Ambiguous Identities: Gesturing Towards an Intersectional Conception of Freedom

By Shaun Soman

ABSTRACT. Writing in The Ethics of Ambiguity (1948), existential philosopher and feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir declared that each individual’s freedom depends upon that of others. This claim was meant to motivate others to not remain complicit in the oppression of others; however, when considering the xenophobic rhetoric within Western feminists’ rhetoric about “liberating” Muslim women, one realizes that this demand warrants further scrutiny. In this paper, I apply Alia Al-Saji’s work on Western feminists’ approaches to liberating “other” women to de Beauvoir’s “we” in order to strengthen this latter concept. Overall, my aim with this work is to demonstrate that an intersectional understanding of “we” is necessary for collective resistance efforts to avoid perpetuating other forms of oppression.

Keywords: “we” as legion, Western feminist rhetoric, initial hesitation

In this paper, I critically evaluate Simone de Beauvoir’s theories regarding freedom and oppression in light of Alia Al-Saji’s analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the United States’ war on terrorism; although de Beauvoir’s work provides a useful basis for both understanding and responding to systemic oppression, I argue that her theories prove insufficient when taken alone. First, I relate de Beauvoir’s understanding of community and interdependent freedom in order to outline the divide de Beauvoir makes between men and women; as I stress throughout this work, this preliminary divide does not fully capture the intersectional nature of identity. Second, I offer de Beauvoir’s claim that
one’s own freedom may only be guaranteed by actively working towards the freedom of others in beginning to interrogate which women speak—and which are silenced—within resistance movements; here, I introduce ‘intersectionality’ as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Third, in drawing upon Al-Saji’s examination of American rhetoric concerning the liberation of “other” women, I demonstrate the shortcomings of de Beauvoir’s generalized “we” insofar as it motivates and reinforces Western imperialism in practice. Given this, while I do not reject this “we” outright, I argue that it is insufficient for collective resistance efforts when taken in isolation from practices of listening. Fourth, by considering the myriad perspectives which feminists maintain in relation to multicultural concerns, I scrutinize what constitutes freedom and how we can attain such freedom. Fifth, I apply de Beauvoir’s own claim that “women... are best suited to elucidate the situation of women” to critique attempts to project Western feminists’ conception of freedom to non-Western contexts (2011, p. 15). Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to both acknowledge the strengths of de Beauvoir’s work and address several drawbacks in order to amend—thereby strengthening—collective, intersectional resistance.

Two overarching concerns motivate my analysis: a) how do we define “community?” and b) how does this definition guide our actions? Initially, one might understand human communities as intersubjective. In contemplating this point, de Beauvoir (1976/1948) crucially stated, “[W]e’ is legion and not an individual; each one depends upon others, and what happens to me by means of others depends upon me as regards its meaning...It is this interdependence which explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful” (p. 82). Evidently, each individual—by virtue of existing within society—is subject to the will of others. Given this dependence upon others, one’s freedom is not self-determined, but rather depends upon whether other subjects “open the future” to this individual or transform said individual into an object by closing this future (de Beauvoir,
In the latter case, one encounters oppression, which—as de Beauvoir (1976/1948) argued in the context of gender—“divides the world into two clans” (p. 83): men and women. At this point, one discerns two weaknesses with de Beauvoir’s gender division. First, it is crucial to note that this dichotomy problematically overlooks non-binary individuals who may also face gendered oppression within Western contexts. A second concern that resonates more closely with the particular aims of this paper is that de Beauvoir defines “women” within a Western European framework; thus, it is imperative that we critique de Beauvoir’s subsequent conception of what “genuine” freedom entails for all women, regardless of culture. Before one may question this freedom, one must consider how oppression affects groups rather than individuals, and how this united “we” may perpetuate oppression of others if it does not recognize the intersectional nature of identity.

Detailing the socialization process which conditions female-bodied individuals to adhere to traditional constructs of femininity, de Beauvoir (2011/1949) claimed, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 283). For de Beauvoir, this Woman is unequivocally defined as “Other” in relation to Man (2011/1949, p. 6); moreover, Woman’s status as Other is present “[i]n all civilizations,” a claim which demands—and will receive—further analysis in light of Al-Saji’s work (de Beauvoir, 2011/1949, p. 167). It is this generalized (and, as I stress, oversimplified) division into men and women that de Beauvoir understands oppression. In order to begin combating this oppression, de Beauvoir was primarily concerned with consciousness raising within the female community; just as the Marxist would attempt to unite the proletariat against class-based oppression, so would the de Beauvoirian hope to unite women under a collective “we [women]” in order to resist gendered oppression (de Beauvoir, 2011/1949, p. 8). Recalling that this “we” acknowledges the interconnectivity of individuals, one may understand how oppression functions. Stated simply, systematic oppression operates at a group—rather than an
individual—level; if one is oppressed on the basis of gender, for example, it follows that others who share this gendered identity may also experience a similar form of oppression. Given this, one ought to work towards the freedom of others in order to ensure one’s own freedom, for the latter is impossible without the former. While this movement towards the liberation of others is perhaps admirable, one must not disregard the issue of which women speak, and which are silenced, within resistance efforts.

