

## **Meaning of Human Existence and Experience Thinking through Beauvoir and Butler**

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### **Abstract:**

The conceptualizations on meanings of existence started with the ontological or metaphysical debates in philosophy. Then at the peak of modern times, the school of existentialism dealt with the issue of human existence particularly by citing individual freedom. In all these series of philosophizing, the human being was considered as a singular type entity who thinks and acts in the same way. So, the historical development of philosophical thinking has not brought enough solutions, with regard to the existential issues of human females and other genders. It is through the end of the modern period only, the identities of caste, class, religion, region, ethnicity, gender etc. were taken into serious scrutiny to see the intersectional issues while conceptualizing the ontic status of humans.

This article is a look at these aspects of philosophizing in general, and in particular, it analyses the issues of gendered experiences of human beings in cultures. This will lead to examining the meanings of existence for women as a category with reference to the modern writings of Simone de Beauvoir. The possible existence of many genders and the issues in conceiving an essentialist category called woman or man, are being scrutinized in this article through the postmodern writings of Judith Butler. To analyze the experience of genders, this study draws references from various feminist philosophical standpoints and concentrates on the existentialist phenomenological writings of Simone de Beauvoir and the deontological phenomenology of Judith Butler.

**Key Words:** *existence, experience, meaning, deontology, gender, Butler, Beauvoir*

## **I Introduction**

The seemingly rational philosophizing and praxis, of thinkers who still cling very much to the binary oppositional categories of modern realities, entail the emergency for raising a sincere phenomenological approach that would incorporate postmodernist theorizations. The existential issues faced by human beings due to their attempts to find the meaning of life experiences are always a topic of interest in philosophy. But the historical development of metaphysical thinking in the East and the West has not brought any solution in the realm of philosophizing or praxis, concerning the existential issues of the human female and other genders. The modern rationalization and metaphysical philosophizing of dichotomous realities in existence, have only helped to concretely put the inequalities and hierarchies into praxis at a deeper level. How the meanings of existence according to a human female in the patriarchal society would vary from that of a male human being who is privileged by birth, has never been under discussion in the history of philosophizing. The philosophical writings of Simone de Beauvoir in the modern context and of Judith Butler in the postmodern context would give us an insightful analysis of the varied meanings of the existence of human females and other genders than that named male. Despite questioning the binaries of human existence as male and female, their analyses of internally constituted unidentified discriminations in the experiences of female entities that have been collectively consolidated by patriarchal propositions of male-centred ideas all through history, would bring out the phenomenological enquiries of meanings of existence.

Surprisingly, we do not find any female names from the time of initial thinkers in the history of philosophy. That fact itself gives the proof needed to understand that the experiences and meanings of existence for other human beings than male entities, were never counted in philosophizing. From the plethora of philosophers and philosophical systems developed all over the world through the ages, we cannot find

any philosophy developed by women thinkers being taught and quoted. Other than Hypatia of Alexandria in ancient times and later Simone de Beauvoir in Modern times we do not find more names of women cited in philosophy, until the time of philosophers such as Judith Butler. Even those names were taken only recently into the academic discussion in philosophy. Why can't we get the names of any women or other genders than male humans as philosophers, is a question that could be raised concerning Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. It is in the mid-twentieth century only the experiences of women were elaborately described by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), in a way to smash the male-centred philosophizing of life. It is a phenomenological and existential account of the meaning that is elicited from the lifeworld of a human female. The book was the first of its kind to have such philosophical treatment in the discussion of the meanings of female existence. While it was published in 1949, it was not very well accepted by the philosophers of her time including her cohabitor/life partner Jean-Paul Sartre. The book got an enormous amount of attention among feminists and it was only later it received acceptance among some philosophers. Beauvoir was exactly saying in an interview that she was not protesting with the book, but she was describing the women's lifeworld situations and the meanings they attach to life. From the approach of describing, it turns to be the best phenomenological work that Beauvoir did for understanding women's thoughts philosophically. It was a historical juncture where philosophy didn't emancipate itself from the metaphysical pitfalls and modern rationality that trapped them in dichotomies. Though existentialism and the philosophy of language helped the philosophers to think differently, they were not capable to apply these philosophies in a favourable way to solve the issues of inequality and oppression between people. It is evidently due to the false perceptions of human relations based on the existing modern forms of binary oppositional conceptions on ethical or virtuous praxis of freedom, will, power, love, care etc. The existentialist

'I' always remained as the "masculine 'I'", and the philosophical language also proved to be an imitation of male-centered mainstream language. Simone de Beauvoir raised this discussion among philosophers, by describing women's thoughts to make a question of whether the existence of female humans has to be secondary, to get defined and taught by men about the whole meaning of life and lifeworld experiences. She also gives a reason for giving this title second sex for the book, as transgenders, gays, lesbians etc. were addressed as the third sex during those days in France. And so, she thought the meaning of second sex may refer to women according to the existing socio-cultural norms that subordinated women to men.

