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# An Analysis of Gender Identity Theory in the Philosophy of Judith Butler

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**Abstract**: *This study explored Judith Butler's idea of gender identity. The topic is important because gender is a subject of debate in philosophy, feminism, and society today. Butler challenges the belief that gender is something fixed from birth. She argues that gender is performed through repeated actions, words, and behaviors shaped by society. Her theory, called gender performativity, shows that gender roles are created by rules and traditions, not by biology alone. The study used a philosophical and analytical method. It reviewed Butler's main books and other writers who have studied her work. It also examined earlier feminist and queer theories to place Butler's ideas in context. The analysis looks at the strengths and weaknesses of her theory based on different scholarly views. The findings showed that Butler's work has greatly influenced how people understand gender. Her ideas have helped movements for LGBTQ+ rights and have encouraged many to question and resist strict gender rules. However, some critics say her theory focuses too much on language and ignores everyday problems like violence and poverty. Others considered that her work may not apply equally in every culture. The study concluded that Butler's theory is an important tool for change. It opened space for more inclusive and flexible understandings of gender. Even with its limits, her philosophy encourages people to question unfair systems and imagine new ways of living with freedom and equality.*
**Keywords**: Judith Butler, gender identity, gender performativity, feminist theory, queer theory, essentialism, social construction, postmodern philosophy.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender identity is a highly debated topic in contemporary philosophy and social theory. Judith Butler's theory of gender identity challenges the idea that gender is a fixed or natural characteristic,

arguing instead that it is socially constructed through repeated actions and performances.[1] This view aligns with earlier feminist theorists such as Kate Millett, Sally Haslanger, Michael Kimmel, and Mari Mikkola, who have all explored gender as a social construct. The distinction between sex and gender was first introduced by Robert Stoller in 1970, a distinction that later became widely accepted in feminist thought. However, Butler goes further by suggesting that sex itself is also a social construct, challenging the traditional view that biology determines identity.[2]

Butler's theory of performativity draws from John Searle's concept of speech acts and J.L. Austin's idea of performative utterances, which demonstrate that language can shape reality. Jacques Derrida's theory of iterability, which suggests that meaning is derived from repetition, further influenced Butler's understanding of gender as a continuous reenactment rather than a fixed state.[3] By applying these ideas to gender, Butler argues that gender identity is not something one has but something one does through repeated social behaviors. This performative nature of gender highlights its fluidity and challenges the idea of inherent gender differences.[4]

Judith Butler argues that gender is a performance composed of repeated acts, making it a parody of itself. In Gender Trouble, Butler asserts that gender is not an expression of an innate identity but a set of imitative acts that create the illusion of stability. She contends that gender is not an imitation of something real; rather, it is a copy of copies, with no original archetype.[5] To illustrate this, she uses the concept of drag, where individuals perform exaggerated gender traits, exposing the artificiality of gender norms. Drag does not imitate a real gender but rather reveals the instability of binary categories. This performativity shows that gender is both an act and a constraint, as choices are shaped by societal norms rather than individual will. Thus, gender as parody highlights its constructed and fluid nature.[6]

Butler's gender identity theory challenges traditional understandings rooted in biological determinism. Early feminist theorists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, highlighted the distinction between biological sex and the social construct of gender. Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" emphasized the cultural processes that shape identity.[7] Butler built on this foundation by framing gender as performative, meaning it is constituted through repeated behaviors that conform to societal expectations. Butler's work is influenced by post-structuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault, who analyzed the role of power and discourse in

[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 40-42.
[2] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge, 1993: 32-34.
[3] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988: 37-40.
[4] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 40-45.
[5] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20-22.
[6] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 25-27.
[7] John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962: 10-11.

shaping identity. Foucault's concept of biopower, as outlined in *The History of Sexuality*, informs Butler's argument that societal norms regulate bodies and identities through cultural practices. Additionally, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy underpins Butler's critique of binary categories, enabling her to question the male/female and sex/gender dichotomies.[8]

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler expanded on these ideas, addressing the interplay between materiality and discursive practices. She argued that while bodies exist, their meanings are shaped through cultural and social frameworks, highlighting the performative processes that give rise to identity.[9] This intersection of the symbolic and material dimensions of gender remains central to her critique of essentialism in feminist and queer thought. Despite its theoretical rigor, Butler's work has faced criticism. Scholars like Nussbaum have argued that her focus on performativity risks neglecting the material realities of those who face oppression based on gender identity. Moreover, critics have highlighted the complexity of Butler's language, which can limit the accessibility of her ideas to broader audiences.[10] By interrogating how gender is constructed and performed, Butler's theory has redefined the boundaries of feminism and queer theory. Her critique of binary gender frameworks aligns with the broader objectives of post-structuralism, emphasizing the instability of identity categories.[11]

