

Book Review

Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection

Allison Weir. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 176 pages

Jason Knight
University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA

In *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection*, author Allison Weir, an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Gender Studies, searches for a more integrated and holistic view of identity, one based in freedom and connections. The book is divided into five chapters, along with a lengthy introduction and brief conclusion. Weir quotes extensively from other theorists and scholars of feminism and gender studies, such as: Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Chandra Monhanty, and Saba Mahmood, just to name a few. Weir demonstrates her knowledge issues of identity by explaining how they have been variously interpreted by other critics. She offers multiple perspectives on each question and then offers her suggestion of a more complex view of identity, while including the better aspects of each of these theories.

In her introduction, Weir states that her purpose in writing this book is to “attempt to loosen the knot of identity, to untangle some of the threads of identity that enable our freedom from the threads of identity that imprison us” (2). She seeks to separate the positive aspects of identity from the more negative components, so as to move toward an identity that is self-formed rather than dictated by social exclusionary norms. Her idea of identity is one that allows for change; it is not restricted by permanent categories. She suggests that fluidity of identity would allow for connections that are more easily formed.

Weir focuses in Chapter 1 on the opposing views of identity as freedom and identity as prison. She refers to Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor, respectively, as she presents each perspective. Foucault calls for a proactive, future-looking approach to the formation of identity, whereas Taylor emphasizes the necessity of knowing where one originated.

Weir finds fault in each argument because each focuses on the self. She proposes that social connections are necessary to a healthy identity and life. The autonomy associated with choosing one's social connections allows for a view of identity that is freeing rather than restricting.

In Chapter 2, Weir discusses identity in relation to "home." She explains that rather than argue whether home is beneficial or detrimental to the formation of identity, one must understand that "Home can also be understood as a locus of values that transcend dichotomies" (46). Home is a complex place that, ideally, should consist of: constructive disagreement, love, freedom, and history. Weir quotes from Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison to illustrate the importance of relationships, connections to other people, as a part of home and, therefore, one's identity. Relationships help one understand one's origins; evolving relationships also provide a path for personal growth.

The next chapter looks at feminism on a global scale and questions the legitimacy of solidarity for solidarity's sake. Weir argues that women cannot simply be grouped together in one all-encompassing category. To pretend sameness among all women is no more an acceptable practice for feminists than it is for misogynists. Weir promotes a more human understanding of each other's values, instead of an assumed uniformity that categorizes and limits women to one identity. Not all women are white, middle-class, and Western, and Weir believes that the move away from this description of women as definitive is already in progress. Acceptance of differences allows for freedom in identity.

Weir opens Chapter 4 with reference to Simone de Beauvoir and her question, "What is a woman?" Weir, then, poses her own query: Why do feminists permit women to be defined as strictly in opposition to men? She writes that women are more complex than this and clearly cannot be so simply categorized. She also discusses queer and transgender theories and their coincidence with feminist theory. Woman, as gender, is constructed; it is and should be constructed by women. Moreover, "women" should be inclusive of "whomever might identify, however partially or contingently, weakly or strongly, as women, with various bodies, sexualities, orientations, and gender identities, and in various transitions" (101). She emphasizes the necessity of openness, of community, for the realization of the desire for connection and freedom.

In the final chapter, Weir investigates the question, “Are there different ways of being free?” in the context of the “piety movement” that is part of the current Islamic revival. She explains that, perhaps, the “women of the veil” are enacting a form of freedom. They choose to be involved in this movement as a way to be closer to God. They subordinate themselves to God. Often, their decisions are actually in opposition to their husbands’ wills. Freedom, then, exists in the right to choose to be part of and connected with a group of people with the same objective of seeking a certain identity. Weir does, however, admit that these women are still being oppressed because their choice is dictated by God.

Weir revisits each of these chapters, briefly, in her conclusion. In the end, she comes back to Foucault and freedom. She takes a postmodern view when she suggests that “We need to recognize a plurality of ways of being modern, and a plurality of experiments in freedom...a diversity of ways of being free” (154). She maintains the view of identity that is inclusive and complex, not one based on binaries and paradox.

Allison Weir embraces a recursive writing strategy in *Identities and Freedom*. She outlines her argument in the Introduction, and then elucidates her ideas throughout the chapters. In each chapter, she reminds the reader of what she has already mentioned. She is not afraid to repeat herself, if the repetition serves to ensure that the reader understands her argument. Most of the time, it does. Due to the complexity of both her topic of Identity and the work of other theorists, her recursive method of presenting the argument is beneficial. Still, this book may not be approachable for some audiences; some prior knowledge of feminist theory and gender studies, such as the theories put forth by Judith Butler, is beneficial to one’s understanding of the nuances of her argument.

Weir’s argument is a search. It is a search for a better, more inclusive, view of identity. An identity should include freedom and connections: freedom from arbitrary restrictions as well as freedom to choose; connections to other people with whom one can identify, communities. Weir emphasizes that women are not uniform; they possess differences in origins, desires, cultures. Therefore, a single definition of “women,” a single identity, is impossible. Identity should include rather than exclude. Freedom to choose is the key to a positive identity.

Weir's book is more than an introductory text to feminism and identity. It is a well-thought and developed argument for a change in the way that feminists and all people see identity, specifically identity as woman. Weir's knowledge of past and current thought on the topic of identity establishes her as a credible voice in the debate. Those interested in following the current of identity politics will benefit from reading *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection*.

Biographical Note: Jason Knight is a Ph. D. student in the English Department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, USA. He is interested in modern and postmodern literature and theory as well as the American Southern Gothic. He is drawn to people and characters who inhabit the margins. E-mail: jxk7635@louisiana.edu