

Are We Safe? On Violence Against Women Through Simone de Beauvoir's Work

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Abstract

This essay titled *Are We Safe? On Violence Against Women Through Simone de Beauvoir's Work* explores Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, with the objective to contribute to the uncovering of the root of the normalization of male violence towards women. The contention is that we cannot understand why violence against women occurs without first undertaking the task of exploring the becoming of children born in a situation, i.e., a sexed body within a society. Therefore, the main research question which the thesis investigates is the extent to which we can use Beauvoir's *magnum opus* and her theory of woman as the Other to understand this phenomenological question. The research also describes the central idea of becoming for the sexes (and becoming of the genders) and the overall pressures applied to bodies, thus encouraging them to perform because of that body. It will present the contemporary feminist philosophy that is circulating around Beauvoir's work and its current reception. Three major chapters will be explored —The Biological Data, The Psychoanalytical Point of View, and The Historical Materialism Point of View—as well as three major concepts to understand the becoming of women as the Other to men, i. e., girlhood, sexual initiation, and heterosexual love. This idea from Beauvoir is based in a sex binary, but this becoming is still relevant to keep in mind as social pressures apply to all genders. These chapter findings lead to the initial claim that male violence towards women — and its normalization — stem from the embodied experience that is the becoming of children.

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Introduction

To exist in the world, one must have a body; to have a body means that one is always vulnerable to others and the external world. This vulnerability exposes us to situations of harm and oppression. The latter are inextricably linked to human experience and can be difficult to dissociate from, even impossible. This possible violence at the root of human suffering carries a socio-historic variant embedded in bodily experiences and upbringings that are not pre-determined but rather, built upon. More specifically, male violence against women is a prevalent and alarming issue in all countries of the modern world and demands immediate action. This is both an issue that presents itself in intimate partner (IP) situations and in non-intimate partner (NIP) situations, which makes it furthermore urgent to address. More than one third of all killings of women are done by an IP, compared to less than five percent of male murders which are committed by an IP (and in most cases only happen as an act of self-defense from male violence) (World Health Organization 2012). In other situations (of NIP violence), female sex workers and bars/nightclub workers are targeted in high numbers (Ibid), as well as organized crime targeting specifically women: “Most of the detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (92 per cent) are females” (UN Women 2022). Although this violence is widespread, few factors seem to be common threads in these acts of violence from male towards female, apart from the single fact that men feel entitled to women’s lives.

In this essay, I develop a text-based analysis of the feminist work of Simone de Beauvoir in order to prepare a new model on which to propose a systematic reading of the problem of male violence against women. I argue that the existentialist premise (“existence precedes essence”) which informs Beauvoir’s understanding of the Other needs to be taken into account as central to her explanation of the male/female becoming and thus, assuming a certain theoretical standpoint, as I propose, the root cause of violence against women in Beauvoir. Several opening remarks are in order. The formulation in *The Second Sex* (2011 edition),

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 2011, 283) will serve as a point of focus. I understand that because it is not the biological facts into which one is born, i.e., a sexed body, what makes one a man or a woman is not biological or anatomical in nature. Rather, becoming is about this particular body which the Self inhabits as being perceived in society and this perception in turn exerting influence, various pressures exerted on lived experience and changing one’s way of navigating the world.

My second remark is on the history of receiving Beauvoir. Beauvoir argues for a materialist understanding of the female and male bodies, but the reception has not always been favorable, as feminists in the 1970s and 80s took her model to be centering on what she calls “the independent woman” as limiting, essentialist and reductionist. On the contrary, I believe her work is strikingly contemporary, useful for current notions of violence upon which contemporary feminist theories rely. In the recent revival of interest in Beauvoir, theorists, such as Eva Gothlin, Sonia Kruks, Ann Murphy and Judith Butler, take up in novel ways particularly the notions of the Other and of ambiguity.

My third remark concerns additional framing due to the opportunity to engage more forcefully Beauvoir for resolving current issues about violence. My aim is to show the relevance of her work on the boys *versus* the girls’ becoming in the world and contributing with the addition of a focus outside strictly Beauvoir scholarship, i.e., using subject formation in a Beauvoirian frame to study the source of male violence against women. I also want to suggest that her theory is lacking a certain consideration in the understanding that these roles have in the continuation of male violence against women. Indeed, I find that Beauvoir speaks on the point of view that women and girls understand themselves as the Inessential Other and that they take part in continuing their oppression, whereas I believe a more promising path lies in shifting the focus from women onto men¹, those being the ones who understand them-

selves as the Essential Object and Dasein. Beauvoir's explanation of girls and women's behaviors, which make them obvious models for a certain type of self-effacement in society, is lacking the side of the male upbringing in which there is no consideration for women as Essential Others. The latter leads to an internal detachment in the comportment towards women's humanity and thus, by extension, perpetuates male violence against them.

In a close reading of Beauvoir, three chapters prove useful especially in the context of Subject formation and male violence. Those are (1) The Biological Data, (2) The Psychoanalytical Point of View, and (3) The Point of View of Historical Materialism. From these arise questions about Beauvoir's relevance in the 21st century, namely, questions that Ann Murphy, Sonia Kruks and Eva Gothlin have taken up as they offer influential accounts of Beauvoir. Murphy's "Ambiguity and Precarious Life; Tracing Beauvoir's Legacy in the Work of Judith Butler" (2012) emphasizes that Beauvoir presents some gender and sex essentialism, but this view changes when she compares her with Judith Butler's critical work on Beauvoir. Kruks' "Simone de Beauvoir: Engaging Discrepant Materialisms" (2010) adds to Beauvoir by showing how she is helpful when understood through the lens of the production of women as the Other, from a Marxist materialist point of view. Finally, Gothlin's "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger" (2003) directs attention towards Dasein and Mitsein by comparing Beauvoir's view with Heidegger and its relation to the 'Othering' of women as well as connecting materialism to an existentialism, which is a project of founding the relations of intersubjectivity. This allows me to examine how, for Beauvoir, the formation of subjects is grounded in a relational ontology.

While reviewing the current debates on Beauvoir in feminist philosophical texts, I narrow my focus on the reception of the three previously mentioned chapters from her theory. They will be under review as they are the scientific starting points from which Beauvoir believes the notion of women's otherness has risen, from 'natural' in their becoming as a Being.

