

RETHINKING BEAUVOIR'S *ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY* AS A PANACEA TO WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN AFRICA

Mohammed Akinola AKOMOLAFE, Ph.D

*Department of Philosophy,
Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos
mohammed.ekomolafe@lasu.edu.ng*
and

Icomewell Joseph UKPONG

*Department of Philosophy,
University of Lagos, Akoka
chitete555@yahoo.com*

Abstract

*This essay reflects on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In this work, Beauvoir examines the degrading human condition and shows how women can truly be free from oppression. She argues that women are subject like men; hence should not be reduced to immanence (object) at home, work, and society at large. This paper finds her idea thought-provoking in liberating women in Africa from political marginalization and domestic oppression. However, it rejects Beauvoir's supposition that it is only via labour that women's oppression can be resolved; while defending her existential conversion as a fundamental ideology for tackling women's oppression in Africa.*

Keywords: Ambiguity, Immanence, Other, Reciprocity, Situation, Transcendence

Introduction

Reflection on the moral philosophy of existentialists has been intensified today. When the term 'existentialism' is used, reference is

usually made to the views of some thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, among others. While there are other existentialists of high repute, the aforementioned philosophers' thoughts have occupied the discourses on existential ethics for decades. In this paper, however, we are interested in considering the philosophical thought of Simone de Beauvoir on ethics. Against this background, we consider it fundamental to ask: How is ethics construed by Beauvoir? In a bid to come to grip with this question, this paper considers, through an appeal to hermeneutics and critical methods, Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with the aim of showing how her thought can address the moral challenges of today's world, especially such challenges as oppression, political marginalization and domestic violence against women in Africa.

To achieve this aim, we structure this paper into two sections. The first section is a hermeneutical exploration of Beauvoir's ethical cogitation. The second section takes a critical look at the strengths and weaknesses of her position, as we identify its philosophical import to address the problems of oppression and marginalization of women in Africa.

A Hermeneutic Exploration of Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

There are clusters of issues that are discussed by moral exponents today. These include such questions as: are ethical norms absolute or situational? Does a human being have a given nature or not? Is man determined by forces outside him or not? In this section, we seek to expose existential ethics from the standpoint of Beauvoir as depicted in her text entitled, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Now we should ask: What is the nature of this ethics? Why does Beauvoir decide to call it 'ethics of ambiguity'? And, what does ambiguity entail in Beauvoir's thought?

The foremost idea, to start with, is that Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is a literary piece on existential ethics. Existential ethics, to be clear, focuses on human predicaments in the world with the hope of addressing hindrances facing human life. Thus, at the core

of existential philosophy is the doctrine of liberation, which Beauvoir evaluates in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*. Before one could be said to have been liberated, it means one was initially constrained, either personally or socially. It may be a cultural, political, intellectual or economic constraint. Apparently, existentialists consider these limiting factors as hindrances that could be resolved through the recognition of one's freedom, responsibility as well as choice. This ethics, as Beauvoir presents it, seeks to address real (rather than ideological) human concerns. In the words of Claudia Card: "It was Beauvoir's view, in fact, that *only* existentialism could provide the basis for ethics."¹

Accordingly, Beauvoir declares that "From the very beginning, existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity."² She then takes existence as being fundamental in the ethics of liberation. As Beauvoir puts it, "...we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others."³ In other words, "In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir declares the human condition to be ambiguous. According to her, we are both separate and connected to each other, a unique subject and an object for others, consciousness, and body, free and unfree."⁴ Hence, the issue of liberation is necessary for human affairs.

Beauvoir contends, here, that no human being can live alone in the world. And as a being in the world, the human being is both free and unfree. To further interpret this concept, Stacy Keltner posits that, "Ambiguity signals the tension between seemingly opposing experiences of oneself as both a free subject and an object for others."⁵ In this regard, Beauvoir thinks that it is ambiguous to

¹Claudia Card, "Introduction: Beauvoir and the ambiguity of 'Ambiguity' in *Ethics*" in *Cambridge Companion Online*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 2.

²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Bernard Frechtman (Trans.), New Jersey: Citadel Press 1948, 3.

³Ibid., 67.

⁴E. Gothlin, "Beauvoir and Sartre on Appeal, Desire, and Ambiguity," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 133.

⁵S. Keltner, "Beauvoir's Idea of Ambiguity," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 201.

describe humans as either a subject or an object. Rather, humans are both subjects and objects. Put differently, Tidd Ursula explains that, for Beauvoir, "...the human condition is ambiguous, or not fixed, and therefore subject to history."⁶ This means that human action cannot be explained without reference to history, that is, to a given situation the humans find themselves. Thus, ambiguity, as used by Beauvoir, does not mean equivocation or vagueness. Rather it involves "...an irreducible indeterminacy, and multiple, inseparable significations and aspects."⁷ If that is the case, what then is the nature of ethics of ambiguity?

