



BECOMING AND BEING: IDENTITY IN SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Saima Hasan

PhD Student, Research Scholar, Dept. of Philosophy, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of identity through the existentialist frameworks of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Beauvoir's analysis of the idea of gender as a fixed or predetermined essence deconstructs the process by which individuals become gendered in specific social, cultural, and historical conditions. It resists the idea that gender is not a predetermined essence but a project of becoming, shaped by freedom, recognition, and the constraints of patriarchal social structures. Jean Paul Sartre's perspective on individual consciousness, bad faith, essence, and authenticity holds that meaning can be changed by individual choice. His view is that humans construct their identities in relation to others and within shared social and cultural contexts, despite this freedom regarding individual authentic existence. Man should not be moved by the social structure or submit to bad faith, but value his choice. By emphasizing individual agency, the study proposes that identity is constructed through both self-formation and becoming. The blend of these two existentialists thus provides a nuanced account of identity as a lived, freely transcendent reality. This assessment demonstrates that identity is neither a passive inheritance nor a purely individual creation, but a continual negotiation between becoming and authenticity.

KEYWORDS : Identity, Essence, Freedom, Becoming, Otherness, Being (Authenticity).

INTRODUCTION

Identity refers to an individual's understanding of the essential nature of their existence. It is, however, developed within a social and cultural environment in which particular roles, behaviors, and expectations are associated with one another. Furthermore, it's not only through biological differences but also through how individuals experience and how expectations are constructed. The existentialist practice, especially in the works of Beauvoir and Sartre, situates identity as a project of becoming: as an ongoing process of self-formation and transcendence, conditioned by freedom and constrained by social norms. The culmination of this genre raises a fundamental philosophical question: 'Is Identity largely a matter of individual agency, or is it a created part within social and cultural relations?' This philosophical venture provided a human existence with a new hope. An adequate response to address this question must take into account both the dignified individual's capacity to shape the self and the social structures that influence and distinguish that individuality. Together, triggering self-awareness in the expression of the quest for identity and authenticity.

Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre provide two complementary lenses through which to consider this question and find a pathway to an armistice. Existentialist feminism is centrally apprehensive of the process of becoming. Beauvoir radically validates how gendered identity is passively constructed from lived experience, social expectations, and the individual's quest for freedom. Sartre's existential mode of being is grounded in a deeper philosophy of authenticity, emphasizing becoming, and it recovers the idea of individual identity. Perspectives on Beauvoir's gender identity emerged for examination across the interrelated dimensions. Therefore, allowing identity to be examined through the interconnected dimensions of individual freedom, becoming, and social belonging.

Existential Freedom and the Project of Becoming

In the first principle, "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1956, p. 21), Sartre proposes rejecting essentialist accounts of fixed identity. Human beings are condemned to be free, without predetermined meaning, and simultaneously responsible for creating their own essence. Beauvoir outspreads this existential insight, famously asserting that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267). In this light, femininity is not passively inherited but is most actively constituted through engagement with social structures, thereby opening the path to the reinvestigation of authenticity.

Identity in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism provides an idiosyncratic lens for the ontological construction of individual existence and the dynamic modes of becoming. At the core of Sartre's philosophy is the principle that 'existence precedes essence'. An exhaustive assertion that human beings first exist and then define themselves through conscious action and choice (Sartre, 1956, p. 21). This ontological priority of existence over essence dismantles the traditional essentialist frameworks, including those that posit gender as a fixed or natural category. Sartre's framework situates identity as a project; one that is continually constituted and reconstituted through lived experience, social interaction, and personal responsibility (Warnock, 1970, pp. 90-93). Sartre claims that individuals are condemned to be free, thrust into a world without predetermined meaning. Thus far perpetually responsible for creating their own essence (Sartre, 1956, p. 34). Freedom in dual nature, for Sartre, is not merely the capacity to choose but the inescapable obligation. On the one hand, freedom allows one to define oneself; on the other hand, one cannot escape oneself, making a choice. Sartre's concept of 'nothingness' is central in the process that makes the self-aware of itself: "It is the possession of this emptiness in himself which makes it possible for a Being-for-itself both to perceive the world and also to act in it, determining his own course of action by reference to an imagined future. His freedom is defined in terms of his own potentiality" (Warnock, 1970, p. 94).

In Sartrean terms, existential identity is not fixed but constituted through the ongoing engagement of inner consciousness with social norms and expectations. His prodigy of the human activity of 'look' of the 'Other', a fundamental concept in Sartre's ontology. It is formative in the development of self-awareness: it is through being seen and recognized by others that one becomes aware of oneself as an object, though this recognition never fully determines the subject's identity (Sartre, 1956, pp. 340-344). This ambiguity of identity is further developed by Simone de Beauvoir, who applies Sartre's existentialism to the lived experience of women, arguing that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267). Here, gender is naked in its process of identity and becoming.

Sartre's existential identity intersects with Marxist thought by acknowledging the role of social and material conditions in shaping subjectivity, while insisting that individuals retain agency, responsibility for selfhood, and a humane attitude. Social causes and influences "enrich individual action, yet do not dissolve it into an impersonal collective" (Flynn, 2006, pp.

101-102). This dialect is especially pertinent in discussions of becoming: gender and authentic being. Supporting the idea that individuals must navigate inherited roles and expectations while exercising the freedom to redefine themselves. The implications of Sartre's philosophy for contemporary identity theory are profound in human existence. Sartre's existentialism frames human identity as an open-ended project, always subject to revision, resistance, and reinterpretation. Sartre's insight that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1956, p. 28), which conclusively provides a philosophical foundation for understanding gender as both a constructed and contingent entity.

