Female Existentialist Freedom and Self-Becoming in *Maybe in Another Life*

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Abstract. Patriarchal structures have long confined women to subordinate roles, and literature offers a space to examine such structures and women's responses to them. This study uses feminist literary criticism, guided by Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist framework, to examine Hannah Martin's position as a woman and how her choices across two parallel life paths reflect her movement within that position, in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Maybe in Another Life* (2015), a narrative built around a single decision that splits Hannah's life into two trajectories. The research addresses two questions, the conditions that shape Hannah's position as a woman, and how her choices reflect her movement within that position. The study applies four concepts from Beauvoir's framework, woman as the Other, freedom and choice, transcendence and immanence, and the social construction of feminine identity. The method is descriptive qualitative, with the novel as the primary data source and the researcher as the main instrument for collecting and interpreting narrations, dialogues, and character actions. The results show that before the novel's split, Hannah exists within conditions that position her as the Other, marked by relational dependence, economic instability, and surrendering decisions to fate. Across both paths, she moves toward self-direction and the claiming of her own subjecthood, though neither path concludes with complete freedom.
Keywords: Feminist Existentialism, Freedom, Transcendence, the Other, Female Agency

INTRODUCTION

Historically, women's position in society has been shaped largely by patriarchal structures that confine them to subordinate roles in both public and private life. Patriarchy refers to male domination in both spheres, and patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior status women continue to hold in many societies (Sultana, 2011: 2). Women across the world have long faced inequality and secondary status as a result of these structures, positioned as victims of oppression and marginalization within patriarchal systems (Mohajan, 2022b: 12).

Over time, however, feminist discourse has challenged these limitations. The world has experienced four waves of feminism that have worked against women's abuse and oppression, and these movements have also accelerated related struggles for civil rights and gender equality (Mohajan, 2022a: 3). Feminist literary criticism emerged from this broader movement, closely linked to feminist thought and focused on how literature reflects gender inequality and women's social experiences (Sen & Das, 2021: 20). These discussions confirm that feminism remains a relevant and growing concern in understanding women's lives and social positions (Kjellgren, 2023: 1287).

One of the central concerns running through these discussions is the concept of female agency, understood as women's capacity to make choices, take action, and determine their own identities despite social or personal limitations (Pour & Rad, 2024: 10). Literature offers a natural space to examine this capacity, since fiction plays a central role in shaping and communicating women's agency to readers (Stuhler, 2024: 29). Through feminist literary analysis, readers are able to examine how female characters assert their identities and exercise agency under different circumstances (Dharshini & Moorthi, 2023: 2).

One literary work that engages these concerns directly is *Maybe in Another Life* (2015) by Taylor Jenkins Reid, a novel built around a single decision that splits its protagonist's

life into two parallel trajectories. The novel follows Hannah Martin, a woman whose choices across these two paths reveal both the conditions that constrain her and the ways she moves within them. This study applies Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist framework, drawing on the concepts of woman as the Other, freedom and choice, transcendence and immanence, and the social construction of feminine identity, to examine the conditions that shape Hannah's position as a woman and how her choices across the two life paths reflect her movement within that position.

At Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Beauvoir's framework has previously been applied to a female character's position and experiences by Martinus and Marsih (2022), whose study of Emoni Santiago in Acevedo's *With the Fire on High* found that Emoni moves beyond her dependence on and subordination to men across economic, personal, and marital dimensions, eventually achieving transcendence by refusing the position of the Other. While this earlier study shares the same theoretical foundation as the present research, it leaves untouched the question of how Beauvoir's concepts operate within a novel structured around two parallel life paths, and no existing study has turned its attention to Hannah Martin through this lens. This research addresses that gap by asking what social conditions and experiences shape Hannah Martin's position as a woman in *Maybe in Another Life*, and how her choices across the two life paths reflect her movement within that position.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism as articulated in *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949 and translated into English by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier in the 2011 Vintage Books edition. Beauvoir argues that man defines woman not in herself but in relation to himself, so that he is the Subject, the Absolute, while she is the Other (Beauvoir, 2011: 26). This construction of woman as the secondary term in the man-woman relation reflects not a natural inferiority but a historical and social arrangement in which man has claimed universal subjectivity while projecting onto woman everything he wishes to distance himself from.

