

BRIEF
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WOMEN IN CANADA



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I

I take it to be empirically true that woman's situation is inferior to man's. By that I mean that he has many more opportunities to exercise his freedom in the world. Consequently, his achievements are far greater, and woman thus appears in a very real sense inferior to him.

Put very bluntly, the traditional view of woman can be summed up in the words of Aristotle:

The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities; we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.

The philosophical assumption exhibited here lies at the crux of the problem at hand: that is, man has consistently defined woman not in terms of herself but in relation to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being; rather, he is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.¹ Simone de Beauvoir has argued convincingly that, throughout history, no group has ever set itself up as the One without at once setting up in opposition the Other, which then tends to become an object. Otherness, she argues, is a fundamental category of human thought.² Thus, good-evil, right-wrong, nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, and male chauvinism.

But, we may well ask, if it is a choice between being the Subject or the Other, between being primary or secondary, essential or inessential, an end or a means, how is it that woman has chosen what so obviously is the inferior alternative? Surely, no one willingly submits to domination. The question is legitimate, since woman clearly occupies an inferior position in today's world. It would seem, therefore, that woman may be both a priori and empirically inferior to man. In accepting the traditional view of herself as inferior, woman has provided justification for the charge of inferiority. Thus, her situation does indeed appear to be her nature.

II

Let us take it as axiomatic that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman or a man. One is born a female or male child with certain given characteristics and certain potentials which are hereditarily and environmentally determined and must therefore be viewed developmentally. To understand woman's nature we must therefore, examine her situation: her history, the myths about her, her immediate social environment, and her education. Simone de Beauvoir has done such brilliant work in this area that I shall quote her extensively at this point.

Regarding feminine history, she says:

If we cast a general glance at this history, we see several conclusions that stand out from it. And this one first of all: the whole of feminine history has been man-made.... We /can see/ why men had moral prestige along with physical strength from the start; they created values, mores, religions; /almost/ never have women disputed this empire with them..... Men have always held the lot of women in their hands; and they have determined what it should be, not according to her interest, but rather with regard to their own projects, their fears, and their needs.³

Myths have always been fundamental to mankind's conception of itself. Through our myths, we attempt to understand the universe and ourselves.

A myth, says de Beauvoir, always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears toward a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. Men have shaped for their own exaltation great virile figures: Hercules, Prometheus Parsifal; woman has only a secondary part to play in the destinies of these heroes.

She concludes:

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.⁴

Thus, history and mythology conspire alike to induce woman to accept her inferiority as something natural and inevitable. All too often, she does not realize that "it is not the inferiority of women that has caused their historical insignificance; it is rather their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority."⁵

Woman's immediate social environment puts enormous pressure on her to submit to male dominance. She is exhorted to play out the role of Cinderella, expecting fortune and happiness from some Prince Charming rather than to attempt by herself their difficult and uncertain conquest.⁶ Be pretty, be pleasant, use mouthwash and deodorant, never have an intellectual thought, and Prince Charming will sweep you off to his castle, where you will live happily ever after. Such is the carrot, and behind it is the stick: "Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," "wall flower," "spinster", "old maid," "loose woman".... the list goes on, and its message is: to have caught a man is proof of a woman's desirability as a human being; to be without a man is a social and moral disgrace.

The economic discrimination against the working woman is equally conducive to her seeing marriage as a liberation from ill-paid drudgery. Women all too often receive starvation wages for performing the same job which pays a man up to twice as much.. Since she also often faces discrimination in both hiring and promotion, it is little wonder that her desire to find a husband is reinforced.

Further, it must be recognized that a multi-billion dollar industrial complex has a vested interest in making women into housewives. I refer to the manufacturers who yearly spend millions of dollars in motivation research aimed at determining how advertising best can induce women (as the major consumers) to

buy specific products. This truly sinister enterprise has become expert in pinpointing the frustrations of housewives and then convincing them that buying specific products will alleviate the frustrations. It need hardly be pointed out that advertising being the major source of revenue of women's magazines, the editorial policies of such publications is not likely to favor changes which would make women less susceptible to the insidious appeal of advertising. The evidence is overwhelming, and the practitioners of motivation research themselves are quite candid: The head of a major motivation research firm in New York has stated that

Properly manipulated ("if you're not afraid of that word") American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack -- by the buying of things.

A depth survey of the American public brought the following report to a manufacturer from this firm:

Deeply set in human nature is the need to have a meaningful place in a group that strives for meaningful social goals. Whenever this is lacking, the individual becomes restless. Which explains why, as we talk to people across the nation, over and over again, we hear questions like these: 'What does it all mean?' 'Where am I going?' 'Why don't things seem more worthwhile when we all work so hard and have so darn many things to play with?'

