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**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF LIBERATION STRATEGY
IN SIMONE deBEAUVOIR'S "THE SECOND SEX"**

By

Amber Katherine

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF LIBERATION STRATEGY IN SIMONE deBEAUVOIR'S "THE SECOND SEX"

By

Amber Katherine

In The Second Sex Simone de Beauvoir offers a liberation strategy to women. Inherent in her strategy is a reliance on the 'good faith' efforts of oppressors, which closes out the possibility for the oppressed to take the first step toward ending their oppression. If the object of liberation is to put women, as a class, on the same terms as men, then any strategy which holds the potential to actualize this goal must be considered. I propose a strategy with this potential, and offer reasons why Beauvoir failed to consider it. The strategy which I propose calls for women to separate from oppressive contexts and interactions which maintain them, and to search for and create counter-contexts without oppressive Othering. Herein lies the possibility for the oppressed to initiate their liberation struggle while under oppression.

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I. Liberation

In The Second Sex¹ Simone de Beauvoir answers the question, "What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome?" (xli) from the perspective of existentialist ethics. Her answer derives an ontological explanation of oppression from women's "lived experience,"² and outlines a strategy for changing women's second class situation. Her analysis employs the Sartrean categories of 'immanence' and 'transcendence' in order to articulate the mechanics of oppression and liberation. Beauvoir tells us that immanence "is a degradation of existence into the 'en-soi'--the brutish life of subjection to given conditions--." (xli) Its corrective, transcendence, is the "expansion [of present existence] into an indefinitely open future," (ibid.) through projects which change the givens. In The Ethics of Ambiguity³ Beauvoir turns Sartre's characterization of human existence as a struggle between the 'in-itself' (immanence) and the 'for-itself' (transcendence) into a moral imperative: assume the ambiguity of the human situation, resist the temptations of immanence, and justify your existence by

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage) 1989.

² Parshley translated the title of Book II, "L'expérience vécue" as "Woman's Life Today" rather than "Lived Experience." Margaret A. Simons, "The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir: Guess What's Missing From The Second Sex," Women's Studies International Forum 6:5, 1983, p. 563.

³ Simone de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, translated by Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel) 1980.

perpetually engaging in the constructive movement of transcendence. In The Second Sex she argues that attaining this ethical ideal will end the oppression of women. The ethical task for men is to abandon the dream of an absolute Other in 'woman', who will affirm his liberty without reciprocity. The ethical task for women is to reject the metaphysical comfort of being a 'woman' and accept the risk of transcendence in order to affirm their liberty.

There is an important distinction to be made in Beauvoir's use of the concept of liberation. The distinction lies in the difference between projects which serve as modes of transcendence and the project of ending oppression. In order to make explicit the difference between liberation from givens, or in Sartrean terminology "facticity," and liberation which ends oppression I offer a brief sketch of each, followed by an explanation of what conspires to confuse the two.

In Beauvoir's analysis transcendence is an individual's attempt to assert her/his subjectivity, for her/himself, through projects which continually re-create the self and the situation. One engages in projects for her/himself in order to elicit recognition from other subjects. One wants recognition from other subjects because it promises the reflective affirmation of existence which is not possible by performing the Cogito or through encounters with Nature. Transcendence is liberating activity in that it is the assertion of the will over otherwise determining

circumstances. When one chooses to undertake a constructive project, rather than attempting to conceal that there is a choice with deterministic explanations and excuses, liberty prevails. Take, for example, an artist whose hands are pulverized in a lawn mower accident. The facts are grim: without hands this artist appears to have lost the means to create the paintings which drew so much recognition. Now the artist faces a choice: transcend the facts by creating new projects or pretend that the facts have determined fate once and for all. Choosing the latter is what Sartre calls "bad faith." Resisting bad faith is one liberation struggle which Beauvoir defines:

. . . along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. (xxxiii)

It is important to note that transcendence involves a special kind of agency. In order to qualify as transcendent one's actions must be "positive," rather than "negative."⁴ In positive projects a subject is able to confer significance for itself by destroying given situations and constructing new ones. Negative actions, on the other hand, are repetitive and senseless, contributing nothing to the affirmation of one's own existence, and not altering the givens. Hence, the choice to seek existence in 'mere being'

⁴Beauvoir first introduces the positive/negative contrast in The Ethics of Ambiguity, p. 30-32. She employs the contrast there, and in The Second Sex, as a mechanism for distinguishing between free agency and agency under oppression.

is not transcendence, but its opposite.