Beauvoir brings out criticisms of various philosophical schools and thinkers, who were eventually misogynistic in their perspectives and praxis. Being affiliated with the existentialist school she raised her issues with Sartre and other existentialists too, by introducing an account of female existence and the meanings that the women ascribe to them. It is mandatory to ask the question of whether existence precedes essence, as believed by existentialists during modern times. The phenomenological schools and the postmodern thought systems have indirectly initiated the questions on existentialist claims by Sartre that would put existence on a preceding stage to essence. The claim that the ontic status as 'I' would be existing before anything and everything, will not stand anymore while we look at the experiential meanings that the 'I' elicit from the lifeworld. Many philosophical arguments would hold the position that the individual 'I' cannot exist without being culturally embedded or socially influenced or constructed. The issues of identity and subjectivity are being discussed through this line to understand the ontological issues and empirical elements of life. If we look at the historical juncture where the individual 'I' was taken as important to discuss the existence of the individual as prominent, the metaphysical abstractions were nullified. It is relevant to see this turn in philosophizing after long-stretched modern and ancient metaphysical

enterprises. At the same time, we have to notice that some of the existentialist arguments were contradictory in themselves. While the existentialists gave importance to the individual and his/her life, they tried to define the individual as existing independent of the social or cultural. It is meaningless to say that nothing as social or cultural/religious would not affect the independent 'I' before the individual has selected them to be part of her/his/their identity. The fact is that the individual is not a void but was already formed through cultural and social inscriptions. Without the consciousness of anything cultural or social, the individual cannot exist as an individual. This contradiction involved in the Sartrean existentialist claim could be addressed with various succeeding philosophies.

Judith Butler is vehemently addressing this issue though for discussing the idea and the term gender, its meanings and the issues around it. Sex and gender are even culturally inscribed in a human being from the moment of birth by announcing it as 'a girl' or 'a boy'. With this theory of embeddedness or situatedness in the culture, religion community, language, region etc. into which a human body is being born, we could also understand that the individual 'I' (like a body or living mind) cannot exist with any meaning to imbibe some essence to attach to it. "Consider that the use of language is itself enabled by first having been called a name, the occupation of the name is that by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse. This 'I', which is produced through the accumulation and convergence of such 'calls', cannot extract itself from the historicity of that chain or raise itself and confront that chain as if it were an object opposed to me, which is not me, but only what others have made of me; for that estrangement or division produced by the mesh of interpellating calls and the 'I' who is its site is not only violating but enabling as well, what Gayatri Spivak refers to as 'an enabling violation'. The 'I' who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further, the 'I' draws what is called its

‘agency’ in part through being implicated in the very relations of power that it seeks to oppose.” (Butler 1993(2022):82,83). Butler is talking about the kind of phenomenological bracketing of ‘I’ to assert that the bracketing of the ‘I’ may be very crucial to thinking through the constitutive ambivalence of being socially constituted, where ‘constitution’ carries both the enabling and violating sense of ‘subjection’. “If one comes into discursive life through being called or hailed injurious terms, how might one occupy the interpellation by which one is already occupied to direct the possibilities of resignation against the aims of violation?” (Butler 1993(2022): 83). Butler continues to discuss the questions of appropriation in gender relations of power, within oneself and with others, to elicit the meanings of the existence of an ‘I’ and its existential ‘Other’. Though there are many aspects raised by feminist theorization about the issues of ‘Othering’, Butler opens still more layers of the existential Other.

The existential issues faced by human beings due to their attempts to find the meaning of life experiences are always a topic of interest in philosophy. The conceptualizations on existence start with the ontological and metaphysical debates. Then at the peak of modern times, the school of existentialism dealt with the issue of human existence in a particular way by citing the individual and her/his/their freedom. In all the series of processes in philosophizing, human beings were considered as a singular type species who can think and act the same way. But the sociocultural embeddedness of these human entities and the issues of intersectionality was not taken into consideration in the modes of modern philosophizing while it worked with binaries of realities. It is through the end of the modern period only, the identities of caste, class, religion, region, ethnicity, gender etc. were taken into serious scrutiny to see the intersectional issues while we conceptualize the ontic status of humans. A detailed look at the issues of gendered experiences of human beings in cultures and the meanings they attach to their lifeworld and existence will lead to analysing the meanings of

the existence of women as a category in this article. It is done with reference to the modern writings of Simone de Beauvoir, especially the book named *The Second Sex*. The possible existence of many genders and the issues in conceiving an essentialist category called woman or man are being analyzed in this article through the postmodern writings of Judith Butler. To analyze the meaning of existence in terms of gender, this article brings out the mode of deontological philosophy in Butler's works. The existence and experience of genders, that are discussed in this study would draw more references from Butler's book named, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Thus, we could derive an existentialist phenomenological approach in the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and a deontological phenomenology in the philosophy of Judith Butler, to understand gender issues in-depth to enable the better praxis of theories of human existence.