Her seminal text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not an innate characteristic but an ongoing social construct shaped through repetitive acts and societal norms. This study aims to explore Butler's gender identity theory, critically examining its philosophical roots, implications for feminist thought, and relevance to ongoing debates about identity politics.[12]

Understanding Gender and Identity

Gender and identity are two important ideas in human life. People often think they mean the same thing, but they are different. Sex is about being male or female at birth, based on physical parts like the body and organs. This is decided by nature. Gender, on the other hand, is about how a person acts, speaks, dresses, and lives based on what society expects from males and females. Gender is not something people are born with.[13] It is something they learn from the world around them. Identity means how people see themselves and how others see them. It is about how a person

[8] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000: 203-204.
[9] Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 31, (1), 1995: 31–55.
[10] Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000: 50-52.
[11] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 78-79.
[12] Mari Mikkola, *Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017: 50-53.
[13] Alice Eagly, *Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social Role Interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1987: 2-3.

feels inside and the kind of person they believe they are. Gender identity is part of personal identity.[14] It is about whether someone feels like a male, a female, both, or neither. Some people feel they are the same as the gender they were given at birth. Others feel different. This makes gender identity something personal, subjective, and not the same for everyone.[15]

Sex is biological. This means it is about the physical body and cannot be changed easily. People are born with male or female body parts, and doctors use this to say if a baby is a boy or a girl. But gender is social. It is about the roles and rules people follow because of their sex.[16] These roles change depending on culture, time, and place. For example, in some countries, it is okay for men to cry and show emotions. In other places, people expect men to be strong and quiet. In some cultures, women work outside the home and are leaders. In other cultures, women are expected to stay at home. This shows that gender is not natural and not the same everywhere. It changes depending on what the society believes is right or wrong for men and women.[17]

People learn how to act like a man or a woman from a very young age. This is called socialization. Socialization is the way society teaches people the norms, values, cultures, traditions, and acceptable practices commonly agreed upon by all members of society. Family, school, religion, the media, and friends all help in teaching these values and norms. From birth, children are treated differently based on their sex. Boys may be dressed in blue, and girls in pink. Boys may get toy cars, and girls may get dolls. As children grow, they watch how their parents behave. They learn by copying what they see.[18] A girl may watch her mother cook and clean, and she may think that is what women must do. A boy may see his father fixing things and believe that is what men must do. In school, teachers may expect boys to be more active and girls to be quiet. In religious places, boys and girls may be taught different things about their roles in life. On television, people see women acting in soft, caring roles and men being powerful. All these things help to shape gender identity. People begin to believe that this is how they must behave because of their sex.[19]

Many thinkers and writers have helped to explain the difference between sex and gender. One prominent scholar on this discourse is Ann Oakley, a British sociologist. She wrote about how sex and gender are not the same. She said sex is biological, but gender is learned. This means people are not born knowing how to act like men or women.[20] Instead, they are taught by the society they

[14] Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, 20-21.
[15] Raewyn Connell, *Gender in World Perspective.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009: 98-99.
[16] Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books, 1987: 76-78.
[17] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25-27.
[18] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 54-57.
[19] Sandra Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing." *Psychological Review* 88, (4), 1981: 354–364.
[20] Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society*, London: Temple Smith, 1972: 88.

live in. Oakley explained that society teaches boys and girls in different ways. Boys are taught to be strong, brave, and not to cry. Girls are taught to be caring, compassionate, quiet, and to help others. These lessons are given to children in simple ways every day, such as the toys they are given, the clothes they wear, and the jobs they are asked to do at home.[21]

Gender identity is also about how people feel inside. Some people feel happy with the gender they were given at birth. Others do not. These people may feel that their true self is different from their body. They may feel like the opposite gender or like no gender at all. Some people are transgender. This means their gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a person born as male may feel they are truly female. They may change the way they look, speak, or dress to match their true gender identity.[22]