Liberation from oppression is a struggle in which individuals of a class attempt to regain the ability to choose positive projects for themselves. One is liberated, in this sense, when one's class attains the means for transcendence. Oppression prohibits women from acting, working, and creating on equal term with men, that is, prevents women from having the means for transcendence. Putting the class of women on the same terms as the class of men is the other liberation struggle Beauvoir defines:

. . . it will be through attaining
the same situation as [men's] that
[women] will find emancipation; (715)

She makes a clear distinction between facticity and the "obstacles" of oppression when she claims, about liberation, that

[i]t 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. (727)

Beauvoir argues that establishing a relationship between women and men of mutual recognition and subjective affirmation will bring about the end of oppression.

Throughout the text these two distinct conceptions of liberation--the liberation from facticity by transcendence and the liberation from oppression--are juxtaposed without reference to the different natures of the two struggles. Hence, in her text the notion of liberation is ambiguous. Consider the following passage:

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. (xli)

Notice that Beauvoir compares oppression and bad faith. They are similar in that both involve the movement from transcendence to immanence. In other words, they are similar in ontological effect. Michele Le Doeuff has suggested that Beauvoir employed this analogy in order to make oppression, which is generally unnoticed or misunderstood, visible within the dominant discourse.³ Regardless of whether it has served this purpose, it obscures the difference between oppression and bad faith, and this in turn, I will argue later, gives rise to the appearance of a contradiction in Beauvoir's liberation strategy.

The difference between being oppressed and being in bad faith has first to do with the circumstances of the descent to the "en-soi." If one "consents" to immanence, then one may at any time choose the path of transcendence. If, on the other hand, immanence, is "inflicted," then the path of transcendence is blocked. A second difference is that the ontological effect of oppression is an experience shared by an entire class of individuals, in this case women. The "en-soi" of bad faith is an individual experience. This

³Michele Le Doeuff, "Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," Feminist Studies 6:2, 1980, p. 279.

difference can be seen between the situation of the artist and that of women. If the artist chooses to create a new project, the excuses he once made about the accident determining his fate do not impede his new decision. However, women's attempts to reject the "en-soi" of 'woman' are met with deeply entrenched and strictly enforced cultural norms held in place by "legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists [who] have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth." (xxxiv) Hence, women are unable to choose new projects because the deterministic explanations and excuses, which others have made for their situation, stick to them with the force of social stigma, impeding other courses of action. Being in bad faith is an individual, moral problem, while being oppressed is class-based, political problem.

The struggle to liberate women from oppression is not the struggle to overcome immanence consented to in bad faith. For the oppressed, ending oppression is, by definition, a precondition for engaging in the struggle to overcome immanence which is consented to. In this paper I will address the liberation struggle which has as its object, ending oppression. My examination of Beauvoir's liberation strategy is intended to provide insight into the question, how can women end oppression while under it? To begin with I will outline the mechanics of oppression, according to Beauvoir's analysis. Second, I will explore the apparent

contradiction between her analysis of these mechanisms and her liberation strategy, and attempt to untangle it in order to present a coherent sketch of her strategy. Third, I will offer criticism, and comment on the limitations of her approach. Finally, I will follow a lead on an alternative strategy which is unintentionally given in her chapter "The Lesbian."

II. Oppression

Beauvoir has defined oppression as the "infliction" of immanence. With regard to the oppression of women she tells us that

. . . 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 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. (xli)

In this section I will explain what it means, according to Beauvoir, to "stabilize her as an object," to "inflict immanence," to "compel her to assume the status of the other," or to have her transcendence "overshadowed" and transcended by another.

