

Feminist Writings
Professor Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Studies
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
The Second Sex - Part 2

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled 'Feminist Writing' where we are looking at and studying Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to the 'Second Sex'. We have already had one lecture on this text and now we move on with this text and this particular lecture. Now, if you remember where we stopped last time, Beauvoir talks about how the woman is defined as a lack and how the woman is defined as a position (0:37) the man who is obviously universal phenomenon.

So, in that sense, woman becomes the Other, Other to the man so the man becomes the universal category, the man becomes the universal location compared to which the woman becomes the peculiar location, the accidental location, the interrupted location, the incomplete location. Now, it is very important for us to understand how is this idea of the Other produced.

So the production of the Other, or the othering is something which happens in almost every narrative of exploitation, every narrative of domination. There is colonialism, there is racism, there is patriarchy, etc. This model is something which we can use quite conveniently and map it on to other contexts as well.

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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.¹

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 upon 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.

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Now this is a very important statement - Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought because what that means essentially is that human thought always produces an idea of the Other so any form of identity formation is like a map making so if you make any map, for instance, any act of map making is an act of inclusion and equally is an act of exclusion because the moment you draw a map of somewhere, you are including certain space and also equally you are excluding certain spaces.

And likewise, human thought or human thought of production of identities always creates simultaneously the Other identity. So the moment you create an identity of your own, you need to create an identity of self, outside the identity parameter. So the otherness as the fundamental category of human thought is how human imagination functions especially when it comes to identity formation.

"Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself." So no group, whether it is a group of racism, group of men, group of any kind of ethnicity; no group formation happens without taking up the consideration of the Other as opposed to itself.

"If three travellers 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;" So the whole idea of strangers becomes important over here.

Who is a stranger? A stranger is someone who you don't recognize, you don't recognize as one of your own, someone who comes from the outside. So in a small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village become Other by default and become suspicious. That is the whole process of becoming another.

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So who are they inferior compared to? Who are they lower class compared to? So it becomes a relative conditioning. So what is assumed over here is that there is a fundamental category which is universal, there's a fundamental category which is vertical, so to say, as opposed to which is an imagination of verticality, imagination of universality which is one of the first conditions of identity formation that if you create a hypothesis whereby certain identity becomes the benchmark, it becomes the 0 point, the touchstone for every other kind of identity.

And how do you define the touchstone? How do you determine what is the touchstone? That brings into the positions of power, that brings in discourses of power, privilege, hierarchy, etc. Right.

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This is a very important statement that Lévi-Strauss, the anthropologist makes that de Beauvoir is drawing on and Lévi-Strauss is talking about the passage from Nature to Culture. When you move from the natural to the cultural in any kind of society, in any kind of demography, to primitive societies, any primitive society and make some effort or historically

it is moved towards being cultural from the natural and that journey from natural to cultural has always happened, has always taken place through a production of dualities. The production of otherness.

Evil versus good, dark versus light, desirable versus undesirable; that is how culture is formed because any formation of culture is dependent on the production of Other. So thus that transition from a natural to cultural is dependent on the necessity or the possibility of producing the Other. And that's something that Lévi-Strauss talks about quite clearly.

Okay. So "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."

So it's not really necessary to explain logically the duality, the symmetry, the differences and power, etc. But what is more important is that these are taken for granted and internalized and consumed as social reality or data of social reality which of course is imagined data.

This is fantastic data as it were or pseudo data but this data became very important and almost vital data for the production of culture, the production of cultural identities so this movement from nature to culture depends on the production of opposites, the production of Others, the production of dualities, the production of opposites, the production of all kinds of conflicts because that defines the way identities are formed in a certain cultural context. Right? So, culture is dependent on the production of Other and there are very vital in an organic way.

And that is something that Lévi-Strauss speaks about from a logical perspective and obviously Beauvoir is drawing from Lévi-Strauss in saying that how this kind of formation from nature to culture is operative even with the patriarchy because what is defined as move towards culture is move towards mass community of maleness so men have culture, men have cultural space, men inhabit public spaces of culture.

Whereas women are relegated to being bodies only, to being nature only and that contrast is a very convenient contrast for patriarchy to operate and continue to discriminate and continue to hierarchize itself as opposed to women.