## **II Existence and Experience of Women: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Phenomenology**

The existentialist phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, would bring out the analysis of women's experiences and the meaning they attach to their existence. In the first volume of the book, Beauvoir goes through the major roles played by social theories, philosophies and literature, in defining human existence and experiences solely as male-centred. In the second volume, she describes the experiences of a woman through the ontological status at the life-world stages of experiencing to be a girl, young woman, married woman, old woman, lover woman, lesbian woman, narcissist woman etc. In this description, she reveals the contradiction between the meanings that a woman ascribes to her existence, and that is imposed on her by the social norms of patriarchy. Both volumes comprising more than seven hundred pages are devoted in a way to analysing the ways in which the male subject would define the female object as 'the other' in theory and praxis. The descriptions of female experiences in

Beauvoir's book lead to a reading that, the male theories are claiming rationality to view or treat woman equally as the Other, seem to be unaware of how humans could be other to themselves, and how the 'self and other' discussion could go in many layers. The gendered aspects in the 'self and other' philosophy are possible with feminist theoretical perspectives, and thus the othering process is seen as complicated in its very theory and praxis level itself. "While the prerogative of speaking for others remains unquestioned in the citadels of colonial administration, among activists and in the academy, it elicits a growing unease and, in some communities of discourse, it is being rejected. There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others---even for other women---is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate. Feminist scholarship has a liberatory agenda which almost requires that women scholars speak on behalf of other women, and yet the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, sexuality, and power are becoming increasingly clear to all." (Alcoff,1995). But still, most of the gender-sensitive claims of male-subjective theory and praxis are to be scrutinized, for their inadequacy in understanding how a woman would find it all as meaningless to her subjective views on ontology and epistemology.

For Beauvoir, the ontological question about the meaning of human existence is similar to the phenomenological question regarding the lived experiences of humans (Linsenbard,1999). She endorses the phenomenological notion of the body as lived experience with reference to Merleau-Ponty's accounts in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and holds the position that human existence is lived experience (Arp, 1995). She rejects the Cartesian dualism to oppose binaries of existential realities, residues of which are there in Sartre's early philosophy (Linsenbard,1999). The discussion about existence and essence is to be taken in a different direction to make sense of the meaning of the discussion of 'I' and 'self' of a human female, and that



task is being done in Beauvoir's existentialist phenomenology, which is often called by commentators as phenomenological existentialism. The problem of existence leads to the question of the autonomous/free 'I' or the 'Self' and who is it to choose anything. Sartre, unlike Beauvoir, accepts a Self but not an autonomous 'I' (Moser 1994:195). Beauvoir, on the other hand, does not entirely reject the autonomous 'I' and the autonomous will according to Moser. Even if life has an inexhaustible multiplicity of relationships with the world, it nevertheless possesses an inner heart, a centre of interiorisation, of *me* which asserts that it is always the same throughout the whole course. (Beauvoir 1977:10) (Moser, 1994: 194). If, due to Sartre one cannot say what a life 'is', one could nevertheless inquire as to what it forms, according to Moser. She quotes Beauvoir to pose the questions of existentialist free will and choice such as how is the interplay of self-determination and determination by others, the relationship of individual designs and societal prerogatives to be understood. Beauvoir would say,

“My life has been the fulfilment of a primary design; and at the same time it has been the product and the expression of the world in which it developed. That is why in telling it I have been able to speak of a great deal other than myself”. (Beauvoir,1977:40)

These existentialist thoughts on the Self and autonomous 'I' in Beauvoir extends to social situatedness of them from the debates of abstracts. “The analysis of the situation of the woman in *The Second Sex* shows, as we have seen, that the societal influence in ‘making oneself’ into a woman is very strong. The existentialist thesis of the free individual project, of the Making-Oneself-into-Something, is weakened by societal conditioning. Beauvoir consistently reiterates that the attempts of some single women to escape this conditioning are bound to fail. As much as a woman may try, there is no escape from the collective *situation* of the woman, except for a transformation of society by a “social evolution” (Beauvoir 725)”. (Moser, 1994: 195)