Clearly she could not mean, by these words, that oppression is the reduction of a female to thing or an object: that would be murder rather than oppression. Beauvoir recognizes that women can act under oppression. In fact, part of what it means to be oppressed is to perform the act of affirming other subjects by recognizing their projects. But in these acts of recognition women must pretend to be passive and receptive. Being an object, in this sense, is exemplified by the "damsel in distress" who feigns helplessness in order to feature the heroic efforts of her rescuer. To be stabilized as an object means that one

does not engage in the positive activities of a subject.

(615) The objective of her actions is to be the Object he transcends.

To her, immanence "inflicted" certainly could not mean the injection of some secret subjectivity-destroying poison. If Beauvoir had thought that oppression was terminal she would not have attempted a liberation strategy in the first place. Although Beauvoir argues that oppression is deeply rooted in history, and in social and economic structures, she is not a determinist. Hence, oppression is a contingent reality, maintained through, and therefore, subject to change through, human agency. In her words,

. . . it must be repeated once more that in human society nothing is natural and that woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilization. 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. (725)

What, exactly, is the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified? According to Beauvoir, the static myth of 'woman' is the preferred tool for the desired modifications.

It projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, significance, knowledge, empirical law, it substitutes a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, necessary. This idea is indisputable because it is

beyond the given: it is endowed with
absolute truth. (253)

Through myths about what it is to be a woman the essentialist concept of 'woman' arises. A myth is a representation of some aspect of reality from a particular point of view. Or, as Beauvoir puts it, "a myth implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears toward a sky of transcendence." (142) The myths which create 'The Eternal Feminine' are representations of women's realities from the point of view of men. (143) There are myths which tell the story of 'woman' as "treasure, prey, sport and danger, nurse, guide, judge, mediatrix, mirror . . ." (186), "virgin, mother, wife, sister, servant, loved one, fiercely virtuous one, smiling odalisque . . ." (195), and mysterious one (256). This smorgasbord of possible ways to be a 'woman' represents the diversity in the points of view of men. But in this the myths are unanimous: to be a 'woman' is to be the other for man and demand no reciprocity, that is, to be the absolute Other.

Beauvoir believes, following Hegel, that in one's search for affirmation of subjectivity that "each separate conscious being aspires to set himself up alone as sovereign subject." (140) The struggle for this desired position ends in a master-slave dialectic which, ultimately, satisfies neither party. Beauvoir employs these fundamentals of human consciousness and interaction in her analysis to explain the phenomenon of the oppression of women which is not the same as slavery. Perceiving women as a threat to their desire to

be the lone sovereign subjects, men devise the static myth-scheme as a way to keep women from reducing them to slavery. Since the myths also do not reduce women to slavery, they provide men with the recognition and affirmation desired, but without the dangers inherent in the master-slave dialectic.

(141) In Beauvoir's words,

[t]he taste for eternity at a bargain,
for a pocket-sized absolute, which is
shared by a majority of men, is satisfied
by myths. (260)

The myths represent women as the absolute Other because, from men's point of view, doing so is an expedient way of resolving ontological dilemmas.

The myth of 'woman' is generated out of projects which serve as a mode of transcendence for men; the manner in which women's bodies and relation to the world are modified can be explained through a closer look at how these projects create a context. "Religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, and movies" (260) have been among the cultural vehicles carrying the blueprint of 'woman' into society. These projects have contributed, historically, to the construction of a social context, the "masculine universe." (597) They have received recognition under the patriarchal ideology of determinism, which interprets women's situation as 'woman's' essence.

Within this context, 'woman', the transcendental Idea, forms the basis of a categorical imperative for women: be the absolute Other. Men need not enforce this imperative with the negative force of interdiction. Compliance is

assured by their role in the positive historical construction of women's total life experience, from birth to death, in every realm. To say that women experience their transcendence as overshadowed and transcended by men's means that through their projects men have created a context in which women's actions are meaningless beyond the terms of men's projects. Beauvoir explains the dictates of the masculine universe in the following terms,

If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine. (253)

Oppression is the structuring of a social context within which women are required to recognize and affirm the projects of men reified in that context, denying them the ability to pursue their own projects. To be oppressed is to have the social identity 'woman' imposed under the aegis of biological determinism. The message is: living as a 'woman' is living in conformity with nature.