Each of them is used in contrast with one of the three contemporary philosophers who re-viewed Beauvoir's relevance in the current debates about women's subordination. This will lead to exploring in detail the theory of Beauvoir to see how my claim about her theory and the formation—in young boys— of violence against women are intrinsically linked. Then, there will be the consolidation of my claim with Beauvoir's idea of Subject Formation and her conception of Heidegger's Dasein/Mitsein, tying together the views of Beauvoir, the contemporary literature on her work, as well as my own claim and novel considerations to her theory.

1. Contemporary Feminist Philosophical Views

Three important contemporary feminist philosophers —Ann Murphy, Sonia Kruks, Eva Gothlin — have critically appropriated Simone de Beauvoir, to argue for an enriched existential and phenomenological account of women's lives and their upbringing in patriarchal societies. The primary concern that will be under study in Murphy's text, with which I begin, is regarding Beauvoir's relevance in feminist debates on violence in the 21st century.

For Murphy, Judith Butler's 1990s attack on Beauvoir is that she is a reductionist and an essentialist. Beauvoir has often been understood as a biological essentialist because she refers to the body as the situation of women in which one is trapped (Beauvoir 2011, 66). First, in Murphy's view Butler's account of Beauvoir, i.e., that according to her, Beauvoir thinks gender is an accomplishment rather than an identity—is not in Beauvoir's language. Butler also thinks that Beauvoir's view of gender reconciles the ambiguity of it being “both a project and a construct.” That is because of Beauvoir's way of keeping becoming ambiguous to make it a “corporeal locus of cultural possibilities.” Therefore, choosing a gender becomes a physical experience within a network of “deeply entrenched cultural norms” (Butler 1986, 37). In this discussion, the cultural norms are understood as all forms of traditions, values and roles that are proper to a specific culture and society. This view is deeply rooted in Western

and European culture, as well as dependent on Beauvoir's time, i.e., early and mid- 20th century. Indeed, what comes out of this claim is that because of these cultural norms applied on bodies, one's life is predetermined as soon as they enter it.

Butler retracts her support for Beauvoir when she follows up on her worry about the existential descriptions of the latter's notion of embodiment, which were too deeply set on an agent acting on someone's performance of gender. Although Butler is not fully embracing the French existentialism, it is undoubtedly seen in her work that she believes in its claims which are (1) that there is no such thing as a sexual essence and (2) that gender performance is contingent upon others (Murphy 2012, 214). This then reinforces the idea that to "become a woman is a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the acquisition of a skill, a 'project', to use Sartrean terms, to assume a certain corporeal style and significance and is not something one is born as" (Butler 1986, 36). Therefore, to be a woman means to have acquired specific skills and roles that are proposed to a person born in a situation, i.e., thrownness. Butler emphasized this idea that becoming a woman is temporal and thus, a process. "In other words, these repetitions are necessary for the continuous reproduction of gender" (Arruzzo 2016, 35). It is through the reenactments and experiences, already established in society, over time, that one becomes woman.

There remains the concern, on my part, about violence and its availability in the becoming of young boys *versus* young girls, which is at the heart of my research. Murphy shows the similarities between Beauvoir and Butler's view on one's vulnerability to violence. Butler has been relying on the notion of agency in the Self and others and has been broadening her views on gender and on human beings in general, with the notion of 'precariousness'. The latter is "signaling the universal ontological truism of the vulnerable body, its omnipresent availability to both violence and care" (Murphy 2012, 214). Beauvoir anticipated Butler's work in three ways:

First, for both philosophers, the ontological fact of vulnerability, dispossession, and mutual exposure does not in and of itself yield a prescriptive ethics, much less one of nonviolence. Second, both precariousness and ambiguity are nonetheless productive figures in that they gesture toward the responsibilities that emerge from the recognition of embodied vulnerability. Finally, ambiguity and precariousness share a similar discursive status, where Butler argues that “precariousness itself cannot be properly recognized” (Butler 2009, 13), and a hallmark of Beauvoir’s discourse on ambiguity is her similar attentiveness to the ways in which ambiguity as such is frequently the object of evasion, obfuscation, and denial. (Murphy 2012, 216)

To be vulnerable does not entail one will receive respect and care from others. What Butler shares with Beauvoir, regarding this ambiguity and vulnerability, is that it is embodied, it is a phenomenological vulnerability (the responses are endless when one is in a situated body). Violence is always an exploitation of one body towards another, i.e., breaking the tie that links us together as *Mitsein* (Being-with-Others²). This last notion is going to be used in contemporary feminism when discussing the role of women as Other, and especially based on Beauvoir’s use of Heidegger’s *Mitsein*³. Precariousness thus becomes the vulnerability that all have by being exposed and interdependent to one another, which inevitably makes one vulnerable to harm and violence from others. Ambiguity is crucial to Beauvoir’s theory because it is solely through it that one can confront the internal and external world. We can add further that conflict is a better way to live than to escape ambiguity, as freedom is achieved through it. Although she believes the latter is achieved through conflicts (with the world, with others, i.e., the break in the face of the Other), she does not argue for abuse and violence. Quite the contrary. In other words, Beauvoir means that one must not disavow its vulnerability by breaking another’s vulnerability. This would go against the principle of *Mitsein*, but also of mutual recognition, which emphasizes that one must recognize another as a fully self-conscious person (Burke 2005, 214). Therefore, disavowing one’s vulnerability by using violence would necessarily imply that there is no mutual recognition, or respect for another’s Self.

For Butler, as it turns out, the reasoning is similar. Butler believes it to be impossible to have a more equitable distribution of precariousness without some level of conflict, even

though the notion of precarity aims at a reduction of an oppressive violence. The ambiguity as main concept in both their philosophies stems from the fact that precariousness might signal both vulnerability and inequity, but it is also by giving an account of it that one's integrity comes through and thus must, as Murphy argues, elaborate a humanism that takes into consideration our experience of abuse and care. Thus, it is argued that Beauvoir was paving the way for Butler when discussing that ambiguity comes from the desire to deny it, to escape from it. One can understand that both theorists had at heart the importance of an ethics that is grounded in the body, which makes it individual and particular to each individual.