Beauvoir, like other existentialists, begins by rejecting the theory of human nature.⁸ For clarity, a theory of human nature is one that proposes that human beings have certain traits that make them act the way they do in everyday life. For instance, Thomas Hobbes advances a theory of human nature whereby he argues that humans are naturally egoistic, and are conditioned by their desires and aversions.⁹ For Beauvoir, the implication of holding a theory of human nature is that it hinders people from taking responsibility for their actions as well as inactions. For her, "The idea that defines the world is not a given world, foreign to man, one to which he has to force himself to yield without. It is the world willed by man..."¹⁰ As the foregoing suggests, humans are free moral agents who decide and will their actions. That is, people make choices even when it appears they have not chosen. Subsequently, she reiterates that:

One can start by saying that our earthly destiny has or has no importance, for it depends upon us to give it

⁶Ursula Tidd, "The Self-Other Relation in Beauvoir's Ethics and Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 230.

⁷M. Langer, "Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 90.

⁸H. Rowley. *Tete-a-Tete: The Tumultuous Lives and Loves of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, Australia: Harper Publishers 2005, 195.

⁹D. Baumgold. "Hobbes" in *Political Thinkers: from Socrates to the Present*, David Boucher & Paul Kelly (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009, 195.

¹⁰Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 4.

importance. It is up to man to make it important to be a man and he alone can feel his success or failure. And if it is again said that nothing forces him to try to justify his being in this way, then one is playing upon the notion of freedom in a dishonest way.¹¹

Beauvoir's excerpt quoted above suggests clearly that humans are necessarily free and that they are the choosers of their actions or inactions. While reflecting on freedom, Beauvoir contemplates on the idea of ambiguity as well. She argues that 'others' can play two roles in our lives. They (people) can hinder our freedom in the same way that they can help in liberating us. Andrew notes that, "For Beauvoir, others are both obstacles to freedom and liberators. They attempt to block freedom by determining the world, and they liberate freedom by recognizing the meaning that one makes."¹² In this respect, Beauvoir explores many examples on how human freedom has been restrained by culture, traditions, patriarchal system, etc.

Having argued that freedom is fundamental in ethical reflection, Beauvoir sees the concept of responsibility as fundamental to ethics. For instance, she posits that "In order for a liberating action to be a thoroughly moral action, it would have to be achieved through conversion of the oppressors: there would have to be a reconciliation of freedoms."¹³ She adds: "...if the oppressor was aware of the demands of his freedom, he himself should have to denounce oppression. But he is dishonest; in the name of the serious or of his passions, of his will for power or of his appetites, he refuses to give up his privileges."¹⁴ So, responsibility, in her contention, is significant for the realization of authentic freedom. She then argues that each person has a choice either to accept or reject whatever happens to him/her. To feel that one is not free is to engage oneself in self-deception. From

¹¹Ibid, 6.

¹²B.S. Andrew. "Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought," in *Cambridge Companion Online*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 27.

¹³Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42.

¹⁴Ibid.

Beauvoir's point of view, self-deception is a vice because it is a denial of one's responsibility and freedom. Hence, an act of self-deception makes us inauthentic. Langer clearly captures Beauvoir's view thus:

Self-deception attitudes are paradoxically ambiguous because we simultaneously know and do not know what we hide from ourselves. While remaining implicitly aware of our unfounded freedom and concomitant responsibility, we may try to perpetuate an undemanding, ready-made, infantile world by adopting an apathetic attitude. Or we may posit absolute values and endow ourselves with inalienable rights, though tacitly aware of our unfounded freedom and its preclusion of such values and rights. Then again, we may acknowledge that our freedom is unfounded, but refused to admit that we create values.¹⁵

Having rejected self-deception as an inauthentic mode of existence, Beauvoir argues that, in many respects, women have accepted the marginalization of their freedom as natural. Still, she notes that women, over the years, have reluctantly accepted themselves as the 'other' (object), hence they fail to liberate themselves. Consequently, women have denied their responsibility to be human. This leads her to make a distinction between concepts of 'Transcendence' and 'Immanence.'

What does Beauvoir mean by the terms: 'transcendence' and 'immanence'? On the one hand, according to Andrea Veltman, "...transcendence encompasses activities that enable self-expression, create an enduring artifact, or in some other fashion, contribute positively to the constructive endeavours of the human race."¹⁶ Of course, how Beauvoir uses the concept of transcendence is

¹⁵Langer, "Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity," 98.

¹⁶Andrea Veltman, "Transcendence and Immanence in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2006, 115.

well interpreted by Tidd, who asserts that by this term, Beauvoir means that, "...we are never entirely there, fixed at the moment, but always somehow engaged in transcending the given state of affairs."¹⁷ That is, all humans are transcendent given that they are free to alter their situation. In this respect, transcendental beings are subjects - active beings that accept the outcome of their situations as freely chosen by them. They are subjects who decide and avoid the manipulation/oppression of others. This, however, does not mean that transcendent beings are isolated beings from others or that they cannot be a means to others' happiness. For Beauvoir, though transcendent beings are both subject and object, they engage in real activities as actors. Beauvoir then identifies labour that humans engage in as a means to realize this transcending value of freedom. For her, human dignity is tied to labour, since what one does shapes one's existence.