Beauvoir herself continuously emphasizes that her kind of different analysis in *The Second Sex* can only be understood if one takes into account existence as a whole (Moser, 1994 :193-194). To understand the woman on the level of the situation, may be possible, on the level of the body and identity. But according to Moser, one should not conceal the fact that these are mere abstractions and may be that is why Beauvoir argued that the value of muscular strength, of the phallus, of the tool can be defined only in a world of values and it is determined by the basic project through which the existent seeks transcendence (Beauvoir, 1989:60). The female human entities need to demand her freedom which is always situated against the historical, biological, legal, psychological, political, cultural, social and religious backgrounds and conditions. Thinking this way, she brings out the linkage between theory and praxis, and claims that existentialist ontology is opposed to dialectical materialism. This is because existentialist ontology maintains that the meaning of a situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of a passive subject, but on a free subject (Beauvoir, 1991). The ideas of free subject and free will etc. are prominent in existentialist philosophy, though the subject was always a male subject. Beauvoir explores how the objectification of women and the subject position of men are happening through life-world experiences.

The process of gendering through the given experiences and given ideas of existence will be clearer if analyzed in terms of any concepts that lead the life-world of man and woman tied together. For example, the word 'love' has not at all have the same meaning for both sexes and the same idea is expressed by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (Beauvoir,1989:683). What woman means by love is total devotion with soul and body but not surrender, and Nietzsche would identify it as like faith as unconditional love. A man in love wants precisely this type of love from a woman. But he can't make it so, because of the presupposition of it as feminine love. If a man desires such total

devotion, then he is not a man according to the normative gender concepts of love. This is discussed by Nietzsche and he gave stresses on the terms as ‘faith’ of women and ‘wants’ of men, to identify the feminine and masculine aspects of experiencing love. Due to the same reasons, the existence of a lover is also very much debated by Beauvoir, citing that there is no ontological status as a man in love though there could be passionate men. We utter about ‘a woman in love’, with the meanings of her existence as eternal in love, but the men would only be passionate lovers at certain moments of their existence. The men would never abandon themselves completely as the women do in love, according to Beauvoir’s view.

“Love has been assigned to women as her supreme vocation, and when she addresses it to man, she is seeking God in him.... .. It is true that there are also men who have burned with this flame: but they are rare, and their fervor has been of a highly refined intellectual form. Women, though, who abandon themselves to the delights of celestial marriages are legion: and they experience them in a strangely affective way.” (Beauvoir, 2011:709)

This kind of explicit criticism through describing the experiences of women and men in relation, to Beauvoir brings out the issues of gendered existence that produce mystic good-women who are accustomed to living on their knees. But her debates do not seem to be accelerating much of the possibilities of women breaking the normative femininity and being intellectual and passionate, but not holding such faith of love to seek any God in men they love. Anyhow her existential call to experience freedom for women to give meaning by creating new situations, is clear in her philosophy. Her basic view is that freedom is the wellspring of all the other values and for living a meaningful but also moral/ethical life (Pettersen, 2015). She is inclined to setting norms and ethical stands along with freedom, though not in a conventional way. Kristina Arp distinguishes three types of freedom in Beauvoir’s work which are ontological, concrete and moral (Arp,

2001). It should be noted that as Arp terms ontological freedom, Beauvoir herself terms natural freedom, while moral freedom is also sometimes referred to as genuine freedom or ethical freedom (Beauvoir, 1948). Beauvoir maintains, with Sartre and Kierkegaard, that every human being is unique and autonomous and she refuses to let the uniqueness and responsibility of each individual be swallowed up by collectivist theory (Pettersen, 2015). Beauvoir's three aspects of freedom interact with three main spheres of human life: the individual, the social, and the political. This not only makes her philosophy conducive to different humanistic disciplines, but it also makes her theory nuanced and complex enough to deal with real people facing real challenges in contemporary society (Pettersen, 2015).

“Beauvoir develops a theory of humanity based on her conception of human nature. She is also a humanist thinker in the sense that she has developed a notion of what constitutes human nature. In contrast to anti-humanists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, the mature Marx, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, Beauvoir does not entirely reject the idea of an immutable human nature..... All of the aforementioned views on humanity—be they Marx's, Hegel's, or Kant's—derive from beliefs about human nature. This is precisely why Beauvoir rejects them; they are founded on philosophical anthropologies that depart significantly from her own existentialist depiction of human beings” (Pettersen, 2015:84).

Pettersen expounds an existential humanism in Simone de Beauvoir to explain human nature in general and that would also explain the gendered issues of female nature and male nature as well. Beauvoir rejects religion and any supernatural or eternal and external guidance for humans to give meaning to their lives. “Despite her de-masking and dismissal of several myths concerning human nature—and women in particular—she does not view some human features such as ontological freedom, rationality, transcendence, and relationality as simply historical or social constructions. Instead, she sees them as given by

nature, and therefore formative of her philosophical anthropology. Furthermore, and most importantly, they are not considered as given only to select groups, for instance, Germans, French, white people, or men, and withheld from others. Beauvoir argues that “the Other”—those excluded from “humanity” such as women, the elderly, blacks, and Jews—must also be recognized as having the same characteristics and in turn the same rights and opportunities as those traditionally encompassed by “humanity.” Hence, her philosophy carries a strong appeal to act and engage in the world, to work for social justice—a hallmark of humanism” (Pettersen 2015:87-86).