I now can turn to my second interlocutor, Sonia Kruks. Beauvoir's relevance on the contemporary scene of debates in feminist philosophy derives from the exploration of her Marxist materialism. Subjectivity arises from social practices, even if the "interior" is still relevant and used in the formation of a Self. This specific materialism focuses on social structures that engage with material needs as it proceeds "from the outside in" (Kruks 2010, 259). Beauvoir's approach of Marxist materialism bases itself on the use of a theory on the 'production' of women as inferior to men, i.e., the socially constructed Marxist view of materialism. She was also very focused on the lived body (Kruks 2010, 262). But, as mentioned earlier, the lived experience of oppression on a body is only relevant within certain social contexts, where the body and physical strength are the most important. It is in these social contexts that the superiority of the male emerges as 'natural'. The problem that is raised is that to become a woman means one can never escape the limits of one's body and the social systems that reinforce its importance (creating a subordinate otherness). Since Beauvoir's materialism is focused on the production of bodies in certain roles, it could appear as though she presents her theory as gender essentialist. Indeed, since her claim is based in corporeality and therefore the body that one is given, it allows for assumptions about the importance she gives to

the body. Contrary to being essentialist, her approach is more about the importance of the societal values and obligations enforced on the body, rather than what this body permits, in itself.

The starting point of this paper was that one is not born but rather becomes woman. There is an ambiguity that lives in Beauvoir's theory in that she believes in the embodiment of a lived experience and that this determines a woman's life and what she can and cannot do (Kruks 2010, 269). Even though she believes the bodies cannot be disregarded and are a crucial part to one's life, she reiterates that the lived experience is lived through the body, but as an alienation from the outside (Kruks 2010, 274). One sees their condition/situation (womanhood) as a disadvantage only because they have interiorized the values of society and how the latter sees womanhood. Thus, these forms of oppression on the body of women and of elder people—Beauvoir was also interested in the oppression of the elderly—are socially constructed⁴. Kruks introduces the 'practico-inert'—a Sartrean term—that can be summed as "[...] practices, social conventions, collectively valued objects and even deeply ingrained attitudes [that] establish the boundaries of our current praxis and become the practico-inert" (Engels, 2018, 51). They provoke human agency by making us subject to its will, its demands. The past actions (and those we do daily) result in the practico-inert that weighs on us afterwards and on our future decisions (Kruks 2010, 275). Since one is in a body (that they did not choose and thus are thrown into), there are things that are restricted and prohibited for certain bodies. The female body is restricted from its birth, and this affects a woman's future actions and thus, the practico-inert surrounding her life. But until trauma (a break in the continuation of everyday norms) happens, one is not aware of the situation they are in. The social practices of being a woman are not 'givens' but they are realities that women live through every day, unconsciously. Therefore, material realities cannot be discarded, as social norms

of sex and race, amongst others, exist. They are life-structuring phenomena that create oppression and inequalities, but they still are realities, however superficial they may be. Sexuality is not absolute, but it becomes so because of the social pressure surrounding the sexes to fit into the 'feminine' or the 'masculine' (Kruks 2010, 276).

Disclosure and thrownness, two terms used by Heidegger and taken up by Beauvoir afterwards, are essential notions to take up when undertaking the task of exploring the relevance of Beauvoir in 21st century feminist philosophy. One is always surrounded by the practico-inert, and until there is a break in one's everyday life to realize they are in that particular situation, things will remain as they are. This binds together the terms disclosure and thrownness with the use we saw in the previous authors as human reality is located through one's body, which also means that it is precarious and finite. When one realizes their situation in the world outside of the everyday routine, i.e., the Being-in-the-World (Dasein) that is indistinguishable from its situation, one understands that their life is precarious and thus emerges the need for disclosure in the thrownness (thrown in a situation). For Gothlin⁵, human beings don't necessarily have explicit self-knowledge of their freedom. She argues that "if you live in a historical situation where freedom is denied to a group of people because their situation of oppression is defined as a natural condition, freedom is not something you are aware of" (Gothlin 2003, 51).

To restate, human beings are not necessarily aware they are free, because they are always in a situation (thrownness). Thus, a 'feminine essence' does not exist, it is created around a situation in which a woman finds herself. Existence determines essence in virtue of occurring in advance of one's own being aware of essential freedom, through this paradoxical temporal complex. Femininity is a becoming; it is a process (Gothlin 2003, 52). The complex of corporeality is extremely important in one's situation. The body is not a thing, but rather is

a situation. One's possibilities and decisions in the world are influenced by one's body (Gothlin 2003, 54). The body is not the explanation for the oppression of women, but because she has a female body (historically associated with certain characteristics), her situation and opportunities have changed. Beauvoir explains time and time again that a part of being a woman is having a female body (Ibid). Now, this does not mean that to be a woman one must have a female body, but rather that since the body is a 'historical idea', it has been associated with it. By historical idea, we are looking at the cultural and historical norms that apply, or have been previously applied, onto the female body and that are supposed to be acquired in order to be a 'woman'. This specific term is applied onto the female body, with the sole purpose of reinforcing the values and elements that have historically been associated to the role of woman. The figure 'woman' in society is therefore not biologically and psychologically determined. Instead, it is produced by our 'civilization', which applies also to women's bodies. The body has different significations in different situations, and it is also individually disclosed and 'lived' (Gothlin 2003, 54).

With what was presented from these authors, the relevance of Beauvoir work on boys' and girls' becoming in the world is clear. Indeed, my aim is to see how her framework, i.e., the emphasis on the materiality of the body and its thrownness in the world, is still useful to study the formation that Subjects undergo in their development, with the availability for one (male) and not the other (female) of the use of violence to assert oneself in the world.

2. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2011) is the work of the philosopher's retracing of women's oppression and their creation in the role of the Inessential Other. She reconstitutes the major constructs of the oppressive patriarchal system, confining her explicit critique to the opening three chapters. The chapters help to reconstruct her scholarship on the evolution of misogyny and more importantly, help to understand the starting point –if there is

one — of violence against women. I next approach some chapters crucial to my study of the development of the Subject formation, i.e., girls and boys. From these chapters, Beauvoir traced a linear explanation of the formation of the Subject, i.e., the girl's becoming into a woman and thus, her becoming into the Inessential Other. I especially seek to underline how the pressure and roles attributed to certain bodies (male vs female) are still corresponding to today's situations of violence against women, and that the young boy's development into a man is crucial in the consideration for these acts of violence.