Some people are non-binary. This means they do not feel like only a man or only a woman. They may feel like both, or neither. These people may use different words to describe themselves, such as "genderqueer," "genderfluid," or "agender." This shows that gender identity is personal and complex. It is not something that can be seen from the outside. It is how a person feels inside, and it may contradict the biological structure of their body. This also shows that there is more than just two genders, and people should be free to express their true selves without fear.[23]

Gender roles change across cultures and times. What one culture sees as normal for men or women may be different in another culture. For example, in ancient Egypt, both men and women wore makeup and jewelry. In some African societies, women have been warriors and leaders. In other places, men take care of the home and children while women work outside. Even in modern times, ideas about gender are changing.[24] More people now accept that men can show feelings and women can be leaders. In many countries, people are fighting for gender equality, which means men and women should have the same rights and chances in life. These changes show that gender is not fixed. It is made by society, and people can change it. People now talk more about allowing everyone to be themselves, no matter what their gender is. This helps people feel respected and safe in their skin.[25]

Understanding gender identity helps us respect others. Everyone is different. Not everyone feels the same way about their gender. Some people may not look or act in the way society expects, but

[21] Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society*, 93
[22] Eagly, *Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social Role Interpretation*, 24-26.
[23] Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barke, *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 95-97.
[24] Stephen Whittle, *Respect and Equality: Transsexual and Transgender Rights*. London: Cavendish Publishing, 2006: 39.
[25] UN Women, *Gender Equality: Women's Rights in Review 25 Years after Beijing*. New York: UN Women, 2020: 77.

that does not mean they are wrong. People should be free to live in a way that makes them happy and comfortable.[26] Respecting gender identity means using the names and pronouns that people prefer. It means not judging others for how they dress or act. It means supporting people who feel different and helping them feel safe. Parents, teachers, and friends can help by listening and learning. Schools and workplaces can make rules that protect all kinds of people. Media can show stories that include all types of gender identities. All these things can make society kinder and fairer.[27]

**The Concept of Performativity in Gender Theory**

In the world of gender studies, one of the most important concepts is performativity, which was introduced by Judith Butler. According to Butler, gender is not something that we are born with, but rather, it is something we do. This idea challenges traditional views of gender and offers a new way of understanding how gender works in society.[28]

The word performative means that something is created through an action. So when we talk about gender performativity, we mean that gender is something that is created by the things we do. For example, we perform gender every day through our actions, how we speak, dress, move, and behave in general. These actions are influenced by social norms that tell us what is expected of us because of our gender. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed, natural thing.[29] It is not something you are born with, whether you are male or female. Instead, gender is created through repeated performances, that is, the repeated actions and behaviors that we do according to the rules set by society. These repeated actions give the illusion that gender is something stable and natural, when in reality, it is always being created through our actions.[30]

Butler's main idea is that because we repeat these actions over and over, gender starts to feel natural. When a boy is told to play with cars and avoid playing with dolls, he begins to perform his gender in a certain way. He might act tough and avoid showing emotions. Over time, because these behaviors are repeated, he comes to believe that this is how men are supposed to act.[31] However, Butler says that this is not natural—it's a learned behavior that has been reinforced through repetition. Butler's theory of performativity challenges the traditional understanding of gender. The traditional view says that if you are born with a male body, you are a man, and if you are born with a female body, you are a woman. This idea relies on the belief that gender is

[26] Sandra Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing." Psychological Review 88, no. 4, 1981: 354–364.
[27] Raewyn Connell, *Gender in World Perspective.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009: 46-48.
[28] Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender,* 58-59.
[29] Kathy Davis, *The Gender of Desire: Essays on Subjectivity and Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, 1995: 115.
[30] Diamond, Irene, and Lee Quinby, *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988: 52-54.
[31] Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 37-38.

something fixed and stable, tied directly to your biological sex. However, Butler believes this idea is incorrect. Instead, gender is something that we create through our actions, and these actions are influenced by the society we live in.[32]

Butler's theory also tells us that society plays a big role in shaping how we perform gender. From an early age, people are taught what it means to be a boy or a girl. Society gives us gender norms, rules that tell us how men and women should behave. For example, girls are often told to be soft, kind, and gentle, while boys are expected to be strong, assertive, and sometimes even aggressive. These rules are not based on biology or nature, they are taught by family, school, media, and culture. These rules push people to act a certain way. People are taught what is acceptable for their gender. If a man shows emotions or cries, for example, others may judge him and tell him that he is acting like a woman. This pressure to conform to gender norms is what makes gender performativity so powerful.[33]