On the other hand, Beauvoir argues that immanence, unlike transcendence, is a restrictive condition, wherein humans do not actualize their essence where their will is repressed by the 'other' (other people) or by self-limitation. One existential treatment of this dichotomy is captured by Susan J. Brison, who quoted Beauvoir's words thus:

I'm the one who spoke of woman as immanence. But I did so in considering the role she has been made to play. It's not by nature that she is reduced to immanence; she is being reduced to it by men who prevent her from acting, creating, transcending herself, as we put it during the era of existentialism, as I would put it today.¹⁸

To buttress the above citation, Catherine Wilson's explanation is

¹⁷Ursula Tidd, *Routledge Critical Thinker: Simone de Beauvoir*, London: Routledge 2004, 30.

¹⁸Susan J. Brison "Freedom, Sex Work and Social Construction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, 193.

crucial. For Wilson stresses that “Beauvoir's view is that women's lesser social status made it difficult for them to take part in the human world - not simply the world constituted by men and erroneously stipulated to be human, but the world of culture and manufacture to which women paradoxically both belong and do not belong.”¹⁹ Beauvoir says that, “Men have always possessed the concrete means of power; since the first epoch of patriarchy, they have found it useful to keep women in a dependent state; their codes were set up against her.”²⁰ On her part, Sara Heinamma explains that, “When studying Beauvoir's notion of sexual difference, it is extremely important to notice the paragraph that describes women as 'other', it is not Beauvoir's last word on the subject. She adds a footnote to explain that this is a definition given by a man.”²¹ In a real sense then, Beauvoir holds that:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an 'other'.²²

Put differently, Beauvoir avers that, “The humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... for him, she is sex - absolute sex,

¹⁹C. Wilson, “Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity,” in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, E.R. Grosholz (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004, 99.

²⁰M. Doeuft, “Towards a Friendly Transatlantic Critique of the Second Sex” in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, E.R. Grosholz (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004, 29.

²¹Sara Heinamma, “Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 32.

²²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley (Trans. & ed.), London: Jonathan Cape 1953, 273.

no less. She is differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the 'other.'²³ Thus, Nancy Bauer asserts that, "The basic idea here is that the subject, man, in this case, needs an absolute 'other', a role the woman has historically played for him, in order to 'attain' himself in the wake of his 'asserting' of himself."²⁴ Beauvoir is not suggesting that it is immoral for humans to be an 'other', rather, what she is opposing is the fact that throughout history, men have made women an *absolute other*, whereas they enjoy the role of an *absolute subject*. This status, according to Beauvoir, makes man to become a dictator over and above a woman at home, working place, and in the society at large. The major concern here, for Beauvoir, is therefore that, "... women in the real world are, for the most part, never really free."²⁵ Consequently, ethics (existential kind) is therefore aimed at liberating women.

One way of showing women's predicament is shown in her exploration of the roles of women in the family. She argues that the roles women play in the families (or marriages) put them at a disadvantaged end such that genuine freedom is repelled. So, Beauvoir's view on freedom and liberation in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* aims at refuting the oppression of women in marriages and patriarchy ordered societies. She employs the concept of mystification to stress the point that men (the oppressors), like other oppressors (such as the bourgeoisie in the capitalist economic system), have mystified women into thinking that their oppressive situations are natural. What does the situation entail here? According to Tidd:

In Beauvoir's thought, 'situation' refers to how a human being as an individual consciousness is engaged in the

²³Simone de Beauvoir, *A History of Sex*, H.M. Parshley (Trans.), London: Four Square Books 1961, 8.

²⁴Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, New York: Columbia University Press 2001, 185.

²⁵C. Imbert. "Simone de Beauvoir: A Woman Philosopher in the Context of her Generation," in *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, E.R. Grosholz (Trans. & ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004, 11.

world with regard to people, to time, to space, and to other products of his/her facticity. My 'situation' is not something outside or around me, but the glue which binds my freedom and my facticity together. 'Facticity' refers to the necessary connection between consciousness between the world of inert matter and the past. Aspects of my facticity are aspects of my situation which I have chosen--for example, the facts of my birth, my body, the existence of other people, my death--and that I cannot choose not to accept as part of my situation.²⁶

In any given situation, Beauvoir thinks that one needs to exercise his/her freedom in social interaction. Women's situation, therefore, demands that they see themselves as individuals. As she puts it, "If every man is free, he cannot *will* himself free"²⁷ and as such, Beauvoir notes that, "This individualism does not lead to the anarchy of personal whim"²⁸ therefore advancing a theory of reciprocity in social relation.