To understand the ontological dimension of human nature and human freedom posited by Beauvoir, it is necessary to analyse her critical picnic through Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, and Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. “Sartre departs on a kind of Heideggerian analysis of *Dasein* from the for-itself as nothingness, to return in a regressive analysis to the origin of the negative that underlies the phenomenon of questioning and that we encounter in various ways. For any mode of questioning involves the possibility of negation. In this structure of consciousness lies the basis of human freedom” (Moser,1994:74) The negating act through which, what appears as unchangeably ‘natural’, can be negated towards a new possibility, towards something that does not yet exist, represent an ‘ontological characteristic’ of the human being as per Sartrian notion too. It is striking that Beauvoir bases her explanation of the project almost exclusively on Heidegger and only refers to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* in order to criticize Heidegger’s approach that “the authentic project of man is Being for death”. Moser notes that Beauvoir posits this criticism in her first philosophical essay *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* in 1944. It could be seen as her entry into the phenomenological discussions to see these projects which are however not projects geared towards death, but towards certain ends of some or other existence or experience. Sartre demonstrated that the human being is not a fixed being, and are object and therefore the human being simply “is” not,

but in every moment has to create himself/herself through self-projects (Moser, 1994:51-52). Though Beauvoir differs in the ethical and socio-political discussions based on Sartrean philosophy of 'being', she also admits that human beings have to create themselves, to exist as some or other chosen identity.

“Within the framework of Beauvoir’s existential ethics, our freedom and our interconnectedness have an impact on our moral responsibilities. Both tell us what we can do to support or destroy others. Ontological freedom is something each individual has of being human; it includes our free will and capacity to act autonomously” (Pettersen 2015:88-89). In the discussion of moral freedom and responsibility Pettersen brings out the issue that many of our actions affect others’ concrete freedom. If we actively deprive others of their rights and livelihood or hamper their struggle for concrete freedom, we become the facticity they fight against. “If we choose *not* to join a common project because we are not willing to act on behalf of humanity by assuming moral freedom, we are free riders in the humanity project. We benefit from the concrete freedom others fought to preserve, but without wanting to do our share to maintain it and ensure its continuation. When we fail to embrace moral freedom, we stand passive in the face of those who seek to undermine concrete freedom, and we fail to support others in their attempts to defend it.” (Pettersen 2015:89). She states that shared freedom is a common good, created by human beings and if the number of free riders grows beyond a critical limit, this common good, which depends for its survival on our ongoing support, could collapse. But by remaining passive or ignorant, or by actively exploiting others, we inflict damage on ourselves, on others and on humanity, she adds. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir says that this freedom cannot be destroyed by others, and violence only affects the other’s external condition, but not their ontological freedom. “As presented in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, this is clearly a limitation in Beauvoir’s portrayal of freedom. She operates

here with a problematic body-mind dichotomy, not quite compatible with her efforts elsewhere to transcend binary modes of thought. Moreover, this dichotomy is empirically unsustainable. Destruction of ontological freedom is not limited to violence, torture, starvation, or imprisonment; it can also be damaged by daily neglect, lack of care and respect, violation of trust—and correspondingly be reinforced by mutual respect and recognition” (Pettersen 2015:89).

The discussions that Beauvoir raised on freedom, free will, ethics and anxieties on them, all would lead us to the understanding of meanings that are kept by human beings in general. And how the meanings would vary for female and male humans according to their given situations unless they are not capable of creating their own situations, are dealt with keenly in Beauvoirian philosophy. It is a given social reality that each of us is always a part of others’ situations, and it follows that we must aspire to not undermine their ontological freedom or destroy their concrete freedom. “Although others’ ontological freedom cannot be penetrated directly, as can the body, it can be demolished indirectly by violence and lack of concrete freedom. Many of our actions affect others’ concrete freedom. If we actively deprive others of their rights and livelihood—or hamper their struggle for concrete freedom—we become the facticity they fight against. In such situations, Beauvoir argues, violence can be permissible. Our moral responsibility, therefore, not only requires us to act for the good of humanity and do nothing to violate other people’s freedom, but it also requires us to avoid inhibiting their (struggle for) concrete freedom. We must make sure that our actions do not reduce or obstruct other people’s free transcendence” (Pettersen, 2015:89). By saying this Petersen tries to postulate that Beauvoir thought transcendence should be possible to all humans including females, and she didn’t reject the early existentialist idea of transcendence or she made use of the term to create a new meaning to it as per the experiential realities and existential anxieties of women. Through the philosophy of Beauvoir, the meaning of existence

in freedom and responsibility could be envisaged as something created and re-created at times. And the paths for the postmodern philosophising of the social construction of reality to explain the ontology and existential meanings in varied ways are opened through her philosophy.

