showing that women simply *are not* men. Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual. To decline to accept such notions as the eternal feminine, the black soul, the Jewish character, is not to deny that Jews, Negroes, women exist today – this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality. Some years ago a well-known woman writer refused to permit her portrait to appear in a series of photographs especially devoted to women writers; she wished to be counted among the men. But in order to gain this privilege she made use of her husband's influence! Women who assert that they are men lay claim none the less to masculine consideration and respect. I recall also a young Trotskyite standing on a platform at a boisterous meeting and getting ready to use her fists, in spite of her evident fragility. She was denying her feminine weakness; but it was for love of a militant male whose equal she wished to be. The attitude of defiance of many American

women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity. In truth, to go for a walk with one's eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two classes of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that right now they do most obviously exist.

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define 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?

To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male.² But if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion. A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man. The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: 'You think thus and so because you are a woman'; but I know that my only defense is to reply: 'I think thus and so because it is true,' thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: 'And you think the contrary because you are a man', for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it. '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 for his part pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Michelet writes: 'Woman, the relative being . . .' And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: 'The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself . . . Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man.' And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.³

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent on any empirical facts. It is revealed in such works as that of Granet on Chinese thought and those of Dumézil on the East Indies and Rome. The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.

Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged.

Lévi-Strauss, at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion: 'Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man's ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality.'⁴ These phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society were simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. Things become clear, on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.

But the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim. The native traveling abroad is shocked to find himself in turn regarded as a 'stranger' by the natives of neighboring countries. As a matter of fact, wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests among tribes, nations, and classes tend to deprive the concept *Other* of its absolute sense and to make manifest its relativity; willy-nilly, individuals and groups are forced to realize the reciprocity of their relations. How is it, then, that this reciprocity has not been recognized between the sexes, that one of the contrasting terms is set up as the sole essential, denying any relativity in regard to its correlative and defining the latter as pure otherness? Why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?

There are, to be sure, other cases in which a certain category has been able to dominate another completely for a time. Very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers – the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth. Again, the two groups concerned have often been originally independent; they may have been formerly unaware of each other's existence, or perhaps they recognized each other's autonomy. But a historical event has resulted in the subjugation of the weaker by the stronger. The scattering of the Jews, the introduction of slavery into America, the conquests of imperialism are examples in point. In these cases the oppressed retained at least the memory of former days; they possessed in common a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion or a culture.

The parallel drawn by Bebel between women and the proletariat is valid in that neither ever formed a minority or a separate collective unit of mankind. And instead of a single historical event it is in both cases a historical development that explains their status as a class and accounts for the membership of *particular individuals* in that class. But proletarians have not always existed, whereas there have always been women. They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology. Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men,⁵ and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change – it was not something that *occurred*. The reason why otherness in this case seems to be an absolute is in part that it lacks the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts. A condition brought about at a certain time can be abolished at some other time, as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved; but it might seem that a natural condition is beyond the possibility of change. In truth, however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be

the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change. Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also. Regarding themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into 'others'. But women do not say 'We', except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say 'women', and women use the same word in referring to themselves. They do not authentically assume a subjective attitude. The proletarians have accomplished the revolution in Russia, the Negroes in Haiti, the Indo-Chinese are battling for it in Indo-China; but the women's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation. They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.⁶

The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews, the workers of Saint-Denis, or the factory hands of Renault. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not to proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Negro women. The proletariat can propose to massacre the ruling class, and a sufficiently fanatical Jew or Negro might dream of getting sole possession of the atomic bomb and making humanity wholly Jewish or black; but woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history. Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible. Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in the totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.

One could suppose that this reciprocity might have facilitated the liberation of woman. When Hercules sat at the feet of Omphale and helped with her spinning, his desire for her held him captive; but why did she fail to gain a lasting power? To revenge herself on Jason, Medea killed their children; and this grim legend would seem to suggest that she might have obtained a formidable influence over him through his love for his offspring. In *Lysistrata* Aristophanes gaily depicts a band of women who joined forces to gain social ends through the sexual needs of their men; but this is only a play. In the legend of the Sabine women, the latter soon abandoned their plan of remaining sterile to punish their ravishers. In truth woman has not been socially emancipated through man's need – sexual desire and the desire for offspring – which makes the male dependent for satisfaction upon the female.

Master and slave, also, are united by a reciprocal need, in this case economic, which does not liberate the slave. In the relation of master to slave the master does not make a point of the need that he has for the other; he has in his grasp the power of satisfying this need through his own action; whereas the slave, in his dependent condition, his hope and fear, is quite conscious of the need he has for his master. Even if the need is at bottom equally urgent for both, it always works in favor of the oppressor and against the oppressed. That is why the liberation of the working class, for example, has been slow.

Now, woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores. In the economic sphere men and women can almost be said to make up two castes; other things being equal, the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages, and have more opportunity for success than their new competitors. In industry and politics men have a great many more positions and they monopolize the most

important posts. In addition to all this, they enjoy a traditional prestige that the education of children tends in every way to support, for the present enshrines the past – and in the past all history has been made by men. At the present time, when women are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world, it is still a world that belongs to men – they have no doubt of it at all and women have scarcely any. To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal – this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide women-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forego liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it – passive, lost, ruined – becomes henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence. When man makes of woman the *Other*, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies toward complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.

But it will be asked at once: how did all this begin? It is easy to see that the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. And doubtless the winner will assume the status of absolute. But why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; or that the outcome of the conflict might never have been decided. How is it that the world has always belonged to the men and that things have begun to change only recently? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women?

These questions are not new, and they have often been answered. But the very fact that woman *is the Other* tends to cast suspicion upon all the justifications that men have ever been able to provide for it. These have all too evidently been dictated by men's interest. A little-known feminist of the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: 'All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.' Everywhere, at all times, the males have displayed their satisfaction in feeling that they are the lords of creation. 'Blessed be God . . . that He did not make me a woman,' say the Jews in their morning prayers, while their wives pray on a note of resignation: 'Blessed be the Lord, who created me according to His will.' The first among the blessings for which Plato thanked the gods was that he had been created free, not enslaved; the second, a man, not a woman. But the males could not enjoy this privilege fully unless they believed it to be founded on the absolute and eternal; they sought to make the fact of their supremacy into a right. 'Being men, those who have made and compiled the laws have favored their own sex, and jurists have elevated these laws into principles', to quote Poulain de la Barre once more.

Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religions invented by men reflect this wish for domination. In the legends of Eve and Pandora men have taken up arms against women. They have made use of philosophy and theology, as the quotations from Aristotle and St. Thomas have shown. Since ancient times satirists and moralists have delighted in showing up the weaknesses of women. We are familiar with the savage indictments hurled against women throughout French literature. Montherlant, for example, follows the tradition of Jean de Meung, though with less gusto. This hostility may at times be well founded, often it is gratuitous; but in truth it more or less successfully conceals a desire for self-justification. As Montaigne says, 'It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other.' Sometimes what is going on is clear enough. For instance, the Roman law limiting the rights of woman cited 'the imbecility, the instability of the sex' just when the weakening of family ties seemed to threaten the interests of male heirs. And in the effort to keep the married woman under guardianship, appeal was made in the sixteenth century to the authority of St. Augustine, who declared that 'woman is a creature neither decisive nor constant', at a time when the single woman was thought capable

of managing her property. Montaigne understood clearly how arbitrary and unjust was woman's appointed lot: 'Women are not in the wrong when they decline to accept the rules laid down for them, since the men make these rules without consulting them. No wonder intrigue and strife abound.' But he did not go so far as to champion their cause.

It was only later, in the eighteenth century, that genuinely democratic men began to view the matter objectively. Diderot, among others, strove to show that woman is, like man, a human being. Later John Stuart Mill came fervently to her defense. But these philosophers displayed unusual impartiality. In the nineteenth century the feminist quarrel became again a quarrel of partisans. One of the consequences of the industrial revolution was the entrance of women into productive labor, and it was just here that the claims of the feminists emerged from the realm of theory and acquired an economic basis, while their opponents became the more aggressive. Although landed property lost power to some extent, the bourgeoisie clung to the old morality that found the guarantee of private property in the solidity of the family. Woman was ordered back into the home the more harshly as her emancipation became a real menace. Even within the working class the men endeavored to restrain woman's liberation, because they began to see women as dangerous competitors – the more so because they were accustomed to work for lower wages.⁷

In proving woman's inferiority, the antifeminists then began to draw not only upon religion, philosophy, and theology, as before, but also upon science – biology, experimental psychology, etc. At most they were willing to grant 'equality in difference' to the *other* sex. That profitable formula is most significant; it is precisely like the 'equal but separate' formula of the Jim Crow laws aimed at the North American Negroes. As is well known, this so-called equalitarian segregation has resulted only in the most extreme discrimination. The similarity just noted is in no way due to chance, for whether it is a race, a caste, a class, or a sex that is reduced to a position of inferiority, the methods of justification are the same. 'The eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul' and to 'the Jewish character'. True, the Jewish problem is on the whole very different from the other two – to the anti-Semite the Jew is not so much an inferior as he is an enemy for whom there is to be granted no place on earth, for whom annihilation is the fate desired. But there are deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro. Both are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to 'keep them in their place' – that is, the place chosen for them. In both places the former masters lavish more or less sincere eulogies, either on the virtues of 'the good Negro' with his dormant, childish, merry soul – the submissive Negro – or on the merits of the woman who is 'truly feminine' – that is, frivolous, infantile, irresponsible – the submissive woman. In both cases the dominant class bases its argument on a state of affairs that it has itself created. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, in substance, 'The American white relegates the black to the rank of shoeshine boy; and he concludes from this that the black is good for nothing but shining shoes.' This vicious circle is met with in all analogous circumstances; when an individual (or a group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he *is* inferior. But the significance of the verb to *be* must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'. Yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men; that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities. The question is: should that state of affairs continue?

