

A study of the main ideas in Beauvoir's works from perspective of existentialism

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ABSTRACT: Simone de Beauvoir is one of the main representatives of existential philosophy which was the most influential philosophy school in 20th century. She is also the most famous feminist in the west. After *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote another brilliant work describing intellectuals' destiny -- *Les Mandarins*. This is a book deeply manifests the French intellectual faces during hesitation on crossroads and struggling for progress after World War II. Intellectuals, women & love, revolution & politics are the main themes in this novel. This thesis aims to analyze Simone de Beauvoir's creation ideas of literature through the social reality in which French intellectual circles lived and from the characters' love experience. It will mainly focus on stating Simone de Beauvoir's feminism vision of love and her ethics of the self and the other advocated in the novel.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir; Les Mandarins; feminism; The Self and the Other

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) is praised as "One of the Most Important Women in 20th Century". Her work *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) has left an extreme influence on Europe and America, and even on the whole world. In this famous theoretical work praised as "The Bible of Feminism", Simone de Beauvoir elaborates her main idea of "Women become women passively instead of being born to be in this way". This book advocates the idea of equality -- "Men can be their own masters; so shall women be able to do the same". Due to the influence brought by *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir became the pioneer in western feminist movement and feminism research. She was not only a public figure of feminism; but was also a well-known writer and literature theorist who cared a lot about women's destiny and living circumstances.

Among Beauvoir's many works, *Les Mandarins* is known as the most famous full-length novel. In the year it was published (1954), *Les Mandarins* won Prix Goncourt. In fact, this novel contains the nature of autobiography to a certain degree. Lobell, Anna and Lewis obviously represent Satre, Beauvoir, and Algren. Beauvoir even admitted in public that *Les Mandarins* was written for her American lover. However,

Les Mandarins is anything but a popular literary novel telling a love triangle. We can find some other important characters among those three main characters. Henry, Lobell's good friend and comrade in arms, is also a leftist intellectual same as Lobell. In later period, these two good friends gradually go in separate ways. Bohr, Henry's former partner and a good friend of Anna, is a martyr of love who is abandoned but conquers herself at last. Nadine, Lobell and Anna's daughter, is a girl who is bold in behavior and is in pursue of independence and freedom. She marries Henry and settles down in Italy. Although this novel records of some actual events, the author fictioneering skills to continuously change personal pronouns, narrator's tones, time, and space. Thus, the whole novel is a mix of stores. It does not only contain continuation of those love stories; but also reflects the author's thinking on ethical trial and intellectuals' missions.

Throughout the novel, intellectuals, revolution & politics, women and love are the main themes. The most important thing Beauvoir needed to do in this novel is to elaborate her thinking and interpretation of existentialism and feminism contained in the themes. This thesis will mainly analyze Simone de Beauvoir's creation ideas of literature and her philosophical view of existentialism from the characters' love experience and through the social reality in which French intellectual circles lived after World War II.

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1 DISCUSSION ON INTELLECTUALS' DESTINY

Same as Satre, Beauvoir was also against the literary view of "Art for Art's Sake" as an existential literateur. She thought literature must involve in politics and life. As a result, her novels can always manifest the spirit of the time and reveal contemporary people's living condition. As she wrote in the preface of *Les Mandarins*: "The function of literature is to reveal what the author sees to readers. Readers can see their worries and find problems from literature. Literature shall function as a witness instead of encouragement for anything..." This may be her idea of literature creation. At least, this is her creation idea in *Les Mandarins*.

Les Mandarins describes those years from right before the end of World War II to early after the end. On the Christmas in 1944, a batch of leftist intellectual elites gathered to celebrate the first holiday after the victory. They were ready to welcome a new phase of the world and the new life they were about to have. At that time, they were looking forward to realizing their hopes. However, they realized the war left them a heavy and difficult-to-heal wound before long. During such dark and miserable time, these elites still kept their faith in making progress and passion in revolution. They kept on fighting and refused to kill time with no accomplishment. They didn't accept to abandon their responsibilities and were even ready to pay a high cost for fulfilling those responsibilities.

Lobell gave up writing for a joint action of the independent left wing and PCF (Parti Communiste Francais). In order to create some actual content for this left-wing organization, Lobell applied various means including persuasion and pressuring to force Henry -- Lobell's good friend and follower -- to give his beloved L'esperance out. Lobell devoted himself to supporting various political and social activities. He set out guiding principles, participated in gatherings, writing articles, organizing discussions, and entertaining followers. Under the complex situation in which the two major forces were against each other, Lobell asked himself to strictly obey the rule that nothing he did shall do any harm to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. For this reason, he then sacrificed his friendship with Henry and continued to fight for his ideal. Later, he discarded the old hatreds and fixed his friendship with Henry actively in order to organize a new periodical. Lobell and Henry prepared to organize a journal and play their roles. They seized the hand stretched out by the Communist Party again and started a joint action to fight for democracy.

