

A Discussion on “Other” Identity in Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*

MI Shuting

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

A woman’s identity may be that of a mother or a wife, but these stereotypical notions of femininity are artificially constructed and externally imposed, and the inability of individuals to shape the notion of femininity as they see fit prompts women to re-examine their own situation. The differences between men’s and women’s situations are reflected in their professional, familial, and social positions, with men’s ambitions and actions often being highly valued, while women’s search for their own value is subjected to a relatively closed system of evaluation that is dominated by the male perspective. In the face of the realization of male value identities, female value identities tend to become self-evident “other” identities. However, these so-called “external values” should not be merged into the females’ self. Women, in their roles as wives, mothers, and housewives, are not able to realize their self-subjectivity. Women’s identity is gradually alienated to the “other” by their upbringing and the influence of male status. However, male authority should not dominate the female sphere. Women’s exploration and development of the future should depend on the context of their own lives as a whole, and should not be bound by male-defined “success”. The realization of female subjectivity requires active and independent integration into life through positive action and the projection of one’s own existence into human society.

Keywords: Beauvoir, “other” identity, females, femininity

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir was an important French writer and thinker of the 20th century. She had devoted herself to the study of feminism from the perspective of existentialism. *The Second Sex* written by her was published in 1949, and caused great repercussions in the ideological world.

Due to the tradition of patriarchal society, it had been a long time that females had been suppressed to the inferior position, which also gradually promoted the feminist movement to its climax. The recognition of group differences and cultural diversity poses both local and global dilemmas for feminism that harken back to the movement’s opposition to hierarchical forms of domination and its abiding concern for sex equality: how to theorize a conception of justice (Dietz, 2003, p. 417). With the advancement of productivity, views and matters about feminism have been more and more debated in the society, especially when it comes to the new century. Through discussion about feminist thoughts and relevant resolutions, maybe we can see that there are more possibilities for females in their individual development.

In the eternal topic of feminism, the “other” identity of females had been discussed a lot from perspectives, and *The Second Sex* did significant works to analyze and deconstruct the concept of the “other” identity, which refers to the famous sentence: One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. In this book, Beauvoir took the

macro society as well as the micro interpersonal relationships as background to reveal the inferior status of females, which shows the process from women’s status rising to liberation is precisely the manifestation of social progress. Although there is still a long way to go to achieve women’s liberation, the progressive ideas and theoretical values embodied in the book are commendable and worthy of future generations’ learning and reference.

Brief Retrospection on Feminist Thought

The development of Western feminist theory has gone through a hundred years, from the equal rights of men and women in Plato’s “Utopia” to the birth of the Women’s Declaration in 1848 and from the first Western feminist movement to the third Western feminism. The climax of the movement has pushed the study of Western feminist theory deeper in the continuous exploration of historical practice.

Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social gender equality.

Feminist thought aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women’s and men’s social roles, experiences, interests, chores, and feminist politics in a variety of fields, such as anthropology and sociology, media studies, literature, education, and philosophy. Moreover, it focuses on analyzing gender inequality themes explored in feminism including discrimination, objectification, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history, and aesthetics. Gender equality is a valuable goal because it facilitates achieving all kinds of social goods: It spurs economic growth, fosters development, and reduces hunger (Prügl, 2015, p. 619).

When it comes to the 20th century, Western feminist thoughts have promoted the development of a hundred schools of thoughts, driven by multiculturalism and economic globalization. Feminist scholars are not only limited to the gaining of women’s rights or the pursuit of women’s status, but also push the research perspective toward pursuing for a new social order, social relations, and social models to replace the existing chaotic society full of discrimination. In the process of development, feminist thoughts change from simple egalitarianism to more profound theoretical speculation, and it uses gender as the basic perspective, critically inheriting various cultural ideas, and focuses on deconstructing social consciousness in deep level, thinking habits, and cultural symbols and try to establish a feminist discourse system.