Beauvoir contends that women know that this message is mystification, trickery, and lies. (720-721) Even if a woman recognizes that "there is not any fixed truth" (612), still she "lacks the means to reconstruct society in different form." (ibid.) If she violates social norms and constraints, in an attempt to refuse the role of 'woman', she must face the social consequences because, as Beauvoir points out, "there is no negative attitude that does not imply a

positive counterpart." (683) For example, if one rejects 'femininity,' then one is not a subject, but a "transvestite," a "homosexual," an "insurgent," an "eccentric," (ibid.) in a word, a monster. Whatever the positive implications are, if she is not being a 'woman', she will not receive the recognition and affirmation her subjectivity requires. Resisting creates a dilemma for her: refusing the identity of 'woman,' which mutilates her subjectivity, entails the denial of any acceptable social identity. (682-683) This is not a dilemma men face because having their subjectivity affirmed creates their social identities. Hence, for women individual revolt is "impotent" (608) within the context of social relations with men. Thus Beauvoir presents oppression as a kind of facticity which cannot be transcended. But the idea that there is any facticity which cannot be transcended violates a fundamental tenet of Sartrean existentialism.

Beauvoir claims that she is committed to the perspective of existentialist ethics (xl) and there are passages which clearly suggest that women have an authentic choice in the matter of their situation. For example, she states, at the end of her refutation of psychoanalytical determinism:

I believe that [woman] has the power to choose between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as an object. (50)

In the same passage, in another formulation of this claim, she characterizes 'woman' as an offering rather than an imposition or infliction:

I conceive her as hesitating between the
role of object, Other which is offered
her, and the assertion of her liberty.
(52)

Often this position is manifest in a prescriptive claim, for
example,

. . . what woman needs first of all is to
undertake, in anguish and pride, her
apprenticeship in abandonment and
transcendence: that is, in liberty.
(711)

These passages are juxtaposed to those in which Beauvoir
describes the paralysis of oppression.

III. Contradictions?

If oppression is the prevention of ability to choose to transcend, then what sense does it make for Beauvoir to state that women can and should transcend? Under oppression either women can transcend or they cannot. To define oppression as the infliction of immanence, and to argue, at the same time, that the oppressed can choose transcendence appears to imply a contradiction. Is it, or is it not, Beauvoir's position that a woman cannot transcend her oppression? In this section I will argue that this is, in fact, her position, and that she holds it, without contradiction, together with the position that women are capable of transcendence.

Consider the passage in which Beauvoir states her belief that women have the "power" to choose between immanence and transcendence. The fact that this statement is part of her attack on the Freudian ideology of determinism indicates that the power which she is referring to is that of human potential. She is saying that a weak superégo and penis envy do not strictly determine a woman's destiny, and therefore, that a woman, "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures" (xli) is capable, under imaginable circumstances, of choosing between immanence and transcendence.

It is important to note that Beauvoir does not signify in that quotation whether she is referring to immanence which is "consented" to or "inflicted." However, in the quotation which follows, in the same passage, Beauvoir uses the term "offered" to signal that she is referring to immanence which

is "consented" to in bad faith, rather than "inflicted" under oppression. But if this is true, then the hesitating which Beauvoir conceives must be post-oppression, because the end of oppression is a pre-condition for the moral struggle. Under post-oppression circumstances, it is still conceivable that the social role of 'woman' could exist even if it were not the basis of a categorical imperative for all women. (And there may even be women around who would be immoral enough to choose it.)

Under this interpretation her prescriptive claim makes more sense. When oppression ends, women must undertake their apprenticeship in transcendence if they hope to "gain the supreme victory," that is, "to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given." (732)

This interpretation resolves the apparent contradiction by pointing out that it is only the result of the ambiguity which arises from explaining the oppression of women by analogy with immanence consented to in bad faith. Clearly, Beauvoir is not advancing the incoherent proposition that women "consent" to the "infliction" of immanence. To the contrary, she holds that,

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 by the One in defining himself as the One. (xxx)