While some people may choose to follow gender norms, Butler says that performing gender is not always a choice. For many people, the social pressures to conform to certain gender roles are so strong that they cannot easily break away from them. From a very young age, we are taught to perform gender in specific ways, and those performances are often rewarded by society.[34] Boys who play with trucks and act tough are praised, while boys who enjoy dancing or playing with dolls may be bullied or made fun of. The pressure to perform gender is not limited to childhood; it continues throughout life. Adults also face pressure to act in ways that are consistent with their gender roles. For example, women may feel pressured to wear makeup, wear dresses, or act in a polite, calm way. Men may feel pressured to act tough, speak loudly, and avoid showing vulnerability.[35]

Butler's idea of gender performativity also allows for resistance against traditional gender roles. Since gender is a performance, it is not something that is fixed or unchangeable. People can choose to perform gender differently from what is expected of them. For example, a woman might choose to dress in a way that is typically seen as masculine, such as wearing a suit, while a man might wear clothes that are seen as feminine, such as a dress.[36] People who identify as non-binary, meaning they don't feel like they are strictly male or female, also perform gender in ways that do not fit traditional categories. Transgender people also show us how gender performativity works. A person who is born with a male body but identifies as a woman might begin to perform femininity in a way that feels true to their identity. The same is true for people who were born with

[32] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 60-63.
[33] Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990; 32-34.
[34] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* Volume I. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980: 26-28.
[35] Foucault. *The History of Sexuality,* 18-19.
[36] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 44-47.

female bodies but identify as men. For these people, gender is something they do to align with their true feelings, rather than something they are born with.[37]

**The Idea of Gender as a Social Performance**

Central to Judith Butler's groundbreaking theory is the concept of performativity, which challenges traditional understandings of gender as an inherent trait or biological fact. According to Butler, gender is not something one inherently possesses, but rather something one does continuously, a performative act shaped by societal expectations. This concept of gender as a social performance is central to her argument in Gender Trouble, where she critiques the idea of a natural and fixed gender identity that corresponds to an individual's biological sex. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that gender is not an essential or pre-existing identity but is instead produced through repetitive acts, gestures, and behaviors that align with cultural norms and social expectations.[38]

Unlike a voluntary performance in a theatre, where an actor plays a role by choice, gender performance is compulsory and deeply embedded in the structures of society. From an early age, individuals are taught to perform their gender roles according to established norms and expectations. This societal regulation is so ingrained that gender performance becomes naturalized and is often perceived as an expression of one's true, authentic self.[39] In Butler's view, gender is thus not something inherent or pre-determined; it is something created and performed following the prevailing norms of culture and society. This performance of gender is not merely an act of self-expression, but a crucial process through which individuals constitute their gender identities. In other words, gender is not expressed; it is enacted; it is brought into being through repeated performances that align with cultural expectations of what it means to be male, female, or otherwise.[40]

Butler's concept of gender performativity is radical because it departs from the traditional binary view of gender, which categorizes people into either male or female based on their biological sex. In contrast, Butler proposes that gender identity is not a fixed or natural essence but a fluid and dynamic construct. According to her theory, individuals perform gender based on the roles that society assigns to them, and these roles are fluid and subject to change.[41] For instance, a person may be expected to behave in certain ways according to their gender, such as a girl playing with dolls or a boy engaging in sports, but these behaviors are not intrinsically tied to the individual's true identity. Rather, these actions are learned and enforced through socialization, and they construct the illusion of an essential, pre-existing gender identity. Thus, gender becomes a

[37] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics.* New York: Routledge, 1988: 21-24.
[38] Andrew Ritchie and MacDonald Maria, "Reimagining the Woman Question: Judith Butler's Contribution to Feminist Theory." *Feminist Theory* 8, (2), 2007: 97–116.
[39] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, 30.
[40] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 90.
[41] Martha Nussbaum. *Sex and Social Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: 117-119.

continual process, constantly in flux and always subject to reconstitution through the act of performance.[42]

Butler's theory encourages a shift away from the view that gender is a natural, biological fact toward the understanding that gender is a social construct, shaped by language, culture, and societal expectations. Through daily interactions and engagements with others, individuals come to internalize the gender norms around them, and these norms shape how they perform gender.[43] For example, people may be punished or rewarded for adhering to or deviating from gendered behaviors, such as a boy being scolded for crying or a girl being praised for being nurturing. These social reinforcements shape gender performance and influence the way individuals experience and understand their own gender. Therefore, the performance of gender is not solely an individual act, but rather an act of social negotiation, constantly influenced by external forces.[44]