In summary, the first section examined contemporary literature on Beauvoir's theory to show the relevance to ideas that our society still espouses and how these are entailed in issues relating to patriarchal values. But furthermore, her work is the point of departure that can help to understand how male bodies are conditioned to act in aggressive and openly violent manners that in turn creates an unsafe world for women, and in which women are second-class citizens. I demonstrated that contemporary thinkers believe she has relevance through the ambiguity that comes with living with others and how it is always precarious as it forces one to go inwards, and to be aware of the interdependency that all humans have with another, which leads to being vulnerable to violence. I also showed through Beauvoir's existentialist framework that a feminine essence does not exist; and additionally, that by having a sexed body, one is always thrown in a situation and socialized with it (thrownness).

2.1. Beauvoir's Refutation of the Oppressive Argument

Below, I first explore the chapters that are Beauvoir's foundation to building her analysis of women's formation as the Other. That is, Beauvoir goes through the 'arguments' that have been made about women's oppression and that would explain it, according to different philosophers, psychologists, historians, etc. She also dismisses any 'natural' conception of women's subordination. She dives into the obvious, i.e., the biological data and the physical

bodies. Once one is born into the body of a male or a female, there are already assumptions applied to it, such that one is the active sex and the other is the passive one (21).

2.1.1. The Biological Data

I emphasize that Beauvoir reconstructs women's oppression in three currents of thinking — biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. The chapter "The Biological Data" delves in the ideology that women's oppression is attributed to their biology, i.e., being female. Biology reflects the way in which society attributes characteristics of any individuals based on their birth sex. For men, there is a discomfort in the opposite sex and thus, this confusion and discomfort is attributed to the female sex and all its attributes, whether they are based in facts. Being female is seen as pejorative. "Man projects all females at once onto woman" (21). These misconceptions rooted in biology are deeply problematic, for they do not account for any of the social pressures applied to these sexes, which is what is under study here. Yet, biological data is not new, in the sense that it has been used to describe women, and men and philosophers, such as Aristotle and Hippocrates, have used this data to try to explain human behavior. "Aristotle imagined that the fetus was produced by the meeting of the sperm [...] woman just provided passive material, while the male principle is strength, activity, movement, and life" (25). Hippocrates' view of the female/male duality is also mentioned; "[his] doctrine also recognized two types of seed, a weak or female one, and a strong one, which was male" (Ibid). This means that biological markers, such as strength, height, weight, musculature, have been used to identify the assigned roles of men and women in society. This is not something that has been easily rejected, and even to this day is used to try to explain women's inferior position in society. Recent philosophers, such as Hegel, have also used this theory. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, he "thought that the two sexes must be different: one is active and the other is passive, and it goes without saying that passivity will be

the female's lot" (25). Beauvoir quickly contradicts these assumptions as she says there are two biases that she proves wrong:

The first one is female's passivity; the living spark is not enclosed within either of the two gametes. It springs forth from their meeting; the nucleus of the ovum is a vital principle perfectly symmetrical to the sperm's. The second bias contradicts the first, which does not include the fact that they often coexist: the permanence of the species is guaranteed by the female since the male principle has an explosive and fleeting existence. In reality, the embryo perpetuates the germ cells of the father and the mother and retransmits them together to its descendants, sometimes in a male and sometimes in a female form. (27)

Having rejected these assumptions based on the body, she still believes that from these myths what emerges is a certain reality that explains women's position as the inessential Other. Men, wanting to be an absolute Subject, have searched for ways in which they differ from women (biologically) and thus, enforced all aspects that are not like theirs as inferior. "The first and main problem with the physiological theory of gendered intelligence is more basic but also, for that reason, more devastating: the evidence does not bear it out such that it fails to be properly "scientific" (Pena-Guzman 2016, 273). Indeed, it is also because this theory was one of interest during the Enlightenment, and in which the womb was the problem. "Irrationality, sensitivity, or emotionality, peculiar to and extreme in women, and their characteristic volubility or imaginative disorders were the result of, and could be explained by, the fact that only they had a womb" (Villarme 2021, 26). As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, "man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea" (45). This further continues my claim in showing that there is importance in bodies, but that this importance is based on the societal needs and values present at one time or another. "Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her becoming; that is, her *possibilities* have to be defined" (45). This is coherent with her view that the body is not a thing but a situation, like Sartre and Heidegger have pointed out. The body realizes itself by existing in a society that has certain customs, desires, and fears. "If the respect or fear woman inspires prohibits man from using violence against her, the male's muscular superiority is not a source of power"

(47). This means that woman is the Other not because of a biological fact, but rather because of the values ascribed to certain bodies and how they serve communities.

There is ambivalence in the importance that the body has in Beauvoir's theory because she does not attribute woman's Otherness entirely to having a female body. This does not mean that woman's Otherness is fundamentally linked to having a female body, but rather that it is possible to see that what society enforces on the female body causes women to become Other. The alterity that has been attributed to woman is always a "disquieting mystery" (Giovanini 2014, 41). In other words, woman is revered when seen as a deity and otherworldly, but these attributes, as Giovanini points out, place women not as objects in their "own rights" (Ibid) but rather as a description of what is good and holy, not human. Therefore, by applying this to human women, there is a denial of a woman's *Mitsein*, "that is, the community where each individual can freely recognize the other and enter reciprocal relations" (Giovanini 2014, 41).

Beauvoir has been criticized for using this male-centered language in discussing the biology of female, and yet she has said later that this was her intention, i.e., "that the brutality of description of the female sex organs [...] is the result of her employing the language of men" (Tiukalo 2012, 80). I aimed to underscore just this point, to show how society thinks about the female and male bodies and makes us understand how degrading and violent the stereotypes ascribed to particular bodies are.

