



Otherness in Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

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According to Beauvoir, “woman is consigned to the category of Other” (2011: 81) and the designated objective of *The Second Sex* is to investigate why this is the case (49).

The function of *the other* (*l'autre*) or ‘otherness’ is to enable man’s subjectivity, which requires a complementary mirror position through which the subject affirms itself: to be other is to be “posited as object in the subject’s eyes” (165). For this reason, “[t]he Other can be embodied in the sea and the mountain just as well as in the woman” (180), yet the specifically sexed relation posing man as essential articulates a historically dependent and culturally specific heritage inscribed in the social positions of masculinity and femininity.

There are a number of working determinations of ‘other’ at play in Beauvoir’s work, of which the most prevalent is connected to her development of Hegel’s so-called ‘master-slave dialectics’, in which the parties arrange themselves in an asymmetrical yet interdependent relation. The position of the other may be relative (Bauer 2001) or absolutized (Lundgren-Gothlin 1991).

The dialectical determination of woman’s situation goes beyond this appropriation of Hegel, however, and includes a use of negation as a driving force in the determination of woman as i) the other as lack, a less developed or a *faulty* man, ii) the other in the sense of a *complement* to man (in dichotomies of passive/active, private/public etc.) and iii) the other as the internally suppressed *conflict* constitutive of femininity.

In her 1970 book *The Coming of Age*, Beauvoir moreover analyses the elderly in terms of ‘the other’.

‘The Other’ presents a major philosophical contribution that to this day works as a critical social category in feminist and postcolonial theories and describes the organization of hierarchies of power according to a centre/periphery or subject/object-matrix.

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