The activities and the people created in this novel are actually those Parisian celebrities, intellectual elites, distinguished ideologists and social activists, widely-known fictionists and playwrights, and famous journalists around Beauvoir. From Lobell, we can see many elements about Satre: Satre earned his leading

authority in French intellectual circle after World War II. He left enormous influence on the young generation and united a batch of left-wing intellectuals around him. Satre's status is almost the same as Lobell's in the novel. Since 1950s, Satre started to be politically close to the Soviet Union and was in a close relation with PCF. He insisted on the spirit of political party and consciousness of camp conception while debating with Albert Camus about the Soviet Union concentration camp problem. Later, he participated in the fight against Cold War and fought for peace. All these paths Satre took are basically the same as Lobell's. Even the break of friendship between Satre and Camus after their debate can be found in Lobell and Henry's break-up. From Henry, we can see both Satre and Camus. On one hand, Beauvoir created Henry to combine Satre's contradiction. We can see Satre's complex state of being politically left wing while striving to maintain his independence on Henry. His attitude towards caring the interests of the whole and compliance with the whole together with his thinking on joining the Communist Party and his independent freedom in relationship with women have all been reflected on Henry. On the other hand, Camus' standpoint on the Soviet Union concentration camp and his actions are also shown in Henry's experience.

In a word, Beauvoir bravely faced reality and herself in *Les Mandarins*. She put her characters through failure and disillusion and back to the starting point. The characters in the novel mainly reflect the path of exhaustion - self-selection - exhaustion - self-selection again. This endless self-selection spirit is advocated in Satre's and Simone de Beauvoir's existential philosophy. It is the reflection of human being's existence value and truly pictures the acts, existence environment, and spiritual journey of Beauvoir, Satre, Camus and the French intellectual elites of their age.

2 ADVOCATION OF EQUAL SEXUAL RELATIONS

Another important clue running from the start to the end of *Les Mandarins* is character's love story, especially Anna's extramarital affair. Besides political activities, social activities, and personal career, romance is another main fun in this batch of intellectual elites' life. In Henry's life, he keeps relationship with several women: Bohr, Nadine, Norsat, and Nadine again at last. Nadine's life is also full of men, from American officer to Henry, then to Lambert and others. For Anna, she goes to America and keeps her personal relationship again and again. Almost more than half of the second half of the novel is about her extramarital affair. In this novel, sexual relation is a form of normal social connection. It is the reflection of the free sexual relation in France. Also, it is related to Beauvoir's ideological system of sexual relation.

In *Les Mandarins*, Beauvoir wrote Henry's bore-

dom with his wife Bohr and his pursue of freedom in a favorable way. She described with sympathy about how Bohr gets stuck in woman's legend and establishes an unreal ideal for herself based on woman's subordinate status leading her to a miserable end. Beauvoir also symmetrically arranged two women who enjoy sexual freedom same as Henry: Anna and Nadine. We can find *Les Mandarins* was published five years after *Le Deuxième Sexe*, *Les Mandarins* follows Beauvoir's ideological thought in *Le Deuxième Sexe* -- "Men can be their own masters; so shall women be able to do the same".

Beauvoir used a lot of wordings to describe from a feminist's perspective. She made Anna the witness and narrator of the whole story, showing reader her own romance with American writer Lewis. From the beginning to the end of the love story, almost every detail reflects Beauvoir's life experience. What is different from Beauvoir's life is the female leading role in the novel is married with an adult daughter. Even so, when Anna finds out she is in love with that young American, she barely thinks about marriage or family. All she cares is whether he loves her or not. Thus, no sense of guilt has Anna ever felt.

As readers, we may easily regard Anna as an extreme carnal egoist. However, she never is. She has no casual sex and is still in love with her husband and daughter. She is willing to help others. What she does is to clearly differentiate love from marriage. She loves; she pursues; she gets; and she lives happily. Then, she leaves; she loses; she grieves; and she feels desperate. All of these are only related to herself and her love.

Beauvoir used Anna's experience to help us understand women have the equal right as men to love. In the meantime, the novel tells us what real feminism is. It is actually feminine individualism by which women can insist on "being myself" without relying on "acting independently". Feminism together with male individualism is a doctrine seeking to reach social balance and cultural balance. Under this doctrine, family and marriage cannot form the whole of women's life. Love and sexual desire are not women's whole life either. Real feminism is not "Irony Lady" doctrine; neither can it be called carnal egoism.