What makes Beauvoir's contribution distinctly feminist is her insistence that this position is not fixed. Because existence precedes essence, a human being is not determined by any essential nature but is always in the process of making herself through choice and action, which means the condition of being the Other can be challenged and refused (Beauvoir, 2011: 26-29). Beauvoir also introduces the concept of bad faith to describe the retreat from freedom into the comfort of a predetermined role, presenting oneself as fixed and necessary rather than as a free subject who is always in the process of becoming.

Freedom, for Beauvoir, can never be understood apart from the concrete situation in which a person finds herself. She writes that freedom is accomplished only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms, and that present existence finds its justification only in its expansion toward an indefinitely open future (Beauvoir, 2011: 37). A woman denied education, economic independence, or social recognition is not simply a free being who has chosen not to exercise her freedom, since her freedom has been structurally curtailed, and that curtailment is itself a form of oppression. Choice, likewise, must be understood situationally, since women often derive genuine satisfaction from dependence, and refusing the position of the Other means renouncing the material and psychological security that dependence provides (Beauvoir, 2011: 10).

The opposition between transcendence and immanence is central to this framework. Transcendence refers to the human capacity to go beyond what one is given, to project oneself into the future, and to engage with the world through activity and self-determination, since every subject posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects (Beauvoir, 2011: 37). Immanence, by contrast, refers to a mode of existence enclosed within repetition and stagnation, in which freedom degrades into mere facticity. Beauvoir argues that the situation of woman has been structured to confine her to immanence, an autonomous freedom placed by men in a position where she is forced to assume herself as the Other and doomed to immanence (Beauvoir, 2011: 37).

The most foundational claim in *The Second Sex* opens the chapter on childhood, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir, 2011: 330), since no biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure the human female takes on in society, and it is civilization as a whole that produces what is called feminine. Femininity, in this account, is not a natural essence but the outcome of a long process of socialization in which the girl is directed toward passivity, dependence, and a definition of herself in relation to others. Together, these four concepts, woman as the Other, freedom and choice, transcendence and immanence, and the social construction of feminine identity, form the analytical basis for examining Hannah Martin's social conditions and her choices across the two life paths of *Maybe in Another Life*.

METHOD

This study applies a feminist literary approach to analyze female agency as shown through Hannah Martin's character in *Maybe in Another Life*. According to Tyson (2015: 83), feminist criticism examines how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges patriarchal ideology and gender inequality, particularly in the representation of women and their experiences. Through this approach, female characters are analyzed not merely as passive figures but as individuals capable of making decisions, expressing autonomy, and shaping their identities.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2014: 4), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This design is appropriate here because the research examines female agency through Hannah Martin's social conditions, experiences, and choices, and the data are presented in the form of words, dialogues, narrations, and character actions found in the novel rather than numerical data. The primary data source is the novel *Maybe in Another Life* (2015) by Taylor Jenkins Reid, published by Atria Books. The novel spans 352 pages and is narrated in the first person by Hannah Martin, structured into two alternating storylines that unfold from a single pivotal choice, one following the path in which Hannah stays with Ethan, and the other following the path in which she leaves with Gabby. Based on a systematic reading of the full text guided by the two research questions, the researcher identified 45 relevant data items, 25 addressing the conditions that shape Hannah's position as a woman and 20 addressing how her choices reflect her agency. The main research instrument is the researcher herself, who, following Merriam and Tisdell (2016: 244), serves as the primary means of accessing and interpreting meaning directly from the text. The researcher read the novel repeatedly, identified and classified passages relevant to the two research questions into a data classification table containing the quotation, category, subcategory, and page number, then analyzed the classified data descriptively using Beauvoir's framework to answer the research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part discusses Hannah Martin's position as a woman and her agency across the two life paths of *Maybe in Another Life*, addressing what conditions shape her situation and how her choices reflect her movement within it.

A. Hannah Martin's Social Conditions and Experiences as a Woman

Before the novel's pivotal moment divides Hannah's life into two paths, she is already living inside a set of conditions that have been accumulating for years, conditions that are not something she actively chooses but the situation she finds herself in. Her identity depends heavily on her relationships with men, her financial and professional life remains unstable and shaped by others, and her general approach to her own circumstances is to wait rather than to act.