Many men hope that it will continue; not all have given up the battle. The conservative bourgeoisie still see in the emancipation of women a menace to their morality and their interests. Some men dread feminine competition. Recently a male student wrote in the *Hebdo-Latin*: 'Every woman student who goes into medicine or law robs us of a job.' He never questioned his rights in this world. And economic interests are not the only ones concerned. One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to *feel* superior; thus, a 'poor white' in the South can console himself with the thought that he is not a 'dirty nigger' – and the more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride.

Similarly, the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women. It was much easier for M. de Montherlant to think himself a hero when he faced women (and women

chosen for his purpose) than when he was obliged to act the man among men – something many women have done better than he, for that matter. And in September 1948, in one of his articles in the *Figaro littéraire*, Claude Mauriac – whose great originality is admired by all – could⁸ write regarding woman: ‘We listen on a tone [*sic!*] of polite indifference . . . to the most brilliant among them, well knowing that her wit reflects more or less luminously ideas that come from *us*.’ Evidently the speaker referred to is not reflecting the ideas of Mauriac himself, for no one knows of his having any. It may be that she reflects ideas originating with men, but then, even among men there are those who have been known to appropriate ideas not their own; and one can well ask whether Claude Mauriac might not find more interesting a conversation reflecting Descartes, Marx, or Gide rather than himself. What is really remarkable is that by using the questionable *we* he identifies himself with St. Paul, Hegel, Lenin, and Nietzsche, and from the lofty eminence of their grandeur looks down disdainfully upon the bevy of women who make bold to converse with him on a footing of equality. In truth, I know of more than one woman who would refuse to suffer with patience Mauriac’s ‘tone of polite indifference’.

I have lingered on this example because the masculine attitude is here displayed with disarming ingenuousness. But men profit in many more subtle ways from the otherness, the alterity of woman. Here is miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility. Those who are not fear-ridden in the presence of their fellow men are much more disposed to recognize a fellow creature in woman; but even to these the myth of Woman, the Other, is precious for many reasons.⁹ They cannot be blamed for not cheerfully relinquishing all the benefits they derive from the myth, for they realize what they would lose in relinquishing woman as they fancy her to be, while they fail to realize what they have to gain from the woman of tomorrow. Refusal to pose oneself as the Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial. Furthermore, the vast majority of men make no such claim explicitly. They do not *postulate* woman as inferior, for today they are too thoroughly imbued with the ideal of democracy not to recognize all human beings as equals.

In the bosom of the family, woman seems in the eyes of childhood and youth to be clothed in the same social dignity as the adult males. Later on, the young man, desiring and loving, experiences the resistance, the independence of the woman desired and loved; in marriage, he respects woman as wife and mother, and in the concrete events of conjugal life she stands there before him as a free being. He can therefore feel that social subordination as between the sexes no longer exists and that on the whole, in spite of differences, woman is an equal. As, however, he observes some points of inferiority – the most important being unfitness for the professions – he attributes these to natural causes. When he is in a co-operative and benevolent relation with woman, his theme is the principle of abstract equality, and he does not base his attitude upon such inequality as may exist. But when he is in conflict with her, the situation is reversed: his theme will be the existing inequality, and he will even take it as justification for denying abstract equality.¹⁰

So it is that many men will affirm as if in good faith that women *are* the equals of man and that they have nothing to clamor for, while *at the same time* they will say that women can never be the equals of man and that their demands are in vain. It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature.¹¹ The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman’s concrete situation. And there is no reason to put much trust in the men when they rush to the defense of privileges whose full extent they can hardly measure. We shall not, then, permit ourselves to be intimidated by the number and violence of the attacks launched against women, nor to be entrapped by the self-seeking eulogies bestowed on the ‘true woman’, nor to profit by the enthusiasm for women’s destiny manifested by men who would not for the world have any part of it.

We should consider the arguments of the feminists with no less suspicion, however, for very often their controversial aim deprives them of all real value. If the 'woman question' seems trivial, it is because masculine arrogance has made of it a 'quarrel'; and when quarreling one no longer reasons well. People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man. Some say that, having been created after Adam, she is a secondary being; others say on the contrary that Adam was only a rough draft and that God succeeded in producing the human being in perfection when He created Eve. Woman's brain is smaller; yes, but it is relatively larger. Christ was made a man; yes, but perhaps for his greater humility. Each argument at once suggests its opposite, and both are often fallacious. If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.

Very well, but just how shall we pose the question? And, to begin with, who are we to propound it at all? Man is at once judge and party to the case; but so is woman. What we need is an angel – neither man nor woman – but where shall we find one? Still, the angel would be poorly qualified to speak, for an angel is ignorant of all the basic facts involved in the problem. With a hermaphrodite we should be no better off, for here the situation is most peculiar; the hermaphrodite is not really the combination of a whole man and a whole woman, but consists of parts of each and thus is neither. It looks to me as if there are, after all, certain women who are best qualified to elucidate the situation of woman. Let us not be misled by the sophism that because Epimenides was a Cretan he was necessarily a liar! It is not a mysterious essence that compels men and women to act in good or in bad faith, it is their situation that inclines them more or less toward the search for truth. Many of today's women, fortunate in the restoration of all the privileges pertaining to the estate of the human being, can afford the luxury of impartiality – we even recognize its necessity. We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large we have won the game. In recent debates on the status of women the United Nations has persistently maintained that the equality of the sexes is now becoming a reality, and already some of us have never had to sense in our femininity an inconvenience or an obstacle. Many problems appear to us to be more pressing than those which concern us in particular, and this detachment even allows us to hope that our attitude will be objective. Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge. I have said that there are more pressing problems, but this does not prevent us from seeing some importance in asking how the fact of being women will affect our lives. What opportunities precisely have been given us and what withheld? What fate awaits our younger sisters, and what directions should they take? It is significant that books by women on women are in general animated in our day less by a wish to demand our rights than by an effort toward clarity and understanding. As we emerge from an era of excessive controversy, this book is offered as one attempt among others to confirm this statement.

But it is doubtless impossible to approach any human problem with a mind free from bias. The way in which questions are put, the points of view assumed, presuppose a relativity of interest; all characteristics imply values, and every objective description, so called, implies an ethical background. Rather than attempt to conceal principles more or less definitely implied, it is better to state them openly at the beginning. This will make it unnecessary to specify on every page in just what sense one uses such words as *superior*, *inferior*, *better*, *worse*, *progress*, *reaction*, and the like. If we survey some of the works on woman, we note that one of the points of view most frequently adopted is that of the public good, the general interest; and one always means by this the benefit of society as one wishes it to be maintained or established. For our part, we hold that the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens; we shall pass judgement on institutions according to their effectiveness in giving concrete institutions to individuals. But we do not confuse the idea of private interest with that of happiness, although that is another common point of view. Are not women of the harem more happy than women voters? Is not the housekeeper happier than the working-woman? It is not too clear just what the word *happy* really means and still less what true values it may mask. There is no possibility of

measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them.

In particular those who are condemned to stagnation are often pronounced happy on the pretext that happiness consists in being at rest. This notion we reject, for our perspective is that of existentialist ethics. Every subject plays his part as such specifically through exploits of projects that serve as a mode of transcendence; he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the '*en-soi*' – the brutish life of subjection to given conditions – and of liberty into constraint and contingency. This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil. Every individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects.

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as an object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome? These are the fundamental questions on which would fain throw some light. This means that I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defines not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty.

Quite evidently this problem would be without significance if we were to believe that woman's destiny is inevitably determined by physiological, psychological, or economic forces. Hence I shall discuss first of all the light in which woman is viewed by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. Next I shall try to show exactly how the concept of the 'truly feminine' has been fashioned – why woman has been defined as the Other – and what have been the consequences from man's point of view. Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live; and thus we shall be able to envisage the difficulties in their way as, endeavoring to make their escape from the sphere hitherto assigned them, they aspire to full membership in the human race.

Introduction to Book II

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations. We must therefore study the traditional destiny of woman with some care. In Book II I shall seek to describe how woman undergoes her apprenticeship, how she experiences her situation, in what kind of universe she is confined, what modes of escape are vouchsafed her. Then only – with so much understood – shall we be able to comprehend the problems of women, the heirs of a burdensome past, who are striving to build a new future. When I use the words *woman* or *feminine* I evidently refer to no archetype, no changeless essence whatever; the reader must understand the phrase 'in the present state of education and custom' after most of my statements. It is not our concern here to proclaim eternal verities, but rather to describe the common basis that underlies every individual feminine existence.

¹ *Franchise*, dead today.

² The Kinsey Report [Alfred C. Kinsey and others: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (W. B. Saunders Co., 1948)] is no exception, for it is limited to describing the sexual characteristics of American men, which is quite a different matter.

³ E. Lévinas expresses this idea most explicitly in his essay *Temps et l'Autre*. 'Is there not a case in which otherness, alterity [*altérité*], unquestionably marks the nature of a being, as its essence, an instance of otherness not consisting purely and simply in the opposition of two species of the same genus? I think that the feminine represents the contrary in its absolute sense, this contrariness being in no wise affected by any relation between it and its correlative and thus remaining absolutely other. Sex is not a certain specific difference . . . no more is the sexual difference a mere contradiction. . . . Nor does this difference lie in the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms imply a pre-existing whole. . . . Otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine, a term of the same rank as consciousness but of opposite meaning.'

I suppose that Lévinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.

⁴ See C. Lévi-Strauss; *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. My thanks are due to C. Lévi-Strauss for his kindness in furnishing me with the proofs of his work, which, among others, I have used liberally in Part II.

⁵ With rare exceptions, perhaps, like certain matriarchal rulers, queens, and the like. -TR

⁶ See Part II, ch. viii.

⁷ See Part II, pp. 121-3.

⁸ Or at least he thought he could.

⁹ A significant article on this theme by Michel Carrouges appeared in No. 292 of the *Cahiers du Sud*. He writes indignantly: 'Would that there were no woman-myth at all but only a cohort of cooks, matrons, prostitutes, and bluestockings serving functions of pleasure or usefulness!' That is to say, in his view woman has no existence in and for herself; he thinks only of her *function* in the male world. Her reason for existence lies in man. But then, in fact, her poetic 'function' as a myth might be more valued than any other. The real problem is precisely to find out why woman should be defined with relation to man.