When considering which groups—which “we’s”—experience oppression, either as oppressor or oppressed, it is overly simplistic to claim that only men oppress and only women are oppressed. As has been thoroughly discussed by feminist thinkers, each individual’s experiences are informed by the various elements of which one’s identity is composed; that is to say, our identities are intersectional. Though not yet explicitly defined at the time, intersectionality’s foundation can be traced back to “the political movement of Black women, Chicana and Latina women, and other women of color” throughout the early 1980s (Carastathis, 2014, p. 306). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) explicitly labeled this concept to demonstrate how prevailing conceptions of discrimination tended to erase “black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Crenshaw (1991) further defined three aspects of intersectionality. First, “structural intersectionality” examines “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes [their] actual experience of...[oppression] different from that of white women” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1245). Second, “political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Third, “representational intersectionality” includes “both the ways in which...images [of women of color] are produced through a confluence of prevalent...
narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color” (Crenshaw, 1991; p. 1283). Of these aspects, representational intersectionality and its approach to culturally constructed images are most useful for my examination of how non-Western women of color are represented in both media and feminist discourse.

To illustrate the necessity of an intersectional approach to understanding the contemporary feminist rhetoric surrounding the liberation of “other” Muslim women, one may turn towards Alia Al-Saji. As Al-Saji (2009) lucidly argued, Muslim women are depicted within Western rhetoric as “passive victims...of their religion or culture from which they require liberation” (p. 65); moreover, this purportedly oppressed status is uncritically understood as essential to Islam. Stated differently, Islam and (Western) feminism are constructed as mutually exclusive entities. Al-Saji (2009) critiqued this Western feminist discourse, which both, “assumes rather than deconstructs the dichotomy of Islam and the West” and takes “the latter to be the only appropriate and perfectible ground for feminist subjectivity” (p. 66). Here, one notes that Western feminists are susceptible to reinforcing xenophobia and racism through their projected conceptions of oppression; by pointing towards the relative freedom experienced by women in Western countries to criticize the veil (in its myriad forms specific to various groups within Islam) worn by Muslim women, the uncritical Western feminist reinforces the narrative which holds Muslim nations as “backwards” or “uncivilized.” Such claims present a blatant problem for the de Beauvoirian; although de Beauvoir (1976/1948) described freedom as genuinely willing itself “only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the freedom of others,” it seems as though “liberating” Muslim women from the veil would actually reinforce their oppression by Western imperialism (p. 90).

In order to potentially resolve this issue, one may, somewhat ironically, refer back to de Beauvoir’s own work.
Recalling the claim that women are particularly suited to describe the situation of women, it would perhaps behoove one to remain somewhat skeptical of the likelihood that non-Western women find themselves “best” suited to describe the situation of non-Western women. To paraphrase de Beauvoir, it seems to be the case that Muslim women “know the [Muslim] world more intimately than [non-Muslim women] do because [the former’s] roots are in it” (1976/1948, p. 15). At this point, a number of potentially problematic counterpoints might be offered. Firstly, one could – rightly, to some degree – point out that women in Middle Eastern countries are, as a general rule, not afforded the same educational opportunities as Western women; given this, the Western feminist might take it upon themselves to “educate” non-Western women about their oppression. Despite the benevolent intentions of such an action, one must remain wary of perpetuating imperialist narratives which holds non-Western countries as “uncivilized” due to disparities in educational opportunities; moreover, such actions would overlook the privileged position occupied by individuals who do find themselves in a position to pursue higher educational opportunities. Secondly, the Western feminist might raise the concern that if they were to do nothing, non-Western women—and, for the de Beauvoirian, all individuals—would remain unfree. In an attempt to assuage this latter concern, I consider how Western feminists can simultaneously work towards the liberation of non-Western women while remaining mindful of not reinforcing white, Western imperialism through listening before acting.

Presaging the xenophobic rhetoric which has partially defined contemporary feminism in the West, de Beauvoir (1976/1948) claimed that the “Koran treats [women] with the most absolute contempt” (p. 89). While one might understand de Beauvoir’s statement as being made in an attempt to generally unite all women—regardless of cultural origin—under the “we,” one must acknowledge how such broadly sweeping claims reinforce xenophobia.
Given this, how might one address and adequately respond to the oppression of Muslim women without effectively perpetuating Western imperialism? The answer is, as I turn to detail, deceptively simple: one ought to first listen before acting. As Al-Saji (2009) claimed, what is needed is a move to bracket “the framework of freedom and oppression that prefigures the representation of Muslim women” (p. 79). This bracketing, which leads to critical reflection, incites hesitation (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 79). Responding to the aforementioned concern that doing nothing is unacceptable, one must note that this hesitation does not lead to or amount to inaction, but merely dissuades uncritical and potentially problematic action by causing us to listen to the perspectives of Muslim women. Ultimately, this means that feminists who seek to “liberate” Muslim women ought to listen to these women prior to working with them rather than simply deciding what is “best” for them. By listening, one may develop a more nuanced understanding of Islam; rather than be inherently oppressive, and thus inferior to Western society, one may understand “how what is so often presented as progressive and liberating for Muslim women in fact partakes of a colonial and paternalistic logic of oppression” (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 80).