1. Dependence on Romantic Relationships as a Source of Identity

Hannah's life in New York begins to unravel the moment Michael, a married man she had unknowingly become involved with, disappears from it. As she admits afterward, "When Michael was out of my life, I realized I didn't have much else going for me in New York" (Reid, 2015: 10), a sentence that exposes how her job, her apartment, and her sense of belonging had never formed a foundation of their own but had functioned as background details to a life organized around one person. When Gabby names the relationship directly, telling Hannah she should not allow a man to treat her like a mistress (Reid, 2015: 9), Hannah lets the advice "fly right through my head and out into the wind, as if it was meant for someone else" (Reid, 2015: 9), and reaches instead for the language of fate and coincidence to describe how she met Michael (Reid, 2015: 9). This substitution removes Hannah from any active role in what is happening, since if the relationship is fate, she is not making a choice but simply receiving something already determined. A similar structure reappears later in Los Angeles, when Hannah reflects that she may need someone in her corner in order to thrive (Reid, 2015: 120), showing that even her sense of her own capability arrives from someone else's belief before it arrives from her own. What Beauvoir (2011) describes as the position of woman as the Other is legible across these moments, a woman who understands herself not through her own terms but in relation to others, so naturalized that it no longer appears as a constraint.

2. Lack of Economic Independence and Career Direction

Standing in front of a mirror on her first night back in Los Angeles, Hannah takes stock of her situation, "I have no apartment and no job. I have no steady relationship or even a city to call home. I have no idea what I want to be doing with my life" (Reid, 2015: 13). The economic dimension of this condition becomes concrete when Hannah admits she does not know how much money is in her bank account because she is afraid to look (Reid, 2015: 19), a refusal to know that functions as a way of not having to decide. The instability sharpens further next to Gabby, who holds a title and an organization as VP of Development, while Hannah describes herself only as "a waitress. And not a particularly good one" (Reid, 2015: 8), despite both women starting from the same point. Even the limited economic ground available to Hannah is not fully her own to control, since she recalls that her boss "hit on me and implied that better shifts went to women who showed cleavage" (Reid, 2015: 11), meaning her income depends in part on how she presents her body to a man with authority over her schedule. When career direction eventually arrives, it comes not from Hannah's own initiative but from Carl Hudson, who offers her a receptionist position without her having sought it (Reid, 2015: 83). What Beauvoir (2011)

identifies as immanence, an existence that remains enclosed and unable to project itself toward a future built through one's own activity, is visible across these conditions.

3. Passive Acceptance of Her Social Circumstances

Alongside relational dependency and economic instability, Hannah carries a habit of waiting rather than acting that runs through nearly every stage of her life. Looking back on the period just after high school, she recalls that she "just assumed it would all fall into place, that the big things in life would take care of themselves" (Reid, 2015: 6), an assumption she admits, as an adult, she has never seriously examined. The same orientation shapes how she describes her repeated moves between cities, decisions she calls her own even as she insists none of them were a conscious choice, made in the hope of a place "just off in the future" (Reid, 2015: 3). This pattern reaches its clearest form on the night of Gabby's party, when Hannah tells herself, "I have to think that the small ones don't matter, that I'll end up where I need to end up no matter what I do. My fate will find me" (Reid, 2015: 25), transforming what had been an unexamined assumption into a fully reasoned belief. This waiting can be understood through two connected ideas in Beauvoir's account, conditioning, since women are directed from early in life toward passivity and dependence rather than activity (Beauvoir, 2011), and bad faith, the retreat from one's own freedom into a comfortable story that removes the need to choose or act (Beauvoir, 2011).

B. Hannah Martin's Choices and Agency Across Two Life Paths

The night of Gabby's welcome-home party is the point at which Hannah's story divides. In one path, an unplanned pregnancy forces her to make decisions that cannot be postponed. In the other, a near-fatal accident strips away nearly everything she might lean on, leaving her physically dependent and emotionally exposed. Both paths press against the way Hannah has always lived, and how she responds is the focus of this section.