¹⁰ For example, a man will say that he considers his wife in no wise degraded because she has no gainful occupation. The profession of housewife is just as lofty, and so on. But when the first quarrel comes, he will exclaim: 'Why, you couldn't make your living without me!'

¹¹ The specific purpose of Book II of this study is to describe this process.

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The Second Sex

"Woman's Situation and Characters"

by Simone de Beauvoir; H.M. Parshley, trans. & ed. 01993 Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

CHAPTER XXI: Woman's Situation and Character

We can now understand why there should be so many common features in the indictments drawn up against woman, from the Greeks to our times. Her condition has remained the same through superficial changes, and it is this condition that determines what is called the 'character' of woman: she 'revels in immanence,' she is contrary, she is prudent and petty, she has no sense of fact or accuracy, she lacks morality, she is contemptibly utilitarian, she is false, theatrical, self-seeking, and so on. There is an element of truth in all this. But we must only note that the varieties of behavior reported are not dictated to woman by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of the female brain: they are shaped as in a mold by her situation. In this perspective we shall endeavor to make a comprehensive survey of woman's situation. This will involve a certain amount of repetition, but it will enable us to apprehend the eternal feminine in the totality of her economic, social, and historical conditioning.

Sometimes the 'feminine world' is contrasted with the masculine universe, but we must insist again that women have never constituted a closed and independent society; they form an integral part of the group, which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place. They are united only in a mechanical solidarity from the mere fact of their similarity, but they lack that organic solidarity on which every unified community is based; they are always compelled — at the time of the mysteries of Eleusis as today in clubs, salons, social-service institutes — to band together in order to establish a counter-universe, but they always set it up within the frame of the masculine universe. Hence the paradox of their situation: they belong at one and the same time to the male world and to a sphere in which that world is challenged; shut up in their world, surrounded by the other, they can settle down nowhere in peace. Their docility must always be matched by a refusal, their refusal by an acceptance. In this respect their attitude approaches that of the young girl, but it is more difficult to maintain, because for the adult woman it is not merely a matter of dreaming her life through symbols, but of living it out in actuality.

Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men. As for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never stood forth as subject before the other members, of the group. Shut up in her flesh, her home, she sees herself as passive before these gods with human faces who set goals and establish values. In this sense there is truth in the saying that makes her the 'eternal child.' Workers, black slaves, 'colonial natives, have also been called grown-up children — as long as they were not feared; that meant that they were to accept without argument the verities and the laws laid down for them by other men. The lot of woman is a respectful obedience. She has no grasp, even in thought, on the reality around her. It is opaque to her eyes.

And it is true that she lacks the technical training that would permit her to dominate matter. As for her, it is not matter she comes to grips with, but life; and life cannot be

mastered through the use of tools: one can only submit to its secret laws. The world does not seem to woman 'an assemblage of implements' intermediate between her will and her goals, as Heidegger defines it; it is on the contrary something obstinately resistant, unconquerable; it is dominated by fatality and shot through with mysterious caprices. This mystery of a bloody strawberry that inside the mother is transformed into a human being is one no mathematics can express in an equation no machine can hasten or delay; she feels the strength of a continuity that the most ingenious instruments are unable to divide or to multiply; she feels it in her body, swayed by the lunar rhythm and first ripened, then corrupted, by the years. Each day the kitchen also teacher of her patience and passivity; here is alchemy one must obey the fire, the water, wait for the sugar to molt, for the dough to rise, 'and also for the wash to dry, for the fruits to ripen on the shelf. Household activities come close to being technical operations, but they are too rudimentary, too monotonous, to prove to a woman the laws of mechanical causation. Besides, even here things are capricious; there are materials that will stand washing and others that will not, spots that can be removed and others that persist, objects that break all by themselves, dusts that spring up like plants.

Woman's mentality perpetuates that of agricultural civilizations which worshipped the magic powers of the land: she believes in magic. Her passive eroticism makes desire seem to her not will and aggression but an attraction akin to that which causes the divining rod to dip; the mere presence of her flesh swells and erects the male's sex; why should not hidden water make the hazel rod quiver? She feels that she is surrounded by waves, radiations, mystic fluids; she believes in telepathy, astrology, radiotherapy, mesmerism, theosophy, table-tipping, clairvoyants, faith healers; her religion is full of primitive superstition: wax candles, answered prayers; she believes the saints incarnate the ancient spirits of nature: this one protects travelers, that one women in labor, this other finds lost articles; and, of course, no prodigy can surprise her. Her attitude will be one of conjuration and prayer; to obtain a certain result, she will perform certain well-tested rites.

It is easy to see why woman clings to routine; time has for her no element of novelty, it is not a creative flow; because she is doomed to repetition, she sees in the future only a duplication of the past. If one knows the word and the formula, duration allies itself with the powers of fecundity — but this is itself subject to the rhythm of the months, the seasons; the cycle of each pregnancy, each flowering, exactly reproduces the one that preceded. In this play of cyclical phenomena the sole effect of time is a slow deterioration: it wears out furniture and clothes as it ruins the face; the reproductive powers are gradually destroyed by the passing of years. Thus woman puts no trust in this relentless force for destruction.

Not only is she ignorant of what constitutes a true action, capable of changing the face of the world, but she is lost in the midst of the world as if she were at the heart of an immense, vague nebula. She is not familiar with the use of masculine logic. Stendhal remarked that she could handle it as adroitly as a man if driven to 'it by, necessity, but it is an instrument that she hardly has occasion to use. A syllogism is of no help in nuking a successful mayonnaise, nor in quieting a child in tears; masculine reasoning is quite inadequate to the reality with which she deals. And in the world of men; her: thought, not flowing into any project, since she does nothing, is indistinguishable from daydreaming. She has no sense of factual truth, for lack of effectiveness; she never comes to grips witty

anything but words and mental pictures, and that is why the most contradictory assertions give her no uneasiness; she takes little trouble to elucidate the mysteries of a sphere that is in every way beyond her reach. She is, content, for her purposes, with extremely vague conceptions, confusing parties, opinions, places, people; events; her head is, filled with a strange jumble.

But, after all, to see things clearly is not her business, for she has been taught to accept masculine authority. So she gives up criticizing, investigating, judging for herself, and leaves all this to the superior caste. Therefore the masculine world seems to her a transcendent reality, an absolute. 'Men make the gods,' says Frazer, 'women worship them.' Men cannot kneel with complete conviction before the idols they have made; but when women encounter these mighty statues along the roads, they think they are not made with hands; and obediently bow down.¹ In particular they like to have Order and Right embodied in a leader. In every Olympus there is a supreme god; the magic male essence must be concentrated in an archetype of which, father, husband, lovers, are only faint reflections. It is rather satirical to say that their worship of this grand totem is of sexual nature; but it is true that in this worship they will fully satisfy their childhood dream of bowing the knee in resignation. In France generals like Boulanger, Main, and de Gaulle² have always had the support of the women; and one recalls, with what fluttering pens the lady journalists on the Communist paper *L'Humanité* formerly celebrated Tito and his splendid uniform. The general, the dictator — eagle-eyed, square-jawed — is the heavenly father demanded by all serious right-thinkers, the absolute guarantor of all values. Women's ineffectiveness and ignorance are what give rise to the respect accorded by them to heroes and to the laws of the masculine world; they accept them not through sound judgment but by an act of faith — and faith gets its fanatical power from the fact that it is not knowledge: it is blind, impassioned, obstinate, stupid; what it declares, it declares unconditionally, against reason, against history, against all denial.

This obstinate reverence can take one of two forms according to circumstances: it may be either the content of the law, or merely its empty form that woman passionately adheres to. If she belongs to the privileged elite that benefits from the established social order, she wants it to be unshakable and she is notably uncompromising in this desire. Man knows that he can develop different institutions, another ethic, a new legal code; aware of his ability to transcend what is, he regards history as a becoming. The most conservative man knows that some evolution is inevitable and realizes that he must adapt his action and his thinking to it; but as woman takes no part in history, she fails to understand its necessities; she is suspiciously doubtful of the future and wants to arrest the flow of time. If the idols set up by her father, her brothers, her husband, are being torn down, she can offer no way of repopulating the heavens; she rushes wildly to the defense of the old gods.

During the War of Secession no Southerners were more passionate in upholding slavery than the women. In England during the Boer War, in France during the

¹ See Sartre's play *Les Mains sales*. 'Hoederer: They need props, you understand they are given ready-made ideas, then they believe in them as they do Ili God. We're the ones who make these ideas and we know how they W cooked up; we are never quite sure of being right.' [An English translation, *Dirty Hands*; is in Jean-Paul Sartre: *Three Plays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).]

² 'When the general passed through, the public consisted largely of women and children.' (Newspaper report, of his visit to Savoy.)

Commune, it was the women who were most belligerently inflamed. They seek to compensate for their inactivity by the intensity of the sentiments they exhibit. With victory won, they rush like hyenas upon the fallen foe; in defeat, they bitterly reject any efforts at conciliation. Their ideas being merely attitudes, they support quite unconcernedly the most outdated causes: they can be legitimists in 1914, czarists in 1933. A man will sometimes smilingly encourage them, for it amuses him to see their fanatical reflections of ideas he expresses in more measured terms; but he may also find it irritating to have his ideas take on such a stupid, stubborn, aspect.

Woman assumes this indomitable attitude only in strongly integrated, civilizations and social classes. More generally, she respects the law simply because it is the law, since her faith is blind; if the law changes, it retains its spell. In woman's eyes, might makes right because the rights she recognizes in men depend upon their power. Hence it is that when a society breaks down, women are the first to throw themselves at the feet of the conquerer. On the whole, they accept what is. One of their distinguishing traits is resignation. When the ruins of Pompeii were dug it was noticed that the incinerated bodies of the men were; fixed in 'attitudes of rebellion, defying the heavens or trying, to escape, while those of the women, bent double, were bowed down with their faces toward the earth. Women feel they are powerless against things: 'volcanoes, police, patrons, men. 'Women are born to suffer,' they say; 'it's life — nothing can be done about it.