The question is: can your product fill this gap?⁸

The "sexual sell" is a billion dollar industry, and its importance in propagandizing women to accept the feminine mystique it postulates can hardly be over-rated.

"The passivity that is the essential characteristic of 'feminine' woman is a trait that develops in her from the earliest years."⁹ Through her upbringing and education from childhood up, her sense of self is



progressively crushed. Whereas boys get experimental, control-oriented toys, girls get role-playing toys. Whereas boys are dressed practically and are expected to get dirty, little girls are too often dressed up to be "lady-like" -- in other words, they are dressed to be pretty objects, like dolls. Whereas boys are encouraged to be rough, tough and aggressive, girls are trained to become timid and docile. Whereas boys prepare themselves to become the creators of their own future, girls are trained to relate through others and taught that to please they must try to please and please and therefore renounce their autonomy.

Simone de Beauvoir sums it up beautifully:

But in thus accepting her passive role, the girl also agrees to submit unresistingly to a destiny that is going to be imposed upon her from without, and this calamity frightens her. The young boy, be he ambitious, thoughtless, or timid, looks toward an open future; he will be a seaman or an engineer, we stay on the farm or go away to the city, he will see the world, he

will get rich; he feels free, confronting a future in which the unexpected awaits him. The young girl will be wife, mother, grandmother; she will keep house just as her mother did, she will give her children the same care she herself received when young -- she is twelve years old and already her story is written in the heavens. She will discover it day after day without ever making it; she is curious but frightened when she contemplates this life, every stage of which is foreseen and toward which each day moves irresistably.¹⁰

To please is to abdicate. This is the lesson the young girl learns. It is the lessons which finds its apotheosis in a recent best-seller by the American movie Star Arlene Dahl -- its commercial success is redoubtable, its title totally indicative of its message: Always Ask a Man

The apparent contradiction inherent in being a woman has, as usual, been well expressed by Simone de Beauvoir:

The young man's journey into existence is made relatively easy by the fact that there is no contradiction between his vocation as a human being and as male; and this advantage is indicated even in childhood. But for the young woman, on the contrary, there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female.¹¹

As long as marriage and motherhood are conceived of as a woman's entire destiny, her lot will involve the acceptance of a situation imposed from the outside rather than free choice according to her individuality. As long as woman accepts this situation, she will endanger her individuality and possibility for growth as a human being. She will be abdicating the potential of her nature while giving in to the demands of her situation.

III

Well, then, we ask - if her destiny is determined by her situation and not by her nature, why does woman submit? Why does she not, when viewing the gilded cage, say with recent protesters: "Hell, no, we won't go."?

Part of the answer lies, I think, in the unfortunate fact that women in large part have come to confuse, with men, historical truth with absolute truth. Furthermore, she has for so long been defined in terms of her relation to man, in a maintenance role rather than a productive role¹², that she has very largely lost her sense of identity. It seems regrettably true that, at the present time, the "mystery" of woman "conceals nothing but emptiness."¹³

There is a further reason for the mass retreat of women to the gilded cage: it is very comfortable. With a pleasant house in a nice garden, with innumerable gadgets and labor-saving devices, with time free for cozy kaffe-klatches and exchanging of confidences and recipes over the back fence, with the pretty picture of the pretty wife in the midst of her adoring familythe cage seems desirable indeed. It is understandable, perhaps, that so many women have traded their rights for their comforts.

There is a deeper reason, too, for such a trade. It has been eloquently set forth by writers such as Dostoevski in the Brothers Karamazov, Erich Fromm in Escape From Freedom, and Paul Tillich in The Courage To Be. It seems to be a fundamental truth about mankind that it will tend to opt for contentment over happiness, because the journey towards ultimate self-realization is arduous and uncertain.

IV

Let us assume for the moment that the gilded cage is the right choice for women. Let us accept with male chauvinists and those who support them that to fulfill herself as a female will fulfill a woman as a human being. The full demensions of this view are expressed in the notion of the "feminine mystique."

The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the root of woman's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.¹⁴

The proponents of this mystique extoll varied and important roles of the housewife: she is nurse and psychologist, economist and educator, creator of a life style and provider of love. The eulogies reach their apex on Mother's Day, when the mass media are redolent with the aura of such beatitude.

Yes, at first glance it all sounds great. The question is, does it really work out as stipulated? The evidence is not encouraging.

At least one out of every three (U.S.) marriages ends in divorce and countless more have sessions with marriage counsellors in the spirit of "Can this marriage be saved?"