So "these phenomena would be incomprehensible if in fact human society were simply a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness." So, if human society was simply an act of solidarity and a *Mitsein* is a human condition where solidarity or comradeship or collaboration takes place. Now, if that were the case, if human society were simply solidarity then this would be impossibility.

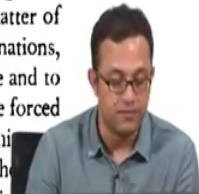
There would be no necessity to create contrast, to create opposites but you find that you create opposites is because we don't really belong, we don't really have a *Mitsein* or fellowship based on comradeship and solidarity and friendliness. Every culture, instead, is basically conditioned to produce out of opposites, produce out of differences, produce out of hierarchies, etc.

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much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality.¹ 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 towards 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 travelling abroad is shocked to find himself in turn regarded as a 'stranger' by the natives of neighbouring 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



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Right so the subject poses itself only in being opposed. The position, opposition go hand-in-hand and this is a really beautiful sentence and it really sums it up so well and so coherently where Beauvoir is quite clearly saying that every act of subject position requires a subject opposition. So position and opposition go hand-in-hand. So if you want to occupy the position of a subject, you need to create an opposition apropos of which your position is produced. Right.

So, she draws on Hegel and says if you follow Hegel, you will find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness. So the whole idea of *Mitsein* as being a human condition categorized to solidarity and fellowship is a utopian condition, ideal condition which doesn't exist. Now what does exist still is the idea of culture, is the idea of position, of subject position which requires a position in order for positionality to be produced. Right?

So, in order to be essential, you have to produce the inessential; in order to have a position, you have to produce the oppositions. So, that necessity to produce opposites, the necessity to produce the Other is unfortunately the true human condition as per the ideas of *Mitsein* and of fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness. This idea becomes very helpful and very crucial and de Beauvoir's study of femininity and masculinity over here.

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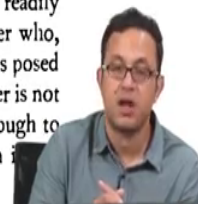
Now, this is where de Beauvoir begins to get more and more... she begins to calibrate the sub-categories within this otherness. So she says quite clearly that if you travel through festivals, if you travel through nations, if you travel through any kind of collaborative categories, you find that the whole idea of otherness becomes quite diluted because you realize that you are in a position apropos some other position. So that reciprocity is recognized to a certain extent when it comes to race, when it comes to ethnicities, when it comes to language, when it comes to culture, etc.

Now, the question then that obviously arises is how come this reciprocity, or the recognition of reciprocity hasn't come into being or has not appeared when it comes to the sexes, when it comes to the male versus female thing? Right. So how is it that we still don't hear talk about the woman as being the inessential, as being the incomplete counterpart of man, etc. Okay.

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So, "why is it that women do not dispute male sovereignty? No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential;" so any act human being with dignity or any human subject with dignity would not want or would not desire to be the object which is inessential, which is required for someone else to be essential. So no one will accept it without any kind of contest or any kind of resistance. So what is the peculiar case of this sexual difference, of this gender difference which makes it more permanent in quality to certain extent.

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Whence comes this submission in the case of woman?" So that is the key question which Beauvoir is asking over here.

So what is this whole idea of submission when it comes to women? So why is it that there is no contest historically in terms of not accepting itself as the Other or rather say that we are the One and as opposed to which man is the Other. So what is the submission, what is the ontological quality of the submission, what is the experiential quality of the submission in the case of women as Beauvoir asked quite clearly.

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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 tradition, sometimes a religion or a culture.

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"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" so sometimes it is just purely mathematical, it is a question of numbers sometimes. Some people are more in relation to others so they have more territorial advantage; they have more numerical advantage which then spills over, which then extends on to discursive advantage or political advantage, etc. So a larger army can vanquish a smaller army on a numerical basis, more often than not.

"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..." so if you take the numerical logic, the more number harassing or exploiting the lesser number that wouldn't work in case of women because it is more or less, equal in terms of number.

"Women are not a minority like the American Negroes or the Jews;" so there's a difference made between the women and the American Negroes or the Jews because the Jews are a minority in terms of numbers. The women are not a minority in terms of numbers. So what is it that makes them the Other of men? Sometimes unquestionably.

"...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."