IV. Strategy

If one is clear about the definitions, and the difference between oppression and bad faith, then, as I have already pointed out, it is obvious that ending the oppression of women is a precondition for moral liberation. But what is required to end oppression, that is, to put women into the running for moral liberation? What will it take so that women, as a class, have the ability to transcend on the same terms as men? On this point Beauvoir is not ambiguous: intersubjective relations between men and women must be characterized by reciprocity. In other words, "mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other." (731) Beauvoir argues that it is possible to rise above the fundamental desire to be affirmed as the only sovereign subject through "friendship and generosity." (140)

Immediately the question arises, who is she prescribing this program for? Women already recognize men as subjects. Women already are others for men. Women already are friendly and generous. Women already are holding up their end of the reciprocity pact. There is good reason to believe that what Beauvoir means when she says, "to gain the supreme victory, it is necessary. . .that. . .men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood [sic]," (732) is that men need to affirm women's subjecthood. Consider the following statements:

[women] get from neither society nor

their husbands the assistance they would need to become in concrete fact the equals of the men. (680)

. . . she will be a full human being, "when," to quote a letter of Rimbaud, "the infinite bondage of woman is broken, when she will live in and for herself, man--hitherto detestable--having let her go free." (263)

The message is clear that women's liberation from oppression depends on men.

Oppression is men's bad faith project. According to Beauvoir,

[m]an gladly accepts as his authority Hegel's idea according to which the citizen acquires his ethical dignity in transcending himself toward the universal, but as a private individual he has a right to desire and pleasure. His relations with woman, then, lie in a contingent region, where morality no longer applies, where conduct is a matter of indifference. (613)

If the oppression of women is going to end, men are going to have to give up the project of making their class that of lone sovereign subjects. They must, in other words, give up the idea that there is a contingent region. They must decide to be moral in their relations with women. Beauvoir devotes long passages at two points in the book to persuading men to do just this. (261-263, 729-731) She directs to them the promise that "to recognize in woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experience. . ." (261) and that "there is no doubt that both men and women will profit greatly from the new situation." (724)

There are no passages devoted to convincing women that

it is in their interests to try to end oppression. This is because, according to Beauvoir, the quest is not in their hands with either an individual, or a collective effort. At an individual level the woman's resistance is impotent:

[s]he protests against man, against life, against her situation, but she does not make good her escape from them. (610)

This is because she has been denied under oppression the opportunity to do anything constructive. (624, 627, 679) Her protests amount to no more than negation and denial,

having no independent domain, she cannot oppose positive truths and values of her own to those asserted and upheld by males; (611)

Those few "insurgents" who have challenged the man-made domain, have not succeeded in liberating themselves from oppression. Beauvoir explains that George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, and the Bronte sisters,

. . . have had to expend so much energy negatively in order to free themselves from outward restraints that they arrive somewhat out of breath at the state from which masculine writers of great scope take their departure; they do not have enough strength left to profit by their victory and break all the ropes that hold them back. (709)

Individual women, who take action to liberate themselves, are constantly frustrated by the confines of the oppressive context. Within it, their actions are not recognized, and achieve no meaning. Oppression reduces individual resistance to futile wheel-spinning. Resistant acts, as resistant, affirm only the status quo, not a different regime of truths and values.

Beauvoir recognizes that if women were to liberate themselves from oppression it would have to be by a collective effort. (627) However, she does not think that this strategy is very promising. She holds that "women lack the means to reconstruct society in a different form." (612) The "means" which she is referring to is the subjective attitude exhibited in class solidarity. In other words, "women do not say 'We'. . ." (xxxix) A sense of solidarity with others of one's class is, according to Beauvoir, necessary if projects to establish a counter-context are to have meaning. She claims that women,

. . . 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. (597)

Apparently women's "organic" connections are with men.

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. (xxxix)

So it is in relations between the sexes that Beauvoir focuses her strategy for liberation from oppression. She puts her hope, first, in men's moral sensibilities. When men control their desire to dominate others, and pursue projects other than that of reifying the Idea of the Eternal Feminine, then reciprocal relations between men and women will be possible.

Only then will women have before them the opportunity to choose transcendence, and to earn the subjective recognition and affirmation that their freely chosen projects deserve.