Psychologists and psychiatrists are facing a large influx of female patients who complain of unspecified emotional problems.

Pill and alcohol consumption by women is reaching new heights.

There is even a physical ailment, "housewife fatigue," with no apparent organic origins and no relation to the women's workload - an ailment which was finally diagnosed as being caused by boredom.

The enormous success among women of such books as Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex and Betty Frie-

dan's The Feminine Mystique and the flood of letters received by Betty Friedan, in the tone of "You have saved by life," are also indicative.

Feminine friendships exhibit many of the attributes we might expect. Here is Simone de Beauvoir's description:

The feminine friendships that she succeeds in keeping or forming are precious to a woman, but they are very different in kind from relations between men. The latter communicate as individuals through ideas and projects of personal interest, while women are confined within their general feminine lot and are bound together by a kind of immanent complicity. And what they look for first of all among themselves is the affirmation of the universe they have in common. They do not discuss opinions and general ideas, but exchange confidences and recipes; they are in league to create a kind of counter-universe, the values of which will outweigh masculine values.... They compare experiences; pregnancies, births, their own and their children's illnesses, and household cares become the essential events of the human story. Their work is not a technique; by passing on recipes for cooking and the like, they endow it with the dignity of a secret science founded on oral tradition.¹⁵

Finally, I would suggest that most men secretly agree that "the little woman" tends to be a bore - often, even a nagging, shrewish bore. It is not for nothing that for centuries Xantippe has been the prototype of the wife.

In sum, then, the picture of the happy housewife is dismal. It spells out in large letters:

FRUSTRATION

For those many housewives who have acknowledged their sense of emptiness, their frustration, there has often followed a feeling of guilt. They feel that there must be something peculiarly wrong with them and that they should be able to cope with their frustration. We are still the beneficiaries of Freud's claim that neurosis is a sign of sickness.

There has emerged recently, however, a new school of psychology with a new definition of sickness and health. Called "The Third Force," it contrasts sharply with the two major psychologies, the behavioral and the Freudian. Some of its major tenets are these:

We have, each one of us, an essential inner nature which is instinctoid, intrinsic, given, "natural." i.e., with an appreciable hereditary determinant, and which tends strongly to persist.

If this essential core (inner nature) of the person is frustrated, denied or suppressed, sickness results, sometimes in obvious forms, sometimes in subtle and devious forms, sometimes immediately, sometimes later.

From this point of view, new kinds of illness are most dangerous; e.g., "the diminished or stunted person", i.e., the loss of any of the defining characteristics of humanness. of personhood, the failure to grow to one's potential, valuelessness, etc.... That is, general-illness of the personality is seen as any falling short of growth, or of self - actualization, or of fullhumanness. And the main source of illnessis seen as frustration (....of expression of the self, and of the tendency of the person to grow in his own style and at his own pace) especially in the early years of life.

No psychological health is possible unless this essential core of the person is fundamentally

accepted, loved, and respected by others and by himself.

Capacities are also needs.

Adjustment is, very definitely, not necessarily synonymous with psychological health.¹⁶

On this basis, it would seem that woman's present situation is not consonant with her nature. It would further seem that the frustrations engendered by attempting to force these disparities into consonance - these frustrations are a sign, not of mental sickness, but of mental health.

VI

The most reasonable conclusion reached from the above arguments is therefore, I would think, that the traditional view of women and its attendant feminine mystique are a fraud. While they are to man's advantage in many (though significantly not all) respects, they mean loss of growth, of full-humanness, to the woman who submits to their edicts. Such a woman will risk a loss of identity, she will risk becoming a thing.

Let us agree with the existentialists that existence precedes essence. A human being is to be judged in terms of what he does; he is to be measured by his acts.

There is no true living reality except as manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society....It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.¹⁷

If we accept this, however, we must also accept the conclusion that woman, as she lives within the feminine mystique of today, has no true identity.

VII

Let us examine more specifically in what sense woman has no identity. Does her lot as a housewife, as a secondary being, provide her with nothing that defines her; that is, she defines herself not as an autonomous being but in relation to her man. Furthermore, within marriage, as we have seen, the role of man is that of producer, while the role of woman is that of maintainer. Man finds self-realization in what he does, but what of woman? Here, again, is Simone de Beauvoir:

Her home is her earthly lot, the expression of her social value and of her truest self. Because she DOES nothing, she eagerly seeks self-realization in what she HAS.