This resignation inspires the patience often admired in women. They can stand physical pain much better than men; they are capable of stoical courage when circumstances demand it; lacking the male's, aggressive audacity; many women distinguish themselves by their calm tenacity in passive resistance. They face crises, poverty, misfortune, more energetically than their husbands; respecting duration, which no haste can overcome, they do not ration their time. When they apply their quiet persistence to an enterprise, they are sometimes startlingly successful. 'Never underestimate the power of a woman,' In a generous woman resignation takes the form of forbearance: she puts up with everything, she condemns no one, because she holds that neither people nor things can be other than they are. A proud woman can make a lofty virtue of resignation, as 'did the stoical Mme de Charrière. But it also engenders a sterile prudence; women are always trying to conserve, to adapt, to arrange, rather than to destroy and build arid: they prefer compromise and adjustment to revolution.

In the nineteenth century, women were one of the greatest obstacles in the way of the effort to free the workers: for one Flora Tristan, one Louise Michel, bow, many timid housewives begged their husbands not to take any chances! They were not only afraid of strikes, unemployment, and poverty: they feared that revolt might be a mistake. It is easy to understand that, if they must suffer, they preferred what was familiar to adventuring, for they could achieve a meager welfare snore easily at home than in the streets.

Women's fate is bound up with that of perishable things; in losing them they lose all. Only a free subject, asserting himself as above and beyond the duration of things, can check all decay; this supreme recourse has been denied to woman. The real reason why she does not believe in a liberation is that she has never put the powers of liberty to a test; the world seems to her to be ruled by an obscure destiny against which it is presumptuous to rise in protest. She has not herself marked out those dangerous roads she is asked to follow, and so it is natural enough for her not to plunge into them with enthusiasm' Let the future be opened to her and she will no longer cling desperately to the past. When

women are called upon for concrete action, when they recognize their interest in the designated goals, they are as bold and courageous as men.'

The Second Sex
by Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Conclusion

‘NO, WOMAN is not our brother; through indolence and deceit we have made of her a being apart, unknown, having no weapon other than her sex, which not only means constant warfare but unfair warfare – adoring or hating, but never a straight friend, a being in a legion with *esprit de corps* and freemasonry – the defiant gestures of the eternal little slave.’

Many men would still subscribe to these words of Laforgue; many think that there will always be ‘strife and dispute’, as Montaigne put it, and that fraternity will never be possible. The fact is that today neither men nor women are satisfied with each other. But the question is to know whether there is an original curse that condemns them to rend each other or whether the conflicts in which they are opposed merely mark a transitional moment in human history.

We have seen that in spite of legends no physiological destiny imposes an eternal hostility upon Male and Female as such; even the famous praying mantis devours her male only for want of other food and for the good of the species: it is to this, the species, that all individuals are subordinated, from the top to the bottom of the scale of animal life. Moreover, humanity is something more than a mere species: it is a historical development; it is to be defined by the manner in which it deals with its natural, fixed characteristics, its facticité. Indeed, even with the most extreme bad faith, it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a rivalry between the human male and female of a truly physiological nature. Further, their hostility may be allocated rather to that intermediate terrain between biology and psychology: psychoanalysis. Woman, we are told, envies man his penis and wishes to castrate him; but the childish desire for the penis is important in the life of the adult woman only if she feels her femininity as a mutilation; and then it is as a symbol of all the privileges of manhood that she wishes to appropriate the male organ. We may readily agree that her dream of castration has this symbolic significance: she wishes, it is thought, to deprive the male of his transcendence.

But her desire, as we have seen, is much more ambiguous: she wishes, in a contradictory fashion, *to have* this transcendence, which is to suppose that she at once respects it and denies it, that she intends at once to throw herself into it and keep it within herself. This is to say that the drama does not unfold on a sexual level; further, sexuality has never seemed to us to define a destiny, to furnish in itself the key to human behaviour, but to express the totality of a situation that it only helps to define. The battle of the sexes is not implicit in the anatomy of man and woman. The truth is that when one evokes it, one takes for granted that in the timeless realm of Ideas a battle is being waged between those vague essences the Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine; and one neglects the fact that this titanic combat assumes on earth two totally different forms, corresponding with two different moments of history.

The woman who is shut up in immanence endeavours to hold man in that prison also; thus the prison will become interchangeable with the world, and woman will no longer suffer from being confined there: mother, wife, sweetheart are the jailers. Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values. But in doing this she is only defending herself; it was neither a changeless essence nor a mistaken choice that doomed her to immanence, to inferiority. They were imposed upon her. All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception. The existent who is regarded as inessential cannot fail to demand the re-establishment of her sovereignty.

Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavours to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with a bad grace that the man lets her go. He is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to accept his companion as an equal in any concrete way. She replies to his lack of confidence in her by assuming an aggressive attitude. It is no longer a question of a war between individuals each shut up in his or her sphere: a caste claiming its rights attacks and is resisted by the privileged caste. Here two transcendences are face to face; instead of displaying mutual recognition, each free being wishes to dominate the other.

This difference of attitude is manifest on the sexual plane as on the spiritual plane. The 'feminine' woman in making herself prey tries to reduce man, also, to her carnal passivity; she occupies herself in catching him in her trap, in enchaining him by means of the desire she arouses in him in submissively making herself a thing. The emancipated woman, on the contrary, wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The 'modern' woman accepts masculine values: she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating, on the same terms as men; instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal.

In so far as she expresses herself in definite action, this claim is legitimate, and male insolence must then bear the blame. But in men's defence it must be said that women are wont to confuse the issue. Many women, in order to show by their successes their equivalence to men, try to secure male support by sexual means; they play on both sides, demanding old-fashioned respect and modern esteem, banking on their old magic and their new rights. It is understandable that a man becomes irritated and puts himself on the defensive; but he is also double-dealing when he requires woman to play the game fairly while he denies her the indispensable trump cards through distrust and hostility. Indeed, the struggle cannot be clearly drawn between them, since woman is opaque in her very being; she stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endued with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously *as self* and *as other*, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences. When she makes weapons at once of her weakness and of her strength, it is not a matter of designing calculation: she seeks salvation spontaneously in the way that has been imposed on her, that of passivity, at the same time when she is actively demanding her sovereignty; and no doubt this procedure is unfair tactics, but it is

dictated by the ambiguous situation assigned her. Man, however, becomes indignant when he treats her as a free and independent being and then realises that she is still a trap for him; if he gratifies and satisfies her in her posture as prey, he finds her claims to autonomy irritating; whatever he does, he feels tricked and she feels wronged.

The quarrel will go on as long as men and women fail to recognise each other as equals; that is to say, as long as femininity is perpetuated as such. Which sex is the more eager to maintain it? Woman, who is being emancipated from it, wishes none the less to retain its privileges; and man, in that case, wants her to assume its limitations. 'It is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other,' says Montaigne. It is vain to apportion praise and blame. The truth is that if the vicious circle is so hard to break, it is because the two sexes are each the victim at once of the other and of itself. Between two adversaries confronting each other in their pure liberty, an agreement could be easily reached: the more so as the war profits neither. But the complexity of the whole affair derives from the fact that each camp is giving aid and comfort to the enemy; woman is pursuing a dream of submission, man a dream of identification. Want of authenticity does not pay: each blames the other for the unhappiness he or she has incurred in yielding to the temptations of the easy way; what man and woman loathe in each other is the shattering frustration of each one's own bad faith and baseness.

We have seen why men enslaved women in the first place; the devaluation of femininity has been a necessary step in human evolution, but it might have led to collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is to be explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by means of identification with the other, whom he oppresses to that end. In each individual man that tendency exists today; and the vast majority yield to it. The husband wants to find himself in his wife, the lover in his mistress, in the form of a stone image; he is seeking in her the myth of his virility, of his sovereignty, of his immediate reality. But he is himself the slave of his double: what an effort to build up an image in which he is always in danger! In spite of everything his success in this depends upon the capricious freedom of women: he must constantly try to keep this propitious to him. Man is concerned with the effort to appear male, important, superior; he pretends so as to get pretence in return; he, too, is aggressive, uneasy; he feels hostility for women because he is afraid of them, he is afraid of them because he is afraid of the personage, the image, with which he identifies himself. What time and strength he squanders in liquidating, sublimating, transferring complexes, in talking about women, in seducing them, in fearing them! He would be liberated himself in their liberation. But this is precisely what he dreads. And so he obstinately persists in the mystifications intended to keep woman in her chains.

That she is being tricked, many men have realised. ‘What a misfortune to be a woman! And yet the misfortune, when one is a woman, is at bottom not to comprehend that it is one,’ says Kierkegaard.¹ For a long time there have been efforts to disguise this misfortune. For example, guardianship has been done away with: women have been given ‘protectors’, and if they are invested with the rights of the old-time guardians, it is in woman’s own interest. To forbid her working, to keep her at home, is to defend her against herself and to assure her happiness. We have seen what poetic veils are thrown over her monotonous burdens of housekeeping and maternity: in exchange for her liberty she has received the false treasures of her ‘femininity’. Balzac illustrates this manoeuvre very well in counselling man to treat her as a slave while persuading her that she is a queen. Less cynical, many men try to convince themselves that she is really privileged. There are American sociologists who seriously teach today the theory of ‘low-class gain’, that is to say, the benefits enjoyed by the lower orders. In France, also, it has often been proclaimed – although in a less scientific manner – that the workers are very fortunate in not being obliged to ‘keep up appearances’. Like the carefree wretches gaily scratching at their vermin, like the merry Negroes laughing under the lash, and those joyous Tunisian Arabs burying their starved children with a smile, woman enjoys that incomparable privilege: irresponsibility. Free from troublesome burdens and cares, she obviously has ‘the better part’. But it is disturbing that with an obstinate perversity – connected no doubt with original sin – down through the centuries and in all countries, the people who have the better part are always crying to their benefactors: ‘It is too much! I will be satisfied with yours!’ But the munificent capitalists, the generous colonists, the superb males, stick to their guns: ‘Keep the better part, hold on to it!’