2.1.2. The Psychoanalytical Point of View

The second major point of view under critique stems from psychoanalysis (cf. anatomy is destiny). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, psychoanalysis is "a method of analyzing psychic phenomena and treating emotional disorders that involves treatment sessions during which the patient is encouraged to talk freely about personal experiences and especially about early childhood and dreams" (Merriam-Webster 2022). Beauvoir wants to

study and critique this doctrine, not to see how it helps us understand women— she believes there is too much bias in it to follow it— but rather, to see what assumptions have been made about women, their bodies, and their ways of thinking and how this has been one of the causes for their oppression. She starts by pointing out that “[n]ature does not define woman: it is she who defines herself by reclaiming nature for herself in her affectivity” (49). The female body does not ascribe psychological traits to a person, it is rather the values surrounding it that make one act according to it. Freud, the founder of this doctrine, has blurred the lines between the sexual and the genital as he said that, for young boys, the sexual realization comes from a single step in the genital development, whereas for young girls, there are two, i.e., vaginal and clitoral. He believes this creates less confusion in the young men’s development and thus, results in women’s complexity and frustration—he also calls it the castration complex, where the girl renounces her virile pretensions (51). This is where Beauvoir rejects Freud’s doctrine. She explains that Freud only thought about it from a masculine point of view. For example, he says that the girl deifies her father because she has a desire to seduce him. It is not because of the castration complex, but rather because of societal values and norms that apply to the patriarch as the head of the family and the social rank that men have that gives him authority (53). This once again, posits the central notion of my analysis that social norms and historical roles perpetuate these ideas that women and men act a certain way because of their bodies. The becoming of the young girl and the young boy, then, focuses solely on those physical and sexual aspects of a person. Beauvoir puts it this way:

Sexuality certainly plays a considerable role in human life [...] The existent is a sexed body, sexuality is thus always involved [...] For example, a young girl is said to be “ashamed” of urinating in a squatting position, with her bottom exposed; but what is shame? [...] Sexuality must not be taken as an irreducible given; the existent possesses a more primary “quest for being”; sexuality is only one of these aspects. (55)

Beauvoir reasserts that there is a significance to the sexed body, but that, as she always comes back to, it is a situation and not a predisposition to act a certain way. Furthermore, she goes against the psychoanalytical rejection of choice and that solely the unconscious would

be the only thing to explain one's actions. For her, it is life that influences, not the opposite. Women's consciousness is found "within the society of which she is a member" (58). Beauvoir makes two distinctions as to why she rejects—although not entirely—the psychoanalytic point of view. These are, first, to not limit oneself to take sexuality as a given (since most of the study was based on male libido) and that, second, women need to be situated within societal values and norms which affect their freedom and roles (58-59). Beauvoir rejects this theory on which is based the duality of the feminine vs the virile and upon which women's alienation is perpetuated. Indeed, woman is stuck in this alienation: "[...] to play at being a man will be a recipe for failure; but to play at being a woman is also a trap: being a woman would mean being an object, the Other; and at the heart of its abdication, the Other remains a subject" (60). By understanding this, we can see that the situation of the man is always singular and thus, anchored in his body, present in it, and ready to transcend itself and be accomplished.

2.1.3. The Point of View of Historical Materialism

The theory of materialism in "The Point of View of Historical Materialism" is the one Beauvoir criticizes the least, as it is closer to her point of view than the two chapters we explored earlier. She underlines woman's body as a situation: "Humanity is not an animal species: it is a historical reality. Human society is an anti-physis: it does not passively submit to the presence of nature, but rather appropriates it" (62). Therefore, how humans have taken on nature and made it their own to exploit it is a central idea. This is how the bridge between sexed bodies can be understood too, as with private property and economic oppression, women's bodies became commodities and properties to be exploited and used (63). Although this all makes sense for Beauvoir, she still believes there is an aspect that is missing from the theory and that is that there is no way to pinpoint the start of women's oppression. Yet, there is something we must keep in mind for the rest of this exploration in respect to the Subject

Formation of young men and young girls and that is, that there has always been, in humans' consciousness, this idea of the Other (66). Therefore, Beauvoir rejects Freud's sexual monism and Engels' economic monism for the same reasons; the sexual life, the body and technology exist for men, thus putting certain values as the norm and those that physically cannot portray them (women) are 'Othered' and thus cannot access transcendence themselves in a world where their own characteristics are devalued and rejected: "The value of muscular strength, the phallus, and the tool can only be defined in a world of values: it is driven by the fundamental project of the existent transcending itself toward being" (68). Coming back to this idea of the situation, there is something Beauvoir does not mention but is important to understand. It is that one's situation can be physically the same but different in perspectives.

Knowles argues accordingly:

Moreover, two people may be in the same physical environment, but occupy very different situations. For example, a woman walking down a street may feel threatened, or find herself constantly having to dodge out of other people's way, whereas a man walking down the same street may stride confidently along the pavement without having any of these experiences. Our situation describes the particular way in which we are opened onto the world [...]. (Knowles 2019, 245)

This situation is also that women are shown to understand because of the body they are born in. They learn to be afraid of a certain environment precisely because this body could be, or has already been, subjected to male violence, even though the said environment is not, *per se*, dangerous.

2.2. Beauvoir and The Sexes' Development

2.2.1. The Girl

In the chapter "The Girl," Beauvoir's discussion of the evolution of the young girl centers on the point that during adolescence there emerges a crisis the young girl must face. She compares this to the young boys and the crisis that they do not go through. The crisis and trauma that confronts the young girl entails that she can have her freedom repressed, thus

eventually resulting in the fear of breakdown, the duality of wanting to be an autonomous being without being able to. The social roles that are presented during adolescence teach the young man to consider the girl as Other. Now, before explaining this chapter, I want to show that this perspective will be focused on cis-men rather than cis-women. That is, I want to emphasize that the way young boys (who identify with their birth sex) are taught to grow up as cis-men encourages gender roles and violence towards women (that is, trans-women, cis-women and non-binary people with female bodies). Unfortunately, most societies are still deeply rooted in raising children in a binary manner of understanding one's 'role' in society and needing to identify with the sexed body they are born into. There is a triadic structure at work in Beauvoir's description of women's experience —as sexual objects. Three events, where harm and violence are done to the girl or adult woman, are as follows: first, the rupture with the past, second, the annexing into a man's world, and third, the temporality of waiting (Simons 2018, 92). These coincide with the three major phases in the becoming of a woman, i.e., girlhood, heterosexual initiation, and marriage (Simons 2018, 92).