### **III Deontological Phenomenology: Judith Butler's Philosophy of Gender**

What exists out there as gender identities, is a basic ontological question that could be answered through the philosophy of Judith Butler. Butler extends the existential possibilities of genders other than masculine and feminine to escape the modern binaries. While Beauvoir accepts the existence of sex as biological and gender as socially constructed, Butler posits both sex and gender as socially constructed. The newborn baby has no idea about it being a boy or girl or anything else. Then it gets into the concepts of being a girl or a boy through its experiences. It is evident then that gender and even sex is a 'becoming' process. Butler takes up the argument of 'becoming a woman' that was proposed by de Beauvoir and explores the existence and experiences of the body. So, the ontological discussion of Butler could be started in connection with Beauvoir's statement 'one is not born, but becomes a woman', though the method of becoming is of 'repeated 'acts'' or performativity. In an early writing Butler says, "when Simone de Beauvoir claims, 'one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman', she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition."(Butler,1988 & 1986). And along with the critical comment on Beauvoir, Butler seeks references from phenomenological philosophers too to bring out her philosophy on performativity-based existence. According to Butler,

“Philosophers rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of 'acts' that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting..... Finally,



the phenomenological theory of 'acts,' espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead, among others, seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign. Though phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of the constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (Butler, 1988).

Butler extends the argument of a subject, object and agent in repeated ‘acts’, to all possible experiences of gender entities and the whole concept of the body as an existent through language. Butlerian arguments would lead to questioning the concept of sex which was considered to be biological and thus having existed as real. For Butler, all bodies are ‘becoming’ into the sexed bodies to be called male or female with a closure towards any other possibilities of the body. There is no state of ‘being’, but everything existing is a result of ‘becoming’ according to Butler. The existence of it being a girl or a boy would be recognized by the baby by experiences of having told so. Then only, the human child makes meanings of its existence as a female entity or a male entity. Here, Butler incorporates the philosophy of language and the postmodern argument of the social construction of sexual identity before the construction of gender identity. Modern feminist philosophizing on identity and individuality was criticized by postmodernists such as Judith Butler, for holding an essentialist position. Essentialism envisaged the existence of a unified category as ‘the woman’, limiting the possibility of understanding women’s experiences and raising issues of women from different socio-cultural backgrounds. The postmodernist standpoint questioned the essentialist position and argued that there is no essentially common characteristic on which we could approach the unitary category called woman. According to this standpoint, we have to see the differences in their

cultural backgrounds as to race, caste, class, religion, region, politics, ethnicity, gender etc. Thus, the identity politics and philosophies underneath are questioned, and intersectionality issues are raised in feminist theorizations on gender, by Judith Butler as a postmodern thinker.

Butler starts the philosophizing of gender with criticism towards feminism by asking the question of whether an ontology of a unitary category as woman is possible at all. Butler also questions the crisis of gender which is not only specific to queer context only but even to envisaging such concepts of femininity and masculinity. Queer experiences are understood to be those of varied genders other than that of humans categorized as man and woman. But the question by Butler not only brings out the issues of attaching the meanings of femininity to some bodies named girl and masculinity to some other kind of bodies named boy, but also shows the pitfalls in fixing of the meaning of these terms. If we fix the meanings so rigidly to these terms, so we have to compulsorily experience irrationality, cowardice and shyness etc. attached to a female body, and rationality, confidence and boldness etc. attached to a male body. Butler talks about this in the preface of the book *Gender Trouble* as follows;

“Briefly, one is a woman, according to the framework of normative sexuality fortifies normative gender, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame, and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose one’s sense of place in gender.... Thus, people suffer from becoming gay, the fear of losing one’s place in gender, or not knowing who someone will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly ‘same’ gender.” (Butler, 1990, p. xi)

This is the first formulation of gender trouble Butler brings in. The next trouble Butler brings in is around the question of whether the sexual practice has the power to destabilize gender, and attempts with this question to address the trouble involved in defining gender itself. For

eg. lesbianism doesn't represent a return to what is most important about being a woman. (Butler, 1990, p. xi). That means it doesn't necessarily mean to carry all existing culturally/normatively assigned femininity symbols or to become a butch mode, if bodies that are called female at birth would want to be lesbians. Butler discusses these issues through the ideas of prohibition, psychoanalysis and the production of the Heterosexual Matrix that is explained in the second chapter of *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, it is a sex, sexuality and gender regime that makes the heterosexual matrix. Butler argues that gender is constructed through a 'heterosexual matrix', in which gender and sexuality are inextricably linked. People think if sex is known gender is known and if these both are known then sexuality is known. According to Butler, it is a question to be asked, why these three ideas are defined through such links between them. With this kind of problematization and philosophizing on bodies, about sex, sexuality and gender experiences ascribed to them categorized within the heterosexual matrix, Butler has done a deontology of gender.

