



Not Born but Made: A Review of Judith Butler's Gender Theory

Axeena

M.A. English, Department of English Literature and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

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Abstract— This paper looks at Judith Butler's important essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" from 1988. She challenges the idea that gender is something we are born with. According to Butler, we form our gender through repeated actions influenced by social expectations. Her argument, based on feminist and philosophical concepts, questions the usual link between sex and gender. This paper explains Butler's points and further analyzes how these points relate to contemporary conversations about gender, identity, and self-expression. It also acknowledges some shortcomings in her argument regarding lack of attention to how race, class, and colonialism structure gendered experiences. Nevertheless, Butler's theory is still powerful and respectable in considering gender as something fluid, social constructed and participatory.



Keywords— Judith Butler, Gender identity, Postcolonial feminism, Caste and gender, Gender roles, social construction of gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

Judith Butler's 1988 essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* is widely seen as a major turning point in feminist and queer theory. This essay critiques the assumption that gender is biologically determined or universal, and articulates that gender is merely a learned performance, in conjunction with the sociocultural conditions of being, doing, and expressing. In short, Butler moves "gender" from an essentialist-pre-existing concept of gender, to what it is to do gender - in the world.

This paper revisits Butler's argument for the purpose of clarifying the theory in a more down-to-earth language and more digestible rubric. This paper discusses the relevance of Butler's ideas in current conversations about identity, gendered expression excluding new socially normative expectations of the time. In contrast though the paper discusses the value of caste, class, and colonial histories attention to gendered experiences and the systematic exclusion from many places of analysis. While Butler's work provides a strong argument to think of gender being fluid and constructed there is also a need for

contextualizing and extending Butler's ideas in ways which are more diverse in their understandings of social practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Judith Butler's intriguing and important theory of gender performativity has largely attracted the attention of scholars in gender studies, philosophy, and queer theory. Many supporters of Butler's work have sought to extend her arguments to analyses of drag performance, queer identity, and social activism. For instance, José Esteban Muñoz enriches Butler's theory of gender performativity by proposing 'queer futurity', and demonstrating that performance can engender hope for futures that have not emerged yet.

Nonetheless, Butler's work raises questions. Scholars such as bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty contended that Butler's theory relies on the West, white, middle-class experiences too heavily; unless gender experiences are examined through the lens of race, class, caste, colonial and other social histories, and inequities,

then one cannot radicalize queer gender identity especially in the context of non-Western countries.

This paper seeks to advance both the possibilities and problems of Butler's work while interrogating both what is possible and impossible in her theory today.

III. SUMMARY

In her 1988 essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* Judith Butler often explicitly opposes the idea of a natural or innate identity of gender. Butler writes that we should not consider gender to be a natural identity or an innate identity, but instead, is something we learn how to repeat through time, embodied in what we do, how we speak, what we do, how we move, and how we dress. Therefore, our gender can be read as something that we perform instead of something we are inherently.

Butler builds her argument on earlier feminist thinkers and philosophers, particularly Simone de Beauvoir. She quotes de Beauvoir's well-known line, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," to show that gender is not based on biology. Rather, gender is something that we nurture over time as we do what our culture asks of us as "men" and "women".

A key point of her work is that this performance of gender is not fully within our control. Young people are trained from an early age about how they should be acting based on their assigned gender, and these roles are performed so often that they are assumed to be natural, despite not actually being so. Butler compares this to acting to a play, we are given a script (although we often do not know we were given it) and we keep performing those same roles because they are considered "normal."

Butler also suggests that not performing gender in a way that society expects can lead to punishment or rejection. For example, those unable to fit into categories of masculinity or femininity as dictated by hegemonic masculinity may experience negative consequences such as bullying for their non-conformity or stigma attached to their non-conformity that prevents them from feeling acceptance deriving from social identification with current social values. It is again easy to see how powerful and controlling gender can be.

However, Butler believes that because gender is based on repetition it can be subverted. Traditionally gender roles can be challenged through alternative gender performances. Examples include drag performers or non-binary individuals, and those who challenge gender norms outside of these identities. These performances help demonstrate that gender is not an essence, but rather is improvable.

Butler also draws attention to the way some feminist theories conceive of "woman" as a singular and universal experience. This according to Butler, ignores the various ways that people experience gender in relation to race, class, and culture. Butler argues for a different, more mobile, and expansive approach to thinking about gender.

Butler's main point is that gender is not something we are, but something we do. Since it is an activity, it also changes, is not fixed. By thinking about gender as performative, Butler creates meaningful space for people to resist, question, and create different ways to express identity.

IV. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Judith Butler's argument that gender is a performance and not something we are inherently born with is one of the most powerful aspects of her article. It made me rethink gender. Rather than viewing it as a static quality, she clarifies that we learn behaviour as "male" and "female" through a repetition of what public life expects from us. These minute behaviours, like ways to talk, ways to sit, ways to dress and move, add up over time and present an illusion that gender is biological. Butler is clear that this is not the case, which I think is a really important and powerful point.

One component of her theory that I was particularly taken by is that she identifies pressures on people to act in a particular manner in relation to their gender. From very young children we learn about how boys are supposed to act, just as we learn about how girls are supposed to act. Butler shows us that it is not just abstractly impersonal pressure, but social systems that hold weight. Those people who do not conform to these rules, including queer and trans people, are subject to judgement, and exclusion. Her theory provides an explanation of why, and also shows us just how much society has power over these norms.

What I also appreciated was that her work allows for change. Because gender is produced through repetition, it can also be changed by performing it in new or different ways. The people who expect to transgress or confuse their genders contest the assumption of only two fixed positions. So, her theory feels hopeful and open to new possibilities.

I was struck by what I assumed would be a funny aspect of her writing; it was not linguistic which apparently comes from a PhD program, but it was substance to her writing for that she had a clear imagery of, experience in using, and importance behind her ideas, that are likely to reach many more people if they were written in a more accessible way.

Additionally, I observed that Butler downplays gender arising from caste, class, race, or culture. She produces a lot of work that very much orientates itself into a Western world view. Whereas places like India, gender is much more tangled with caste and religion and tradition. Feminist theorists, and cultural theorists like bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, acknowledge that these differences matter and we should observe these variations. By leaving these aspects of identity unexamined, Butler's theory may be out of touch with understanding, or even addressing the experiences of peoples by different parts of the world.

She also speaks of resistance but does not provide many concrete examples of what resistance looks like in everyday life. It is one thing to say we could repeat gender differently, but that can be difficult in the real world especially in cultures where breaking gender norms would result in harm or rejection.

Despite these problems I see within her theory, I still consider Butler's theory significant. It illustrates how gender is not fixed or natural, and promotes the ability to question and imagine alternatives to how we might be. It urges us to transcend labels and be open to multiple forms of identity. In order to make it even more valuable, however, I feel her theory needs to engage with more voices and experiences from various locations and backgrounds.

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