

TRAVELING WITH DE BEAUVOIR FROM INDIA

I came to *The Second Sex* at seventeen in the last year of my schooling in 1989, which was in Bombay. It was the year before I left to study literature and philosophy at a small liberal arts college, a women's college, in the U.S. My recollections of school-days seem to be dominated by that year, for I suppose everything must have been marked by the exhilaration of a first leave-taking from the places of a fortunate childhood. It was in this year that I found myself in possession of a copy of *The Second Sex*. (I remember reading it on certain desultory summer afternoons when I was assigned to the reception-desk at the non-profit organization where my best friend and I volunteered our time. It was Parshley's English translation; I grew up in a bilingual family, at home in Bengali and English). The book was my mother's, from her university days in London, and it was ferreted from the bookshelves at home. In reflecting on the significance of Beauvoir's text for me today, then, I take that time as my starting point.

I am in the first place, my mother's daughter. She was a product of that post-Independence generation of "midnight's children" (whose aspirations Rushdie made known in his celebrated troping of a national awakening) and to which the horizon of my intellectual and political imagination remains indebted. They were the children of an English-speaking Indian elite, born immediately after the achievement of freedom from the British Raj. Their inheritance was a vision of secularism and the democratic commitment to social justice within the legal framework of a liberal state. The ambivalence of Rushdie's trope, however, gestures to the underbelly of this national imagining; it continues to mirror, for post-independent elites, Nehru's own originary equivocation at the moment of a national founding. A "redemption" of freedom, indeed, but only at the midnight hour, the same moment in which Pakistan individuated itself out of the body of a liberated India.

Emancipation and the possibilities of self-articulation -- the moment of the liberal Indian nation-state -- was inseparable from the immediate history of communal violence. In the Nehruvian narrative, a nationalist elite "rescued" the promise of the enlightenment from its instantiation in empire, recalling Western philosophy's foundational claim about the necessary and historical connection of reason to freedom. But enlightenment entailed forgetfulness, and so Nehru's eloquent hesitation should continue to suggest that a "people" are constituted in the light of their historical distinction only after they have been *thrown*, as it were, out of an originary, insensible "0 hour". The

Partition of India involved the largest migration of a population in the twentieth century, sectarian violence, and mass dispossession. It should be emphasised -- as Indian feminists consistently have -- that the experience of such dislocation was represented and enacted through the bodies of women. Forced migrations were accompanied by the abduction of Muslim and Hindu women to the “wrong” side of the national dividing-lines, by rape and the mutilation of women’s bodies (tattooed, as I am told they were, with the signs of the autonomous nation). And afterwards, widowhood would haunt the edges of new borders.

It was not as if my mother’s generation were unaware of this double legacy: she, like the children of so many others, was immediately related to those who had been involved first in the brutalities of the anti-colonial struggle and then, as professional and bureaucratic elites, in the difficult decisions of nation-building. But a vocal metropolitan intelligentsia, even if comfortable in their passages in and out of a vernacular idiom, had always spoken to *politics* in the tongue that took liberalism to be a second-nature. Communalism was a deep possibility, certainly, but an atavistic one: the public realm of the post-colonial nation-state, whose enlightened indifference to faith detached it from any one denomination, would learn to work through the traumatic history of such regressive impulses. The socio-historical premises of an inherited belief in the compatibility of gender equality with the tolerance of difference were never systematically evident to me as I grew up. In this exercise, I re-consider my engagements with Beauvoir’s text against these first premises, for it must be admitted that the *The Second Sex* was received and bequeathed to me as a part of the “imported” languages of the enlightenment.

At present, I am a graduate student of political theory, and my most recent encounter with Beauvoir’s text was last semester, when I taught a course on feminist interpretations of modern western political thought to a small and enthusiastic class of four seniors. In it, we read sections of *The Second Sex*. I was struck by my recognition -- not only of the experience described, but of the text itself -- in that passage, where Beauvoir describes a philosophical conversation with an anonymous male friend.

I have sometimes been annoyed in the middle of an abstract discussion, at hearing men say to me: “You think this or that because you are a woman”; but I know that my only defense is to reply “I think thus and so because it is true”, thereby

removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply, "And you think the contrary because you are a man", for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity...It amounts to this: just as for the ancients, there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature....[while] man superbly ignores the fact [of] his anatomy... He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it (Parshley, xviii).