It must be admitted that the males find in woman more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed. And in bad faith they take authorisation from this to declare that she has desired the destiny they have imposed on her. We have seen that all the main features of her training combine to bar her from the roads of revolt and adventure. Society in general – beginning with her respected parents – lies to her by praising the lofty values of love, devotion, the gift of herself, and then concealing from her the fact that neither lover nor husband nor yet her children will be inclined to accept the burdensome charge of all that. She cheerfully believes these lies because they invite her to follow the easy slope: in this others commit their worst crime against her; throughout her life from childhood on, they damage and corrupt her by designating as her true vocation this submission, which is the temptation of every existent in the anxiety of liberty. If a child is taught idleness by being amused all day long and never being led to study, or shown its usefulness, it will hardly be said, when he grows up, that he chose to be incapable and ignorant; yet this is how woman is brought up, without ever being impressed with the necessity of taking charge of her own existence. So she readily lets herself come to count on the protection, love, assistance, and supervision of others, she

¹ In *Vino Veritas*. He says further: ‘Politeness is pleasing – essentially – to woman, and the fact that she accepts it without hesitation is explained by nature’s care for the weaker, for the unfavoured being, and for one to whom an illusion means more than a material compensation. But this illusion, precisely, is fatal to her ... To feel oneself freed from distress thanks to something imaginary, to be the dupe of something imaginary, is that not a still deeper mockery? ... Woman is very far from being *verwahrlost* (neglected), but in another sense she is, since she can never free herself from the illusion that nature has used to console her.’

lets herself be fascinated with the hope of self-realisation without doing anything. She does wrong in yielding to the temptation; but man is in no position to blame her, since he has led her into the temptation. When conflict arises between them, each will hold the other responsible for the situation; she will reproach him with having made her what she is: 'No one taught me to reason or to earn my own living'; he will reproach her with having accepted the consequences: 'You don't know anything you are an incompetent,' and so on. Each sex thinks it can justify itself by taking the offensive; but the wrongs done by one do not make the other innocent.

The innumerable conflicts that set men and women against one another come from the fact that neither is prepared to assume all the consequences of this situation which the one has offered and the other accepted. The doubtful concept of 'equality in inequality', which the one uses to mask his despotism and the other to mask her cowardice, does not stand the test of experience: in their exchanges, woman appeals to the theoretical equality she has been guaranteed, and man the concrete inequality that exists. The result is that in every association an endless debate goes on concerning the ambiguous meaning of the words give and take: she complains of giving her all, he protests that she takes his all. Woman has to learn that exchanges – it is a fundamental law of political economy – are based on the value the merchandise offered has for the buyer, and not for the seller: she has been deceived in being persuaded that her worth is priceless. The truth is that for man she is an amusement, a pleasure, company, an inessential boon; he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence. The exchange, therefore, is not of two items of equal value.

This inequality will be especially brought out in the fact that the time they spend together – which fallaciously seems to be the same time – does not have the same value for both partners. During the evening the lover spends with his mistress he could be doing something of advantage to his career, seeing friends, cultivating business relationships, seeking recreation; for a man normally integrated in society, time is a positive value: money, reputation, pleasure. For the idle, bored woman, on the contrary, it is a burden she wishes to get rid of; when she succeeds in killing time, it is a benefit to her: the man's presence is pure profit. In a liaison what most clearly interests the man, in many cases, is the sexual benefit he gets from it: if need be, he can be content to spend no more time with his mistress than is required for the sexual act; but – with exceptions – what she, on her part, wants is to kill all the excess time she has on her hands; and – like the greengrocer who will not sell potatoes unless the customer will take turnips also – she will not yield her body unless her lover will take hours of conversation and 'going out' into the bargain. A balance is reached if, on the whole, the cost does not seem too high to the man, and this depends, of course, on the strength of his desire and the importance he gives to what is to be sacrificed. But if the woman demands – offers – too much time, she becomes wholly intrusive, like the river overflowing its banks, and the man will prefer to have nothing rather than too much. Then she reduces her demands; but very often the balance is reached at the cost of a double tension: she feels that the man has 'had' her at a bargain, and he thinks her price is too high. This analysis, of course, is put in somewhat humorous terms; but – except for those affairs of jealous and exclusive passion in which the man wants total possession of the woman – this conflict constantly appears in cases of

affection, desire, and even love. He always has 'other things to do' with his time; whereas she has time to kill; and he considers much of the time she gives him not as a gift but as a burden.

As a rule he consents to assume the burden because he knows very well that he is on the privileged side, he has a bad conscience; and if he is of reasonable good will he tries to compensate for the inequality by being generous. He prides himself on his compassion, however, and at the first clash he treats the woman as ungrateful and thinks, with some irritation: 'I'm too good for her.' She feels she is behaving like a beggar when she is convinced of the high value of her gifts, and that humiliates her.

Here we find the explanation of the cruelty that woman often shows she is capable of practising; she has a good conscience because she is on the unprivileged side; she feels she is under no obligation to deal gently with the favoured caste, and her only thought is to defend herself. She will even be very happy if she has occasion to show her resentment to a lover who has not been able to satisfy all her demands: since he does not give her enough, she takes savage delight in taking back everything from him. At this point the wounded lover suddenly discovers the value *in toto* of a liaison each moment of which he held more or less in contempt: he is ready to promise her everything, even though he will feel exploited again when he has to make good. He accuses his mistress of blackmailing him: she calls him stingy; both feel wronged.

Once again it is useless to apportion blame and excuses: justice can never be done in the midst of injustice. A colonial administrator has no possibility of acting rightly towards the natives, nor a general towards his soldiers; the only solution is to be neither colonist nor military chief; but a man could not prevent himself from being a man. So there he is, culpable in spite of himself and labouring under the effects of a fault he did not himself commit; and here she is, victim and shrew in spite of herself. Sometimes he rebels and becomes cruel, but then he makes himself an accomplice of the injustice, and the fault becomes really his. Sometimes he lets himself be annihilated, devoured, by his demanding victim; but in that case he feels duped. Often he stops at a compromise that at once belittles him and leaves him ill at ease. A well-disposed man will be more tortured by the situation than the woman herself: in a sense it is always better to be on the side of the vanquished; but if she is well-disposed also, incapable of self-sufficiency, reluctant to crush the man with the weight of her destiny, she struggles in hopeless confusion.

In daily life we meet with an abundance of these cases which are incapable of satisfactory solution because they are determined by unsatisfactory conditions. A man who is compelled to go on materially and morally supporting a woman whom he no longer loves feels he is victimised; but if he abandons without resources the woman who has pledged her whole life to him, she will be quite as unjustly victimised. The evil originates not in the perversity of individuals and bad faith first appears when each blames the other – it originates rather in a situation against which all individual action is powerless. Women are 'clinging', they are a dead weight, and they suffer for it; the point is that their situation is like that of a parasite sucking out the living strength of another organism. Let them be provided with living strength of their own, let them have the

means to attack the world and wrest from it their own subsistence, and their dependence will be abolished – that of man also. There is no doubt that both men and women will profit greatly from the new situation.

A world where men and women would be equal is easy to visualise, for that precisely is what the Soviet Revolution *promised*: women reared and trained exactly like men were to work under the same conditions² and for the same wages. Erotic liberty was to be recognised by custom, but the sexual act was not to be considered a ‘service’ to be paid for; woman was to be obliged to provide herself with other ways of earning a living; marriage was to be based on a free agreement that the contracting parties could break at will; maternity was to be voluntary, which meant that contraception and abortion were to be authorised and that, on the other hand, all mothers and their children were to have exactly the same rights, in or out of marriage; pregnancy leaves were to be paid for by the State, which would assume charge of the children, signifying not that they would be taken away from their parents, but that they would not be abandoned to them.

But is it enough to change laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context, for men and women to become truly equal? ‘Women will always be women,’ say the sceptics. Other seers prophesy that in casting off their femininity they will not succeed in changing themselves into men and they will become monsters. This would be to admit that the woman of today is a creation of nature; it must be repeated once more that in human society nothing is natural and that woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilisation. The intervention of others in her destiny is fundamental: if this action took a different direction, it would produce a quite different result. Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself. The abyss that separates the adolescent boy and girl has been deliberately widened between them since earliest childhood; later on, woman could not be other than what she *was made*, and that past was bound to shadow her for life. If we appreciate its influence, we see clearly that her destiny is not predetermined for all eternity.

We must not believe, certainly, that a change in woman’s economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear. At this moment they have been realised nowhere, in Russia no more than in France or the United States; and this explains why the woman of today is torn between the past and the future. She appears most often as a ‘true woman’ disguised as a man, and she feels herself as ill at ease in her flesh as in her masculine garb. She must shed her old skin and cut her own new clothes. This she could do only through a social evolution. No single educator could fashion a *female human being* today who would be the exact homologue of the *male*

² That certain too laborious occupations were to be closed to women is not in contradiction to this project. Even among men there is an increasing effort to obtain adaptation to profession; their varying physical and mental capacities limit their possibilities of choice; what is asked is that, in any case, no line of sex or caste be drawn.

human being; if she is brought up like a boy, the young girl feels she *is* an oddity and thereby she is given a new kind of sex specification. Stendhal understood this when he said: 'The forest must be planted all at once.' But if we imagine, on the contrary, a society in which the equality of the sexes would be concretely realised, this equality would find new expression in each individual.

If the little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, the same severity and the same freedom, as her brothers, taking part in the same studies, the same games, promised the same future, surrounded with women and men who seemed to her undoubted equals, the meanings of the castration complex and of the Oedipus complex would be profoundly modified. Assuming on the same basis as the father the material and moral responsibility of the couple, the mother would enjoy the same lasting prestige; the child would perceive around her an androgynous world and not a masculine world. Were she emotionally more attracted to her father – which is not even sure – her love for him would be tinged with a will to emulation and not a feeling of powerlessness; she would not be oriented towards passivity. Authorised to test her powers in work and sports, competing actively with the boys, she would not find the absence of the penis – compensated by the promise of a child enough to give rise to an inferiority complex; correlatively the boy would not have a superiority complex if it were not instilled into him and if he looked up to women with as much respect as to men.³ The little girl would not seek sterile compensation in narcissism and dreaming, she would not take her fate for granted; she would be interested in what she was doing, she would throw herself without reserve into undertakings.