So in case of, for instance, colonialism, there was a time where the colonized and the colonizers did not know each other. They were completely autonomous from each other, different from each other so before colonialism happened, the colonized natives had their own traditions, had their own religion, had their own culture which was then obviously wiped out with the arrival of colonialism but then it is possible to produce a past or at least remember a past before colonialism where there was some sense of identity which suffered erasure. It's the term used in post-colonial studies.

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¹ See C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*.



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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,¹ 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, never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring



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So even in the case of proletariat and the upper class we find that, that too came out of something. It did not exist from the word God; it didn't exist from inception. Some people got richer and some people did not get so rich and that's how the class divisions took place and then we have the bourgeois one of the proletariat as different categories but there was a time when there were no proletariats. So proletarians have not always existed whereas there have always been women.

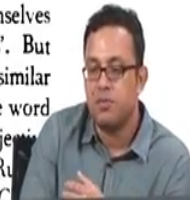
"They are women in virtue of their anatomy and physiology." So since the beginning of human species, since the beginning of human civilization, women have always been women in terms of the virtue, of the anatomy and physiology. "Throughout history they have always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change – it was not something that occurred."

So it was not occurrence. So the subjugation of women is not an occurrence like colonialism. So colonial army comes and wipes out the natives and sets up its own civilization, that's an occurrence of human history. Slavery is an occurrence in the human history. Anti-Semitism is an occurrence in the human history.

So it happened at a certain point of time in the human history. Prior to which there were different situations, prior to which there were different demographic conditions but when it comes to women, there has always been women from the very inception of human civilizations so that occurrence is not really an occurrence in human history of female subjugation. It's not really an occurrence. There is a key difference between female subjugation and imperialism, [between] female subjugation and class struggle as de Beauvoir is very clearly mapping out.

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So something which happened in human history can also unhappen. An occurrence which came can also be retaliated again. So when the white men had come and taken away the independence of people some of the parts of the world, their independence can be regained, their independence can be fought back because it happened at one point of time, that can be undone. But something which has always been there, is quite possibly, beyond the possibility of changes that is de Beauvoir is suggesting.

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this change according to Beauvoir. Proletarians say 'We'; Negroes also. Regarded themselves as subjects, they transform the bourgeois, the whites, into 'others'."

So you can turn it the other way around where proletarians would say that we are the 'we' and the bourgeois are the Others; Negroes would say or the black men would say that we are the 'we' and the white men are the Others. So they can turn the table on the whole otherness.

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The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organ
themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the commu



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So this becomes a critique of women done by Beauvoir over here. So she says that no, the proletarians have accomplished revolution in Russia where the Tsar was abolished, Tsarism was abolished and the Bolshevik party came to power which then became the communist party. The Negroes in Haiti have done a similar thing. They have done away with white imperialism and they gained back their territory.

And the Indo-Chinese, which is obviously the Vietnam War is being referred over here, are battling for for Indo-China against imperials, the American invasion for instance. But a woman's effort has never been anything more than a symbolic agitation.

So what de Beauvoir seems to suggest or seems to want over here is a real agitation rather than a symbolic agitation so the reality becomes more important for de Beauvoir and she wants women to possess a reality, rather than just a symbolic presence.

They have gained only what men have been willing to grant them. So what the men have given them, and granted them and conferred on them from a position of privilege, they have [women] just taken that; they have taken nothing, they have only received. So they need to possess power, they need to take power, they need to appropriate power that belongs to them. They haven't done that. They have just received privileges that men have given to them.

So that's a very key condition, a very key difference that de Beauvoir is mapping out between the woman condition and a class condition and the race condition which too have problems of subjugation, harassment, exploitation, hierarchy, etc.

But there is a fundamental difference in those conditions and these conditions. So one is the temporal difference, that those conditions of colonialism or racism or domination of race or language happen at a certain moment of historical time. So it was an occurrence, once was done and can be undone. So it can be retaliated again. Whereas as a woman's condition has been happening since the beginning of human civilization that women have been subjugated.

And secondly the retaliation is real when it comes to political struggles or race struggles or ethnicity struggles, etc. But the retaliation for the women, according to Beauvoir, is strictly speaking, symbolic in quality and that needs to change according to Beauvoir's argument. So we will stop at this point today and we will conclude with this text in the lectures to come. Thank you for your attention.