

Women and Existentialism

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The point is not for women simply to take power out of mens hands, since that wouldn't change anything about the world. Its a question precisely of destroying that notion of power.

– Simone de Beauvoir

Abstract

One is born without a choice. One lives life for a certain period without having to make any decisions for oneself. After that certain period, one is responsible for the choices one makes. Existentialism deals with one being responsible for one's own doings. Understanding existentialism is easy but applying it is difficult. Existentialism is a philosophy which gives importance to individual freedom, individual choices and individual existence. With the scenario concerning women around the world, feminist existentialism might, just help.

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Introduction

Existentialism was introduced by Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher in the 19th century. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Albert Camus (1913-1960) are well-known Existentialist Philosophers. Despite being very different from each other and belonging to distinct academic fields, they shared the same belief. To these existentialists, human beings—through their choices—create their own values in the society and give a meaning to their lives because a human being does not have any originality or importance at birth and at the early stages of life. It is only in the ensuing future, that one realizes its own 'individual opinion and thinking' without any banal, already-used philosophy. One's individual identity and importance must be created by the individual. Man is a social animal and hence, a rational one too. Every human being is unique. It is this uniqueness that makes one take different choices. Now, the choices can be for one's own good or bad and that again is completely dependent on the scenario one is facing.

The 'existence precedes essence' proposition is the principal assertion of Existentialism. It basically means, one exists first i.e. one is born first and then one constructs oneself by the workings of the society or nature (essence). As the well-known existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre puts it in his work, Existentialism is Humanism: "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."

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Part 1

Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) was published in France in 1949. It was later translated in English in 1953. It is a book by the French existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir. It was a huge sensation (thanks to the translation in English) and was read religiously as the Feminist Movement took place in the early 60's to the 70's, just a decade after its publication. Beauvoir asks the question, 'What is a woman?' To that, she replies by stating, that woman is the other man because 'society' decided and hence, defined so. "She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential..." (Beauvoir 2009:6). (No doubt the book was important for the feminists then and now) Why is it that the woman so easily accepts the secondary position? Why is that, the woman doesn't revolt? "It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them." (Beauvoir 2009:6). To this, she states that the woman sometimes and to some extent is culpable to her condition. (Keep in mind Simone's existential thinking) Due to the long going tradition in the society; of woman being the 'submissive object' she has already accepted it or rather learnt to accept it. She indirectly denies herself to flourish mentally and physically. The woman also faces difficulty in getting along with other women. The woman cannot really relate to the whole idea of 'we' as women. She finds it tough to cope with other women who are of other colour, race, religion etc. For example, white women not communicating with women of colour. "They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests and social conditions to certain men – fathers or husbands – more closely than to other women..." She continues by explaining that the woman competes with other women because she feels she 'needs' to demonstrate her authority or her 'place' in the social scale so that she gets the liking of the man (which seems important to her). The female identity is "very much bound up with the identity of the men around them..." (Reynolds 2006:145)

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", a controversial and celebrated quote by Simone de Beauvoir in the field of Feminism. Simone indirectly rejects the notion of 'womanhood'. According to her, the woman is a construct, an idea and not a living object. "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man." Gender, she suggests is just a banal term provided by the society. Sex, is just a biological term. Her point is, the woman becomes 'the woman' after she encounters the society's behaviour towards her, its terming her as 'woman' (Existence Precedes Essence). The woman's mental, sexual and social freedom is then curbed. Not only does the society drive her to approve it, but she herself consents to it. Unknowingly she has barred herself from being socially, sexually and mentally independent.

Part 2

Women are not powerless, rather they make themselves feel powerless. "...her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly." (Beauvoir, The Second Sex). Bad faith is a term established by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Bad faith is when one, under society's per-conceived notions and fake proclamations and uncanny culture forgets one self's uniqueness and merges its identity with the dull, boring and normal day-to-day life like everyone else. Women are the largest marginalised society in the world. Masculine conventions of thousands of years, have forced women to think and act according to patriarchy. They seldom think of their own self and put the other first; husband, child, family. Even if they

were to make decisions for themselves they most of the time, 'have to' think of another individual. Women first, are oppressed because of 'bad faith' and then the social norms. They feel that they are obliged to do the household work and shoulder responsibilities. What they fail to realize is that, everybody is, and should be. Only responsibilities should be shared equally, unfortunately they are largely shared by women. Men too, are victims of patriarchy. But unlike women, they are not oppressed and have the luxury of freedom and are not judged merely by the choices they make. Women need to rise and pay heed to their own needs, learn to make their own choices and defy the clichéd norms set for them by the pretentious society. One cannot be in 'bad faith' and put the onus on someone else for their sufferings. They need to understand their oppression and tackle it. Women are wonderful, smart and excellent multi-tasking humans. In order to escape from the shackles of 'invisible' oppression they need to educate themselves and establish a pristine world for themselves.

Conclusion

The philosophy of Existentialism, which was introduced in the late 19th Century, can be seen in today's society but not on a large scale. Taking one's own decision (whether a woman or a man) and acting on it without being influenced by any kind of pressure is critical. One must not confuse existentialism with nihilism or selfishness. Individual, original and independent thoughts are very much essential for the progress of human society.

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