This strategy follows logically from her analysis of oppression. If men are responsible for oppression, and if the mechanisms of this oppression are such that women's actions against it are futile, then, ending it, ultimately, is men's burden. While it may be true that men can have an active part in the liberation struggle to end oppression, I do not agree that women, must or will, wait for men to take responsibility for the project.

V. "The Lesbian"

If the primary obstacle keeping women from careers of transcendence is incessant Othering by men, if oppression is not terminal, but is continuously re-created by contextual construction (and Beauvoir's analysis indicates that it is), then there are at least two strategic options open to women. The first is to wait for men to change. The second is to separate from the oppressive context and interactions which maintain it, and to search for and create counter-contexts without oppressive Othering. Beauvoir's strategy falls under the first option. I believe that the second option is more promising for those women who refuse to wait for oppressors to end oppression. Although separation can be perceived as a form of revolt, it differs from the kind of revolt which Beauvoir discusses in two ways. First, it relieves women of the internal conflict, which oppression creates, between making oneself through projects of transcendence and making oneself a 'woman'. Second, it offers a kind of resistance which does not affirm the truths and values of the status quo.

Two difficulties keep Beauvoir from seriously entertaining the second option. First, if Otherness is inflicted, making all action negative, then what makes disengaging possible? If the context of "primordial Mitsein" makes "the cleavage of society along the line of sex" impossible, then what possibility is there of separating from this context? Which leads to the second difficulty, if women,

as a group, suffer a fundamental incapacity for class solidarity, then what possibility is there of creating counter-contexts within which different meanings can arise? I believe Beauvoir's inability to find satisfactory answers to these difficult questions led her to advocate only the first strategic option in the struggle to end oppression. Ironically, Beauvoir's text provides clues for answers which she herself does not take up and develop. Consider the following observation from the chapter entitled "The Lesbian,"

[m]any women who are employed in workshops and offices, surrounded by women, and who see little of men, will tend to form amorous friendships with females: they will find it materially and morally simple to associate their lives. (418)

Beauvoir is describing, for the first time in Book II, "Lived Experience," a situation which differs radically from all the other situations--marriage, motherhood, social life, prostitution, childhood, maturation, and old age--which she addresses in the book. Although women are alone together at times in all these situations, Beauvoir does not acknowledge it. Only in the chapter "The Lesbian" does she consider relations between women in the absence of men. Beauvoir is more than aware that these types of situations change women's experience. Specifically, they reduce the pressure upon women to play the role of 'woman'.

Never in the presence of husband or [male] lover can she feel wholly herself; but with her woman friend she need not be on parade, need not pretend: they are

too much of a kind not to show themselves frankly as they are. (420)

In the presence only of women, even within the broader context of the "masculine universe" (597), there is no physical male presence to monitor her actions or interpret their meaning. And as I said earlier, the context of oppression only survives as long as there are real live men and women "reproducing" it through their "intercourse." Even the temporary absence of men creates two possibilities: first, to stop play acting the role of 'woman', the absolute Other; and therefore, second, to have their actions acquire positive meaning.

Certainly the objection could be raised, that the absence of men will not stop the incessant Othering, because the desire to be the "lone sovereign subject" is fundamental to human consciousness. In the absence of men, women will fall into the dialectic of master and slave. I have two responses. First, even if this were true it would not necessarily amount to oppression, especially if the women were equals with regard to other class variables. After all, when men engage with each other on equal terms they often attempt to lord over each other, but it is not oppression. However, there appears to be no good reason why the drive to dominate should be any more fundamental to consciousness than being 'woman' is to nature. Hence, my second point is this: if the myth of 'woman' is a representation of female identity from a particular point of view (men), then why isn't the master-slave dialectic a representation of human relations

from a particular point of view (ruling class)? I think Beauvoir's mistake was to pay more attention to the claim about the fundamental nature of human consciousness, than to the social position and gender of the claimant. I am saying that the absence of hostile othering among the oppressed indicates the possibility of another form of intersubjective relating. Lesbian relationships, according to Beauvoir, begin with reciprocity.