3 ADVOCATION OF MUTUAL-SITUATION RELATION BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE OTHER

As a leading figure among existential literature, Beauvoir can always pass a philosophical value to her readers. From the first book *L'invitée* to *Les Mandarins*, all the characters' dialogues and conflicts are around the relation between the self and the other. Beauvoir's perspective of the other is an ethical view of the relations between the self and the self, the self and the other, and the self and the world. It can be

called a practical ethical view or a daily-life ethical view. Three periods of Beauvoir's lifetime writing are related to the ethical view of the other. The first period is before World War II. For example, the novel shows the contrary views of self-conscience and conscience of the other. The second period is Beauvoir's life history in Paris under Nazi's occupation. During this period, Beauvoir changed her contrary views and advocated the mutual-situation relation between the self and the other. The other is the situation of actions taken by the self while the world is the situation that both the self and the other face together. This view is fully interpreted in *Les Mandarins*. In the occupied Paris, those slaughtered Jews and Communists consisted the situation of people with no Jewish nationality or Communist Party relation. Besides, they were also the situation of Nazi and traitors. This is because kill the other as something instead of a human being can show can every other person can also be slaughtered like something. Hence, to bring oneself freedom means to give the other freedom. The mutual-situation relation between the self and the other is a mutual beneficial relation. The differentiation between two subjectivities can only be respected with the existence of mutual recognition.

The mutual-situation relation between the self and the other described in *Les Mandarins* is mainly shown in the following aspects: firstly, Beauvoir designed two clues for readers -- one goes throughout Henry's life experience and the other follows Anna's narration. This design is totally different from Beauvoir's familiar monologue writing style. The two leading characters' experiences are necessary in narration and they support the structure of each other. Secondly, the intellectuals in the novel are mainly good examples of being independent. They keep their independent personality from the beginning to the end. When Henry's marriage has cracks, the extreme patience he shows has left great impression on readers. The extreme tolerance shown among those characters is the best manifestation of the author's and her character's philosophical ideology. In the meanwhile, all the intellectual elites created in the novel act in collective activities in most of the time. They are used to gathering together and talk freely about future. When we read the original French version, it's not hard to find Beauvoir preferred to use "nous" and "on" instead of the first person "je". This replacement can well display the author's mind of sharing all fun with others which can help reflect each talker's sense of participation. Thirdly, make a comprehensive survey of Beauvoir's works, regardless they are novels in her early writing period, such as *L'invitée* and *Les Mandarins*, or memory books and novels written in the middle period; they all derive a constant theme -- relation between mother and daughter. In a male-dominate society, both mothers and daughters are "the other" in the society. Relation between mother and daughter is actually relation between the others. In Beauvoir's ideology,

relation between mother and daughter has went through multiple evolution processes. At first, Francoise and Xavier show a relation of controlling and being controlled. Besides, the relation between Anna who's the mother in *Les Mandarins* and her daughter Nadine develops from contrary to conformity. This change is a powerful proof of the mutual-situation relation between the self and the other.

Based on the above, we can find the different views that Beauvoir and Satre had on "the self and the other". Beauvoir's feminist ideology is deeply influenced by Satre's existentialism. However, she didn't specialize Satre's existentialism and apply it to feminism analysis. Instead, she developed feminism based on existentialism and made great achievement. On personal freedom, Beauvoir didn't agree with Satre's idea that personal freedom can hinder other's freedom. On the contrary, Beauvoir thought "Our freedom is just like stones on an arched door supporting each other". Individuals can only realize their personal plans through others. Similarly, women's liberation movement can only bring liberty to individuals. To create an equal and harmonious free world for women, we need to have women's movement with support from the society.

4 ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL ACTIVITY

For Beauvoir, literature was a means to involve in political life. The involvement that existentialism made in literature made Beauvoir insist on the belief that literature contained the mission to guide political actions. This belief led her to express her philosophical ideology and political views in novels. As mentioned above, intellectuals like Henry and Lobell in *Les Mandarins* believe revolution and politics are the channels for them to understand and participate in the world. They hold this belief from the beginning to the end. Henry and Lobell can truly reflect the activities, existence environment, and spiritual journey that Satre, Beauvoir, and those French intellectual elites of their age had.

Beauvoir actively took part in political activities and insisted on expressing her ethical views about the consistence between the self and the other after World War II. She applied those views in political practice

and supported Algerian Anti-Colonization War which liberated Algerian girls from the slaughter of French troops. She sponsored, supported, and participated in French Feminism War. She revealed the reality that the old generation was considered as "the others" by the society. She voiced her discontents towards children's "the other" status in families.

Beauvoir's unique contractual relation with Satre and her involvement with Satre after World War II helped her and Satre win worldwide reputation together. Most of Beauvoir's and Satre's friends were celebrities and political VIPs. She and Satre sympathized on the working class and the lower class. They supported the career fighting for justice and freedom. Besides, they protected young people's achievement in fighting for freedom of speech and encouraged young students' social activities. All these have brought Beauvoir and Satre reputation and wide-range circulation for their works.

From the above, we can see that *Les Mandarins* shows us another Beauvoir we cannot see in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. *Les Mandarins* is Beauvoir's supplement for her belief or ideology in a literal way. We can also regard this novel as a practical experience in Beauvoir's ideal. On the completion of this novel, Beauvoir amended her life path more or less and accomplished something she couldn't conquer anywhere else.

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