Through childhood, girls are still grasping themselves as autonomous beings. It is during adolescence that girls are taught that their social role is to be submissive to men and *vice-versa*, the young boy is taught to see women as inferior. The young boy has no other focus than himself and his life, the young girl is taught to wait for a man, “[...] her youth is consumed by waiting. She is waiting for Man” (341). This does not mean that the young boy is not dreaming of the girl, but his future does not depend on her, he is not taught, contrary to girls, to see the latter as his savior, and certainly not his equal. Throughout both their childhood, they have been taught that male superiority is real. Beauvoir says that “[...] this male prestige is not just a childish mirage; it has economic and social foundations; men are, without question, the masters of the world; everything convinces the adolescent girl that it is in her interest to be their vassal” (343). Growing up in an environment where men are praised

and applauded cannot do other than perpetuate this cycle of Self vs Other. Beauvoir explains that the girl sees that she is Other to man, as he is for her, but the boy sees this Other as inessential, whereas the girl is taught to see him as essential to her. At around the age of thirteen, boys are socialized to be violent, aggressive and assert themselves in the world through force. They are encouraged to develop their will for power (343). Girls, on the contrary, are taught to repress this aggressiveness that would be helpful in the world. The unlimited access to, even encouragement for, violence that young boys receive reinforces that this is a tool that they can and must use to assert their presence in the world. “In particular, the attitude of defiance, so important for boys, is unknown to [girls] [...]. Climbing higher than a friend or getting the better in arm wrestling is affirming one’s sovereignty over the world. [...] Undoubtedly, in the adult world brute force plays no great role in normal time; but it nonetheless haunts the world” (Beauvoir 2011, 343). Violence is so easily accessible for men that using it becomes a form of everyday action. This is not to say that all men use violence, but that growing up and being socialized into knowing that violence is always accessible to them, reinforces the fact that they can use it to assert their presence in the world. She continues: “it is enough for the man to feel in his fists his will for self-affirmation for him to feel confirmed in his sovereignty” (343).

An important part Beauvoir singles out is that “the male has recourse to his fists and fighting when he encounters any affront or attempt to reduce him to an object: he does not let himself be transcended by others; he finds himself again in the heart of subjectivity” (343). The fact that violence is rooted in the boy’s education and raising into the world constitutes a threat to women as he is rewarded for asserting himself violently to anyone who he believes reduces him to an object in the world.

Thus, this notion of the accessibility of violence is crucial to understand in Beauvoir’s explanation of the young man and girl because it shows that the former “has the impression

of actively confirming [the world and the questions in it] when he accepts it” (344). This gives him the opportunity to be convinced he has power over the decisions taken in his life, as well as in others’ lives because he can always resort to violence, and he feels it in his body. The notion of feeling this immediate power in his body is also central because it confirms to the young boy that the body (and what it entails, such as brute force and physical strength), has importance in the world and thus, that if one is physically weaker, they are inferior to the one that is stronger. This will inevitably lead to an imbalance in relations, as it is socially accepted that the physically stronger is the dominant party. Again, Beauvoir confirms that “[o]ne needs only to see the importance that young men give to their muscles to understand that every subject grasps his body as his objective expression” (344). But she believes that if the young girls had the opportunity, when younger, to assert themselves in the world with their body and by playing rough, they would have the same superiority complex as the young men. The latter, seeing this, believe that they are the only ones for whom using brute force is acceptable, and even, rewarded. During her adolescence, the young girl is taught that, even if she likes sports or any other physical activities like her male friends, she must be “woman as well” (346). This shows that men are understood as humans, whereas women are female humans, they need to portray their “female characteristics” in order to have a place in a man's world. An example of this is that humanity is known as mankind or when one discusses human beings, they say men. Thus, young men, once again, understand themselves as essential and powerful, the world revolves around them, they are the world. It is not the lack of similar opportunities that creates the future of the boy or the girl but rather how these opportunities are apprehended and understood for the sexes. Levy explains:

Children, both girls and boys, are initially open to the world and are capable of freely acting in and on it. However, society gradually restricts girls’ natural openness to the world, limits their sense of freedom, and ultimately diminishes their desire to explore the world and its limits with their bodies. When freedom is compromised, it is not due to the child’s incapability of exercising it, but due to society’s continuous efforts to limit the opportunities (and ultimately desire) for exploring freedom. (Levy 2016, 151)

Since the roles are already attributed to particular bodies, the child's development is altered depending in which body it is born into and what the cultural and social norms surrounding it are. Although this constricted freedom changes through adolescence, as teenagers are prone to rebellion, the norms that have been engrained throughout childhood remain present in the young adult's actions (Levy 2016, 153).

Beauvoir understands that the gender roles are imposed on the adolescents during their development. I advance this point further: enforced gender roles normalize violence against women. Indeed, Beauvoir says “[a] young man's venture into existence is relatively easy, as his vocation of human being and male are not contradictory [...]. It is accomplishing himself as independence and freedom that he acquires his social value and, concurrently, his manly prestige [...].” (346). The young man is glorified for affirming his presence in the world and being free. He is socialized to be independent and those are the ways he acquires his meaning as ‘man’, it is the way society confirms to him that he is essential and prestigious. To be submissive to anyone would throw off his manly character and reduce him to be Other. The girl wants this freedom as well, she was attracted to it, like the young boy, since childhood, but the gender roles that society pushes her towards create a conflict for her. “[A] conflict breaks out between her originary claim to be subject, activity and freedom [...] and [...] the social pressure to assume herself as passive object. [...] she is still suspended between the moment of childish independence and that of feminine submission [...].” (346). The girl still wants to be free, but the gender roles in her socialization push her to deny it. On the contrary, the young man is pushed to embrace his freedom and to demand submission from the world, as a way to confirm himself. Still on the subject of violence, heterosexual intercourse involves violence, whereas the homosexual relation (between two women) “[...] is generally without violence; homosexual embraces involve neither defloration nor penetration” (358).

