Reality Check: Review of *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* by Toril Moi.

Meryl Altman  
*DePauw University, maltman@depauw.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)  
Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](http://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs)

Recommended Citation  

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. For more information, please contact bcox@depauw.edu.
Jacoby

as the United States and France, Jewish parents shielded children born during and after the war. They didn’t tell them of grandparent’s deaths in Auschwitz. Many didn’t circumsine their sons. Some gave their children their mother’s Christian surname. Or more subtly, and equally destructively and futilely, the parents never talked about what happened “over there”—sometimes only fifty kilometers away, sometimes thousands. Reading Jacobsy reminds us of how far Madeleine Albright went to deny her Jewish roots and the murder of her relatives.

If Holocaust haunted children, even a child like Susan Jacobsy whose father’s relationship to Jewishness was entirely negative. Sometimes it is as though Jews’ homes and to try to correct their teaching patterns, control the gesturing of their hands, even their faces. Sometimes they became anxious and forgetful, obsessive and paranoid. David Grossman’s seven-year-old Monk in "Sideways: Love" has his parents whispering about the Nazi Brest. He imagines a terrible animal and is sure it lives in their basement. Trying to devise ways to trap the beast and kill it and so protect his parents, he becomes so overworried that he stops eating. No one ever told Monk about the camps, yet he comes to look more and more like one of their walking dead. Soon his parents send him away to a camp to get well.

Jacoby’s book lacks a certain narrative drive, and is rather over-stuffed with filler about German Jews, the history of anti-Semitism in America, and Jacobsy’s own family’s history. But there is a fundamental question at its emotional heart, and that is: “Can there be Jews—without Judaism?” To which she notes that Jews have been asking the question for centuries. No. Then she quickly slides over the question of cultural Jewishness, which she is clearly not that familiar with, and gets to where she’s going—which is that her father “did not qualify as ‘culturally Jewish’ (and would not wish to do so)… He was a man with no Jewish education of any kind, a vessel emptied of Jewish content, open to the magical metamorphosis promoted by conversion.” This is where Jacobsy missed an opportunity. I think for her father’s intense negativity about Jewishness pointed to his struggle with a history of anti-Semitism and a Jewish history willy-nilly. He probably was culturally Jewish, but not by choice.

What a complicated question Jacobsy raises but sidesteps. Her book is meant for a popular audience, so she avoids the sort of anxieties and incoherence the question, “What is a Jew?” raises. It’s an old and thorny question, and one that many secular Jews in the US have taken up again in the last fifteen years. It is one of the reasons that a number of universities and colleges have created new life into Jewish Studies programs, and why there has been a revival of the study of Yiddish, the language of that Ashkenazic culture practically wiped out by Hitler, that was to a great extent secular, socialist, Zamenhofian, psychological, the face of persecution—these are among the qualities they will claim, if carefully dissected, Jacobsy’s. Freud, that most articulate of men and an atheist, could not himself answer the question, “What is a Jew?” He knew about his mother’s Jew and that was enough but what it precisely he could not say. In a letter to the sister-in-law of the psychoanalyst David Freud, Freud wrote, “We were both Jews and knew of each other that we carried that miraculous thing in common, which—inaccessible to any analysis thus far—makes writing about myself and about Judaism, our task impossible to say what heritage from this land we have taken over into our blood and nerves.” “(Our blood and nerves)?” If David could not say what was Jewish, Jacobsy’s Jewish, small wonder Robert Jacobsy could say nothing about an ethnicity he did not feel.

And yet when Adolf Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem, Jacobsy writes, “My father would watch, tight-lipped.” And in a later essay, she press that perhaps Israel didn’t have a right to try them, her father said, “He’s in a courthouse, he has a lawyer… Did he give any of his victims a trial?” Her father’s position seems, also expressed “bellecore enthusiasm” for Israel even though he shied away from things military in general. As sympathetic as I was towards Robert Jacobsy’s suffering from anti-Semitism as a child, and again at Davidson, and the lack of Jew in his repressive mother, in the larger picture it seemed inappropriate that her daughter become, theoretically and practically, a member of European Jewish During World Two. Her description of her father’s suffering as a Jew, in short, lacked a certain historical depth. Also, whether Jacobsy never thought her father was a coward. Mightn’t she have been just a little perturbed by the great lengths he went to deny to his Jewish past?

Jacoby is a journalist and that’s the voice we get in this book, but the subject care she has shown in researching her father and suffered his depressions and shame, but what she doesn’t do here is acknowledge how these shaped her—whether she has hidden or repressed, or where she felt cornered and coerced or simply robbed. She learned a great deal about her father’s family. She found lost photographs and letters, researched her past. But to what end, one wonders. There was no catharsis in the telling, no apparent catharsis in the writing. What is left is the “interruption” of her past. It is not from under post-structuralism, and to see what happens when one else—another voice in the telling. The lack of humor, suggest that some deep level of understanding was never reached. Half-life remains cool at its center, but anxious edges and occasional signs enunciate sadness and regret.  