In thinking about how one could be "weighed down" in the course of speaking by the specific peculiarities of one's body, we saw that Beauvoir is trapped between two false propositions. On the one side, Beauvoir is "caught" by simple-minded self-confirmation: "*When I speak, I am (only) a woman. Any truth-claim I make is always only relative*". (This description of vacuous self-confirmation reminds me of those women who are compelled to enact their partiality constantly: in order to speak, they refer themselves to a mitigating femininity. I think Beauvoir describes something interesting here about the "flirt" -- a woman who is boring, in the end, because she is without a point-of-view). On the other side, Beauvoir faces the severity of self-denial: "*When I speak, I am not a woman*". But this position is marked equally by a lack of conviction, a loss which must accompany words that are a consequence of any "removal of my subjectivity". Politically, it suggests the hollowness entailed in commitments involving a disavowal of my body. (This option is familiar to me as well: Beauvoir implies that the lie-by-omission will probably not stop the woman, the one who likes to talk about philosophy with her male friends, from choosing such an option. In other words, she will learn to identify with her disavowal -- "I say this not because I am a woman" -- simply because she wishes to continue to engage in conversation).

But there seemed to be, in the course of class discussion, another alternative -- what about keeping silent? What would it mean to feign muteness with this friend? If my own voice lies in an unspoken space between confirmation and disavowal, I would have to show, in the course of this exchange, that I was *faking* silence -- by withdrawing from the conversation, from the room itself, could I re-enact how my

friend's very solicitation to speak gags my voice ? ¹ In each of these three scenarios, however, the beginning of reflexive self-definition occurs only at a point of *resistance*. Running up against the sexist interlocutor's decree ("you are a woman") -- this is the *real* starting point of an intersubjective engagement ("conversation") in which Beauvoir had assumed she was already involved.

The thesis I offered to my class was this. Beauvoir's sensibility is contemporary. She understands, by setting up the problem between the equally unphilosophic options of confirmation and disavowal, that the body resists a facile conflation with subjectivity. But she also knows that the body returns to haunt any assertion of identity (and indeed of "freedom") that would leave it behind. The body is to be neither confirmed nor transcended: the persistence of its meaningfulness is to be *negotiated*. And this repeated -- and perpetually failing -- negotiation of the body in speech would constitute an "authentic" conversation of friends.

As for the integrity of the third way, keeping silent, implicit but not explored in Beauvoir's "conversation": is the act of resisting speech the same thing as exercising the freedom of one's exit-option, of choosing to walk out on a conversation? I suppose it goes to my own constitutive experiences -- my own "background" as a certain kind of Indian woman, now part of a diasporic community of intellectuals in that cosmopolis, the Great American Research University -- that I am distanced from those who whose *forced* muteness testifies to how they have been silenced by the very "options" that make them who they are.

December 1992 represented a political awakening for many of my generation. On December 6, an organized group of self-styled Hindu militants desecrated a historical mosque, razing the 15th century structure to the ground and inaugurating a fury of violence against besieged Muslim communities across the Indian subcontinent. The Indian State reacted slowly, feigning bewilderment at the actions of a

¹ Toril Moi opened up this possibility in a discussion with students at the Gothic Bookstore, Duke University, March 2000. Find a further discussion of it in the section entitled "You Say That Because You are a Woman", pgs. 207-226 in *What is A Woman* (Oxford/New York, 1999). I assigned sections of Prof. Moi's book to my class: my own conversation with the text is indebted to class discussions around these assignments, most particularly to Erin Abrams ('00) and Alisa Nave ('00).

spontaneous and irrational crowd (indeed, it was no “mob” that demolished the Babri Masjid, as was represented in the papers); its representatives at the level of state and local governments responded with undisguised partisanship, distancing themselves from even a gesture of protection to those targeted.²

The significance of the violence lay in the extraordinary lucidity of the militants’ claim, that the desecration of the religious site was a symbolic founding, the origin of a transformed self within the Indian nation. Hindutva (a neologism, meaning Hindu “essence”, literally “hinduness”) was to replace the secular, liberal self-understanding of the Indian state. My discovery was not, I suppose, of the every-day possibility of violence: for I learnt to see what I had already known, that the post-independent Indian state has regularly functioned as patron and vehicle to the violent exercise of social power by clientelistic elites, men, high-castes, landowners, capitalists. Rather, the events of December 1992- January 1993 represented the unprecedented only insofar as they marked the sudden untenability of a certain history of political identification. I discovered for the first time, my full investment in the Indian state’s self-designation as neutral, tolerant and secular.