In conclusion, Sartre's existentialism is based on the principles of identity, freedom, and responsibility. The ontological ambiguity, therefore, through conscious engagement with both social structures and personal choice, towards creating an authentic identity. Individuals continually negotiate their sense of becoming and selfhood, affirming Sartre's enduring relevance to debates on identity and difference.

Simone De Beauvoir Existential Deconstruction Gender Identity

For Beauvoir, the existentialist insight is that each human must forge their own path in a world without predetermined meaning. This vision applies not only to individuals in the abstract but also to all human subjects situated within concrete historical, social, and political conditions. So, Beauvoir's point is that 'woman' is not a natural essence but a social identity. Biology alone doesn't confer womanhood; it is shaped through cultural recognition, lived experience, and participation in the fragile construct of femininity. By calling femininity, it highlights instability and endangerment in the sense of dependence on social norms. (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, p. 23). The existentialist maxim that existence precedes essence is foundational to Beauvoir's work, which holds that no one is born with a fixed purpose or identity. However, each individual continually forms themselves through choices and actions in the world. This core idea is the foundation of her critique of gender essentialism, which promotes the idea that femininity is a natural or fixed mannerism. Through the spectrum of exposition, Simone examines the ontological and cultural system that positions 'woman' as the 'other', a category that sustains male universality and female subordination.

Her validation lies in interpreting this hierarchy as not natural but historically imposed, and therefore open to account and transformation (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, pp. 25-26). Her widely illustrious assertion, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,' powerfully captures the existentialist central tenet (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, p. 283). According to Beauvoir, gender is not a natural fact or a stable category but a product shaped by experience, cultural norms, and social expectations. Portrayal of Womanhood, not a biological destiny, though, a status achieved through a complex interplay of self and external structures. The depiction of women as 'Other' is not an innocent portrayal of difference but a deliberate architecture of domination. By elevating man as the universal measure of humanity, society establishes his existence as the standard of subjectivity. While reducing women to a dependent reflection whose meaning is borrowed rather than self-defined. Thus, such a hierarchy is presented as timeless, as if it were still considered set in nature itself. Indeed, because it is contingent, it remains vulnerable to refusal.

Existential freedom, which belongs to all human beings, provides women the capacity to resist complicity with imposed roles and to reclaim themselves as autonomous Subjects. Moreover, it harvested the patriarchal systems that commodify women's bodies, reducing them to reproductive instruments under male authority (Batool & Hayat, 2024). It is a claim in

tune with Simone de Beauvoir's that women are constructed as 'Other,' a status naturalized to appear eternal yet historically contingent and therefore contestable (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011). This reveals that oppression is not a vocation, and then the constructed order is susceptible to resistance and redefinition through women's agency. In this way, Beauvoir unmasks oppression as a deception of the natural order, while affirming that liberation is possible. Coherence holds that women's inequality is not primarily a matter of individual predilection but rather of societal structures. However, under the law, women are seldom granted the rights they have on paper; prevailing customs and traditions prevent them from being fully realized or being socially accepted.

Economically, the arrangement of men and women functions almost as if they were discrete castes. This is the case with the framework of men's constant preference to secure better jobs, higher salaries, and greater chances of success, even as women remain disadvantaged. Milieu constructs the systemic hierarchy that keeps women subordinate in law, employment, and politics, showing how patriarchy works both in theory and in practice (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, p. 29). In her approach, Beauvoir makes the existential distinction between transcendence and immanence. Transcendence denotes the human drive to go beyond given circumstances, to invent, generate, and project oneself to new possibilities. Immanence, however, is limited to static, repeated roles, determined generally by social convention or tradition (Beauvoir 1949, 2011, p. 37). It follows that gender identity is a social and historical process. Beauvoir rejects the idea that biology or evolution can rank men and women in a natural hierarchy. She argues that such comparisons are empty, mixing pseudo-science with vague ethics. The proposed idea claims that males and females can only be understood from a human perspective, in which identity is not fixed by nature but is designed through freedom and self-making. In particular, she argued that existence is becoming. (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, p. 68). For later feminist thought, Beauvoir's existentialist account has been foundational, but it is not without controversy.

In a similar tone, the feminist theorist Butler, too, expresses the elaboration on Beauvoir's insights. In highlighting the tension and interplay between existential freedom and cultural construction, viewing gender as both a personal project and a set of cultural narratives that are constantly being reinterpreted (Butler, 1986, p. 36). In the end, Beauvoir's enduring contribution is her insistence that gender is neither a natural, fixed property nor a mere social role. She believes that freedom is always possible for human beings, but that women are conditioned to accept dependency through social expectations, structures, and pressures. For Beauvoir, true freedom consists in facing this dilemma: freedom must be consciously seized in the face of deep-seated conditioning; otherwise, it is self-deception (Beauvoir, 1949, 2011, pp. 295-298). On the conclusive ground, her argument lies in the contradiction that freedom is not erased by nature but restricted by structures that present subordination as inevitable. Women remain free in belief, but their lived circumstances often channel that freedom into compliance with subordination.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that human identity is a dynamic process of becoming, conditioned by the structures of becoming and authenticity. Uncover the identity contingent, rather than a determined submission to the structural notion. The synthesis of existentialist perspectives illustrates that individual agency and social affirmation are mutually constitutive. Notably, existential freedom prevents the reduction of identity to conformity, while an emphasis on becoming ensures that self-creation is always situated within social relations. Identity, therefore, is best understood as a

continual negotiation between self and self-formation. The responsibility of owning our identity is a dynamic passion that opposes the label of a determined essence.

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Paris: Gallimard.
2. Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage International.
3. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
4. Flynn, T. R. (2006). *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason, Volume Two: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Sartre, J.-P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library.
6. Warnock, M. (1970). *Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.