Briefly conceived, 'reciprocity' suggests that no individual can live alone in the world. Humans cannot communicate alone; hence they need others for the realization of their authentic freedom. She maintains that, "Individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of the others."²⁹ Hence, Tidd observes that for Beauvoir, "The Self-Other relation is therefore necessary and potentially reciprocal, experienced as it is with, *All Men Are Mortal*, in a dialectical framework of history."³⁰ This can also be logically expressed thus:

²⁶Ursula Tidd. *Routledge Critical Thinker: Simone de Beauvoir*, London: Routledge 2004, 30.

²⁷Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* 31.

²⁸Ibid, 70.

²⁹Ibid, 70.

³⁰Ursula Tidd. *Routledge Critical Thinker: Simone de Beauvoir*, (London: Routledge 2004), 230.

“...a person must acknowledge himself and the other as objects as well as subjects in order for reciprocal recognition to be achieved.”³¹ Again, Andrew makes Beauvoir's idea of reciprocity more vivid thus: “One is alone in choosing. But one chooses amongst actions that involve others who may hinder or facilitate one's freedom.”³² And Langer maintains that, “Other's confirmation requires that we seek their freedom and happiness, rather than enslaving them.”³³ In short, man is a being unto others. People have a duty to protect the interest and dignity of others when they choose. In this case, Catherine Wilson asserts that: “Beauvoir believed that dignity depended both on how one was regarded by others and on one's relations to the material and intellectual world.”³⁴ Hence, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* refutes moral doctrines such as aestheticism, which demands the withdrawal of people from society. She recounts her experience of such mode of acting and, as such describes withdrawals from political and social life as an escapist approach:

I was really indulging in escapism, putting myself into blinkers so as to be safeguarding my peace of mind. For a long while, I stuck obstinately to this 'rejection of humanity' which was also the inspiration of my aesthetic view.³⁵

Beauvoir proposes that when humans pursue their individual good, they should acknowledge that all humans are both subject and object, face the responsibility of their choices, recognize the transcendence of others as well as engage in a reciprocal relationship with them rather than attempting to escape from the world. She believes that when we reject absolute moral codes, oppression of others as mere objects (means) as well as a rejection of self-deception and the theory

³¹Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, 186.

³²B.S. Andrew. “Beauvoir's Place in Philosophical Thought,” 27.

³³Langer, “Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity,” 97.

³⁴Wilson, “Simone de Beauvoir and Human Dignity,” 91.

³⁵Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, Peter Green (Trans.), Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd 1960, 148.

of human nature; ethics will concretely serve us more.

So far, we have engaged in an interpretative exposition of Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The following section seeks to adopt Beauvoir's view in confronting the challenges of oppression and marginalization of women in Africa.

Implications of Beauvoir's Theory for Women's Liberation in Africa

This section explores the issue of women's oppression in Africa, and it shows how this concern can be addressed through Beauvoir's idea of freedom, choice, responsibility, authenticity and reciprocity. While it is our opinion that her work has some merits, we think there are some fundamental flaws in Beauvoir's thesis; hence this section is reflective. This section begins with a critical evaluation of her positions with the hope of avoiding certain problems in her views prior to the adoption of her work to address women's marginalization and oppression in Africa.

What are the shortcomings that lie unresolved in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*? We will look at three shortcomings in this text, and therefore show how they threaten Beauvoir's thesis.

Firstly, Beauvoir makes a claim, which would likely affect one of the tenets of her ethics of ambiguity. What is this claim? In her discourse on the distinction between transcendence and immanence, she makes an exploration of the principle of reciprocity. While this exploration is impressive, the claim that it is when women take part in productive or intellectual labour that they can attain transcendent seems superficial. What is the problem with Beauvoir's supposition? The problem in this contention is that Beauvoir assumes, wrongly we think, that human dignity rests or depends on the work people do. She contends that when women are allowed to do the same kind of jobs that men do, then they are free. And if they are free to choose their occupations, then oppression at home would end. This conclusion can easily be noticed when one considers her claim that:

It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the

male; it is employment alone that guarantees her concrete freedom. Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based in her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator... When she is productive, active, she conquers her transcendence; in her projects, she concretely affirms as a subject; in connection with the aim she pursues, with the money and the right she takes possession of, she tests and experiences her responsibility³⁶

Her argument can simply be summarized as follows: Premise 1: women are free to the extent that they are gainfully employed. Premise 2: women are free if they make personal decisions. Therefore, if women are gainfully employed, then they make personal decisions. In the above citation, Beauvoir commits herself to two fundamental claims that are not compatible with her existential project. Existentialism, either in her view or not, deals with real-life situations. Solutions to social problems, though differ from person-to-person, place-to-place, or from time to time, they must, however, attend to concrete human conditions. But does her position, as cited above, reflect the condition of all men and women? First, is it correct to say, as she seems to argue, that it is *employment alone* that can guarantee women concrete freedom? Would this not translate to the claim that if women are not working, then they are not free and they are necessarily exploited? Would it not translate to the claim that if women are working, no matter the kind of job, then they are transcendent beings, even when they are exploited at work? The above contention of Beauvoir also suggests that those who are women, who by nature of their birth - let us say, handicapped, insane, physically challenged, etc., who cannot take any gainful employment due to their medical challenge(s), are necessary immanent. The above quotation could also be read to mean that Beauvoir assumes that all men are transcendent simply because they engage in gainful employments.