The performative nature of gender also has significant implications for the politics of identity and social change. By recognizing that gender is performative, Butler empowers individuals to challenge the rigid expectations that society places on them based on their gender. Gender performativity opens up the possibility for individuals to reject or subvert conventional gender roles and create new forms of gender expression that better reflect their identities.[45] For example, a transgender person who transitions from one gender to another is not simply "becoming" their true gender, but is instead performing and enacting a new gender identity. In this sense, gender transition is an act of performance that challenges the idea that gender is something biologically determined or fixed. Similarly, non-binary and gender-fluid individuals, who do not conform to the traditional categories of male or female, are performing gender in ways that challenge the binary understanding of gender and promote greater fluidity and diversity in gender identities.[46]

Butler's theory also raises important questions about the relationship between gender and power. In her view, the performance of gender is not a neutral or voluntary act but is always shaped by power dynamics that regulate and enforce gender norms. Societal expectations about what is "appropriate" for men and women are deeply entrenched in social, political, and economic structures, and these norms serve to reinforce existing power relations.[47] For instance, in many cultures, women are expected to perform gender roles that emphasize submission, nurturance, and caregiving, while men are expected to perform roles that emphasize dominance, strength, and

[42] Fineman and Jackson. *Feminism Confronts Homo Economicus: Gender, Law, and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017: 10-18.
[43] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 20-24.
[44] Andrew Rirchie and MacDonald Maria, "Reimagining the Woman Question: Judith Butler's Contribution to Feminist Theory." Feminist Theory 8, (2), 2007: 97–116.
[45] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, 116.
[46] Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction, 118.
[47] Moya Lloyd and Judith Butler: *From Norms to Politics.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007: 102-104

authority. These expectations are not merely personal preferences but are rooted in larger societal structures of power, such as patriarchy and capitalism, which shape how gender is performed and experienced.[48]

Furthermore, the idea of gender as performative helps to explain how gender norms are internalized and naturalized. Through repetition and social reinforcement, gendered behaviors become so ingrained in individuals' daily lives that they appear to be natural expressions of one's true identity. This naturalization of gender performance serves to reinforce the idea that gender is an essential and unchangeable aspect of identity, when in fact it is a social construct.[49] For example, the widespread expectation that women should be nurturing and men should be assertive is not based on any inherent truth but on long-standing cultural norms that are perpetuated through socialization. Butler's theory invites us to reconsider the ways in which we perform gender in our daily lives and encourages us to think critically about the social structures that shape our gender identities.[50]

The notion of gender as performance also challenges the idea of an authentic or essential self. According to Butler, there is no true or "real" gender identity that exists prior to performance; instead, identity is always produced through acts and behaviors that align with societal norms. This challenges the idea that there is an authentic, fixed "self" that one discovers or reveals over time. Instead, gender identity is always a construction, subject to change and transformation.[51] In this sense, gender is not something people "have" but something they do. The performative nature of gender suggests that individuals can reshape and redefine their gender identity through their actions, offering greater agency and flexibility in how gender is experienced and understood. This opens up new possibilities for gender expression, as individuals are no longer constrained by the idea of an essential or fixed gender identity but can create and perform their gender in ways that reflect their true selves.[52]

**The Role of Repetition in Butler's Gender Identity Theory**

Judith Butler avers that gender is not something we are born with. Instead, she believes gender is something we do over and over again. She calls this "performativity." This means that we show our gender by repeating actions, such as how we dress, talk, move, or behave. Over time, these repeated actions make people believe that gender is fixed and natural, but it is not. Butler takes this idea from the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who discusses about citationality. This means something gets its meaning by being used many times. Butler also uses ideas from Michel

[48] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge, 1993: 40-42.
[49] Lloyd and Butler, *From Norms to Politics.* 57-58.
[50] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. 37-38.
[51] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction,* 150-152.
[52] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990: 78-79.