1. Exercise of Freedom in Her Own Choices

The pregnancy path opens with the same drifting logic that has carried Hannah from city to city, but the discovery of the pregnancy removes drifting as an option, since her old reflex of blaming fate (Reid, 2015: 131) fails to resolve a situation with a due date and a body attached to it. What Hannah builds afterward is aggressively practical. She negotiates the price of a car down to eight thousand dollars without letting a condescending salesman decide the outcome (Reid, 2015: 116), then tells herself afterward, "I'm doing this. I'm making a life for myself" (Reid, 2015: 117), a repetition that performs the settling of a belief rather than confirming one already held. She repeats the same pattern negotiating her starting salary at the pediatric practice (Reid, 2015: 118), and draws a boundary around responsibility rather than affection when she refuses Ethan's offer to help, "I'm not going to make these things his problem" (Reid, 2015: 130), and when she tells Michael plainly, "I'm having the baby. Step up to the plate and deal with it or don't" (Reid, 2015: 172). Even her decision to spend one more night with Ethan before telling him about the pregnancy, made with the ending already named and in full view (Reid, 2015: 179), reflects what Beauvoir (2011) calls genuine choice rather than bad faith, a choice made with full awareness of what one's situation actually is. Beauvoir's (2011) account of freedom as situational, exercised inside pressured circumstances rather than in their absence, names what is happening across this path, an accumulation of small decisions that each reverse a habit Hannah has spent years practicing.

2. Attainment of Transcendence Through Self-Directed Action

The accident path gives Hannah eleven days in a hospital bed, dependent on others for nearly every physical need, at the exact moment she is developing feelings for her night nurse, Henry. When Ethan visits and it becomes clear he went home with another woman the same night as the accident, Hannah tells herself, "I want to be realistic, for once. I want to be grounded. I want to make smart decisions" (Reid, 2015: 70), using clarity while the choice is still open rather than waiting for time to make it unnecessary. She names her feelings for Henry directly as a repeated pattern rather than dressing them up as fate (Reid, 2015: 68), and acts on the recognition by deciding to tell him how she feels despite Gabby's caution, "I'm just stupid enough to have it now. So help me into the damn wheelchair" (Reid, 2015: 201), the kind of self-directed projection toward the future Beauvoir (2011) calls transcendence. The most complete reversal arrives when she confronts Mark over his infidelity to Gabby and rejects the language of fate she once used on herself, "Fate or not, our lives are still the results of our choices. I'm starting to think that when we don't own them, we don't own ourselves" (Reid, 2015: 221). The morning she is discharged, she states without flinching, "I am not ready to be a mother. I am nowhere near it" (Reid, 2015: 200), and later chooses to train as a nurse rather than remain in the receptionist role handed to her. The path closes with Hannah naming her home not as a city but as a person, "I found my home... It's Gabby" (Reid, 2015: 229), a conclusion arrived at only after her choices had already built it.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Hannah Martin's position as a woman and her agency across the two life paths of *Maybe in Another Life*, guided by two questions, what conditions shape her position, and how her choices reflect her movement within it. Before the novel's pivotal moment, Hannah exists within conditions that position her firmly as the Other, her identity organized around her relationships with men, her economic situation unstable and partly conditional on how she presents herself to male authority, and her general posture one of waiting rather than acting, a posture she eventually turns into a consciously held belief that her fate will find her.

Across both life paths, Hannah moves toward self-direction. In the pregnancy path, she projects herself concretely into the future by securing a car, a job, and an apartment through her own initiative, refuses to let Ethan or Michael define the terms of her situation, and makes a choice about her own relationship with full awareness of what it means. In the accident path, physical immobility becomes an unexpected catalyst, since stripped of the ability to move or distract herself, Hannah recognizes her feelings for Henry without reaching for fate, pursues him despite the risk of rejection, and eventually rejects the very language of fate she once relied on when she confronts Mark's infidelity. Neither path concludes with Hannah in a condition of complete or uncomplicated freedom, since a romantic relationship remains present at the close of both paths. What distinguishes these endings from her starting condition, however, is that the relationship now arrives after Hannah has already moved, decided, and oriented herself toward a future she has chosen, rather than being the condition her sense of self depends on.

These findings demonstrate that female agency in *Maybe in Another Life* is represented not as a fixed state Hannah either possesses or lacks, but as a situated and ongoing process of becoming, consistent with Beauvoir's (2011) understanding of transcendence as something continuously practiced within the conditions of one's actual life. The novel's structure of two parallel life paths performs this argument directly, showing that the

conditions shaping a woman's situation are not the same as her destiny, and that the same woman can move differently depending on what she chooses to do when a situation demands a response. This study contributes to feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating the continued relevance of Beauvoir's feminist existentialism as a framework for reading contemporary fiction structured around choice and its consequences.

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