

Du Bois, Racial Equality, and Gender Equality

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W. E. B. Du Bois' text *The Souls of Black Folk* makes the reader aware of the lived experiences of black people and the systemic racialization that they face in America. Du Bois fights for racial equality, which means that black Americans are provided with the same opportunities and respect that white Americans enjoy. Simone de Beauvoir, in her text *The Second Sex*, challenges male supremacy by arguing extensively for gender equality – that women and men are equal, and that this equality will only truly come about by considering the lived experiences of women. Beauvoir would regard Du Bois' arguments in *The Souls of Black Folk* as merely another brick in the wall of male supremacy because Du Bois fails to consider the lived experiences of black women when he argues for racial equality between black and white Americans. These lived experiences inform us of what it means to be a woman, and gender equality transpires only when these experiences are considered.

In order to fight for gender equality between black men and women, it is important to learn about the problems that women face from women leaders and activists themselves -- a task that Du Bois does not undertake in his book. One of the main criterion for achieving gender equality in Beauvoir's text is the idea of considering the lived experiences of women. In her book, "... we will describe the world from the woman's point of view such as it is offered to her, and we will see the difficulties women are up against ..." (Beauvoir, p. 17). Women experience the world differently than men do and it is important to take those experiences into consideration. Beauvoir uses quotes and passages from diaries of women like Sophia Tolstoy, female characters

from books written by authors like Virginia Woolf, and analyses women's feelings, situations, and choices. Women are treated as being inferior to men and it is important for Beauvoir to understand why the society thinks that way. Du Bois, when making his arguments about racial equality between black and white Americans, studies the lived experiences of black men like Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, a fictional character called John, and some others. He never writes about the experiences of black women activists and leaders who were prominent during that time. Beauvoir would consider Du Bois' not paying attention to the condition of black women when fighting for racial equality as supporting male supremacy. Without considering the lived experiences of women, Du Bois cannot see the obstacles that lie in the path of women trying to achieve racial equality. Beauvoir would say that this is what prevents Du Bois from finding solutions that are attentive to these lived experiences of women. And without solutions that enable both black men and black women to achieve racial equality, Du Bois' arguments seem biased against really ameliorating the situation of black women in America.

Du Bois' generalization of the term "Negro" as being masculine shows his participation in the othering of women and, thus, his failure in arguing for gender equality by not considering women as subjects equal to men. Throughout the text, Du Bois uses the term "Negro" in relation to black men. His use of masculine pronouns to refer to black people instead of using gender-neutral language shows his consideration of the male as the default. When defining who "Negroes" are, Du Bois says, "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son" (Du Bois, p. 2). Du Bois could have used the word "child" in place of "son", but he decides to generalize the "Negro" as being male. Black women, and women in general, face constant alienation from a society defined by male supremacy. They are posited as being inferior to men. Beauvoir recognizes this experience of

othering that women have to face. She explains, "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (Beauvoir, p. 5). Both men and women constitute humanity, but humanity is generalized as being male by a male-oriented society, similar to how Du Bois generalizes the "Negro" as being male. Beauvoir would not see Du Bois' arguments as fighting for gender equality along with racial equality because Du Bois participates in the othering of black women. By not recognizing the othering of women as a lived experience and becoming a part of patriarchy which treats women as being defined by men, Du Bois does not see men and women as equal and does the very thing that women are struggling against every day. Beauvoir would consider his arguments as preserving male supremacy.

Not only does Du Bois participate in the othering of black women, but he also argues for opportunities of transcendence that are accessible only to black men, which denies black women such opportunities of freedom and existence outside of their homes and prevents them from being equal to men. Du Bois argues that working toward racial equality will require black men who are educated in the liberal arts in order to question their position in society. He says that there is an "... imperative demand for trained Negro leaders ... - men of skill, men of light and leading, college-bred men, ... men who thoroughly comprehend and know modern civilization" (Du Bois, p. 104). Du Bois uses the term "men" four times in a single statement and claims that black men, having the opportunity to receive education, will bring about racial equality. By receiving an education, black men transcend their existing conditions of being treated as inferior by white people. Du Bois, again, fails to consider the situation of women and whether they would be able to grab such opportunities of transcendence. Beauvoir, who has thoroughly studied the lives of women, recognizes the challenges that they face while trying to transcend.