Reasons of Females Having the “Other” Identity

In the description of Beauvoir, she puts forward that females are not borne as the image of the “other”, but are endowed with the “other” identity by the society in the process of their growing up. She smoothly analyzes the reasons of females becoming the “other”, which includes two aspects—the bothering of physical gender and the oppression from society.

In the first place, Beauvoir discusses the distinction of physical structure between males and females. In their childhood, when boys and girls are gradually aware of their differing with the opposite gender children, they will be curious about the reason of the difference and their mentality will change a lot. In the analysis of Beauvoir, boys will be implanted with the idea by the surrounding people that boys should be stronger and take more responsibility on their own initiative as the saying goes—“Men only weep when they deeply hurt”. That gender should be considered a moderator in the relation between identity and personality which is suggested by several important but different types of considerations (Cramer, 2000, p. 44). And, in fact, boys usually have more excellent physical power. They are allowed to do some exciting activities, such as climbing

trees, swimming, or just capering here and there at will and even act as a mischievous son. They are encouraged to make adventures and to innovate continually in a pioneering spirit. Therefore, boys might believe that it is their gender that they can have privileges beyond girls’ in life. Thanks to their gender, they have their male features; and thanks to their male features, they can enjoy an entirely different life from girls. So, boys will gradually believe that their bodies are symbols of manliness and strength. And, boys often feel proud of their own masculinity.

However, referring to Beauvoir’s argument, the society attach importance to the masculinity but not do the same to females. For instance, in the ancient Roman period, people selected books and games for a girl and led her to the way of fixed fate. She was required to cook, sew, and do housework, and at the same time she also had to learn how to dress up herself, keep charming, and always have a sense of dignity. According to the expectation of others, she must behave herself and restrain herself from vigorous exercise like fighting with friends. In brief, people urged a girl to become a maid and puppet just like her female elders. Nevertheless, even it has come more closely to the victory of feminism, and it is normal to encourage a girl to study as much as possible and to devote to sports, a girl is still supposed to become a woman at least and not to lose her female features. And girls will tend to feel that their brothers are superior to them because of the boys’ physical structure is different from girls’. So, boys and girls will possibly attribute the differential treatment by society to their different constituent part of body, and the mental development in the period of childhood is able to lay the ground work for the formation of females’ other identity.

Secondly, in the following argument, Beauvoir reveals that the family experience can also make an impact on females becoming equal to the “other” identity. As proved in the book, the elders usually admire boys much more than girls. And most parents often look forward to having a son but not a daughter, which irresistibly changes the girls’ cognition to themselves to a large extent. In addition, the hierarchy of genders existing in the tradition of a family will also influence girls’ awareness. Generally speaking, as girls growing up, they will gradually find that their fathers enjoy extreme authority in the household matters. Even when mother actually deals with the household duties, the father’s will still can be showed out subtly. And father is often regarded as the patriarch taking responsibility of the family. So, when girls get much more mature, they will realize that the dominating force of the world is men but not women, and realize the advantages of males will be more settled with the widening knowledge as well as experience. So, the girls’ minds will be largely influenced. They can foresee that they will become almighty women just like their mother but not the sovereign father.

Boys are able to seize the dominant position of being through contending, but girls can only endure such position with a sort of appreciative attitude and except appraise from father passively. So, little girls will possibly place themselves in the bottom of the hierarchy of genders. And Beauvoir also illustrates the idea by some examples, in which males are often shaped as heroes in most history or literary works, and the legends, arts of status and of paintings that are about praises toward men account for a large percent. Within a girl’s whole childhood, she gets to realize that her fate is governed by the subject world step by step as a result of being influenced by her surrounding people. And she will accept the fact that she is bound to face her passive fate as the “other” person. So, it is easier to understand what dramatic contradiction is happening in girls’ minds—that she knows she cannot be “adult” unless she is willing to accept her identity as a female, which makes her destined to live an uneasy life, which resists the tendency of advancement of women, as a result of being governed by patriarchy society.