The term deontology is used here in this article, is not of the Kantian ethics of deontology, but it is used as a philosophizing of ontological negation with a method similar to Derrida's deconstruction. Butler calls this ontological philosophy as a genealogy of gender, which can be explained through phenomenology and discourse as methodical frameworks. When the term 'heterosexual matrix' was introduced by Butler, it was for describing that we live in such a matrix of sex, gender and sexuality. All our experiences are understood or even defined in a totalizing way through the connection between these three terms and the meanings attached to them normatively. If the body of a human being is looked at as male according to the normative meanings of masculinity, then that body's sexuality would be understood as a desire towards female bodies, as defined by the heterosexual matrix. Any different experience from this would be considered as the existence of deviance. The normative doing of gender is a fixed and totalized

meaning naturalized by repeated usage of languages and terms of the hegemony of heteronormativity. Butler talks about the power structures of gender fixing the meanings of the existence of human bodies. The book *Bodies that Matter: Subversive Limits of Sex* (1993) by Butler, explains this doing of gender and the need for undoing it, and culminates in drafting the queer theory that would overcome the limits and open up the horizon of possibilities of bodies in their meanings of existence and experience.

According to the Butlerian viewpoint, not only the normative judgmental gender definitions, but the feminist debates over the meanings of gender also lead us to a certain sense of Trouble. The trouble is also about the prevailing norms of the normal, and the trouble to get out of that trouble. This trouble sometimes euphemized some fundamentally alleged mystery of all things feminine, according to Butler. Gender ontologies always operate within established socio-political contexts as normative injunctions to fix the sexed and gendered bodies as intelligible to the culturally accepted norms of the heterosexual matrix. The three regimes of sex, gender and sexuality defined in the heterosexual matrix are lived through the bodies of men and women that are disciplined to be masculine and feminine through the disciplinary powers that existed in cultures. The disciplines due to religion, culture, and legal and social norms are all regulating gender concepts. So we can understand gender only based on such factors. According to Butler, we could do the negation of identity formed on such factors as religion, region, race, ethnicity, class, caste etc. that forms our identity politics, which will go along with even the negation of an ontology of gender. It is based on a perspective that ontology is not a foundation but it installs itself into the socio-political and cultural discourse as a necessary ground. But Butler doesn't reject that the identity politics that was envisaged by modern feminism was a foundational point, though it has to be criticized/ revised. Butler didn't deny that the identity category of 'the woman' was deemed necessary

to mobilize the feminist movement for women's welfare. But this would limit the possibilities of agency to be foreclosed by the positions taken by the identity categories as foundational and fixed.

When we talk about the agency, there comes a question about the subject behind the agency. Butler argues that the false distinction of sex as biological and gender as social introduces a split into the supposedly unified subject of feminism. Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by the subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. Later in 2004 Butler has written a book named *Undoing Gender*, in which this aspect is explained more in detail. Sexed bodies cannot signify without gender, and the apparent existence of sex prior to discourse and cultural imposition is only an effect of the functioning of gender. According to Butler both Sex and Gender are socially constructed, through performativity and repeated doing. Butler takes the statement by Beauvoir (1949), 'One is not born, but becomes a woman', and opines it opens up the door to explain the postmodern argument of the social construction of gender, and to negate the existing concepts of femininity and masculinity. But Butler problematized the idea of social construction too and opined the kind of becoming a woman as what Beauvoir said, is through performativity. For Butler, not only is the woman a gendered entity to perform normative feminine features, but the sex also is a product of performativity.

Butler describes the doing or living of gender or the instigation of sex as well as gender on human beings, as performativity or a parody. For Eg: The doctor or nurse would be announcing at birth, 'it's a girl' or 'it's a boy'. This performative act of utterance initiates and constitutes, that infant's way of being in the world. Not only the utterance of a doctor or nurse at the birth of a body to be sexed, similar utterances in the lifeworld experiences of the human body when it comes into existence as a human being, would totalize and define the gender. It is quite common that we hear utterances as 'you are a woman, a woman

should be like this', 'you are a man, you should do like this' etc., in our everyday lifeworld experiences that would fix our existence into normative heterosexual matrix. The use of language is mentioned by Butler as a tool of creating cultural discourses and a means of performativity. Through the discourses, the performativity of language makes norms universalizing and totalizing. The parodic repetition of gender exposes it as an inner subject and fixes the gender identity. The politically enforced performativity of 'gender as an act' involves the effect of splitting self-parody, self-criticism and the emergence of 'new natural', which eventually exaggerates to reveal the fundamentally phantasmatic status.