Even when women are provided with opportunities of transcendence, “it is rare for the woman to be able to make full use of her possibilities: ... her friends and family will ... impose duties and chores on her, and curtail her freedom” (Beauvoir, 737). Existing familial and social structures prevent women from existing outside of their homes and enjoying the privileges that men enjoy. Du Bois does not consider the ways in which women, despite having access to education and other opportunities, are deprived of such transcendence. Beauvoir would regard Du Bois’ arguments as not promoting gender equality because Du Bois elucidates the ways in which racial equality can be achieved, but he does not consider if black women would have a chance of being a part of the process of achieving racial equality.

Du Bois argues that black people should not be denied the right to vote, but he does not recognize the exploitation and lack of freedom that women experience despite possessing certain rights in a society that is predominantly male-oriented, and, hence, fails to address the problem of gender inequality. Du Bois, in his critique of the first statement of the Atlanta Compromise by Booker T. Washington, demands that black people be given the right to vote. On the importance of having the right to vote, he says, "... but it is utterly impossible ... for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right to suffrage" (Du Bois, p. 31). The way Du Bois phrases his argument shows that his demand is only limited to black men. Even if he uses the term “men” as a generalization of the “Negro”, he does not take intersectionality into account. Black women have to deal with existing social structures that discriminate against her because of her race as well as her gender. To say that black people have the right to vote does not guarantee that black women get to enjoy them. Beauvoir argues that enfranchisement for women is not often protected. She uses the example of married women and says, "... the kept woman ... is not freed from the male just because she has a ballot paper in her

hands; ... she remains a vassal, imprisoned in her condition" (Beauvoir, p. 721). Being a member of a certain race confers on the woman a right to vote, but being a woman denies her that very right. When Du Bois argues for voting rights for black people, Beauvoir would consider it as not promoting equality of opportunities for both men and women. She would say that Du Bois does not attempt to consider the lived experiences of women when trying to advocate for their rights, leading to only men enjoying those rights and women not being equal to men.

Some people might argue that despite Du Bois not addressing issues of gender equality outside of the home, he does recognize opportunities of transcendence and, thus, an opportunity for gender equality that girls and women enjoy in the domestic sphere. The domestic sphere, that is, the home, is a place where women and girls have the opportunity of challenging the male members of the family and showing their transcendence. Du Bois, when talking about Josie and his family whom he meets when he was young and in search of a school to teach in, says, "The mother would scold the father for being so "easy"; Josie would roundly berate the boys for carelessness" (Du Bois, p. 39). Home is a place where Josie and her mother can be themselves and not have to be the other. They can scold the male members of their family if they do not behave properly in the home which they try very hard to maintain and decorate. Their scolding is a form of transcendence; they become subjects rather than objects. People would, therefore, say that Du Bois considers women's lived experience in the domestic sphere and recognizes it as a place where women can be considered equal to men.

While it may seem that opportunities of transcendence within the domestic sphere are indicative of some form of gender equality, there is evidence that suggests that women, in the long run, lapse into immanence and do not enjoy freedom as men do. Married women are often tasked with looking after the home – cleaning, cooking, taking care of children. For them, this

housework is often accompanied by lapsing into immanence. Beauvoir, describing the situation of married women at home, says, “Done every day, this work becomes monotonous and mechanical; it is laden with waiting ... there are long moments of passivity and emptiness” (Beauvoir, p. 481). Beauvoir uses the terms “monotonous”, “passivity”, and “emptiness” to mean immanence. Women do not get to do something new. They cannot grow and experience freedom when all they do is to perform the same tasks every day. Even girls are forced by their parents to engage in this housework. Beauvoir says that “Housework or everyday chores that the mother does not hesitate to impose on the girl student or trainee completely exhaust her” (Beauvoir, p. 346). Girls are often not allowed to go to schools and seek education. They cannot experience transcendence in a home where they do passive instead of active work. It is this immanence that does not let women and girls be equal to men. Men can go out into the world and experience freedom; for women, the home is their world. Small opportunities of transcendence, like scolding men for their improper behavior at home, that Du Bois points out in his text do not compensate for a life of immanence that women and girls live. Here, Beauvoir would say that Du Bois’ consideration of a part of the lived experience of women does not demonstrate that his arguments are directed toward equality between black men and women when he argues for racial equality between black and white Americans.

As discussed in this essay, Beauvoir would consider Du Bois’ arguments in his text as merely another brick in the wall of male supremacy because Du Bois fails to consider the lived experiences of black women that prevent her from achieving transcendence. For a person belonging to multiple categorizes that are minorities in terms of population and social status – being a woman, being black, being homosexual, etc. – it is important to account for their diverse and intersecting experiences when fighting for their equality.