In this context -- from within the claims of a post-independent national identity -- I am reminded that a practical politics of sexual violence is implicit in the puzzle of verbal and interpretive coercion that Beauvoir raises, like an inescapability, in the insistence of the body. Rape, legitimised by narratives of war or identity politics, has involved

²The dominant understanding of communal violence defined the events of 1992 privately, negatively, as a regressive term of liberal secular tolerance. This perception was pivotal in the English-speaking nation's interpretation of the Babri Masjid affair, which was as an act of religious intolerance precipitated by socio-economic disaffection. The self-perception of communalists, on the other hand, vocally and repeatedly proclaimed, remained (incredibly) a blind spot in the discourse of “secular” moderate-left positions. For communalists, traditional religious identity functions as the denominator of warring national communities: hence the ritualistic invocation of a traumatic “founding” in 1947, the repeated appropriation and representation of a mortified memory of collective violence that underwrites every renewed assertion of national consciousness.

the forcible reduction of subjectivity to an image inscribed with the identity of an (masculine, collective) other. Nothing in my political instruction into the liberal Nehruvian values of tolerance and secularism could have prepared me for the reports that I heard of rape as a spectacle and ritual of nationalism;³ for extending my imagination to women who were not victims but perpetrators in the collective appropriation of national memories of sexual violence⁴; for my speechlessness (and the *inexplicable* experience of profound shame) years later, when a friend who spoke to me of the horrific reduction of the body, that December, to the prison-house of a communal text.

It seems, then, that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* must confront the charge of obsolescence, for I have implied that the text -- in the English translation, at least -- is the property of a (perhaps) obsolete cultural elite. In this way, it is yet another lasting mark of the failure of their political imagination.⁵ ("Obsolete" perhaps also because Beauvoir is an essential moment in the classical "Western" project of emancipation through self-enlightenment, even if we concede that she reconfigures this paradigm immanently through the experiences of the "peculiarities" of women's bodies. It could be argued that the reproduction of cultural and political hegemony by a nationalist elite

³ Surat, 1992, where the country saw some of the worst violence. Thirteen Muslim women were raped under floodlights. Reports that this event was videotaped remain, as far as I know, unconfirmed.

⁴ According to the reports of journalist and activist Teesta Setalvad, more than 20,000 *kar sevikas* were present at the site, and actively urged on the demolition of the mosque. (*Sunday Observer*, January 3-9, 1993). See also her piece "The Woman *Shiv Sainik* and Her Sister *Swayamsevika*" in *Women and the Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experiences* (eds. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia, Zed Books: London, 1995) In a grotesque affirmation of every-day *praxis*, the militant Hindu right has appropriated the phrase *kar sevak* (feminine *sevika*) from the Sikh religion which used it to denote, in the context of religious service, the dignity of those who did manual labor.

⁵ I am aware that an abridged translation of *The Second Sex* exists in Hindi. The text, as far as I know, is not taught in the philosophy department at Delhi University, but is offered in sociology courses. Because of the limits of my own field of research, as well as the fact that I have pursued the study of philosophy outside India, I cannot speak to whether Beauvoir has been deployed directly by practical feminism, nor do I have the authority to speak to the ways in which her text may have been appropriated into particular contexts.

implies that this project failed for a “second” time in the context of post-colonial nationhood). Beauvoir must also answer the charge of obsolescence as levied from the side of contemporary gender studies: here, her insistence on the body implies an essentialism, and her methodology reveals an inadequate theorization of gender in its resort to “anecdotal” evidence. My own suggestion is, however, that the text retains a timeliness for Indian feminism in the context of neo-nationalism just *because* of the way in which contemporary theories of subjectivity have deemed it to be dated -- Beauvoir’s text continues to resist the dismissal of the body and its historical knowledge to the status of a contingency.

The post-independent Indian nation defines itself along that which Beauvoir identifies above as the ancients’ prerogative: an assumed “vertical” (inviolable *lingum*) essence, ubiquitous norm of the chaste Hindu male. Its opposite point is the sexually predatory Muslim male. And against this vertical axis, emerge two tenuous trajectories of deviancy. Along these reside the oblique and unspeaking presences of Hindu and Muslim women. Here, then, would be the history of a nation, a history of its subtext. Shame, too, must play a part in all of this. If I may be permitted to reconstruct an account of its trajectory in the terms of Beauvoir’s dialectic, I suggest that shame registers necessity, the way in which another’s gaze *must* pass through the dark places of my body. It is a reminder (although never a redress) of a strange country that lies between speaking and silence, one has been forced into the light of another’s imperative.

In this context, Beauvoir's affirmation of philosophy in experiences of the every-day ("I am a woman") appears to me as something extraordinary. Her proposition, “I am”, to be understood only by way of its qualification, is both modest and heroic. This self-assertion defends the consistency between the desire for “philosophic” awakening -- self-articulation, individuation and transformation -- and, on the other hand, the experience of shared histories and the practices of ordinary life, the intimate knowledge of our bodies as the condition as well as limit of subjectivity. And perhaps it is the prospect of this very affirmation that weighs so terribly upon the *psyche* of the Indian nation, bound, as it seems to be, to repeatedly foreclose its possibility, rendering the body again, and again without impunity, into a totem for collective honor and masculine expiation.

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