

One of the most prominent feminists de Beauvoir profoundly influenced was Shulamith Firestone, who dedicated her masterpiece, *Dialectic of sex* (1972) to her "who persists." For Firestone, Beauvoir got it right in proclaiming that women's biology ties them to domestic sphere, making it impossible to be free. Firestone argues that biology itself—procreation—is the origin of dualism. However, she went farther than de Beauvoir in claiming that "women were the slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business of the world" (1972, p. 192). Sex class, unlike economic class, sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women are created different and not equal. The difference lies in pregnancy, which she believes, is "barbaric," and the only way to escape "fundamental biological conditions" and the "tyranny of the biological family" is to use reproductive technology to eliminate sex/gender differences. She also sees productive technology as a liberating force that frees men and women from useless toil. Firestone looks forward to "cybernetic" communism that will abolish economic classes and all forms of labor exploitation, by granting all people a livelihood based only on material needs (1972, p. 224).

#### *Gynocentric Feminism*

A feminist reclaiming of the mother's womb begins fittingly with an homage to de Beauvoir. Her feminism is one that advocates freedom and autonomy, via a flight from the body. The body is understood as a shackle, a chain one needs to free oneself from. It limits freedom, by its materiality, its corporeality, and its being *given*. More importantly, the body has been understood as a justification of the naturalness of the sexual division of labor, which in turn, gives credence to the productive/reproductive labor divide. Thus, to be identified with reproductivity (menstruation, pregnancy, lactation) is to set oneself up for continuing oppression and otherness.

As a penultimate representative of early second wave feminism which emphasized women's liberation as a symbolic severance from the womb, de Beauvoir drew criticism from later feminists who argue that on the contrary, women benefit greatly from celebrating the body, the womb included. This view marked a movement toward the healing of the body, which had been much maligned and ravished not only by men but alas, by feminists as well. Iris Marion Young, a staunch advocate of *gynocentric* or woman-centered feminism, notes that by portraying women as victims, as forever objects if they fail to achieve transcendence (from being identified with body), de Beauvoir failed to highlight the value of women's work that has provided lasting caring social values to an otherwise mutilated and selfish world inhabited by men. Likewise, by defining women's oppression

as the confinement and mutilation of women's possibilities by their efforts to be pleasing and deferential to men, de Beauvoir undeniably exalted masculinist culture by prescribing the denial of femininity as liberation for women.<sup>4</sup> This is evident in her pronouncement that "pregnancy is an ordeal"<sup>5</sup> which, according to Young, was understood by de Beauvoir as acquiescence to patriarchal control against individuation and freedom.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, there is much to celebrate in the claim that women's embodied experience is superior, and therefore the only reference point with which women can break the silence of subjugation. And in doing so, they allow a new spring to burst through for embodied women who are absolutely fearless.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, for Nancy Hartsock, one of the earliest advocates of feminist standpoint theory, the experience of menstruation, coitus, pregnancy and lactation, which challenges body boundaries, gives women a greater experience of continuity with nature which men do not have. Women's labor in caring for men and children and in producing basic values in the home, gives them more rootedness and a more basic understanding of life processes than men.<sup>8</sup>

For Irene Diamond, feminist discourse is primarily focused on the sexed openings of the body.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately such discourse highlights both the loathing and worship women feel with regard to those parts that form the locus of their being female. Susan Griffin illustrates this dilemma through a conversation:

<sup>4</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like a Girl And Other Essays In Feminist Philosophy And Social Theory* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 559 as cited in Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 78.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Some ecofeminists for instance celebrate the relationship between women and nature through the popularization of ancient rituals centered on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system. This prehistoric era, centered on goddess worship, was dethroned by an emerging patriarchal culture which male gods to whom the female deities were subservient. Nature was further degraded by the scientific revolution of the 17th century that replaced the nurturing earth with the "metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from outside... The earth is to be dominated by male-developed and -controlled technology, science and industry." See Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: Revolutionary Thought/Radical Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 191 and Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990). [Ed: this is a content footnote and can be retained here. But numbered 1 in the text and as footnote. Source citations can be reduced to short forms, See Merchant, 1992, pp 191 and Daly, 1990]

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983) appendix 2, as cited in Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Irene Diamond and David Sordenberg, "Sensuous Minds and The Possibilities of Jewish Ecofeminist Practice," in *The Sacred Earth*, ed. Roger S. Goettlieb (New York: Routledge, 2004), 438-448.