³⁶Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 755-6.

One needs to ask: Are all men truly transcendent? Or, how could her view that suggests that when a woman 'is productive, active, she conquers her transcendence...' be interpreted? Another issue arises when one asks whether all productive engagements (works) done by women would make them qualify as transcendent? Our take here is that although productive activities give rise to the development of inner capacity, it is erroneous, to sum up that every productive engagement necessitates human development. Therefore, to submit that labour would automatically transform women to the level of transcendence is to underrate the issue of exploitation, alienation, and other oppressions at home, workplace, and society at large. Second, still, on the issue of labour, it is erroneously assumed by Beauvoir that men's conditions are improved upon by the works that they do; she therefore unjustifiably believes that women's dignity, status and respect would increase in the same proportion if they too engage in such jobs. The problem with this view is that Beauvoir assumes that all labours are alike. As we shall show shortly in this paper, women in Africa (in Nigeria, for example), do engage in active labours, however, their conditions are precarious.

Secondly, there is a logical problem in Beauvoir's two fundamental concepts: the idea of authenticity and reciprocity. These logical problems are not obvious; hence we need to establish our claim. To do this, there is a need to clarify the nature of the logical error Beauvoir commits. This requires that one explains a logical relation called asymmetrical relation. For a relation (say 'A') to be asymmetrical, it must have a relation to another thing (say 'B'); and it must be such that 'B' itself cannot have the same relation to 'A' in a given circumstance. For instance, if 'A' is the father of 'B', then 'B' cannot be the father of 'A' if the notion of a father is used literally. If it is true that 'A' is the father of 'B', then to say the latter is the father of the former is to commit a logical error. Beauvoir appears to have committed this kind of error in the manner she explores the notion of authenticity and reciprocity in her work.

How does the logical error arise in her work? An individual, she says, must live an authentic life to be free. In her relationship with the other, an individual must be authentic such that, he/she must assert

him/herself as a subject. If an individual does not realize her freedom, then such a human is inauthentic. Given that ethics of authenticity is the real moral justification for human action if one is to be responsible for one's action, then authentic selfhood begins if a person defends her freedom in all public interactions. This is the conclusion which Beauvoir reaches. We shall show how logical error emerges in this conclusion as follows: the problem begins to take shape if one realizes that everyone is also *willing* to establish his/her own choice. Beauvoir assumes that the solution to the conflict of interest lies in the recognition of the fact that we are both subject and object. This, in her view, would resolve the problem. In actual sense, however, it does not. The logic of Beauvoir's argument can be expressed as follows: *Authentic actions are those which are not influenced by one's relationship with the other. And decisions that arise from reciprocity are inauthentic.* The problem can be noticed if one reads into her work another mode of thought which Beauvoir seems to allude to Premise 1: All actions that are freely taken are those that arise from individual actions. Premise 2: Women freely take action if their decisions are personal. Therefore, all freely chosen actions which are authentic arise without the influence of others. In a more practical sense, we are sceptical that such kind of action is possible. The major misnomer here is that Beauvoir stresses the notion of authenticity too far that it somewhat weakens the spirit of reciprocity such that the existence of one appears to rule out the existence of the other. It is the notion of individuality that creates this tension in her work.

To demand reciprocal action in a scenario where an individual is conscious that others see her as a means to an end is a difficult matter which Beauvoir addresses. This matter, however, cannot be fully addressed if all human persons seek authenticity at the detriment of reciprocity. The lacuna in Beauvoir's position is that she does not show which of the two issues women should pursue first. On this ground, therefore, we consider it fundamental that human freedom ought to be limited not only by law but by custom and tradition insofar as human dignity is not repelled by these institutions.

Thirdly, while Beauvoir recognizes the need to respect the dignity of others when acting; there is a contending issue as to how

women are to act if the prevailing social order marginalizes them. She does not provide any moral code on how women should address their circumstances other than her claim that they should seek for freedom against patricianly ordered societies and cultures by engaging in labour. This ethics appears to be empty unless women are told what to do if certain events occur. For instance, what should happen if this or that happens to women in Africa, Asia, or Europe, considering that women's circumstances defer all over the world? Since situations differ as she rightly observes, we nurse the belief that unless ethics of women's oppression is made universal, cases of oppression and marginalization of women would be treated differently in different climes. If unlike cases are treated alike in different parts of the world, *existential injustice* in the treatment of women across the world would then be the case. It could be claimed that ethics aims to address anti-social actions against humans and nonhuman, whereas women and children are the most vulnerable.

