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Rafia Khan

Batch RWP-078

'One is not born a woman, but becomes one' - Simone de Beauvoir

OUTLINE

i) Introduction

- a) Hook
- b) Background
- c) Thesis Statement

ii) Gender: A social construct

- a) Nature vs Nurture debate in gender studies
- b) How biological categories of male/female become social categories of man/woman.

iii) 'Gender is performative' - Judith Butler

- a) One does not have a gender rather one does gender.
- b) Believing gender norms and engaging in practices that map onto those norms.
- c) Gender is a process, not a state.

iv) Tabula Rasa - A Blank slate

- a) Diminishes the idea of innate qualities
- b) Knowledge/Ideas are derived through experience

v) What is a woman

- a) Woman defined in relation to a man
- b) The concept of otherness by Simone de Beauvoir

(vi) How Beauvoir influenced the second wave of feminism.

- a) 'The Second Sex' came out in 1949 and radicalized the feminists of that time.
- b) Moving beyond suffrage to analyze societal structures.
- c) Provided philosophical tools and language to address inequality.

vii) Defying the norms and expectations of becoming a woman.

- a) Breaking gender stereotypes
- b) Bringing out more neutrality in society

viii) Conclusion

ESSAY

"She will be her father's little princess"

A sentence often heard at the birth of a girl - already putting certain expectations on the new born. When a baby is born, they are wrapped in a cloak of supposition of how they will act and how they will be acted towards, based on their gender.

The statement that one is not born but rather becomes a woman carries the essence of social construction - gender is not a natural phenomenon but is nurtured. It is the experience of a woman that makes her a woman not that she was born with certain traits. One of the first divisions we experience is that of gender - learning we are male or female. Both have expectations of certain behaviours that are to be embodied to fit in one's gender box. Women are expected to be calm, gentle and nurturing and this expectation leads them to adopt such traits and behaviours. While, deviance from gender norms leads to stigmatization. This social construction is not done on a conscious level rather it is so internalized that one can not recognise that they are continuously performing their gender. An infant does not come into the world with the knowledge of their gender but learn how to become a man or a woman through society's internalized beliefs and expectations attached to their sex.

The Nature vs Nurture debate has been ongoing for a few decades now. Is it natural for a woman to love shopping

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and for a man to love watching sports? Or is it social construction that makes them behave similarly to their gender? Analyzing both possibilities one can not help but agree with the 'nurture' side of the debate because if these behaviours were natural, they do not explain why a great number of deviations exist. There exist girls who do not 'act' like their gender and are branded as 'tomboys'. Similar is the case with men who are then stigmatized. The reason behind this is that gender like culture is a human production that depends on everyone constantly behaving like their assigned gender.

However, the natural part does exist and it is the biological category of male and female. Sex (biological) and gender (social construct) are two different things and it is through acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity that biological categories of male/female become social categories of men/women. Through a mixture of cultural norms, historical formations, family influence and psychic realities, a female learns how to be a woman.

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Judith Butler's book 'Gender Trouble' discusses how gender is performative aligning with the Simone de Beauvoir's concept of learning gender. It is not that one HAS a gender rather one DOES gender. It can be argued that a woman is not simply ^{is} but ^{is} performing or doing her gender through stylized, repeated behaviors that are expected of her. Wearing a dress and jewellery aligns with feminine attributes and by doing that she is engaging in a practice that maps onto her gender norms. So, that leads to the conclusion that gender is not a state but a process that is ongoing at all times.

Moreover, the internalized belief that men and women are different is what makes them behave in different ways.

This difference comes in the form of gender roles, the concept of masculinity and femininity and the attributes associated with them. There are different attitudes towards different genders and different attitudes expected from them which pushes them to act or behave according to their gender. This explains why a mother who is not caring is looked down upon while a father of similar

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nature is not. Men are expected to be strong, tough and not quite emotional while women are thought of as nurturing, caring and emotionally available. The expectations build gender norms and then ultimately the notion of man and woman itself.

While some philosophers like Plato believed in innate knowledge and qualities - John Locke contradicts it with his philosophy of 'Tabula rasa'. His beliefs that a human being is born with an empty mind like that of a blank slate supports the idea of social construction of gender. A baby girl born into the world does not know that she is to be caring, polite and submissive, it is the conditioning and construction of her mind that make her into such a person. This stands for the view that knowledge or ideas are derived through experiences that we internalize. This experience defines what it is to be a woman.

Furthermore, who decides what is a woman has been a question of rhetoric in the feminist literature for a long time now. Since, Beauvoir claims that one is not born but rather becomes a

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woman, she has also spoken about what is a woman and how she is defined - through her counterpart in relation to man himself.

"Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself but in relation to himself." - Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex)

It can be argued that a woman has no autonomy and what it is to be a woman is also decided by man. 'Humanity is male' highlights the concept of othering of the female gender where man is seen as the default and a woman - the other gender. From this perspective, it can be said that when a woman learns to be a woman, she is doing so from a man's perspective of what a woman is, since he defines her in relation to himself and not in herself.

These ideas expressed by Beauvoir influenced the second wave of feminism by radicalising the feminists of that time. Questions about the social structure and construction of ideas began taking form, moving beyond the woman's suffrage. Beauvoir provided philosophical tools and language to address the inequality of

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gender and how it is formed. It can be argued that the text 'The Second Sex' ~~talked~~ picked at the root of the problem by addressing social constructionism of gender and how women are considered the other or the inferior one in the binary.

Through progression of such ideas, defiance of performing gender roles has popularized. The concepts of femininity and masculinity are challenged, leading to a more post-modern feminism. Neutrality is adopted in spite of gender binary. Uni-sex baby clothes, men and women working same jobs and changing of gender roles is what these ideas have led to.

In conclusion, it can be said that as previously believed gender to be natural has been proved incorrect through sound philosophical ideas like that of social construction. Being a woman is not a state rather a process that is always ongoing and it is only through shared experience that one learns how to be a woman. Simone de Beauvoir perfectly summed up the notion of social construction, behaviour and norms expected of a woman to become a woman.