Features of Females’ “Other” Identity

In the whole period of a girl’s childhood, the disturbance due to the physical structure and the oppress root in the society added to her bring her a sort of inferiority complex, which are surely indispensable factors for the formation of the “other” identity of women being changed into. According to Beauvoir’s argument, the “other” identity of women also includes some features. Firstly, passivity is a distinct one of all the features, which has been developed since the woman was a child. In the period of a girl’s childhood, she always has to listen to words of education in various aspects in life. Sometimes, a girl can be guided to the path of being passive thanks to games and dreams. For instance, through dressing up a cloth doll, a girl can find what beauty and ugliness mean. In turn, when parents tell her that a girl should strive for being a lady in the future and have to win for others’ favor, she will start to dream she could be as wonderful as the doll in her hands, which is invariably dressed up elaborately and appreciated by people.

When a girl’s values have not taken shape, she starts to be instilled with the thoughts that it is significant to try hard to be liked by others. And to achieve this, she must give up being her own master as a subject. She is a living cloth doll to some degree due to the passivity. Boy’s situations are totally different from the girl’s. The great advantages of a boy lie in his independent existence. He can freely contest with other boys, register his body as an instrument to tame nature, and make fights. His charm shines through games, exercise, battles, challenges, and test. It is unnecessary for a boy to bother to win the favor from others. Therefore, it is a vicious circle for a girl. The less she tries to understand and grasp the essence of the ambient world independently, the more limited her thoughts will be and the less confidence she will have to affirm that her identity as a subject. If given that she is encouraged equally as the boy, she might be no less energetic, curious, creative than a boy.

The passivity is not only reflected on the girl’s yearning for other’s cares and preference, but also on the role of females in the society. In the tradition of a patriarchal society, women are always educated to obey the authority of men. So, women will easily give up their own critical thoughts or deliberate judgement, and just grin and bear it. When men establish and carry out the rules, laws, and ethics as the pathfinders of history, women can only make efforts to understand the inevitability of history and have no choice but support the father, brothers, and husband blindly. To a large extent, due to not participating in the establishment of all forms of order, women are ignorant and slavish. They regard men as a sort of superior existence beyond them. They unconditionally believe men are superior and always seek for protect and recognition subconsciously, which indeed consolidate the passivity of women. Therefore, passivity can be an absolute feature of females’ “other” identity that carries through all periods of their life.

In addition to passivity, the femininity is also a feature of a woman titled with the “other” identity. As to the femininity, it is expressed from both of the appearance and characters of females. Generally speaking, a lady of standard is often thought to be proficient with matters of dressing herself up, suppressing her feelings, being modest and prudent, not being stand out and being submissive all the time. And such form of femininity is also related to the first feature passivity. Under the control of passivity, a woman will not take actions on her initiative on making friends or seeking for love, but to keep passive attitude. Because men do not like those women who are intellectual, knowledgeable and those with strong personality. To set up a good image of tender lady to cater for a man, a woman tends to behave out of affection instead of making the best of their ingenious nature. And if given that a woman confirms her existence as a subject in the society but not as the “other” person, her femininity as well as allure to men will be weaken. So, the feature of passivity is closely connected with the femininity and

the latter is also an important feature of females’ “other” identity. In general, it seems that males are aggressive towards other males and non-discriminatory in that they will usually attempt to mate with any female of the same species (Manning, 1985, p. 349). In addition, femininity can also be shown through the responsibility that women take, which concerns with the role that women play among all family members. In general, men have a say in almost all major household decisions, because they represent the image of guardians of a family, and they have enough strength to carry the burden of his family and hack his way through difficulties. In the aspect of overcoming the setbacks, it seems that men usually possess more courage and strength than women. However, as the care-giver and manager of households, women rarely share those significant responsibilities equally with men or have a say in the decisions. Unlike men, the focus of women’s life does not lie in social value, wealth, or reputation, but in whether she can live a happy life smoothly. And to acquire satisfying life, women will let their position be ironed out by tedious life and embody their male relatives’ agenda, so that they can devote themselves to serving the male members of the family and be a housewife heart and soul. They can only be constrained within her life circle and have little opportunity to widen her horizon. So, it makes sense to say the femininity of women also means some flaws of women’s characters—mediocrity, lowliness, cowardice, parochialism, laziness, servility, and so on, which constitute a large part of women’s femininity feature.