Despite the challenges in Beauvoir's work, it has some significant merits. While the above analysis is strong enough to create doubt regarding the thorough-going posture of her work, Beauvoir's idea has re-awoken the consciousness to confront the existential situation of women in Africa. First, the strength of her idea of responsibility and reciprocity cannot be overemphasized. This, to be certain, complements other perspectives on ethics such as medical ethics, bioethics, and environmental ethics that address the condition of women, among other species at the workplace, environment, and in the world. As our hermeneutical exploration of her idea has shown, there is an urgent need to develop practical ethics which cares for all humans, regardless of their sex. Of course, her ideas show how people can both care for others as they care for themselves, and how this can be extended to the world at large.

Again, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* resolves the problems of exploitation, marginalization and/or oppression not only of women but of all mankind. Exploitation of women does hinder the growth of individuals who are oppressed, which could later have negative implications on the society if not addressed. Having confronted this issue using the notions of transcendence and immanence, Beauvoir

reopens a perennial philosophical problem that has pummelled many societies in Africa. Interestingly, it is not only that the issue of oppression is considered, she also demonstrates how women are marginalized at home and workplace. More fundamentally, she shows clearly that women are marginalized economically and politically, which gives rise to her being further dominated domestically. For instance, she traces the issue of oppression to the traditional institution called 'marriage'. For Beauvoir, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society."³⁷ In marriage, she argues that the patriarchal system has created a hierarchy of species, where men, the superior or head, dominate and exploit women. It is convincing to agree with Beauvoir that cultural institutions have played significant roles in the molestation of women. Thus, the rethinking liberation of women (and the poor) is what can fully reposition the contemporary political world. Accordingly, Debra Bergoffen notes that "A politics of liberation is tied, Beauvoir tells us, to the abolition of the rule of the father."³⁸ This domineering posture of the traditional institution of the family has wrecked more havoc than good for social engineering in recent times. Hence, to avoid the burden that oppressors pose on women, we agree with Beauvoir that moral responsibility, authenticity, and freedom are fundamental. How can this be advanced? Beauvoir has rightly espoused that 'existential conversion' is necessary. We consider this conversion as vital since only ethics that is rooted in authenticity, reciprocity, responsibility and that which guarantees social freedom can suffice.

We now turn to the issue of oppression and marginalization in Africa. Over the past few decades, women's liberation movements have emerged in different parts of Africa to defend the rights of women on the continent. Today, there are different associations seeking freedom for women in South Africa, Nigeria, the Gambia, Kenya, as well as other parts of the continent.

³⁷Ibid, 425.

³⁸Debra Bergoffen. "Marriage, Autonomy, and Feminine," in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Critical Essays*, Margaret A. Simons (ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006, 97.

Women's Rights Movements and National Women's Union were also formed in Nigeria, Women's National Coalition in South Africa, Action for Development in Uganda, Women's Movement in Egypt, etc. are women's liberation groups that argue for the recognition of women's rights in Africa. Many such groups are available today. Some countries in Africa have recognized and given women more roles to play in politics and society at large.

In 2016, arguments have been made for equalization of men and women in every sphere of life in a bid to remove the discrimination against anyone as specified in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution. According to the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 34 (1):

Every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly- (a) no person shall be subject to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment; (b) no person shall be held in slavery or servitude; and (c) no person shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour.³⁹

In Section 42 (1), it is emphasized that:

A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only that he is such a person:- (a) be subjected either expressly by, or in the practical application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any executive or administrative action of the government, to disabilities or restrictions to which citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions are not made subjects; or (b) be accorded either expressly by, or in the practical

³⁹“The Nigerian 1999 Constitution”, available on the International Centre for Nigerian Law (ICFNL) website at: (www.nigeria-law.org/ConstitutionoftheFederalRepublicofNigeria.htm.Chapter_4)

application of, any law in force in Nigeria or any such executive or administrative action, any privilege or advantage that is not accorded to citizens of Nigeria of other communities, ethnic groups, places of origin, sex, religious or political opinions.⁴⁰

Despite this as well as other provisions granted for the protection of women's rights in Nigeria (and other African nations), there are clear and systemic violations of women in the continent, like in other parts of the world. For instance, in 2016, a lawmaker in Nigeria, Senator Biodun Olujimi of Ekiti State, Nigeria proposed a Bill which aims at ensuring that the provision of the United Nations Convention on the elimination of discrimination against women was deeply entrenched into the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria with the hope of providing equal treatment for all humans (men and women alike) in all spheres of life. The bill aims at ensuring equal rights in marriage, divorce, the inheritance of property, land ownership, education, etc. The aim also includes freedom of movement for women as well as economic activities. However, this Bill which seeks to equalize women and men as expressly stated in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria did not pass through the second reading.⁴¹ Sadly, most justifications of men's superiority over women are based on exploitation, oppression, and marginalization arising from religious and cultural underpinnings of the people. Johanna Schalkwyk clearly articulates this thus:

Gender (like race and ethnicity) functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meaning given to being male or female... This is evident in the division of labour according to gender. In most societies, there are clear patterns of 'women's work' and 'men's work', both in the household and in the wider