What we need today more than ever is critical analysis that seeks to question and equality for women, in the most meaningful sense of the word…”That feminism, I am happy to say, may also be a way, usually even the most meta-nets, physical feminist theorists support it in part. No feminist I know is incapable of understanding what it means to say that the Taliban are deporting Afghan women from their most elementary human rights just because they are women. (p. 9)

Y et, but “today” really the year 2000? And can the author of these words really be Toril Moi? Maybe there’s hope for feminist theory after all.

Moi’s first book, a little primer of feminist literary criticism called Sexual/Textual Politics (1983), sold a lot of copies and made a lot of people very angry including me. Moi’s scathing dismissals of most American approaches to critical theory, including lesbian studies and the critiques offered by women of color, as “phallocentric” and tied to naïvely undecorated conceptions of “the unified self,” seemed to demand that we abandon political approaches to literature in favor of Krvisen meanderings about subjective textualities. The field has yet to recover from this.

I was not alone in finding the tone of Sexual/Textual Politics unacceptably con- tentious and contemptuous. But in 1996 Moi published Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman, a lovely, articulate, informative book, firm-minded—by any standard—personably historical, attentive to textual detail. One of the most efforts in the current remis- nance in Beauvoir studies, this book taught me more than almost any other, not just about Beauvoir, but about how literary criticism could still be made to do feminist work. But that book had so little to say about theory with a capital T that it almost left one wondering whether there could be two Toril Mois.

Now we have this complex huge blockbuster of a book, What is a Woman? And Other Essays. It’s really two books: the first, a substantive new piece of work exploring Beauvoir’s continuing value for feminism, the other a loosely connected set of essays on topics ranging from Tristan and Isolde to Pierre Bourdieu. And here the real Toril Moi stands up (at least I hope so) as one of the most astute and lucid critics writing today. She calls her book "Try to enter her past. But to what end, one wonders. There was no catharsis in the telling, no apparent catharsis in the writing. What is left is the “interruption” of her past. It is not from under post-structuralism, and to see what happens when one else—another voice in the telling. The lack of humor, suggest that some deep level of understanding was never reached. Half-life remains cool at its center, but anxious edges and occasional signs enunciate sadness and regret.  


What we need today more than ever is critical analysis that seeks to question and equality for women, in the most meaningful sense of the word…”That feminism, I am happy to say, may also be a way, usually even the most meta-nets, physical feminist theorists support it in part. No feminist I know is incapable of understanding what it means to say that the Taliban are deporting Afghan women from their most elementary human rights just because they are women. (p. 9)

What is a Woman? And Other Essays by Toril Moi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 577 pp., $35.00 hardcover.

According to Moi, “post-structuralist theorists of sex and gender are held pris- oners by theoretical mirages of their own making.” If a realist feminist theory is merely self-inflating, then Beauvoir still offers us, or offers us again, neither a feminism of equality, nor a feminism of difference, but a feminism of freedom that dares to speak its name. Why not take up the chance to “use the word woman without having to blush,” the invitation to “make theory fun again”? And yet there is no retreat into anti-intellectualism here. Moi’s book is a seri- ous attempt to get to the bottom of what that means, rather than a set of elegant evanescences and euphemisms, dancing on the shining but ever-shifting surface of the halftone. One ought to be able to test, in writing a theory, how powerful it is—how much of the world does it help explain—and how useful it is—how much it helps to solve the problems actually confronting women today and to move toward the better world we are hoping to build. “Any theo- ry of subjectivity that fails when con- fronted with a concrete case is not going to be able to tell us much about what it means to be a man or a woman today.” Moi’s disagreements, more tightly argued than I can indicate here, could serve as a lucid introduction to recent theoretical debates, and also as a farewell to them.

The book’s main theoretical contri- bution is to point out that the different senses of men and gen- ders, Moi shows how crucial this distinction is to opposing the notion that women are determined by their biology in any particular way. But she also points out that Beauvoir was able to oppose that notion quite successfully without making any such distinction; she asks why a deter- minist of the body sought to be more feminine and more personal in her writing. The sense of determinists (religious, ethical, cultural), and she questions the centrality of the sex/gender distinction to current theory, especially given the controversies around subjectivity and “the body” that result.

In its place outlines and re-pro- pozes an active identity, what I will call a “feminist practices.” They are no more than an instrument of the woman’s flush comes to us through history,” but it is still,  


This content downloaded from 183.120.91.91 on Wed, 8 Jan 2014 10:05:47 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Reality check

by Meryl Altmann

What is a Woman? And Other Essays by Toril Moi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 577 pp., $35.00 hardcover.

Realit check

by Meryl Altmann

What is a Woman? And Other Essays by Toril Moi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 577 pp., $35.00 hardcover.
recognized, flesh. In a careful reading of the opening chapter of _The Second Sex_, Moi gives us back what Beauvoir actually said about the body, historically and between men and women are different: So what? Many things have followed, from sexual difference and embodiment, but no particular thing is more interesting than this instance. The important thing about the Beauvoirian body is that it isn’t just a sexual body. It is, in its place, it climes trees. It is, as Beauvoir seems here to note, that thing to notice is about it that it’s the body of a woman, or of a man, and sometimes that means the most important thing:

My suspicion is that most feminists will continue to find the distinction between sex and gender helpful in everyday use—particularly, as something that foregrounds and works on the important idea that it is the body of a woman, or of a man, and sometimes that means the most important thing:

To stop worrying about it—does feel like a breath of fresh air in a very stale room.