Influences of Females’ “Other” Identity

According to Beauvoir’s argument, the “other” identity can generate great influences directly or indirectly on the development of themselves. And no period of a woman’s life can escape from being impacted by the “other” identity. It is pointed that a sort of inferiority complex can be caused since an adult was a little girl with the “other” identity. Due to the difference of physical structure, females’ physical power is not enough like males. Large groups of unrelated females do not provide a similar benefit to human females. For human males, use of social exclusion reduces intra-individual competition, but simultaneously weakens the group in inter-group contests (Benenson et al., 2013). And toward most physical activities demanding a high level of physical load, it seems that female is not as appropriate as male. For instance, whether it is daily exercise of swimming, running, and playing tennis or is extreme sports of rock climbing, going for skiing, and parachuting or even exploration in nature, females always belong to the inferior position. So, it is difficult for girls to achieve to cultivate interests or pursuing for dreams in the direction of matters that are more suitable for boys. And girls will also directly think they are inferior to boys. Therefore, it is inevitably that such inferiority complex will accompany the girls since they become teenagers. What’s more, such inferiority complex can also suppress the development of females’ intelligence. As a result, from the beginning of puberty, girls will lose their superiority in the fields of art and science. Because it is common that boys are often encouraged to innovate and create miracles in the study of intellectuals, but girls are not lucky enough to be treated like that. As females, they are supposed to take care of both their occupational burden and the burden relating to the gender identity. That means females must work hard in careers without ignoring looking after every household trivial matter, even so they are still not given enough space or freedom to release their potential abilities in the fields of art and science.

In addition to the influence on the individual development of females, the “other” identity can also make impact on the women’s situation in a family. When a woman gets married, she possibly needs to give up her original dream and has to transfer from a light-hearted maid to an exhausted housewife. Under the force of the “other” identity, she cannot laugh, cry, or live for herself, but actually to live for other family members. Anything that relates to her desire is insignificant, but it is impossible to free herself from acting as the babysitter of the

whole family. As a result, with the restrictions of the “other” identity, women will gradually consume their body and soul up in a marriage, and silently dedicate to the daily life of her husband and of son to make a living to the greatest extent. Therefore, with the “other” identity, both of females’ individual development and the situation among family members can be deeply influenced.

Destruction of “Other” Identity by Financial Independence

In the previous chapter, the reasons, features, and the influences of females’ “other” identity have been analyzed in detail. In the following discussion, problems about how females can change the status and find a way out in their development will be discussed point by point. In Beauvoir’s opinion, it is vital for a woman to seek for her own career, which can actually make sure that a woman gains true freedom. Because females have their own career, they can break the relations of dependence between males and them instead of living on the role of parasites. And they do not need the intermediary agent of men to communicate with the world. The focus on females’ achievement striving in self-selected activities is particularly needed because of the relative neglect of females in much theory and research on achievement motivation. There appears to be a need for females to develop achievement orientations and to express them in a variety of areas including, but not restricted to, academic and occupational attainment (Stein & Bailey, 1973, p. 345). The achievement of career means the transfer of identity—from the “other” identity to a producer as well as an initiative person. As a subject in life, a woman can freely control her own thoughts. She can pay more attention to her individual development and even regain her original interests and dreams that had been buried deep down in her heart when she was young. As a subject, she does not need to bother to change her cleverness for people’s attention and affection. With the participation in career, more new things can be introduced to their common life. For instance, women can have more complex interrelationships, which allows them to contact with different styles of people but not only being limited within the little circle of family. And she can have a say as a subject in her own life circles without being intervened by any family member. Due to the identity transfer, women can also feel a sort of release from inferiority complex. Because once women deal with matters about career as a subject, she has to think more and more independently, so that it is easy for her to break traditional styles and get more active thinking.