In domestic work, with or without the aid of servants, woman makes her home her own, finds social justification and provides herself with an occupation, an activity, that deals usefully and satisfyingly with material objects - shining stoves, fresh, clean clothes, bright copper, polished furniture - but provides no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality. Such work has a negative basis: cleaning is getting rid of dirt, tidying up is eliminating disorder.... Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present.

What makes the lot of the wife-servant ungrateful is the division of labor which dooms her completely to the general and the inessential. Dwelling-place and food are useful for life but give it no significance: the immediate goals of the housekeeper are only means, not true ends.¹⁸

It seems clear that, on empirical evidence alone, housewifery is not generally conducive to creativity.

It can even be said, I believe, that the kind of mind which can find fulfillment in more housewifery and the kind of mind which strives towards real creativity are mutually exclusive.

I will conclude from this, therefore, that insofar as woman accepts male dominance and consigns herself to be his servant, to be secondary and not autonomous - insofar as she agrees to this, she will abnegate her own growth and her possibility of achieving any real identity as a human being.

VIII

Modern woman is in the grip of a vicious circle and in urgent need of liberation.

The less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find about herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject.... she will have more and more reason to accept man's judgment of her as an inferior, and in accepting that inferiority, she will establish its truth.¹⁹

Women must reject the limitations of their situation and seek to open the road of the future. Resignedness is only abdication and flight, there is no other way out for woman than to work for her liberation.²⁰

The question is, therefore, how to effect this liberation. What are the goals towards which we must work?

First of all, we must recognize that the liberation must be collective. It must be collective because one cannot achieve full equality for some members of one's group while the rest are not free. (This does not mean, however, that all women will be FORCED to leave their present major role of housewifery. It does mean that any and all who chose to do so will have the freedom to follow their choice.) Therefore, no "token

integration," no relieving of symptoms without getting at their causes.

Secondly, full economic rights must be granted, because only economic liberty can guarantee women that their theoretic civil liberties will provide them with liberty in practice. Furthermore, once woman has ceased being a parasite, the system based on her dependence will crumble.²¹

Thirdly, woman must be freed from her present partial or complete slavery to the species. That is, she must have the right to determine when she will become pregnant. Therefore, it is imperative that a program of sex education, birth control information and devices, and liberalized abortions be set up.

Fourthly, girls and women must be encouraged to seek self-fulfillment as human beings rather than merely as females.

When woman no longer needs to define herself exclusively in terms of her relationship to man, she will cease to be secondary and will become an autonomous human being free to enter into an equal partnership with man.

Specific Proposals for This Commission Towards the Effecting of Liberation of Women in Canada

1. Effective machinery should be set up to insure complete equality of economic opportunity.

2. Effective machinery should be set up to insure full equality under the law in the area of civil rights for women.

3. Free sex education (without mores) should be made available to all children and to anyone else who seeks it.

4. Free birth control clinics should be set up to distribute free information and free contraceptive devices to anyone who seeks them.

5. Abortion laws should be substantially liberalized.

6. A comprehensive system of day care centers should be set up to study the fundamentals of woman's situation and the means whereby she may be liberated. Such a bureau should concentrate on areas like:

a. Exploding false myths of "femininity" and "masculinity".

b. A systematic re-examination of traditional concepts and institutions such as sex-appeal, sex, love, marriage, parent-child relationship, etc., to see if they are viable in terms of free relationships among equals.

c. Recognizing and counteracting the vested economic interests to whose advantage the "feminine mystique" operates.

d. Studying the liberation movements of other oppressed groups, especially the black liberation movement, and apply relevant measures to the liberation of women.

e. Inviting positive contributions from men and also attempt to show them the specific benefits which they would derive from the liberation of women.

This bureau should set up facilities to insure that the findings from such studies could be effectively disseminated. Special concentration should be placed on two areas:

a. mass media

b. the university campus

It is my hope that, in doing this, Canada would avoid the mistakes of the United States and thereby make this Commission a powerful factor in a cause where the U.S. Commission failed.



FOOTNOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. XVI.
2. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. XVI-XVII.
3. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 118-9.
4. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 132-3.
5. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 122.
6. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 126-7.
7. As quoted by Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique, p. 208.
8. Betty Friedan, op. cit., p. 225
9. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 261
10. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 278-9.
11. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 314
12. Ti-Grace Atkinson, in "The Second Feminist Wave," op. cit.
13. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 242-3.
14. Betty Friedan. op. cit., p. 43.
15. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 511
16. A.H. Maslow, Toward a Psychology of Being, p. 197.
17. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 33-4.
18. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 425-8.
19. de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 313-14.
20. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 591.
21. de Beauvoir, op. cit., p. 639.

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