⁴⁰Ibid

⁴¹Jinali M., "Senate Rejects Bill That Seeks to Make Women Equal to Men", 8:4pm on March, 2016 at: (www.nairaland.com/2991369/nigeria-senate-fails-pass-gender)

community--and cultural explanation of why this should be so.⁴²

Today, the justification for the stratification of society on gender lines has cultural as well as the biological root. If Africans can adopt democracy as it is now being practiced in Africa from the lives and cultures of non-Africans, it would also be useful to adopt values that could liberate African women from cultural oppression and marginalization if this would help Africa to achieve concrete development? We thus consider it necessary, not only to invite women into fellowship with men politically, economically, or intellectually, there is also the need for this fellowship to be legally as well as universally affirmed in African political life for it to be effective. It is by giving legal as well as moral considerations to the issue of human rights (women's rights inclusive), can a positive transition be made in public policy.

In 1979, the General Assembly of the United Nations “adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women.”⁴³ In this Bill, the UN General Assembly declares that, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms outlined in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, ... birth or other status” (Ibid). Many nations of the world (including African nations) have adopted the imports of this Bill in their national policies which openly affirm equal rights to men and women even though in practice, these policies have not been fully implemented. One way of recognizing women's freedom is to recognize their political rights as being equal to men's. On the political level, studies on African women affairs indicate that only 7 out of 108 seats are occupied by Nigerian

⁴²Johanna Schalkwyk. “Gender Equality,” in ADC Sourcebook in Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality, 2000 retrieved at: www.acid-cida.gc.ca. on 15-10-2015.

⁴³United Nations (CEDAW), retrieved at: (www.un.org/en/globalissues/women)

women in the 2015 Upper House national election, which is 6.50% (see www.ipu.org/wme-e/classif.htm), whereas the majority are traded into marriages due to cultural inclinations. Economically, women are left uncared for in most parts of Africa as reported in the 2016 Aljazeera news, especially in Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. There are other social vices against women in regard to rape and forced marriage. The case is not even made more enduring for homosexuals.⁴⁴ All these have affected human relations in Africa.

Today, Beauvoir has revolutionized our conception of women as transcendence rather than mere immanence in which sex is fettered to a child's procreation. As one can possibly claim, the major challenge facing contemporary women in Africa is not the lack of awareness of their exploitation and oppression by men; rather, it is simply that women have been nurtured culturally to take their predicaments as natural. As Beauvoir has clearly articulated, this has accelerated the domination of women. In Africa, it has led to women's inauthentic existence and inability to press for justice in the face of blatant cruelty against their persons. For Akinola Mohammed Akomolafe and Olusegun Steven Samuel, the lack of commitment to humanist cause often leads to a backlog of vices that often weaken common good.⁴⁵ While it could be claimed that women's exploitation, marginalization, and oppression are culturally defined, today, women have accepted their fate as weaker vessels, whose responsibility is to remain in the kitchen, to cook and nurse the family. Trinh T. Minh-ha observes that:

The need to contain and restrict women's wisdom within the mothering role is therefore a constant in social institutions across cultures; and women's status as child-

⁴⁴Oladipup S. Layi & Emmanuel Ofuasia. "The Religious Foundation of Violence against Homosexuals: Proposing a Relief from African Local Epistemologies." In D.O. Laguda & E.G. Konyana (Eds.). *Religious Violence and Conflict Management in Africa: Phenomenological and Epistemological Engagements*. (Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Peace, Dialogue & Tolerance Studies 2019, 186.

⁴⁵Mohammed A. Akomolafe & Olusegun S. Samuel. "An African Humanist Assessment of Technology and Moral Concerns," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2016 Vol. 9(3), 30.

bearer continues in many African contexts to be the test of their womanhood. From one generation to another, mothers are called upon to perfect their duty as the killjoy keepers of tradition—especially in matters that concern their gender. As is well-known, a woman's lot is to conceive, bear, feed, and, above all, indoctrinate her children.⁴⁶

Although these are not negative virtues if they can be blended with other values in which women can contribute to the world, African societies see these as the primary and major reasons why women are created. Olufadekemi Adagbada (2006: 105) puts it this way:

The fact that women have been and are still being oppressed, marginalised and denigrated has been a typical issue in many nations of the world as far back as the eighteenth century. Many African women, most of whom have either gone through such oppression in one form or the other or who have been witnesses to them, accept that the male gender has upper hands in several things in the society. This is detrimental to the women, who are regarded and treated as second class citizens. Some of these women (who are increasing in number daily) are working to see an end to their oppression; striving to achieve a kind of co-operation and recognition of roles between genders...⁴⁷

In Africa, women have accepted injustice as necessary, thereby failing to liberate themselves from oppression. That is, they have accepted the erroneous belief that they are created for men. Beauvoir

⁴⁶Trinh T. Minh-ha. "Mother's Talk," in *The Politics of (Mothering): Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, Obioma Nnaemeka (ed.), London: Routledge 1997), 31.