I have already pointed out how much easier the transformation of puberty would be if she looked beyond it, like the boys, towards a free adult future: menstruation horrifies her only because it is an abrupt descent into femininity. She would also take her young eroticism in much more tranquil fashion if she did not feel a frightened disgust for her destiny as a whole, coherent sexual information would do much to help her over this crisis. And thanks to coeducational schooling, the august mystery of Man would have no occasion to enter her mind: it would be eliminated by everyday familiarity and open rivalry.

Objections raised against this system always imply respect for sexual taboos; but the effort to inhibit all sex curiosity and pleasure in the child is quite useless; one succeeds only in creating repressions, obsessions, neuroses. The excessive sentimentality, homosexual fervours, and platonic crushes of adolescent girls, with all their train of silliness and frivolity, are much more injurious than a little childish sex play and a few definite sex experiences. It would be beneficial above all for the young girl not to be influenced against taking charge herself of her own existence, for then she would not seek a demigod in the male – merely a comrade, a friend, a partner. Eroticism and love would take on the nature of free transcendence and not that of resignation; she could

³ I knew a little boy of eight who lived with his mother, aunt and grandmother, all independent and active women, and his weak old half-crippled grandfather. He had a crushing inferiority complex in regard to the feminine sex, although he made efforts to combat it. At school he scorned comrades and teachers because they were miserable males.

experience them as a relation between equals. There is no intention, of course, to remove by a stroke of the pen all the difficulties that the child has to overcome in changing into an adult; the most intelligent, the most tolerant education could not relieve the child of experiencing things for herself; what could be asked is that obstacles should not be piled gratuitously in her path. Progress is already shown by the fact that ‘vicious’ little girls are no longer cauterised with a red-hot iron. Psychoanalysis has given parents some instruction, but the conditions under which, at the present time, the sexual training and initiation of woman are accomplished are so deplorable that none of the objections advanced against the idea of a radical change could be considered valid. It is not a question of abolishing in woman the contingencies and miseries of the human condition, but of giving her the means for transcending them.

Woman is the victim of no mysterious fatality; the peculiarities that identify her as specifically a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them. They can be surmounted, in the future, when they are regarded in new perspectives. Thus, as we have seen, through her erotic experience woman feels – and often detests – the domination of the male; but this is no reason to conclude that her ovaries condemn her to live for ever on her knees. Virile aggressiveness seems like a lordly privilege only within a system that in its entirety conspires to affirm masculine sovereignty; and woman *feels* herself profoundly passive in the sexual act only because she already thinks of herself as such. Many modern women who lay claim to their dignity as human beings still envisage their erotic life from the standpoint of a tradition of slavery: since it seems to them humiliating to lie beneath the man, to be penetrated by him, they grow tense in frigidity. But if the reality were different, the meaning expressed symbolically in amorous gestures and postures would be different, too: a woman who pays and dominates her lover can, for example, take pride in her superb idleness and consider that she is enslaving the male who is actively exerting himself. And here and now there are many sexually well-balanced couples whose notions of victory and defeat are giving place to the idea of an exchange.

As a matter of fact, man, like woman, is flesh, therefore passive, the plaything of his hormones and of the species, the restless prey of his desires. And she, like him, in the midst of the carnal fever, is a consenting, a voluntary gift, an activity; they live out in their several fashions the strange ambiguity of existence made body. In those combats where they think they confront one another, it is really against the self that each one struggles, projecting into the partner that part of the self which is repudiated; instead of living out the ambiguities of their situation, each tries to make the other bear the objection and tries to reserve the honour for the self. If, however, both should assume the ambiguity with a clear-sighted modesty, correlative of an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their erotic drama in amity. The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another; it is never the given that confers superiorities: ‘virtue’, as the ancients called it, is defined at the level of ‘that which depends on us’. In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit, of finitude and transcendence; both are gnawed away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another; and they can gain from their liberty the same glory.

If they were to taste it, they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and fraternity between them could then come into existence.

I shall be told that all this is utopian fancy, because woman cannot be transformed unless society has first made her really the equal of man. Conservatives have never failed in such circumstances to refer to that vicious circle; history, however, does not revolve. If a caste is kept in a state of inferiority, no doubt it remains inferior; but liberty can break the circle. Let the Negroes vote and they become worthy of having the vote; let woman be given responsibilities and she is able to assume them. The fact is that oppressors cannot be expected to make a move of gratuitous generosity; but at one time the revolt of the oppressed, at another time even the very evolution of the privileged caste itself, creates new situations; thus men have been led, in their own interest, to give partial emancipation to women: it remains only for women to continue their ascent, and the successes they are obtaining are an encouragement for them to do so. It seems almost certain that sooner or later they will arrive at complete economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis.

However this may be, there will be some to object that if such a world is possible it is not desirable. When woman is 'the same' as her male, life will lose its salt and spice. This argument, also, has lost its novelty: those interested in perpetuating present conditions are always in tears about the marvellous past that is about to disappear, without having so much as a smile for the young future. It is quite true that doing away with the slave trade meant death to the great plantations, magnificent with azaleas and camellias, it meant ruin to the whole refined Southern civilisation. In the attics of time rare old laces have joined the clear pure voices of the Sistine *castrati*,⁴ and there is a certain 'feminine charm' that is also on the way to the same dusty repository. I agree that he would be a barbarian indeed who failed to appreciate exquisite flowers, rare lace, the crystal-clear voice of the eunuch, and feminine charm.

When the 'charming woman' shows herself in all her splendour, she is a much more exalting object than the 'idiotic paintings, over-doors, scenery, showman's garish signs, popular reproductions', that excited Rimbaud; adorned with the most modern artifices, beautified according to the newest techniques, she comes down from the remoteness of the ages, from Thebes, from Crete, from Chichén-Itzá; and she is also the totem set up deep in the African jungle; she is a helicopter and she is a bird; and there is this, the greatest wonder of all: under her tinted hair the forest murmur becomes a thought, and words issue from her breasts. Men stretch forth avid hands towards the marvel, but when they grasp it it is gone; the wife, the mistress, speak like everybody else through their mouths: their words are worth just what they are worth; their breasts also. Does such a fugitive miracle – and one so rare – justify us in perpetuating a situation that is baneful for both sexes? One can appreciate the beauty of flowers, the charm of women, and appreciate them at their true value; if these treasures cost blood or misery, they must be sacrificed.

⁴ Eunuchs were long used in the male choirs of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, until the practice was forbidden by Pope Leo XIII in 1880. The operation of castration caused the boy's soprano voice to be retained into adulthood, and it was performed for this purpose. –Tr.

But in truth this sacrifice seems to men a peculiarly heavy one; few of them really wish in their hearts for woman to succeed in making it; those among them who hold woman in contempt see in the sacrifice nothing for them to gain, those who cherish her see too much that they would lose. And it is true that the evolution now in progress threatens more than feminine charm alone: in beginning to exist for herself, woman will relinquish the function as double and mediator to which she owes her privileged place in the masculine universe; to man, caught between the silence of nature and the demanding presence of other free beings, a creature who is at once his like and a passive thing seems a great treasure. The guise in which he conceives his companion may be mythical, but the experiences for which she is the source or the pretext are none the less real: there are hardly any more precious, more intimate, more ardent. There is no denying that feminine dependence, inferiority, woe, give women their special character; assuredly woman's autonomy, if it spares men many troubles, will also deny them many conveniences; assuredly there are certain forms of the sexual adventure which will be lost in the world of tomorrow. But this does not mean that love, happiness, poetry, dream, will be banished from it.

Let us not forget that our lack of imagination always depopulates the future; for us it is only an abstraction; each one of us secretly deplores the absence there of the one who was himself. But the humanity of tomorrow will be living in its flesh and in its conscious liberty; that time will be its present and it will in turn prefer it. New relations of flesh and sentiment of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes; already, indeed, there have appeared between men and women friendships, rivalries, complicities, comradeships – chaste or sensual – which past centuries could not have conceived. To mention one point, nothing could seem more debatable than the opinion that dooms the new world to uniformity and hence to boredom. I fail to see that this present world is free from boredom or that liberty ever creates uniformity.

To begin with, there will always be certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature. This means that her relations to her own body, to that of the male, to the child, will never be identical with those the male bears to his own body, to that of the female, and to the child; those who make much of 'equality in difference' could not with good grace refuse to grant me the possible existence of differences in equality. Then again, it is institutions that create uniformity. Young and pretty, the slaves of the harem are always the same in the sultan's embrace; Christianity gave eroticism its savour of sin and legend when it endowed the human female with a soul; if society restores her sovereign individuality to woman, it will not thereby destroy the power of love's embrace to move the heart.

It is nonsense to assert that revelry, vice, ecstasy, passion, would become impossible if man and woman were equal in concrete matters; the contradictions that put the flesh in opposition to the spirit, the instant to time, the swoon of immanence to the challenge of transcendence, the absolute of pleasure to the nothingness of forgetting, will never be resolved; in sexuality will always be materialised the tension, the anguish, the joy, the frustration, and the triumph of existence. To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine

her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognising each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other. The reciprocity of their relations will not do away with the miracles – desire, possession, love, dream, adventure – worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories; and the words that move us – giving, conquering, uniting – will not lose their meaning. On the contrary, when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the ‘division’ of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form. ‘The direct, natural, necessary relation of human creatures is *the relation of man to woman*,’ Marx has said. ‘The nature of this relation determines to what point man himself is to be considered as a *generic being*, as mankind; the relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. By it is shown, therefore, to what point the natural behaviour of man has become human or to what point the human being has become his *natural* being, to what point his human nature has become his *nature*.’

The case could not be better stated. It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given. To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood.