The meaning of existence can go into varied experiences for a human body which is not fixed with any kind of existing normativity. It is attained through politically enforced performativity and that comes out of self-criticism and social criticism. It is with a similar kind of critical mentality for accepting the splitting of self-parody and social performativity only we can understand the queer existence. In the book *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler first reflects on the concept, meaning and theoretical place of 'queer', but there are references citing that Butler was against the theoretical institutionalization of 'queer' against 'feminism' (Kornak, 2015). The word appears only a few times in the book, but the last chapter is dedicated to its consideration. In no other book by Butler, does the term 'queer' appear so often or carry so many theoretical implications. Up to the last chapter of the book, Butler uses the word 'queer' without proposing any specific meaning for the term. It is rather that the context in which the term is used prescribes its connotation. There are opinions that around 1993, the concept of 'queer' was already used in academic literature as a sign of a new kind of approach to sexuality studies. But Butler gave it an openness to discuss the issues of fixing identities of sex, gender and sexuality, to finalize the acts of the existents denoted by the terms in a totalizing and defining way, followed by the modern thoughts of exhausted meanings

of dichotomous existence in favour of people at power. May it be a hegemony ruled by visible violence or by invisible diplomatic praxis, with said or unsaid weapon of language in the form of theories on care, love or any virtue, the performativity fixes the meanings and thus normativity of human existence solely in its favour. Since the meanings of gendered experiences have a lot to do with the conceptualization of human relations based on love and care-related virtues, these points also would turn prominent to be discussed for a deontological theory. Humans entrapped in a 'heterosexual matrix' theorize love tied to care, even by mistaking care as a human virtue but mostly defined of normative femininity. Thus, it is to be noted that the whole discussion of sex, sexuality and gender wouldn't also escape such virtue-related performativity aspects with the heterosexual matrix.

Butler's performativity theory and deontology were widely accepted in philosophy, cultural and literary studies for social analysis. But in feminist studies, there were severe criticism of this kind of deontological standpoint by citing the impossibility of organized movement for the cause of women or any oppressed categories of human entities, even based on intersectional aspects. This was also part of the feminist standpoint that we still need to organize for the rights and equalities in our societies, and the way Butler nullifies the categories and theories of feminism and gender, wouldn't facilitate for such social praxis/activism. Anyhow Butler has initiated a great lot of philosophizing to produce a queer theory, which envisages free human entities with varied existence and experiences of their choices if any. The deontological theory also acts against the tendency of the modern and reformist theorists to mask their hegemony of various judgmental restrictions that they impose on all human experiences to make everything and everyone fixed into their preferences. And the praxis of such a strict modern paradigm that doesn't suit any progressive and pleasant life of individual humans, is subverted with Butler's performativity theory. In a way, the philosophies of performativity and

deontology by Butler develops into a kind of humanism to smash the normatively gendered paradigm, by revealing the reality of theoretical contradiction involved in its praxis, which are again fixing new modes of parody and closures around lifeworld experiences.

#### **IV Conclusion**

The approach of the existentialist phenomenology in the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir and the deontological phenomenology of Judith Butler, contributes in abundance to analyze the experience of genders and the meanings that women and other genders attach to their existence. Both Beauvoir and Butler could be read as the philosophers of the phenomenological approach, as they are trying to discuss the experiences of human existence in various ways. The meanings of existence could be different for a male entity and a female entity, due to the varied socio-cultural embeddedness that they experience. The same intersectionality issues would apply for the experiences of other genders than the binaries of man and woman. This article tried to analyze these aspects through Beauvoir and Butler. It is important to note what are the issues of gendered experiences of human beings and how the life world gives them discrete meanings. The existence and experience could be taken as problematic to raise the issues of social discrimination and oppression concerning the concepts of gender.

The analysis of the meanings of the existence of women as a category is done in this article with reference to the modern philosophical writings of Simone de Beauvoir. And the possible existence of many genders and the issues in conceiving an essentialist category called woman or man, are being analyzed through the postmodern writings of Judith Butler, which arrives eventually to a philosophical negation of ontology of gender, which could be called as a deontological philosophy. The discussion continues to detect some form of essentialism in Butler with reference to the philosophy of language, existentialism and phenomenology while analyzing the meanings attached to their



existence by free human entities. The hidden forms of existence that humans lead in our society as a result of existentialist anxiety, bad faith, and fear of heresy that prevent them from exercising freedom and choices on the various possibilities of human life may be opened up by related revolutionary philosophising on the meanings of existence and experience.

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