Foucault, who explains how society controls people using rules and punishments. So, Butler thinks gender is created through repeated performances under rules made by society.[53]

For example, if a boy always wears trousers, plays football, and avoids crying, people say he is acting "like a boy." If a girl wears dresses, plays with dolls, and smiles politely, people say she is "being a girl." These behaviors are not from nature; they are repeated actions taught by parents, schools, religion, and media. People follow these actions to "fit in." Butler says gender performances are controlled by social norms. These norms are strong rules that tell us what is "right" or "wrong" for a boy or girl to do. If someone does not follow these rules, they may be laughed at, punished, or feel left out.[54]

Butler also says that these repeated actions are not always the same. Even though people repeat gender behaviors, each time they do it, there is a chance to do it a little differently. This small difference is very important. It means that gender is never completely fixed. People can slowly change what it means to be a boy, a girl, or something else. This is what Butler calls the space for resistance.[55] A good example of this is in drag performance. In drag, a person dresses up in exaggerated clothes and behaviors that society connects to a different gender. A man might wear makeup, high heels, and speak in a soft voice to look and sound like a woman. Butler says that drag shows us that gender is something we "do," not something we "are." Drag copies the usual gender behaviors, but does it in a way that is funny, extreme, or surprising. This helps people see that gender is not natural; it is a performance that we learn and repeat.[56]

Another example is how children learn gender. When a baby is born, people quickly decide if it is a boy or a girl. Then they give the baby clothes, toys, and colors based on that decision. As the child grows, they watch others and learn how to act like a boy or a girl. They repeat these actions every day. A girl may learn to cross her legs, speak quietly, and smile often. A boy may learn to speak loudly, run fast, and never cry. These are repeated gender acts. They feel natural because they are done so often, but they are not natural—they are taught and learned.[57]

Repetition is not only something we do—it is also something we see in media. Films, TV, adverts, and songs show us what it means to be a man or a woman. When we see the same kind of characters over and over, we start to believe that this is how all men or women should be. For example, if men in films are always shown as strong and brave, we think men must act that way in real life.

[53] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction,* 47-48.
[54] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 89-90.
[55] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004: 205.
[56] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution.* New York: Seal Press, 2017: 213-214.
[57] Nussbaum. *Sex and Social Justice,* 46-48.

Butler would say that these media images are powerful gender performances.[58] They are repeated so often that they feel true, even though they are just made up. But repetition does not only maintain gender norms—it can also break them. Every time someone repeats a gender act, there is a chance to do it differently. For example, a man can wear a skirt, or a woman can choose not to have children. These small changes may seem simple, but they are powerful. They show that there is not just one way to be a man or a woman. Butler believes that people can use repetition to change how gender is understood in society. This makes repetition not just a way to keep rules but also a way to resist them.[59]

Critics of Butler's idea observed that she focuses too much on language and performance. They think she forgets about the real, physical body. For example, some people feel that their gender is deeply connected to their body. They say Butler does not talk enough about the pain, joy, or changes people feel in their bodies. But Butler replies that she is not denying the body. She only wants to show that even how we understand the body is shaped by repeated social ideas. So, even the body is not just natural—it is understood through repetition and rules.[60] Butler also believes that repetition can help create gender identities outside the male/female binary. She says that society usually wants people to be either a man or a woman nothing in between. But some people do not feel like either. They may be transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer. These people often use repetition in new ways. They may mix male and female behaviors, change their names, or wear different clothes. Through these actions, they show that gender is not just two boxes. It is more like a wide space where many identities can exist.[61]

In schools, the role of repetition in gender identity formation is evident. Teachers often treat boys and girls differently. Boys may be asked to carry chairs, while girls are asked to decorate the class. Over time, these small repeated actions teach children what is "normal" for their gender. These school practices show how gender is repeated in everyday life, not just in theory.[62] Changing school rules and behaviors can help children learn that they can freely choose their gender expressions. Workplaces also show how repetition controls gender. Women may be expected to smile more or act friendly, while men are expected to lead and take charge. These expectations are not written in job descriptions, but they are repeated in daily work culture. People who do not follow these unwritten rules may face judgment or miss promotions. Butler's idea helps us see that workplaces

[58] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change.* London: SAGE Publications, 2009: 26-28.
[59] Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge, 1991: 2-4.
[60] Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 34-35.
[61] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change,* 90-92.
[62] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 51-53

are full of gender performances, repeated daily. If we change how these performances work, we can create more equal and free workplaces.[63]

