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*The Image of Woman in the Works of
Simone de Beauvoir
and
Jean-Paul Sartre.*

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Abstract.

The thesis examines first the situation of women in France today and their attitudes to the current questioning of women's rôles, which has arisen in part from the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième sexe, concluding that women are divided in their views.

The early life and background of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre are considered, and their relationship and their attitudes to love, particularly in those respects which have influenced their writing.

This is followed by a brief account of aspects of existentialist philosophy as they have affected the lives of the two authors, and which are relevant in the study of their women characters, noting that it is Simone de Beauvoir who has explored the moral consequences of living in accordance with existentialist theories.

The main points of Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième sexe are summarized, with some comments on criticisms of it, noting the sometimes hasty and not quite objective reactions of some critics and its sympathetic reception by some, but not all, women readers.

Women characters in the works of each author are examined, to see how far the image presented expresses the philosophical ideas of the authors, with comments on the differences in the attitudes of the two authors to the characters, and women are then considered as they appear in their relationships with men, conventional or unconventional.

The conclusion is that the image of woman presented is not one that may be considered an ideal representation of women living according to existentialist principles, but shows women of different degrees of existentialist authenticity, grappling with the problems of life.

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Introduction.

Today women in France, as elsewhere, are becoming increasingly vociferous in their claims to a right to have a certain status in society, to receive consideration as autonomous individuals. This is part of a world-wide reevaluation of the rôle of women in society. It is not a new movement, but the impetus it has gained in recent years is partly due to the work done by Simone de Beauvoir in the 1950's.

In France, there is a long tradition of respect for women. Henri Peyre writes:

No other history is probably as rich as that of France in remarkable women: saints, queens, court-esans, favourites, tyrannical mothers, warlike heroines. Down to the eighteenth century there flourished also more women writers of the first rank in France than in Italy, Spain or Britain. Marie de France has no equal in any other medi-
eval literature; nor have Madame de Sévigné and Madame de Lafayette or the prolific and passionate letter writers of the... "Age of Reason." George Sand and Madame de Staël were, in the Romantic era, the last great survivors of a long series of women writers who lived their novels while writing them. (1)

The courtly poets sang of love, placing the lady on a pedestal. Writers of fabliaux painted a more down-to-earth picture. Through the ages women have been portrayed in French literature against the background of their times. In addition, since the thirteenth century there have been outstanding women writers and patronesses of the arts, such as Aliénor d'Aquitaine and her daughter Marie, Marguerite d'Angoulême, queen of Navarre, Madame de Lafayette and the Marquise de Rambouillet. There have been some, from Madame de Staël and George Sand to Simone de Beauvoir, who have not accepted passively the woman's traditional rôle in society, and who have expressed their unconventional ideas in their literary works and put them into practice in their own lives.

It must not be suggested that all women, or all French-women, conform to a stereotype, and it is particularly important not to be taken in by the image presented by popular writing:

Il faut que nos amis de l'étranger ne se laissent pas séduire ou scandaliser par le portrait souvent injuste et généralement conventionnel que trop de gens ont tracé d'une Française à la tête légère uniquement préoccupée de mode et de galanterie. Comme partout dans le monde, on trouve en France nombre de femmes laborieuses, vaillantes devant les grandes épreuves de la vie; et les mères françaises

ne le cèdent point aux autres en dévouement silencieux à l'égard de leur foyer. (2)

Twentieth century society is changing with increasing rapidity. In times of crisis, of which many have been seen in the twentieth century, women have shown their mettle and taken their place alongside of men:

Il y a ces admirables résistantes qui hier, dans le maquis et sous le feu des pelotons d'exécution ont témoigné d'un courage au moins égal à celui des hommes. (3)

In 1961, Françoise Giraud expressed the opinion that young women no longer needed to fight for self-realisation and assurance, that they preferred the "old struggle to find a husband and to keep him", that they used their weapons of hair-styles, clothes and cosmetics to conquer him, but rejected any idea of domination: "Perhaps she knows what she would be losing-- the velvet glove which conceals the iron hand beneath." (4)

In 1974, a reviewer of Françoise Parturier's Lettre ouverte aux femmes notes that already at the beginning of the century Marcel Prévost in his Lettres à Françoise (1902 - 1928), had foreseen a feminist movement:

....Jamais l'esprit de la femme n'a fermenté comme à cette heure. La femme reprend par-devers soi le souci de son bonheur au lieu de le confier à l'homme. Qu'on goûte ou non cette évolution, il est rigaud de la nier. Quant au sens de cette évolution, point n'est besoin non plus d'être grand clerc pour l'apercevoir. La femme, au cours des prochaines années, tendra de plus en plus à rapprocher sa condition de celle de l'homme. Et les habitudes, les apparences mêmes des deux sexes inclineront de plus en plus à se confondre. (5)

Indeed, some women have gone even further and have demanded equality with men in many spheres. The reviewer comments:

Il ne faut pas écouter les faux prophètes qui disent aux femmes: "Attention! Le jour où vous avez les mêmes prérogatives que les hommes vous deviendrez la femme-à-barbe." Ceux-la ne savent pas que pour aimer vraiment une femme, l'aimer dans tous les sens du mot, il faut la respecter et la tenir pour égale à soi. (6)

Another article (1973) proclaims that:

Dans le monde entier les femmes bougent, les femmes parlent, et leurs voix parfois dissonantes disent qu'elles sont enchaînées, déchirées entre leurs maternités et la rentabilité, entre le travail "visible" (rémunéré) et le travail invisible (surajouté), entre le plaisir et le devoir, entre leur sexe biologique

et leur sexe social, entre l'homme et la société,
disent qu'elles veulent être libérées. (7)

The same article admits quite freely that not all women feel this way. Articles which take up extreme positions cannot present a true picture. Françoise Giraud's article represents one reaction to Simone de Beauvoir's views, the later articles a different reaction to similar views; it has to be admitted that the women's desire to be liberated is far from universal. Many women now wish to work outside their homes, but less in order to gain independence in a man's world than to add to the family budget. In a survey carried out by L'Express, the results of which are given in the article just quoted (7), 56% of the women interviewed wished to work for financial reasons, 27% to gain independence.

Investigators in this survey found that the forceful and articulate few, particularly intellectuals and city dwellers, may give the impression that Frenchwomen are in a state of feminist ferment, but that the ordinary provincial Frenchwoman is likely to tell an interviewer that she wishes only to be "heureuse avec son mari, avec suffisamment d'argent, des gosses raisonnables en bonne santé." or: "Je préfère être commandée par un homme, car pour moi, un homme est supérieur." (8).

Françoise Parturier, in an interview published in July, 1974, expresses the opinion that the current women's movement in France owes much to the influence of women's movements in America. Women seem largely concerned with such subjects as equal pay with men, abortion and divorce. She, too, feels that women's cause is far from won. The interview is headed: "En n'osant pas profiter de leurs droits, les femmes trahissent la cause des femmes." In the course of it, Françoise Parturier says:

Beaucoup d'hommes, en fait, continuent à ne pas accepter la femme ailleurs qu'au lit ou dans la cuisine.....Les femmes, trop souvent encore, élèvent leurs filles comme elles ont été élevées. De mère en fille se transmet ainsi l'héritage des lieux communs sur le destin de la femme.....Les femmes sont trop souvent complices de leur asservissement. (9)

Françoise Mallet-Joris, a contemporary novelist, expresses similar views on women's situation. She says:

En fait, je crois que la femme française de notre époque est encore assez conditionnée par l'image type qu'on faisait de la femme au début du siècle.
Il y a beaucoup de femmes qui se posent des problèmes

parce qu'elles travaillent, parce qu'elles ont une sorte de complexe de culpabilité, parce qu'elles trouvent qu'elles ne s'occupent pas suffisamment de leurs enfants, et qu'il y a.... un environnement social qui conditionne la femme et dont c'est impossible qu'elle ne soit pas marquée. (10)

While Simone de Beauvoir's long essay on women of the 1950's, Le Deuxième Sexe gained enthusiastic support from many women sympathetic to her ideas, it created a furor of outrage amongst the conventional members of bourgeois society, especially some of her male critics, who were quick to point to her unconventional relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre as proof of what they called her moral depravity. Nevertheless her book marked the beginning of a wave of feminism in France and elsewhere.

In Le Deuxième sexe she traced the origins of women's subordination and dependence back to a primitive era when the physical weakness of women when confronting danger and the physical demands of childbearing and motherhood were considerable and inescapable handicaps. Having once gained a position of domination over women, men remained there.

A woman's desire for liberty, equality and authenticity may lead her to eschew the restraints of traditional marriage, though she may still find happiness with an enlightened partner; it does not require her to deny her essential femininity, the fact that she is a woman. In fact, she may find true fulfilment in working with her partner, whether he be husband or lover, toward a common goal.

The existentialist philosophers' outlook is so important in considering the women characters in their novels and plays that it is necessary to examine it briefly, after a short account of the early lives of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre and their long association with one another.

Notes.

1. Henri Peyre, "Contemporary Feminine Literature in France", in Yale French Studies No. 27, 1961, p. 47
2. M. Bruézière et G. Mauger, Cours de langue et de civilisation françaises, Tome IV, p. 139
3. Ibid.
4. Françoise Giraud, "The Second Sex," in Yale French Studies op. cit., p. 25
5. James de Coquet, "Françoise parle aux Françaises", in Figaro hebdomadaire international, 13 avril, 1974, p. 6
6. Ibid.
7. Danièle Heymann, "Jusqu' où vont-elles aller, les femmes", in Et Maintenant, 5 mars, 1973, p.1
8. Ibid., p. 3
9. Interview de Françoise Parturier par Pierre Démeron, in Marie Claire, No. 263, juillet, 1974, p. 5
10. Françoise Mallet-Joris, Le Naturel est une longue étude, Disque No. 77, Collection Français de notre temps.