

The second sex and
the construction of
gender: becoming
woman by society's
standa...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The question of what it means to be a woman has been floating through society for ages with any sort of permanent or universally accepted answer remaining elusive. It is a constantly changing definition in which traits appropriate to the time are assigned to the female form as a means of capturing the meaning of being a real woman. Labels such as being obedient, submissive, weak, and well-behaved have been assigned alongside abilities such as being a talented cook, an excellent child rearer, as well as an efficient housekeeper. Stereotypes of inabilities based on gender have arisen as well, such as that women do not have the mental capacity of men and that they cannot work important or difficult jobs. Simone de Beauvoir, however, rejects these labels completely in her philosophical text *The Second Sex* and identifies the idea of the proper woman as a socially constructed concept. She questions what a woman is and what it means to identify with the word, if anything at all. While the distinction between men and women exists today, this difference was attached no meaning to begin with and is one that has been built throughout history. Woman has reached her status in society by means of man attaching meaning to her being, and the idea of the real woman has become a daily role that is played and an ever-changing mask that is worn. For these reasons, the social concept of gender is one influenced by external factors that have resulted in the development of an accepted and executed idea of the female form and sense of self.

To begin, Beauvoir identifies that the concept of gender is one that is constructed by society and rides completely on the existence of women being different and therefore lesser than men. Beauvoir addresses this in the

statement, “‘ A man’s body has meaning by itself, disregarding the body of the woman, whereas the woman’s body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the male. Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man.’ And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called ‘ the sex,’ meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex” (Beauvoir, 6). Gender as an idea falls upon the subordinate group in the sense that without women there would be nothing to question or compare men to, but the existence of men is not questioned because they hold the dominant position in society. Male domination has come to mean that women are identified as separate, different, and nothing without their male counterparts. Without said counterparts, however, femininity cannot be identified and has no existence. Thus, the sense of self that has been forced upon women relies on the external classification of gender as specifically referring to the female body and form.

Similarly, the separation of woman from man by her socially fabricated gender results in her labeling and treatment as an Other as man in return adopts the position of the superior figure, or One. Beauvoir first approaches this topic with the testimony that, “ No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself” (Beauvoir, 6). This is the case because in order for one identity to be clearly dominant, the Other must first be isolated and then must recognize and submit to their position as the Other. Beauvoir argues that existence precedes essence in the sense that although female and male bodies are different, this difference held no meaning at the start. The development of the Other vs. the One,

however, has resulted in the creation of a society in which supremacy is a craved and natural feeling, as Beauvoir states, “ One of the benefits that oppression secures for the oppressor is that the humblest among them feels superior [...] The most mediocre of males believes himself a demigod next to women” (Beauvoir, 13). This desperate need to identify a ruling class has played a major role in the formation of the sense of self that women possess and society possesses surrounding women today.

In addition to this, Beauvoir addresses that there is nothing strange about the human desire to define and separate based on difference, despite that these distinctions may only exist within the heads of those who have noted them. She shows that to recognize these differences is simply a part of the human condition in the statement: “ The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies; this division did not always fall into the category of the division of sexes, it was not based of any empirical given [...] Alterity is the fundamental category of human thought” (Beauvoir, 6). Through this it is implied that identifying diversity among beings and then attaching meaning to these differences is an inherently human action, as these types of differences are not ones that could ever possibly be derived in nature. Essence has still, however, been understood and implemented by mankind throughout history and without it gender differences would have remained meaningless. Consequently, every concept of self that surrounds the female form is one that is constructed upon the external factor of mankind’s need to attach significance and implication to every existence and to identify a dominant and ruling species.

Beauvoir also argues throughout *The Second Sex* that a woman is in a constant state of “ becoming” and that only by succumbing to a state of “ being” shall she be trapped in her status of alterity. She expresses, “ When an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they are inferior. But the scope of the verb to be must be understood; bad faith means giving it a substantive value [...] To be is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself. Yes, women in general are today inferior to men; that is, their situation provides them with fewer possibilities: the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated” (Beauvoir, 12). In this she addresses that today women are provided with fewer opportunities than men, but only for the reason that the social order has made them this way. Sex exists and must be recognized as an essential part of human biological function, but it should not be allowed to define the way things must within society. Sex is an accidental trait, such as class, race, or sexuality. The concept of gender, however, is not accidental and has been established only on the basis that to some extent the state of becoming has yielded to a state of being. In this cessation of “ becoming” society’s ideal woman, the feminine form has reached a condition of existence that fits society’s predetermined idea of female identity. In short, she who was once “ becoming” has reached a state of “ is” and this state has been adopted and maintained by the external in a way that is known as the standard behavior, appearance, and intelligence of women.

In response to this Beauvoir states, “ Clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex” (Beauvoir, 4). This idea of bad faith refers to one who is unable to acknowledge their given situation and is

therefore unable to move past their current self. This is important as Beauvoir stresses an idea of transcending the physical body as fundamental to overcoming the current restraints put on the feminine form by society. She addresses that biology of the body has been stressed as a point for determining difference as a means of defense against females competing with males when she states, " Women were becoming dangerous competitors [...] To prove women's inferiority, antifeminists began to draw not, as before, on religion, philosophy, and theology but also on science: biology, experimental psychology, and so forth. At most they were willing to grant ' separate but equal status' to the other sex" (Beauvoir, 12). Beauvoir argues, however, that biology does not equal destiny and should not be allowed to be used as a means for defining a human's existence. Furthermore, she stresses that one cannot be separate and equal in society and that this has been an excuse used for many different cases of minority subjugation as she states, " This convergence is in no way pure chance: whether it is race, caste, class, or sex reduced to an inferior condition, the justification process is the same. ' The eternal feminine' corresponds to ' the black soul' or ' the Jewish character'" (Beauvoir, 12). She asserts that this mindset is nothing other than a tool that has been used throughout history in order for the One to maintain control over the Others and to force them into specific roles, thus creating an artificial sense of self that is reflected both by the Others onto themselves and by society onto the Other.

The sense of self that the feminine form holds today is one heavily constructed on the external pressures of society that result from the aspect of human nature that gives meaning to otherwise meaningless

characteristics such as sex and gender. Additionally, while sex is a reality that is formed around the biology of the human body, gender is an idea that has been created solely as a method of undermining and locking the Other, who in this case is woman, into a role in which she is inferior to the One, who is a man. This processing of othering is exercised as a method of maintaining power and control as well as insuring that the One is never under threat of becoming the subordinate party. In addition to this, the submission to a state of being from the state of becoming has resulted in a development of society's picturesque idea of woman. For these reasons, the accepted idea of the female form is one that has been built on outside influence and exterior concepts of gender.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Chevallier. New York: Vintage, 2011. Print.