Moi still makes big claims. But here she develops them through careful close readings, sensitive to both the historical context and the textual nuance. While she continues to maintain that the right to disagree openly, to argue, and to think and say, are crucial to feminism in our life-world, generally, she offers the views of even those she disagrees with refreshing clarity, fulfilling the first task of the teacher, which is to be a good explainer.

While the “return to Beauvoir” is the book’s main theme, it is not the only authority invoked here. Moi also mobilizes Bourdieu, Freud, Wittgenstein, “ordinary language” philosophy, logic and common sense. It’s almost her textbook, stretching back to a graduate-school paper on Andreas Capellanis, and arranged more or less in reverse chronological order—which is a bit disconcerting, since issues are sometimes raised that were seemingly resolved earlier in the book.

A pack rat myself, I understand the impulse to include everything and every accumulation of cultural capital that makes it possible, but there is some resulting sacrifice of overall coherence. As Beauvoir’s friend Zara, caught between the Catholic moralism of her mother and the intellectual fearlessness of her friends, observed “It’s chosen que j’aime, notre s’aimait pas entre elles”—the things I like don’t all like one another. Freud (a very old friend of Moi’s) and Bourdieu (a rather new one) might be less compatible, and behave a bit less well, at this party honoring Simone than the hostesses might have liked. I have a judgment, in favor of, or as she says, “appropriating,” them is impecable: they’ll come in any case. “...generally revolutionary work has always taken as its starting point the tradition it wishes to transform... All intellectual statements, whether by Aristotle or Plato or Wolff and Beauvoir, require rethinking in new circumstances. We always read with an eye to what we need and what we can use. What other way is there? Intellectual life is appropriation. Moi is perhaps too quick to dismiss the problem of whether “the master’s tools can demolish the master’s house.” That debate is not really over, but has access to academic and cultural institutions, who had the right and was empowered to speak, as much as it was about the possibility of feminist autonomy. Still non-trivial questions. But I think she is content to observe that one ought first to inquire what all the tasks are and how we use whatever tools come to hand. And very valuable insights of major proportions can be reached by more than one road; most of the places feminists have gone by way of Foucault can be approached through Beauvoir, usefully detouring around the vexed problem of agency her work raises. The real question might be whether to appropriate the master’s tools means to acknowledge him (or her) as an master. The worst mistake is to spend so much time collecting and polishing the tools, and boasting that you have better tools than others, that you forget entirely that there was a house to build in the first place. This is what Moi means by “theoreticism.” If we all agree the nail needs hammering in, hammer it with the heel of your shoe and move on to the next nail.

Questions of subjectivity, and of style and tone, converge in a discussion about using the personal voice, that inevitably returning repressed Other of theoretical positism. In several essays here, a defense of the right to object to what seems wrong and to think and speak seriouly about difficult things leads to a thoughtful distinction between narcistic uses of the personal voice and more honest ways it can correct for over-abstraction. Like Moi, I too have come to find the “adversary paradigm” less irritating and more politically defensible than the woolly-minded all-embracing civility that cuffs “us” and “them” against being asked hard questions, both on grounds of a J. S. Mill-like view that truth emerges from controversy and on grounds of its type of ground zero of honesty and authenticity. Beauvoir was not the only girl who noticed that you had to choose, not always but a lot of the time, between being smart and being nice; she decided that the second alternative destroyed both the mind and the heart.

The personal, more or less clearly labelled, such, ought to come into an intellectual argument when it clarifies or advances that argument; otherwise, not. That is Moi’s practice; it was more or less Beauvoir’s practice in _The Second Sex_; I hope it has been mine. If we’re clearer about what the point of writing theory is supposed to be, maybe we can be clearer about using “the personal” as a means to that end, rather than as an end in itself. One theoretical aporia remains. Excuse me. I mean, there was one place where I still couldn’t agree, an unsolved problem I find crucial. Moi offers a fine theory of subjectivity, of “I,” but how are we supposed to get from “I” to “we”? In the 1940s Beauvoir could sketch no collective or gatherings of women she’d encountered pre-1948 still seemed to her (and were) bourgeois, colloquial and a little suspect. Freud was not interested in this problem except insofar as political collectivities seem to have struck him as mystifications or “cover stories” for something else. Bourdieu’s apparent answer—that praxis is a sort of game—is too cynical, for my taste at least. Not every book can solve all problems even if it is 500 pages long. But if the goal of feminist theory is usefulness in concrete cases, a theory that leaves out the question of how groups can form and press for change leaves more work to be done. While we’re waiting, what emerges? Well... The reports of the death of the self were greatly exaggerated. Read _The Second Sex_ (all of it, if in French you can); take long views; practice random acts of concrete close reasoning and critical facility. Trust yourself, but remember the reader. And don’t give up.