

'It changed my life!'

Everyone should read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, argues Toril Moi

Toril Moi
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This week we celebrate the centenary of Simone de Beauvoir. Born in Paris on January 9 1908, she was brought up to follow the usual path for a French Catholic girl of good family: religious devotion, marriage and children. Her parents sent her to the kind of Catholic girls' school that elite students used to joke about, as places "where one only goes to class once a week, and where the chorus of mothers and governesses at the back of the class whispers the right reply to the dear child". That this girl went on to become a world-famous writer and intellectual, and the greatest feminist thinker of her century, is a phenomenal achievement.

An accomplished novelist, Beauvoir won the Prix Goncourt for *The Mandarins* in 1954. She is also one of the most important French memoirists of the 20th century. Yet on her 100th anniversary, it is to *The Second Sex*, her epochal essay from 1949 on the oppression of women, that we should return.

Ever since it was published, *The Second Sex* has provoked intense responses. In 1949, it unleashed a sexual scandal. "Unsatisfied, cold, priapic, nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, I was everything, even an unmarried mother," Beauvoir comments in her memoirs. For half a generation, an aura of risqué sexuality clung to the book. Early American editions had a naked woman on the cover. In the 1950s and early 1960s, any young woman caught reading *The Second Sex* would be considered decidedly subversive.

In the years before the women's movement, *The Second Sex* was a source of inspiration and insight for countless women. "It changed my life!" is a refrain one often hears. Yet feminist responses to *The Second Sex* have been surprisingly ambivalent. In their breakthrough books, major writers of the women's movement - Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Germaine Greer - barely mention Beauvoir, as if to deny the influence of a threatening mother figure.

In the 1980s, feminist theory became an academic subject, yet this did not benefit *The Second Sex*. Dominant French theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were openly hostile to Beauvoir, whom they cast as a champion of "male" notions of equality

When Beauvoir died in April 1986, one French differentialist, Antoinette Fouque, a founder of the *des femmes* bookstore on the Left Bank, declared that the author of *The Second Sex* had been pushing an "intolerant, assimilating, sterilising universalism, full of hatred and reductive of otherness".

In the late 1990s, I still felt that the book was not being read with the care and attention it deserved. Compared to the 1980s, however, the situation was much improved; serious academic reconsideration of Beauvoir truly got under way in the early years of the decade. Today, there is a steady stream of serious books and essays on her work.

Everyone who cares about freedom and justice for women should read *The Second Sex*. Long before Amartya Sen, Beauvoir argued that abstract freedom (the right to vote, for example) will make no difference to women who are deprived of health, education and money to avail themselves of such rights.

Beauvoir's analysis of sexism is perhaps her most powerful theoretical contribution to feminism. In a sexist society, she argues, man is the universal and woman is the particular; he is the One, she is the Other. Women therefore regularly find themselves placed in a position where they are faced with the "choice" between being imprisoned in their femininity and being obliged to masquerade as an abstract genderless subject.

To explain what she means, Beauvoir gives an example. In the middle of an abstract conversation, a man once said to her that "you say that because you are a woman". If she were to answer "I say it because it is true", she writes, she would be eliminating her own subjectivity. But if she were to say "I say it because I am a woman", she would be imprisoned in her gender. In the first case, she has to give up her own lived experience; in the second, she must renounce her claim to say something of general validity.

The anecdote warns us against believing that feminism must choose between equality and difference. As long as that "choice" takes place in a society that casts man as the One and woman as the Other, it is not a choice, but an insoluble dilemma.

Beauvoir argues ferociously against attempts to lay down requirements for how women ought to be or behave. To her, any imposition of "femininity" on women is an invitation to soul-destroying alienation.

The Second Sex provides a strong alternative to identity politics. For Beauvoir, identity is an effect of choices and actions in specific situations: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Living under vastly different conditions, women are unlikely to develop the same political interests. Women often have stronger allegiances to their race, religion, social class or nationality than to their own sex, Beauvoir writes.

Unfortunately, the only English translation of *The Second Sex*, done in 1953 by the zoologist HM Parshley, is seriously defective. Almost 15 per cent of the text is missing. The philosophical inaccuracies are such that it is difficult to get a clear sense of Beauvoir's thought. For decades, Random House, Beauvoir's US publisher, resisted

every suggestion that the translation was flawed. Last year, however, it suddenly announced that a new translation has finally been commissioned. The translators, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, are best known as cookery book writers. Let's hope they do justice to Beauvoir's masterpiece.

The Second Sex is a wonderfully energetic book. For Beauvoir, the future is wide open, and freedom within reach: "The free woman is just being born," she optimistically concludes. The Second Sex urges us to have faith in our power to transform the future.

• Toril Moi's Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman is reissued this month by Oxford University Press, price £30

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