

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S CONCEPT OF WOMAN ITS ROLE
IN THE WOMEN'S STRUGGLE IN THE PHILIPPINES

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By

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ABSTRACT

This research presents Simone de Beauvoir's critique of woman as the Other to liberate the Filipinas from patriarchy. It sees woman as an existential transcendent subject who is undetermined by patriarchal construct of gender which treats man as the Subject, the essential, and the ideal of human existence. It underscores that feminist struggle entails eliminating the Other through conscious refusal of the exclusive political position between man and woman.

The Filipinas' struggle against patriarchy within the Philippine societal institutions requires a radical feminist tool. For instance, lesser representation of women as compared to men in the economy and politics has constrained the full implementation of structural programs for gender and development. Human rights violations in connection to sex and gender are rampant in spite of the revised law of women in the country. Although many women have participated well in the bureaucracy, numerous Filipinas have been politically dominated, sexually oppressed, and economically marginalized.

If Beauvoir's feminism is applied in the women's struggle in the Philippines, Filipinas will start gaining essential opportunity and productivity as social roles are based on qualities and competence. A renewed social awareness about the uniqueness of Filipina will take place, and hence, the variety of subjectivity of woman as well as of man will be respected and upheld. Finally, national feminist agenda will be carried out effectively as patriarchal power is collectively resisted in cultural and structural realms.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Masculinity and femininity reflect a social convention. Constructs of gender and sex are perceived as innate of man and woman. Social expectations such as proper behavior, habits, traits, and functions between what is for female and male have carried invariably an absolute gendered meaning. Although social contexts vary, femininity and masculinity often allude to the unchanging essence of man and woman.

For instance, being female is considered emotional and being male is rational.¹ Emotion is deemed inferior while reason superior. The feminine body is regarded as weak while the masculine body is strong. As a rule for discipline, girls are treated with leniency and boys with severity. Thus, masculine enterprise usually requires the physical while the feminine one compels the sensual. Boys have to climb trees to be men while girls have to wash the dishes to be women. Although women have been working outside the household to meet the rapid changing economic demands, household or domesticity is largely perceived to be a feminine chore.²

The attribution of the social role to gender is deemed regressive for women but may be progressive for men. It puts the hierarchy and ministry

¹ Jean Curtheys, *Feminist Amnesia: The Wake of Women's Liberation* (London: Routledge, 1997), 21

² Emma S. Regis, "Gendered Identities: Manifestations of the Woman Question" *LILA: Asia Pacific Women's Studies Journal* 9 (October 2004): 92

functions as a masculine domain and the unquestioning subservience as a feminine one.³

Roles according to gender constructs often carry a peculiar ambiguity on the social identity of women. As James Doyle and Michele Paludi attest, “For too long, women have existed as the “other” in a second class position”⁴ This is evident in the customary surrender of maiden’s surname to the spouse after marriage. A married woman also appends a marital title “Mrs ” and the spouse’s surname⁵

Social insensitivity on the feminine experience is a consequence of gender-defined essence. Women who aggressively propose marriage to men are often mocked or considered repugnant by society, previous sexual experience with other men often leaves them in contempt. They often become prey to sexual abuses and they are treated as careless when they conceive. Even victims of sexual abuse are not spared from social ridicule.⁶

³ Jean Stockard and Miriam M. Johnson, *Sex and Gender in Society*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 11

⁴ James Doyle and Michele Paludi, *Sex and Gender* 2nd ed. (Iowa: WMC Brown Publishers, 1985), 169

⁵ Philippine civil code prescribes that married woman could either use, first her maiden first name and surname and add her husband’s surname, second, her maiden first name and add her husband’s surname, and lastly, her husband’s full name, but prefixing a word indicating she is his wife such as “Mrs ” See *The Civil Code of the Philippines 2005*, (Mandaluyong City: National Book Store, 2003, 2005), 79.

⁶ Gender discrimination among Asian societies comprises the following: family’s inclination toward boys than girls, sexist education, domestication of women, and hierarchical religions. Asian women find themselves in an ironic situation, their quality and capacity for political leadership is met with social and cultural reluctance. Tissa Balasuriya, *Planetary Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 73-74

Most social institutions obscure woman through gender stereotypes. For instance, the Roman Catholicism is a predominantly male-centered organization. As the Apostolic Constitution of the Church points out, ordaining women to priesthood is contrary to the apostolic tradition since Jesus sent out men not women.⁷ Thus, the women's presence in the hierarchical sphere remains an ambiguous discourse.⁸ Hierarchical religion is typically gendered as in the case of the assembly of priests, bishops, and popes. Females, children, elders, and women hear sermons from the males and attend in the liturgical festivities presided by men.⁹ Language in religion typically reflects a male gender preference. The Bible, for example, is replete with masculine terms, such as Son, Man, Father, Lord, King.¹⁰

It is clear that male-centered convention inherently provides men a higher possibility than women. It ascribes individuals' proper roles, functions, status, and destiny in gender stereotypes that are inimical to women. If such social construction persists, women will be subjugated and oppressed, they will be left

⁷ John Wight S.J., "Patristic Testimony on Women's Ordination in *Inter Insigniores*," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 523-524; Jaroslav Pelikan *Man Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 219.

⁸ In 1994, Pope John Paul II issued a pastoral letter to American bishops denouncing the possibility of ordaining women to priesthood, declaring it as 'non-issue.' David Van Biema, "A Pilgrim's Journey: Pope John Paul II 1920-2005," *Time Magazine*, 11 April 2005, 38-39.

⁹ For critical review on liturgiology in the light of pastoral needs and services of the Church, see D. H. Tripp, "Liturgy and Pastoral Service," *The Study of Liturgy: Revised Edition*, ed. Cheslyn Jones and others (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 565-587.

¹⁰ *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (Manila: Word & Life Publications, 1997), 79-81.

behind in the essential development. If the criteria of passion, skills and character are patriarchal, other qualities will be secondary, effeminate, and *womanly*.¹¹

Hence, the struggle of women is a foremost human concern. It summons an existential query: What is a woman? This question leads toward understanding the essence of woman and its variety of perceptions of femininity. It unveils other pertinent inquiry, like gender and its connection to norms, culture and traditions. Unless this existential feminist question is illumined and presented, the social and political structures will be unfavorable to women.

A famous existentialist-feminist thinker who explored this problem was herself a woman. She is Simone de Beauvoir, widely renowned for her feminist classic *The Second Sex*. In reclaiming and revaluing the existential essence truly for women, Beauvoir introduces the rejection of patriarchal femininity and masculinity at a time when such theme was absent in the canon of philosophy. A close student of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Martin Heidegger, she also wrote philosophy at a time when it was mainly a male domain.¹²

Beauvoir's studies in philosophy at Sorbonne in 1927 with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean-Paul Sartre shaped her existential feminism. In 1929, she passed the renowned *agrégation* examination in philosophy next to Jean-Paul Sartre, and became the youngest female Philosophy teacher of France. She wrote and published many articles and books, which

¹¹ Webster's 1956 edition dictionary defines the 'woman' as effeminate, cowardly, emotional, and weak. Webster's 1916 collegiate edition however attributes the 'male' the intense and superior qualities contrary to the 'female'. Stockard and Johnson, *Sex and Gender in Society*, 5-6.

¹² Shannon Mussett, 'Simone de Beauvoir' [article online], available from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/beauvoir.htm#HI>, 13 December 2005.