**Butler's Gender Identity Theory: An Assessment**

While Judith Butler's theory of gender identity has had a profound impact on feminist discourse, it has also attracted substantial criticisms, particularly from feminists within materialist and radical traditions. One major critique is that Butler's deconstruction of gender identity undermines the political cohesion necessary for feminist struggle. Materialist feminists argue that by focusing on the performative and fluid nature of gender, Butler's theory shifts attention away from the material realities of women's lives, such as economic inequality, bodily suffering, and systemic oppression.[64] According to critics, the focus on discourse and language distracts from the concrete struggles that women face daily. For example, issues like access to healthcare, gender-based violence, and economic disparity are not adequately addressed by Butler's work, which, according to these critics, makes it difficult to form a coherent political platform to challenge these injustices.[65]

One of the most vocal critics of Butler's approach is Martha Nussbaum, who argues that Butler's work is excessively abstract and disconnected from the lived realities of women. Nussbaum contends that Butler's rejection of fixed gender categories and her emphasis on the performative nature of identity ignore the material conditions that shape people's lives.[66] For Nussbaum, a focus on the deconstruction of gender risks alienating those who experience oppression in tangible, everyday ways. By placing much emphasis on language and theory, Butler's approach, according to Nussbaum, diminishes the urgency of addressing concrete issues like poverty and discrimination. In this sense, Nussbaum accuses Butler of losing sight of the real, material concerns that feminist activism has historically aimed to address.[67]

Another significant criticism is that Butler's theory downplays the importance of biological embodiment and the lived experiences of gender. Some critics argue that by focusing so heavily on language and discourse, Butler overlooks the material aspects of gender identity, such as the role of the body in shaping gendered experiences. While Butler acknowledges that gender is socially constructed and performative, some critics believe that she neglects the fact that individuals' experiences of gender are also shaped by their physical bodies.[68] The biological

[63] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", 1241–1299.
[64] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008: 56-57.
[65] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction,* 90-93.
[66] Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 88.
[67] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 203-205.
[68] Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, 234-235.

dimension of sex, for example, cannot be entirely ignored, especially for people whose gender identities align with their biological sex or those whose gender expression is influenced by their bodily experiences. Critics argue that Butler's theory risks alienating individuals who feel their gender identity is closely linked to their physical bodies and experiences of embodiment.[69]

Butler's theory highlights ongoing tensions within feminist theory. While her work has undoubtedly expanded feminist discourse and opened up new avenues for thinking about gender, it has also raised difficult questions about the relationship between theory and praxis. Critics argue that Butler's focus on deconstructing gender categories risks undermining the material and collective struggles that feminism has historically prioritized. However, Butler's contributions remain significant, as her theory continues to challenge established norms and offer a more inclusive understanding of gender identity.[70]

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Butler's theory is not universally embraced. Critics from within feminist theory, such as Martha Nussbaum, have argued that Butler's focus on language and performance neglects material realities and structural inequalities that shape gendered experiences, such as economic oppression, sexual violence, and institutional discrimination. Other scholars, particularly those working in the global South, have questioned whether Butler's largely Western, postmodern framework can be applied to societies where gender roles are deeply embedded in cultural and religious traditions. Furthermore, some transgender theorists have pointed out that while the idea of gender as fluid can be liberating, it can also be misused to undermine the legitimacy of transgender identities by denying the deep, lived reality of their experiences.

Despite these criticisms, Butler's philosophical contribution remains invaluable. This research has shown that her work offers a vocabulary and analytical lens for interrogating the normative systems that produce and regulate gender. Her argument that gender is not something one is but something one does has been particularly influential in shifting discussions of identity away from fixed categories. This shift has fostered an inclusive approach to identity politics, one that accommodates diverse experiences and expressions. From a broader philosophical standpoint, Butler's theory challenges foundational assumptions about identity, truth, and reality. By exposing the contingent and constructed nature of gender, she also calls into question the stability of all identity categories. This radical openness to redefinition reflects a post-structuralist commitment to resisting closure and fixed meaning. It also aligns with a democratic ethos in which identities are negotiated, contested, and reimagined through collective action and dialogue.

[69] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 57-58.
[70] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 40-345.

The analysis in this work confirms that Judith Butler's gender identity theory is both a philosophical intervention and a political tool. It offers a critical rethinking of how gender is produced, lived, and contested, while also inspiring resistance against the normative systems that enforce conformity. While the theory is subject to critique and requires contextual adaptation, its emphasis on performativity, fluidity, and subversion remains relevant in contemporary struggles for equality and freedom. The enduring legacy of Butler's philosophy lies not in prescribing a fixed understanding of gender but in enabling continuous questioning, dialogue, and transformation. In this sense, her work challenges not only how we think about gender, but also how we think about the possibilities of human existence itself.

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