THE CRISIS
IN WOMEN'S IDENTITY
(University of California, San Francisco, 1964)

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It Changed My Life: Writings on the
Women's Movement
"The Crisis in Women's Identity"

by Betty Friedan

1963, 1964, 1966, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973,
1974, 1975, 1976, 1985, 1991, 1998 by Betty Friedan

I am delighted to be here. Women all over this country are on the verge of completing the massive delayed revolution that needs to be won for women. It is a delayed revolution because all the rights that would make women free and equal citizens of this country, persons able to develop to their full potential in society, were won on paper long ago. The last of these rights, the right to vote, was won the year before I was born. But we are not really free and equal if the feminine mystique keeps us from freely using our rights; if the only world we really are free to move in is the so-called woman's world of home; if we are asked to make an unreal choice no man is ever asked to make; if we think, as girls, that we have to choose somehow between love, marriage and motherhood and the chance to devote ourselves seriously to some challenge, some interest that would enable us to grow to our full human potential.

Are we really free and equal if we are forced to make such a choice, or half-choice, because of lack of support from our society—because we have not received simple institutional help in combining marriage and motherhood with work in the professions, politics, or any of the other frontiers beyond the home? If girls today still have no image of themselves as individual human beings, if they think their only road to status, to identity, in society is to grab that man—according to all the images of marriage from the ads, the television commercials, the movies, the situation comedies, and all the experts who counsel them—and if therefore they think they must catch him at nineteen and begin to have babies and that split-level dream house so soon that they never have time to make other choices, to take other active moves in society, to risk themselves in trial-and-error efforts, are they, are we, really free and equal? Are we confined by that simple age-old destiny that depends only on our sexual biology and chance, or do we actually have the freedom of choice that is open to us as women today in America?

I say that the only thing that stands in women's way today is this false image, this feminine mystique, and the self-denigration of women that it perpetuates. This mystique makes us try to beat ourselves down in order to be feminine, makes us deny or feel freakish about our own abilities as people. It keeps us from moving freely on the road that is open to us. It keeps us from recognizing and solving the small, but real problems that remain.

Whether you know it or not, you have—in your own lives, in your own persons—moved beyond this false image. You yourselves deny the feminine mystique; you deny the very images of women that come at you from all sides. There are no heroines today in

America, not as far as the public image is concerned. There are sex objects and there are drudges. We see this on television every day.

You here, however, are the new image of women: as person, as heroine. You live actively in society. You are not solely dependent on your husbands and your children for your identity. You do not live your life vicariously through them. You do not wait passively for that wise man to make the decisions that will shape your society, but move in and help shape society yourself, and begin to make it a more human world. You bridge that old, obsolete division that splits life into man's world of thought and action and woman's world of love. With little help from society, you have begun to make a new pattern in which marriage, motherhood, homemaking--the traditional roles of women—are merged with the possibility of women as individuals, as decision-makers, as creators of the future.

But because of the feminine mystique, you have not felt fully free and confident even as you have moved on this road. You have felt guilty; you have endured jeers; sneers, snickers, perhaps not from your own husband—who, I suspect, supports you more than the image would admit—but from the image-makers, and perhaps from your less adventurous neighbors, who are less willing to assume the role of heroine.

Your presence here today, however, is a testament to the fact that you are beginning to become conscious of the task that is before you. You are beginning to become conscious of the moment in history in which you stand, and this consciousness is what we need now.

Someone said to me in St. Louis that I wasn't actually telling women to do anything new, that I was only helping to make them conscious of the road on which they were already moving. I would accept this. I think we must become conscious of it in order to finish the job. Otherwise we keep repeating over and over again the same arguments with ourselves, the same conflicts, the same decisions, instead of moving ahead and facing the new problems that need to be solved, and asking, in voices loud enough to be heard, for what we need from society. We do not know how strong we could be if we affirmed ourselves as women and joined together, instead of each woman feeling freakish and isolated, as if no one else but herself had the brains and the courage to look beyond that young peak of marriage and childbirth that the feminine mystique enshrines.

You know that you have brains as well as breasts, and you use them. You know what you are capable of, but you could use it for yourselves and for other women with so much more freedom if you could only break through those self-denigrating blocks. It is not laws, nor great obstacles, nor the heels of men that are grinding women down in America today. Men as well as women are victims of the feminine mystique. We must simply break through this curtain in the minds of women in order to get on with the massive delayed revolution. And there are massive numbers of us, if we stop to realize how many of us have already moved beyond the feminine mystique and how many more are ready to move.

I am speaking not only of the women who work outside the home in industry, but of every woman who works in society, for they all have made a certain advance from the isolation of household drudgery. Unfortunately, far too many women are taking jobs too soon in order to put their husbands through law, engineering, graduate or theological school, because these women do not take themselves and their own abilities seriously enough to put themselves through schools. Consequently, too many women of the one of-

three who work outside the home are concentrating on the housework jobs of industry—which are going to be replaced by the machine, anyway, just as much of the drudgery of our housework at home has been replaced by the machine. Even more of this household drudgery could be done by machines if the massive resources of American technology were devoted to it, instead of to selling women things they do not need and convincing them that running the washing machine is as creative, scientific and challenging as solving the genetic code.

All of these women in industry housework, however, are now in a position, with the proper training, to move ahead to the kinds of work that cannot be replaced by the machine. With them in the massive revolution are the great numbers of women who engage in volunteer community leadership, work that requires a great deal of human strength, thought and initiative. To a certain extent, their work is often more in tune with the rapid change in our society than that of the existing professions. Committed, innovative volunteer work is done almost completely by women in America, and thus is not recognized for what it is by our society. Therefore, by sneaking around the corner, it manages to innovate in ways that the conformity, the resistance to change, structured into the existing professions does not permit.

I think, however, if we break through that denigrating image of women enshrined in the feminine mystique and take ourselves seriously, society may begin to take us seriously. The disparagement of volunteer work in America will stop, and the false line between the professional and the volunteer will be redrawn. As it is, professionals have such a low opinion of the woman volunteer that they dream up work to keep her busy, use her far below her own ability merely to raise money or hold teas or lick envelopes—or they break the jobs up into little segments that someone with even a small IQ could do. And yet we hear that they cannot find the professionals that they need to solve the social problems in the community, and that there aren't enough trained group workers to do what needs to be done in the hospitals, the schools, and the health and welfare agencies.

If all the volunteers resigned tomorrow, much of this work, not all, would still have to be done, but it might be done with a more serious use of women's real abilities.

I would add also to the massiveness of this revolution the great numbers of women who are doing the housework of politics, who, trapped in the feminine mystique, acquiesce merely to lick envelopes, take nominal posts in ladies' aid auxiliaries, collect furniture for auctions, and second nominating speeches. Freed from their self-denigration, however, they could hold policy-making positions, run for the county committee, serve on the town committee, run for the state Senate or Congress, go to law school and become a judge, or even run for Vice President. I won't say President, for I think that may be premature, but it might help the revolution if a woman had enough courage to try. Above all, women in America need higher aspirations in politics. We know more than we think we know politically, and we are not using this knowledge.

Of all the passions open to man and woman, politics is the one that a woman can most easily embrace and move ahead in, creating a new pattern of politics, marriage and motherhood. Only self-denigration stops women in politics.

In addition, there are the great number of women who could be artists, who are artists but do not take themselves seriously as such. In *The New York Times* recently, there were some interesting figures that showed an enormous increase in the number of Americans who answered "Artist" on the census blank, who defined themselves

professionally as painters, sculptors, art teachers, writers, poets, playwrights, television writers, all the rest. This great increase was almost completely made up of men. All that keeps a woman of talent from being an artist is her false image of herself, the fear of making the commitment to discipline herself—and of being tested. She doesn't even run across the problems that an American woman has, say, in wanting to become a physicist. Even if as a young girl she does not absorb the notion that physics is unfeminine, she may find it hard to want to have children and go to the physics laboratory at the same time. However, you can paint at home. It is only for lack of taking herself seriously that a woman who paints does not become an artist—or that a woman who wants to become a physicist doesn't work out some sort of accommodation for both children and a career.

I also add to the massive, delayed revolution many of the young women who fell hook, line and sinker for the feminine mystique, used it as a rationalization for evading their own choices, and married early. They thought that all they had to do was to get that man at nineteen and that would take care of the rest of their life, and then they woke up at twenty-five or thirty-five or forty-five with the four children, the house and the husband, and realized they had to face a future ahead in which they would not be able to live through others. Such a woman, whose children are already moving out the door, finally asks herself what she is going to do with her life, and begins, even if late, to face and make some choices of her own. These great numbers of women are now trying to go back to college to get the education they gave up too easily and too soon, and they are getting more or less—too often less—a helping hand from the educators. Some of the universities are braving through formal barriers and helping these women to grow to their full potential by admitting them to part-time college or graduate work—since part-time study is usually the only answer today for a woman who is still responsible for small children. Some universities may even provide part-time nursery schools so that women may continue to study even during those years; in this way they will not emerge as displaced people when their last child goes off to school, and they will not have to contribute to the population explosion by having baby after baby for lack of anything else creative to do. Perhaps the colleges and universities will even begin to be a little less rigid and understand that a woman who has had the strength to innovate in the community—who has led in solving new problems in education, politics, mental health, and in all the other problems that women have worked on in their suburbs and cities in recent years—may have learned something that is the equivalent of an academic thesis.

Finally, there are the great numbers of young girls for whom, thank heaven, the choices are still ahead. If they only see through the false image, they can so easily make the little choices—not the fake big ones such as marriage versus career, but the little ones—that, if made all along, will easily create a new image of woman. And even if their choices involve effort, work, a few conflicts and problems that have to be solved, these are easier problems than that desperate emptiness a woman faces at thirty-five or forty after she realizes that all her life cannot be lived in lifelong full-time motherhood. These young girls can decide in high school "I would like to be a physicist, I would like to be a teacher, I would like to be a nurse, I would like to be an astronaut." Not "What do you want to be, little girl?" "I would like to be a mommy." "What do you want to be, little boy?" "I would like to be a cowboy." Of course he is going to be a husband and father; of course she is going to be a wife and mother. But the choices she must make in school are to learn what else she can be and do herself, because if she does not make these choices

when she is young, she will not even try to do the work, to make the effort that will take her to our new frontiers.