Between women love is contemplative;
caresses are intended less to gain
possession of the other than gradually to
re-create the self through her;
separateness is abolished, there is no
struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact
reciprocity each is at once subject and
object. . . (416)

Of course it is true that these situations of women together, in the absence of men, do not constitute, in and of themselves, counter-contexts. I have indicated that Beauvoir insists 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." (597) While it may be true that women have never constituted a "closed and independent society," Beauvoir admits that women have created counter-contexts, within patriarchal society, where it is, nevertheless, possible for them to exist beyond the category 'woman.'

The woman who makes herself a lesbian because she haughtily declines male domination is often pleased to find the same proud amazon in another. Formerly lesbians flourished among the women students at Sevres, who lived together far from men; they took pride in

belonging to a feminine elite and wished to remain autonomous subjects; the common feeling that united them against the privileged caste enabled each to admire in a friend the impressive being whom she idolized in herself; in their mutual embraces each was at once man and woman and each was enchanted with the other's androgynous qualities. (419)⁶

The fact that there is a chapter in the book entitled "The Lesbian" indicates that counter-contexts already exist. The existence of lesbian would be inconceivable if the "masculine universe" which only recognizes 'women' exhausted the contextual possibilities. What is required for women to be able to choose not to be 'woman' is not a wholly independent world, but simply a context where they can limit their interactions with men, and where their choices will receive recognition and affirmation.

Beauvoir has argued that the Mitsein between men and women is "organic" and that solidarity among women is "mechanical," and therefore, not the grounds for the subjective voice "we." But she has also insisted that what is "organic" only acquires meaning in "the light of an ontological, economic, social, and psychological context." (36) Beauvoir's mistake here was to fail to extend her existentialist critique of determinism to the heterosexual Mitsein. The "biological fact" of heterosexual reproduction,

⁶Parshley translated "la femme quise fait lesbienne" as "the woman who turns lesbian," rather than "the woman who makes herself a lesbian." Claudia Card, "Lesbian Attitudes and The Second Sex," Women's Studies International Forum 8:3, p. 209. I believe his translation obscures the fact that becoming a lesbian is a positive project engaged in by women.

like the "biological fact" of female physiology, "can be defined only in a world of values." (60) Beauvoir's failure to understand the "fundamentalness" of the Mitsein as a product of values in a context, keeps her from recognizing the potential in, and existence of, relations between women.

The strategy which Beauvoir fails to consider, that of women gathering away from the immediate pressure to be the absolute Other, in order to engage in their own constructive projects, at once creating a counter-context and giving meaning to their projects through it, is nevertheless, possible and being actualized. I have argued that the physical absence of the oppressor, even within his context, opens up new possibilities for women. And that turning to each other for reciprocal recognition and affirmation of subjectivity is a strategic option available to women in the struggle to end oppression. Women do not suffer a fundamental incapacity for class solidarity. In solidarity, women are able to choose transcendence.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show how Beauvoir's liberation strategy closes out the possibility for women, as individuals and members of a class, to take the first step toward ending oppression. In addition, I have argued that the possibility, of initiating the liberation struggle while under oppression, is suggested within Beauvoir's analysis, although it goes undeveloped by her. If the goal is ultimately to put women, as a class, on the same terms as men, i.e. a world where all have the means for transcendence within their grasp, then any strategy which holds the potential to actualize this goal must not be ignored. There is evidence to suggest that this strategy became more apparent to Beauvoir as the women's liberation movement developed in the 1960's and 1970's in France and the United States. In an interview with Deirdre Bair in 1982 she endorsed a separatist strategy,

[p]roperly feminist attitudes arose when women discovered that the men of '68 did not treat them as equals. . . They realized that they would have to take their fate into their own hands and separate their battles from the larger revolutionary rhetoric of the men. I agreed with them because I understood that women could not expect their emancipation to come from general revolution but would have to create their own. Men were always telling them that the needs of the revolution came first and their turn as women came later. . . and so I realized that women would have to take care of their problems in ways that were personal, direct, and immediate. They could no longer sit

waiting patiently for men to change the society for them because it would never happen unless they did it themselves.⁷

⁷Deidre Bair, "Women's Rights in Today's World: An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," 1984 Britannica Book of the Year (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1984), p. 25.

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