⁴⁷Olufadekemi Adagbada. "Women Oppression, Its Rejection and Nomenclature in Yoruba Video Films," *Journal of Philosophy and Development*, Suleimon O. Opafola (ed.), Vol. 8 (nos. 1 & 2), (Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd 2006), 105.

would consider this as bad faith which is a denial of women's self-esteem, individuality and/or authentic selfhood. In this regard then, we argue that it is significant for women to continually demand recognition since this is what makes human truly liberated as a member of a democratic society. Beauvoir's work, therefore, shows that ethics can complement other social tools such as the law to redress women's failure to address their predicaments which is disadvantageous. The need for women to be responsible for their circumstances is therefore fundamental.

It can then be claimed that Beauvoir's ethics is promising to the extent that it teaches women not to accept the fabricated and gendered-structured-world as natural. Of course, the divide between the sexes (male and female) is therefore culturally made. The question is: is it justifiable for a person/man to benefit at the expense of another? Given that those who support the marginalization of women, as most examples above have shown, rely on a favourable aspect of a people's culture to keep themselves at an advantage level, it would equally be correct for others to press for the need to restructure the gendered society which permits such injustice as natural. According to J. Ann Tickner, "Feminists define gender as a set of socially constructed characteristics that define what we mean by masculinity and femininity ... Gender is a system of social hierarchy in which masculine characteristics are more valued than feminine ones."⁴⁸ It is people, who, based on the prevailing culture they profess, define how one relates or is to relate with the other. As Beauvoir has rightly argued, there is a need to transpose cultures that see women as objects. For, O.S. Samuel, cultures are "constantly changing, and as they change, cultural identity, unity, and diversity are altered."⁴⁹ To Schalkwyk, "Cultural change occurs as

⁴⁸J. Ann Tickner. "Gender in World Politics," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (eds), 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, 265.

⁴⁹Olusegun O. Samuel. "Re-echoing the Dawn of Cultural Revolution in Africa: The Case of Sex and Sexuality in Social Ethics," in *Sex and Sexuality in Africa and Africa Diaspora: A Social and Ethical Engagement*, Danoye Oguntola Laguda (ed.), Harare: African Institute for Culture, Peace, Dialogue & Tolerance Studies 2013, 189.

communities and households respond to social and economic shifts associated with globalization, new technologies, environmental pressures, armed conflict, development projects, etc.”⁵⁰ Society can no longer be organized on a ladder that promotes injustice against women for the good of some people if social development is desirable.

Both men and women, including least advantaged men, require social recognition, which, indeed, cannot be attained unless freedom is deeply rooted in contemporary African culture. In this case, the existential conversion is apposite in addressing the backlog cases of marginalization and oppression of women in most parts of Africa. This conversion requires that women (and men) should be recognized as humans, whereas women (and men) should act responsibly. This means that differential treatment of humans which leads to injustice needs to be reconsidered in social policies. It means then that the issue of injustice should no longer be ignored in Africa. It is when justice takes place that impartiality, unfair treatment of persons, and domination can be settled.

It is when the United Nations (UN) Declaration which guarantees equal rights for all people across the world is legally adopted as sacred in Africa can men begin to engage in true partnership and relationship with women, for the public good. This is possible when the promotion of common good is embedded in Africa. This can be made accessible through the development of the humanist spirit in society. As M.A. Akomolafe and O.S. Samuel have envisaged, “The first goal of the community is therefore of proper social integration...”⁵¹ and this requires “...social solidarity, good family upbringing, community responsibility, the moral obligation not to harm others, mutual trust, social harmony, honesty, truth, benevolence, etc. All these are virtues that are necessary for human well-being.”⁵² Unfortunately, these values are ebbing in

⁵⁰Johanna Schalkwyk. “Gender Equality,” 1.

⁵¹Mohammed A. Akomolafe & Olusegun S. Samuel. “An African Humanist Assessment of Technology and Moral Concerns,” 28.

⁵²Ibid, 27.

contemporary Africa. It is our considered view in this paper, therefore, that the invigoration of the traditional value-system which promotes mutual association such as *iwapele* (patience), *iwarere* (benevolence) and *emi-isokan* (collective spirit) can accelerate the resolution of women's oppression in Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has assessed Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. It showed that Beauvoir's idea was a critiqued of the divide between subject-object, transcendence-immanence, etc. which has generated tension between men and women. The paper showed that the division between the sexes has necessitated the oppression as well as marginalization of women. It was established that Beauvoir's principles of reciprocity, responsibility, and freedom are invaluable for the resolution to the subjugation of women in Africa. While the paper rejects Beauvoir's conjecture that gainful employment is adequate to confront the problem of oppression/marginalization of women in Africa, it articulated that through existential conversion, women's liberation in Africa is possible. This, as the paper showed, requires the development of collective spirit and compassion for all humans.