Of course, if the revolution is going to be so massive, there is going to be resistance to it. In the last year or so, the problem of women in America has been put on the table. The President's Commission on the Status of Women has made its report. My book and others like it have stimulated discussions among women who have too long suppressed their own aspirations as people, and we are beginning to see some resistance.

There was a story in the New Yorker a few months ago called "An Educated American Woman," by John Cheever. It was about an educated woman who fought a zoning battle in her neighborhood, who was taking a French course at Columbia and who was writing a book. She was punished. The baby-sitter left her child alone and he died. Her husband left her for a motherly woman. No more education, no more zoning battles, and, heaven forbid, no more books.

In one of the Doris Day movies, she too was fighting a zoning battle, and the implication was, as a result, no sex: her man left her bed. Obviously, no more zoning battles for her. In the latest one, *The Thrill of It All*. Doris Day is an obstetrician's wife who gets a chance to do television commercials. She enjoys it, but her husband doesn't like it very much. He, by his great scientific ingenuity, is helping one of his patients, a poor, embittered, sophisticated career woman, to finally have a baby at the age of forty. In the end, the baby is born in a taxicab on the East River Drive, with Doris helping to deliver it and the obstetrician galloping up on a horse. Doris Day says, "Now I know what life is all about, helping you to deliver this baby." But of course, how foolish can the audience be, she can't help him deliver a baby in the operating room tomorrow, so what will she do? Aha, she'll have another baby herself, that's the answer. But the real life Doris Days can't go on having babies forever.

Recently you may have seen an advertising campaign by one of the women's service magazines. There are three obviously neurotic women. One says, "I read this wonderful poem; it was such an escape." Dreamy, neurotic escape. A second one, a very hard, bitter, career woman with a hat pulled down, says, "I read this article about India in such and such a magazine. It kept me occupied coming home on the five thirty-five." Another woman who looks as if something is wrong with her says, "I read a wonderful novel by so-and-so." Then we see the fourth one, healthy and wholesome, Mrs. Average Housewife: "I read about a new paint for the children's room. I won't use it, Jim will." The magazine only a homemaker could love. No articles about India, no poems, no great literature here, only service to home and children.

Red book magazine had a story about a woman who felt guilty because she just sat home and baked cookies and fooled around while her neighbor made petitions to improve the schools. This neighbor said, "Goodness, how are women ever going to assume their equality if you are just going to sit on your behind and make cookies?" Then a mousy little wren came to town who wouldn't even sign the petitions; she literally did nothing but bake cookies. And the guilty woman discovered that this mousy little wren, who didn't even bother to look attractive, had been a physicist. But she saw no greater thing in the world to do now than to bake cookies in her own home. This was evidently supposed to mean that it was all phony, the idea that women could make petitions and campaign for the school board or be physicists or dream of doing something else besides bake cookies in their own kitchens.

Margaret Mead, who has contributed much to our knowledge of the plasticity of the human male and female but who has also helped to create the feminine mystique, had an article in *Redbook* attacking the report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women because, she said, it assumed that political life and work would be important to women and did not emphasize enough that women must be full-time wives and mothers. This woman, who is a world-famous, far-traveled anthropologist, declares approvingly that more and more educated women are choosing to be full-time wives and mothers. Margaret Mead even asked that if women really finish the job that the President's Commission says needs to be done, "who will be there to bandage the child's knee and listen to the husband's troubles and give the human element in the world?" Somehow she never explains how the woman is going to listen to the husband's troubles during the eight hours of the day when the husband is at the office, and how she is going to bandage the child's knee when the child isn't there but is at school.

Thus the resistance to the revolution even shows up in the ranks of what I call "capital C" Career women, women who would not be caught dead themselves behind a dishpan, and who from their vantage point back from the expedition in New Guinea or behind the television microphone, say, "But what greater thing can a woman do but drudgery for those she loves, and how many really rewarding, satisfying things in the world are there to do anyway—look at taxi drivers?" Somehow this is always at Radcliffe or Harvard, where the choices open to women, or men, are far more than being taxi drivers. Or, they sneer, how many women have abilities to do anything beyond housework? Of course, these women know they have such abilities, but they are exceptional.

I don't think they are so exceptional. I think that 50 percent of the women are above average, just as 50 percent aren't. And I think that while all women have to get dressed, eat dinner, make meals and keep houses clean, these tasks can hardly use all the abilities of an above-average woman—or the whole life-span abilities of a below-average woman, either. For we are going to live, my generation, to be seventy-five, and our daughters may live to be one hundred. No matter how much they will love their children, how much they will want to be wives and mothers and truly enjoy motherhood, it will be such a small part of their lives. It would deprive them of their real choices to say that they should think of themselves only, or even primarily, in terms of their sexual difference from man (long live it) and never in terms of their unique human abilities, whatever they may be.

There is also resistance on the part of some men, but not of as many as you think. I am increasingly surprised at the numbers of men who really do have a full regard for their wives as human beings, who want them to have full lives of their own, who are weary of the burden and the guilt of having to make up to a woman for all the life she misses beyond the home, for the world she has no part in. Men are weary of coming home from that tough, complex rat race in society only to be met by a pent-up wife who feels short-changed in the narrow world of home—and finds him somehow inadequate because he can't give her all that magic fulfillment she has been told to expect from marriage. But perhaps he is not inadequate at all; perhaps she is merely asking for too much from marriage. Perhaps for a woman, as for a man, marriage and love, while two of the basic, great values of life, cannot be all of life. For it is a fact that most men do not spend most of the hours of their day, most of the years of their lives, preoccupied with love or sex, as much as those passions are overglorified in the public image today. These images are directed at women, and they are directed at women to sell them something.

Do we really have to keep on acquiescing to the sexual sell, and is it really essential to the American economy? I have a hunch that if women were released to develop their full potential, they might want things that would keep the American economy alive just as much as those eighty-eight ways to get that man or keep him, or those magical powders that will keep the skin pure white. Perhaps more of the American economy might go to research and education, perhaps there might be other changes, but I hardly think keeping the American housewife in a state of perpetual frustration and emptiness and nagging discontent is essential to the American economy.

I think there are some men who may resist this massive, delayed revolution because they have had too much smothering from mothers who need them for an identity, and thus feel insecure in their own ability to move as human beings in the world. They may think they need a woman as a doormat. They may need someone whom they can think of as inferior so that they can feel superior. But I doubt that it is really going to solve any man's problem for his wife to beat herself down, to project a phony inferiority. Isn't it pretty contemptuous of man to say that his ego is so weak that he needs her to pretend to be something that she isn't, in order to make him feel like a big boy? I happen to think men are stronger than that. It might be better for both men and women if they could accept each other for what they are. It might even free men from the binds of the masculine mystique. Someone else will have to write a book about that.

I think all of these resistances are not that great. Our own self-denigration of ourselves as women and perhaps our own fears are the main problems. For it is an unknown road we now must take, and if we move on it, we take risks. It takes courage. We face a more complex life when we begin to create this new image of woman and to put all of these pieces of ourselves together. We risk being tested, being measured. We risk exposing ourselves if we insert ourselves into the human story instead of living through our husbands and children. The longer we hide in our homes evading the challenges of the society that is moving and changing so fast outside our doors, the more we may be afraid to move, the more we may wish, insist, somehow, that we can and only need to be wives and mothers, this is all, this is the greatest thing in life. And it is indeed the bedrock of life, the beginning.

But it isn't all, it can't be all for women today. And if it has to be all for some women too old or too frightened to risk a more complex road, it is not too late for most women. Most women have more strength than they imagine. We do not know what strength we have.

I will tell you something that might make you feel good; it makes me feel good. There is a study not yet published that is being done at Washington University Medical School about the growth of the self in women, the ego, identity, whatever you want to call it. Do you know who has the most mature and the strongest self of all, the most autonomous ego? The committed woman volunteer. Her sense of identity is much stronger than that little housewife. Much stronger, interestingly enough, than the professional social worker in the same field. Why? Because she pioneered on an unknown road; because she had to structure a growth pattern for herself, not *a pattern already there and structured by society; because in many cases she innovated; and because she imposed a discipline on herself that was not imposed by the demands of the paycheck. She is living this new image of woman, she is showing the way. And so are you, whether you realize it or not.

We must all say yes to ourselves as women, and no to that outworn, obsolete image, the feminine mystique. We must stop denigrating ourselves, stop acquiescing in the remaining prejudices the mystique enshrines. We must recognize and affirm each other in the massiveness of our own numbers and our own strength and ask for all women what we all need to move freely ahead. One does not move freely and joyously ahead if one is always torn by conflicts and guilts, nor if one feels like a freak in a man's world, if one is always walking a tightrope between being a good wife and mother and fulfilling one's commitments to society—with no help from society. If we ask, I think we can get simple institutional solutions from society to these real problems. Well-run five- or eight-hour-a-day nursery schools or day-care centers are needed, and Maternity leaves that are real and not just on paper—so that the staff doesn't become mysteriously reduced when you get pregnant. Real credit needs to be given for the work you have done as volunteers. More part-time patterns are needed in all professions for mothers. Above all, women must assume real political equality and take their place as decision-makers in political life.

We must ask for these things ourselves, for no one will hand women anything, any more than society has handed Negroes anything. It was only when they said for themselves, in 1963, the young ones and the old ones, we will no longer eat, live, work, go to school, or even go to the toilet as anything less than free and full and equal human beings, that the rights they won on paper a hundred years ago began to be a reality, and our society began to take them seriously.

American women—the only majority, perhaps, that is still treated like a rather unequal minority—do not have the uncomfortable suffering of the Negro. But they will not be free and equal members of society until they take themselves seriously and finish the work of the delayed revolution. Each and every woman must in her own life stop denigrating herself and must help to win these things for other women.

I have three children. I love them. I would not have missed having them for the world. They are a great fulfillment of my life. But my children no more fulfill, no more define me as a woman; my love for and my life with my husband no more defines or fulfills me as a woman, than the work I do, the nonsexual passions, the questions and the search that made me write my book—and the wish to help write the human story that makes me urge you to affirm your own identity as full human beings and to help create this new image of women as people, both for your daughters and for our society.