Again, violence is expected when a man is in a relationship with a woman, as a norm. Heterosexual intercourse glorifies violence towards women as a form of pleasure, but also that women should submit to male violence and accept it, even appreciate it. “[...] Hollywood films have hundreds of times presented *enfants terribles* [i.e., women who do not conform to stereotypical submissive femininity] tamed by the healthy brutality of a lover or husband: a couple of slaps, even a good spanking, seem to be a good means of seduction” (363). Young boys are taught (here through films and entertainment) that their role is to control their partner’s behavior and that violence and force are the ways to do it effectively. Being socialized to inflict this form of oppressive control over a female partner becomes normalized for young men. Throughout her formation, woman is also in a constant situation of ambiguity because she is both a young girl but also a woman in becoming; “[t]his means that the girl is always becoming girl, having been a child, and becoming woman” (Mitchell 2017, 263). This situation puts her in an uncomfortable situation of always aiming to transcend oneself, while remaining in the same place at the same time. This creates a confusion that no human being can live through in order to achieve freedom and transcendence. The girl is a woman in waiting. “As a waiting, as steeped in the present, a woman lives herself as a body-subject as temporally confined” (Burke 2018, 122). This confines her to living in immanence rather than transcendence because, for Beauvoir, woman “is positioned in time through her relation to men [and it] underscores that being anchored “in time” is the temporal dimension of objectification and subordination” (Burke 2018, 122).

Coming back to the idea of male superiority that is instilled in young men, Beauvoir concludes that “[h]is superiority idealizes the love that the girl brings to him: it is not only because he is male that she wants to give herself to him, it is because he is *this elite being*” (361). The idea that men have to be prestigious, superior, and dominant in order to have

women worship them, or, for women to show interest in them, reinforces once again that the man needs to show strength and dominance over women to be accepted as a ‘real man’.

2.2.2. The Woman in Love

“Woman in Love” is the chapter in which Beauvoir advances the idea of the roles that women are socialized to have in a relationship compared to the one that men are socialized to have, so that it can be clear that this socialization of the heterosexual couple reinforces the stereotypes of male dominance versus female submissiveness. This socialization is not a law of nature or an intrinsic feeling that women and men in love have, it is due to their situation in the world (683). By that, she means that since men grasp themselves as Subjects in the world, they do not want to be doomed to immanence, thus expect women to have this role (684). There is also an interesting point to draw attention to, women remaining children forever. Women are socialized to remain youthful, while men are encouraged to mature. In a relation, this reinforces the problematic of violence and dominance as it portrays a relation of unequal power dynamic, since a mature/adult person necessarily has power over the child. “You look like a little girl” (686) is a compliment that men give to women.

We know all the examples of women being forced by society into believing that remaining youthful will make them more attractive to men (either by shaving, getting cosmetic procedures, or even being a ‘virgin’). The woman’s perspective is highlighted, i.e., saying that her dream is to “become a child again in the arms of a man” (686). In contrast, the fact that men are therefore socialized into thinking women are dependable on them, like children, and thus, that they have the power in the relationship, they are the dominant one.

2.2.3. Sexual Alienation

The next important point to consider is women’s alienation through sexuality. Heterosexual intercourse is often based in the passive/active and Beauvoir emphasizes this when

saying: “[...] the love act requires a woman’s profound alienation; she is awash in the indolence of passivity; eyes closed anonymous, lost, she feels transported by waves, caught up in torment, buried in torment [...]” (689). Having the active role in intercourse is yet another way that reinforces to men that they have the upper hand and are essential, while she is the object. Beauvoir notes that “[...] in providing her with sensuality, the man attaches her to him and does not liberate her [...]” (690). This is interesting as it shows that during heterosexual intercourse, the woman is rarely satisfied, and it is very much male pleasure centric. This, once again focusing solely on the man and his interests, reinforces that his needs above all are important and that woman and her body are means for him to get to his ends.

To summarize, she is not an end in herself, in his view, in the way he has been socialized. He has been socialized to use her. This leads to the next point, which is relevant to see that men’s socialization encourages violence against women. Beauvoir discusses the fact that women are a part of him. He is the Whole, she is a part attached to it, thus she belongs to him (this is what men are taught to believe as normal).

Masculine sexual desire as a longing for “domination”, she says that man seems “in revolt against his carnal state”, since the virile subject uses sex to assert his subjectivity at the expense of engaging a reciprocity that could recognize or illuminate his own embodied existence in its fleshly and vulnerable ambiguity. Instead, he projects these qualities onto his partner, thus incarnating her as the Inessential Other. (Singleton 2011, 463)

From their infancy to adulthood, men are constantly taught that women are dependent on them and that he is the free agent in the relationship. This means that men are not taught to think that women will leave them. They are taught to think women will always be theirs, thus jealousy is not an emotion they necessarily experience from the start, whereas women are taught that men can leave them anytime and they have to be careful to keep them.

Rather, Beauvoir believes that “[t]he man grasps the woman as being assimilated to him, in her immanence; [...] he cannot imagine that she too could be someone who slips away from him” (702). This implies that there is a sense of entitlement to women that men have, and that seems to be due to the fact that they have always been taught to focus on themselves

and that women will be theirs when they choose them. Since he grasps her to be assimilated to him, it is inconceivable that she would ever leave him, which shows that this entitlement is a threat for women. “Jealousy for him mainly appears derivative; when things go badly for him or when he feels threatened by life, he feels derided by his wife” (702). This passage is extremely important for my thesis as it shows that men, having been socialized to always have things under their control and to look, in front of women, as strong and powerful. That is the danger that society inflicts on women by raising men as infallible. If something threatens his masculinity (which is based on his dominance and control over life), he will act on the thing he was taught all his life to believe he has power over, his partner.

Finally, Beauvoir discusses authentic love, what it should be, and where society fails to raise young men that will enter in a relationship of authentic love. “Authentic love must be founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms; each lover would then experience himself as himself and as other; neither would abdicate his transcendence; they would not mutilate themselves [...]” (706). Beauvoir is describing an ideal, almost utopian relationship, because society teaches young people to understand that there is a dominant one in the relationship and a submissive one. Equal love is possible, but it is not the socialization that children and adolescents receive, “[...] it would only be the same for woman if she also existed essentially for-herself” (707). Women are raised to exist for men, and to exist for herself is an act of extreme rebellion in a world that values her solely based on her status with a man. Balzac wrote that “Woman is equal to man only in making her life a perpetual offering, as his is perpetual action” (708). Women are constantly reminded that without a man and without offering themselves to one, their lives are meaningless, but even with this meaning they are Other, not Self. There is a here a sense of a “vertical relationship” (Richardson-Self 2017, 259) understood as a natural subordination that is involved in heterosexual relationships. Richardson-

Self explains that men have projected their experiences as the ‘representative’ of humanity, and that our Western culture is therefore androcentric.