In addition, with the collapse of inferiority complex, the more the new things are tried by women, the more the confidence will be increasingly accumulated. And gradually women will not feel they are inferior to men any more, no matter in the field of art or science. They can open up eyes through occupying a proper post in the career, from which they can realize that apart from serving for family they can also achieve their own values in the outside world as a subjective existence. Except the transfer of the identity, the achievement of career also benefits the economic independence of women. If so, women can easily get rid of the support of men. Instead, they can make the best use of their savings earned by career to spend on anything at will. It is unnecessary for them to worry about food problem; on the contrary, they can spend more on spiritual nourishment and enjoy the conveniences brought by promotion of life equality. Therefore, a suitable job is the first step to achieve the liberation of females.

The “Other” Identity Is Overwhelmed by Female Intellectuals

In the last part, the importance of becoming financially independent has been emphasized. And then the necessities of becoming female intellectuals will be demonstrated. According to Beauvoir, due to wasting too much time on the trivial matters at home, a large number of girls will neglect the true education at school. Lacking

of regular cultivation of education, it is admitted that the quality of girls is worse than boys’. And it is easy for girls to become superficial and mediocre persons. Providing some evidence for sex differences in both brain morphology and cognitive performance, future evidence may link the two in a causative relationship. Females’ choice of career and professional achievement reflect such differences which in no way follow from their present evidence (Rosser & Ardener, 1980, p. 445). Given not enough opportunities to know and understand what education is, so that it is difficult for girls to taste the sweet when acquiring knowledge. In the face of choice of brain work of reading and easier physical labor, girls will choose the latter. Because they lack courage and impetus to continue the study, with being stressed by family burden. However, to get over the bad influences of the “other” identity, females must concentrate their efforts in the study. They should read textbooks and extracurricular books as many as possible to train the divergent thinking, from which they can gain a key to a new world. And they will realize that the magic knowledge can bring her more affluent imagination and the precious ability to innovate as a pioneer, but not only pursuing for utilitarianism. Especially in the period of childhood and puberty, reading is significant for the shape of values of girls, who need to prepare for starting the path of becoming intellectuals as soon as possible. If females are knowledgeable enough, actually they can analyze, summarize, and then solve problems through what they have learned and put into action. Because to some extent, if they can conquer the challenge of studying, they will be freer and more experienced at other things in life. And they do not need to just obey men’s opinions without thinking by themselves in the household affairs. Except the change of situation in a little family, becoming intellectual females can promote women to contribute more in the field of art and science. Men have been showing extraordinary talents all the time, but women always keep silent. Although it is rare to see that women are lively to shock the circle of intellectuals, but once they seriously absorb more specialized knowledge, they will make contributions no less than men’s to the world and to exhibit females’ charms but not only being hidden behind men. And it is a perpetual theme to become an intellectual woman to achieve both of the intellectual and social values in the pursue for true liberty.

Conclusion

It is believed that it’s also indispensable for women to establish a sort of bidirectional relationship with men. Because according to Beauvoir, most of the time women can only wander around the margins of men’s field. Despite the variety of ways in which man has construed her essential characteristics, she is always the “Object”, a conglomeration of attributes to be predicted and controlled along with other natural phenomena (Alcoff, 1988, p. 406). They cannot put themselves on an equal footing with men due to the “other” identity. As the subordinate existence in men’s life, women will become used to respect the superior position of men and sometime they dare not to raise a claim as a result of being afraid of destroying the happiness she has in the marriage. But women do not have to drop their ego and give up the desire of being a true “Subject”, and getting rid of the “other” identity is never the final destination, but a long-lasting process for females to recognize and become themselves.

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