To demonstrate the advantage of Al-Saji’s approach and to further emphasize the need for intersectional approaches to oppression, consider the broader anti-Muslim rhetoric following the September 11 attacks. Puar and Rai (2002) related how much of the black humor describing the appropriate punishment for Osama bin Laden focused on making him “have a sex change operation and live in Afghanistan as a woman,” which simultaneously revealed “racist, sexist, and homophobic suggestions” (p. 126). By failing to critically examine “how the dominant media are using the figure of the burkha-ed woman in what are often racist and certainly chauvinistic representations of the Middle East,” Western feminists risk silencing and erasing the voices of Muslim women (Puar & Rai, 2002, p. 127). Although Western feminists might view Muslim women’s
experience as oppressive and may certainly be inclined towards liberating these women, action motivated by uncritical acceptance of these dominant images effectively impedes their efforts by perpetuating racist narratives. This is not to suggest that Western feminists should unconcern themselves with the experience of Muslim women, but rather to emphasize the need to amplify this latter group’s collective voice. Of course, simply listening will not defeat oppression; action is necessary to undermine oppressive systems. The primary benefit of listening is that we can more adequately understand the needs of Muslim women as they themselves articulate such needs. In this way, we might move away from political action motivated by inaccurate and supremely problematic media depictions of Muslim women to informed by actual experiences. Beyond aiding Muslim women in liberating themselves, a nuanced critique of anti-Muslim rhetoric allows for a greater understanding of the oppression of LGBTQ persons both at home and abroad (Puar & Rai, 2002).

The aforementioned move towards listening rather than acting first is heavily indebted to Al-Saji’s “initial hesitation...[which] aims to destabilize representational frameworks that close down the imagination and limit the possibilities for feminist solidarity” (2009, p. 79–80). Rather than responding to oppression with indecision, as was the de Beauvoirian’s concern above, feminists who adopt Al-Saji’s framework may find themselves better suited to combat not only gendered oppression, but also systemic oppression deriving from colonialism. As Al-Saji (2009) stated, the initial hesitation, when coupled with bracketing—or, the suspension of judgment of—“the framework of freedom and oppression that prefigures the representation and knowledge of Muslim women...[may] dispel certain seemingly paralyzing dilemmas...that confront feminists when it comes to Muslim women” (p. 79–80). Oddly enough, such an adoption seems to resonate with de Beauvoir’s theories regarding the ambiguity of ethical decisions more than feminist responses which uncritically apply “ready-
made binaries” such as freedom-oppression, modernity-religion, and West-Islam” (Al-Saji, 2009, p. 79). By committing to first listen, to truly listen and understand others’ perspectives, and then to shape our actions around those voices, we allow ourselves the opportunity to develop a more well-rounded conception of freedom. If de Beauvoirian is genuinely concerned with maintaining an open-future for individuals, then it seems outright hypocritical to reject certain possibilities as some Western feminists do in regards to Muslim women.

Admittedly, criticisms which may be raised against de Beauvoir benefit in part from hindsight and subsequent theoretical developments in the realms of philosophy and feminism. Although de Beauvoirian and Western feminists have been the subjects of my criticism within this paper, I do not mean to imply that such positions must be utterly abandoned; quite the contrary, it seems as though placing various theories into “conversation” with one another—which has only been hinted at in this particular analysis—would prove conducive to the development and flourishing of coalitions which would ideally work together to end oppression in all its forms. Certainly, de Beauvoir’s contributions to feminist philosophy can neither be understated nor simply ignored; however, it falls upon each of us to engage in an ongoing, ever-reflective critique of our actions and the various factors which motivate them. Beyond this critique, one effectively adapts or “updates” de Beauvoir’s work in referring to Al-Saji’s work. In compelling each of us to undertake “the difficult work of concrete communication, self-critical reflection, and attention to historical and contextual specificity being carried out,” Al-Saji (2009) outlined the means for us to disrupt commonly accepted binaries whose unexamined application impedes our efforts towards achieving feminist solidarity (p. 80). Ultimately, such ambitions hold de Beauvoirian accountable to consider multicultural perspectives and concerns; as de Beauvoir (2011/1949) herself declared upon concluding The Second Sex, “Let us beware lest our lack of imagination
impoverish the future” (p. 765). In the case of feminist discourse, we must conceive of a world in which Western notions are not uncritically accepted as inherently free to the detriment of non-Western cultures.

References


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