The sexual initiation for young girls and young boys is extremely relevant when discussing violence male against women as there is a clear link between violence and sexuality in heterosexual intercourse (passive/active, immanence/transcendence, dominant/submissive). I want to point out that sexuality, and how it is presented to young men and women, is understood as an act where male dominance and female submission is the norm. This reinforces the issue that men can resort to violence and have control over women and that it is socially normalized, even romanticized. Beauvoir starts the chapter with the following quote:

For man, the passage from childhood sexuality to maturity is relatively simple: erotic pleasure is objectified; [...] penis, hands, mouth, with his whole body, the man reaches out to his partner, but he remains at the heart of the activity, as the subject he manipulates; he projects himself toward the other without losing his autonomy; feminine flesh is a prey for him, and he seizes in woman the attributes his sensuality requires of any object. (383)

This passage reveals the very predicament in which young women are socialized into thinking their role is to be men’s Other, the inessential, the passive being with no way towards transcendence. Young men, on the other hand, are therefore socialized into thinking that women serve them a purpose and that without their own being, women will not be complete. The male body reaches out towards the world, and it never crosses his mind, because of how young men are socialized as Subject, that he could lose his autonomy or sense of Self. He is used to seeing himself as the center of any activity and to see women as a means that can make him get where he wants, but never as an end in herself. “The woman is penetrated and impregnated through the vagina; it becomes an erotic center uniquely through the intervention of the male [...]. In the past, a woman was snatched from her childhood universe and thrown into her life as a wife by real or simulated rape; this was an act of violence that changed the girl into a woman [...]” (384). Male violence towards women is so normalized that it becomes a rite of passage that young girls need to go through in order to become a

woman. Young men are therefore taught that, not only is their presence in women's lives indispensable, but also that they can exercise violence in sexuality and that it is a normal part of the intercourse. "To say he slept with a woman, a man says he 'possessed' her, that he 'had' her [...]" (386). Once again, the gender roles imposed on sexed bodies are reiterated and reinforced, even through language. Although there are many more important passages, I want to focus on this particular one:

[Talking about male discharge:] In any case, being the one who pollutes confers a dubious superiority. In fact, man's privileged situation comes from the integration of his biologically aggressive role into his social function of chief and master; [...] because man is sovereign in this world, he claims the violence of his desires as a sign of his sovereignty it is said of a man endowed with great erotic capacity that he is strong and powerful [...]. (387)

Because of the anatomical function of the male body, i.e., discharge and his erection, these are yet another way that encourages young men to think they are transcending themselves while the women remain passive (and thus in the same state of immanence). The female body is, once again, a means to an end and is considered as such by men since they were socialized in their adolescence and sexual initiation to see women as objects. Young men are taught that women's pleasure (and thus, her desire, needs and opinions) is inessential, but that theirs is valid and necessary. This creates an entitlement, i.e. to sex, but the latter escalates in all spheres of life, where men become entitled to everything surrounding women, even their lives. On this entitlement, Beauvoir believes that love could be dangerous and even lethal because of the social structures that surround heterosexual relationships (Gregoratto 2017, 138). By considering the normalization and romanticization of violence in man/woman couples, we can see that the preparation for it has been dictated throughout the whole of the man and the woman's becoming.

Conclusion

My central contention in this paper was that we cannot understand why violence against women exists and is trivialized without first undertaking the task of exploring the becoming of young girls and boys born in a situation, i.e., sexed body within a society. Beauvoir's relevance in this discussion was shown in a threefold manner. First, vulnerability is used and understood as a phenomenological experience that is always embodied, therefore making one open to precariousness. This precariousness must never go over one's integrity and must respect the boundaries of mutual recognition, otherwise becoming gratuitous violence. Second, Sonia Kruks' Beauvoir's Marxist materialism was fundamental to understand the foundation of violence against women, because there is a 'production' of women as inferior to men, which is not a given at birth, but rather inflicted upon as the result of a society focused on productivity through one's physical attributes. The life-structuring phenomenon that is living in a body must also be understood, and through trauma and a break, one will not realize it and will live an un-free life, which make one sex and the other stay in these specific 'feminine' and 'masculine' roles that inevitably lead to gendered violence. Finally, Beauvoir's relevance is shown with her use of Heidegger's thrownness. Human beings do not have knowledge of their freedom as they are always thrown into a situation, i.e., existence. Thus, the body of a woman does not make her oppression, but the society, norms and values in which she lives in, i.e., her situation, impose on her body and the male body, different roles and expectations. I have explained that to understand the root of male violence against women, one must look at the Subject formation that young boys and young girls receive in their early years. Indeed, in support of the validity of my hypothesis I have shown three major arguments from Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In order to understand where male violence against women is first formed, we must investigate Beauvoir's existential understanding of the Subject's becoming. I explored how Beauvoir's existential notion of the Other could lead

us to see that violence against women is deeply rooted in the boys versus the girls' becoming in the world. From the beginning of women's lives, their first sexual experiences and the dynamics encouraged in heterosexual relationships, dominance in males and submission in females is the norm, thus making violence accessible for men to use on women.

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Endnotes

¹ My wording throughout this paper will be compliant with cis-gender traditional understanding of sex assignment at birth. As sexual identity is not the focus of this research, I will be referring to men as male and women as female, to highlight the superficial importance that society gives to the sexed bodies and to see how it correlates with the stereotypes that perpetuate male violence against women.

² Being-With is the character of Dasein since it is always already related to other Daseins (even when one is alone and others are actually absent) (Moran 2021, 111)

³ Beauvoir uses Heidegger's Mitsein to present the vulnerability that comes with having a body that is open to violence, but that this very violence breaks the bond that exists between mutually respecting Being-with-Others, i.e., Mitsein.

⁴ In Kruks' text, she discusses the idea that Beauvoir has compared the bodily experience of women and of aging bodies in a similar way, as they have been deemed less relevant by capitalist societies.

⁵ In her essay "Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger"