

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 26**  
**Introduction to Judith Butler**



Good morning dear friends and welcome to this module. In the last few modules, we had looked at the evolution of the term gender as newer dimensions were gradually added to it. This week takes the discussion to the renowned thinker and academician Judith Butler. As we all know 21st century understandings of the term gender are significantly shaped by the thought of this iconic philosopher.

This week we will deal with what is gender performativity with special focus to two of our books 'Gender Trouble' which was published in 1990 and 'Bodies that Matter' which was published in 1993. In this module today I would discuss two early essays of Judith Butler which had led to the publication of 'Gender Trouble' later on.

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### Judith Butler

- Judith Butler, born in 1956, is a philosopher and one of the most challenging thinkers of our time.
- She received worldwide acclaim for her theory on the performative nature of gender.
- Her ideas on gender are influential in the fields of philosophical feminism, queer theory, and culture studies.
- As a gender theorist, Butler was a leading figure of the Third-Wave of feminism.



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Born in 1956, Judith Butler is a philosopher and one of the most challenging thinkers of our times. She has received worldwide acclaim for her theory on the performative nature of gender and her ideas have been deeply influential in the fields of philosophical feminism, queer theory as well as culture studies etcetera.

As a gender theorist she is a leading figure of the Third-Wave of feminism and her ideas are still immensely significant even now. Butler is known for her critical voice in socio political discourse and debate. Her qualities as a thinker are reflected in her passionate engagement in conversations with contemporaries in and outside of academia.

She had been raised in a Jewish family received a PhD from Yale University in 1984, has been a Fulbright scholar in Germany and currently she is a Maxine Elliot professor at University of California, USA.

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• She rose to prominence in 1990 with *Gender Trouble* which unearthed some of the foundational assumptions in philosophy and feminist theory.

• The turn towards post-structuralism profoundly shaped Butler's philosophy as she was inspired by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

• Her notable works include *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993), *Excitable Speech* (1997), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) and *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015).

The slide also includes a collage of images: the cover of *Gender Trouble*, the cover of *Undoing Gender*, a portrait of Judith Butler, and a stack of books.

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She rose to prominence with the publication of ‘Gender Trouble’ in 1990 which had unearthed some of the foundational assumptions in philosophy and feminist theory. The turn towards poststructuralism profoundly had shaped her philosophy as she was inspired by thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.


Her notable works include ‘Gender Trouble’ and ‘Bodies that Matter’ as well as the subsequent works like ‘Excitable Speech’, ‘Undoing Gender’, ‘Giving an Account of Oneself’ and ‘Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly’ which were published after 1993 are also considered to be of significant critical value.

Poststructuralism had suggested a rejection of claims of totality and universality. For Butler it consists the binary oppositions with an openness to linguistic and cultural signification. She finds this structuralist approach limiting in this regard, the

poststructuralist influence led her to reject ideas like a universal definition of womanhood, celebrating the ideas of difference.

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- Apart from gender performance, Butler's philosophy raises critical questions on homosexuality, transsexuality, the politics of language and identity, and other complex relations of feminist and queer theory.
- She has also spoken out on numerous contemporary political issues like "Black Lives Matter" and Anti-War movements. She is an activist-theorist who is engaged at a grass-roots level with many of the struggles she writes about.
  - She has worked as the chair of the board of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.
  - She is also on the advisory board for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.
- Butler identifies herself as a lesbian, and legally 'non-binary', which is an umbrella term for identities outside of the gender binary.
- Butler uses the pronouns "she or they."



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Apart from gender performance, Butler's philosophy also raises critical questions on homosexuality, transsexuality, the politics of language and identity as well as other complex relations of feminism and queer theory. She has also been outspoken on several contemporary political issues like Black Lives Matter as well as the Anti-war movements.

She is an activist and theorist who is engaged at a grass root level with many of the struggles she has written about. As a testimony to it we can see that she has worked as a chair of the board of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and also on the advisory board for Israeli-Palestinian Peace.

Butler identifies herself as a lesbian and legally a 'non-binary,' which is an umbrella term for identities outside of the gender binary. She uses the pronounce she or they. Non-binary individuals may identify themselves in different manners: as an intermediate or separate third gender or identify with more than one gender or have a fluctuating gender identity, this is also called gender fluid. Therefore, Butler's choice of pronoun she or they suggests it appropriately.

Butler has often stressed on the idea of hospitality towards otherness difference and diversity. This is reflected in her early work particularly ‘The Subjects of Desire,’ which was published in 1989. The idea of a constitutive relation to alterity the state of otherness is a key motive that underpins all her writings. It can be traced back to her very first publication ‘The Subjects of Desire’, Butler often has stressed on the idea of hospitality towards otherness, difference and diversity. Her philosophy urges an openness to anything or anyone that eludes the subjects understanding. Even in her early age, Butler had felt it to be important to find one’s distinguishing identity, also crucially to find ways for self expression. In this video these aspects of her personality and thinking become clear to us:

“I was born in Cleveland Ohio into a Jewish family.

And my parents were very engaged in politics and debate.

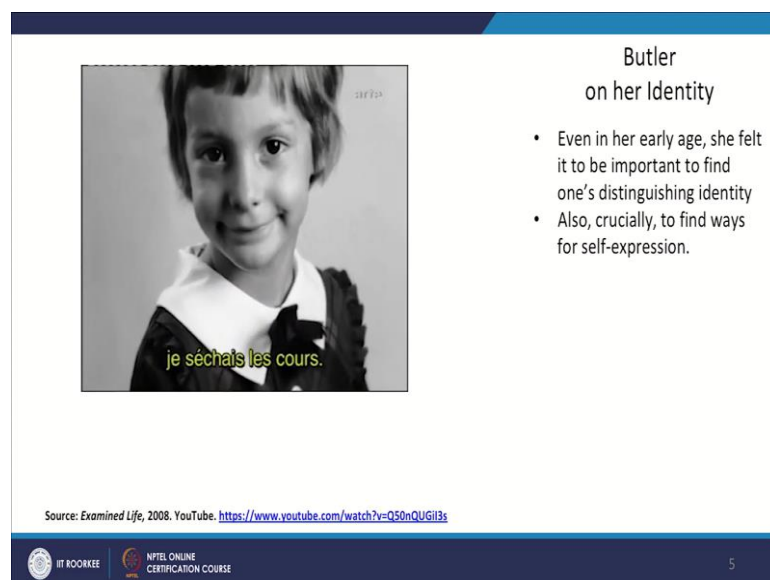
And I was never very good in school.

I was a what they call a problem child. A disciplinary problem.

And I would speak back to the teachers. And I would not follow the rules.

I would skip class. I did terrible things.

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Butler  
on her Identity

- Even in her early age, she felt it to be important to find one’s distinguishing identity
- Also, crucially, to find ways for self-expression.

Source: *Examined Life*, 2008. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q50nQU6Ii3s>

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Butler  
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- Even in her early age, she felt it to be important to find one's distinguishing identity
- Also, crucially, to find ways for self-expression.

Source: Examined Life, 2008. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q50nQU6I3s>

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And yet I was apparently smart in some way.

But I didn't understand myself as smart.

I understood myself as strategic. You know, one had to get through.

One had to find one's way in the school, in the synagogue.

And I did not really like authority.

I'm lesbian, I'm gay, yes, I am lesbian I am gay.

But do I subscribe to everything the lesbian and gay movement says?

Do I always come out as a lesbian and gay person first before say, I am a woman?

Or before I am a Jew or before I am an American or a citizen or a philosopher, no.


You know it is not the only identity.

So, these are communities where one belongs and one does not belong.

And it seems to be we travel, I travel.”

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- In the interview given for the documentary titled *Examined Life*, Butler explains her Jewish identity and unique persona which was apparent from her early years in school.
- Her dislike for authority and forced disciplinary rules led her to continue her education through homeschooling.
- Even at a very early age, she was resolute in her opinion that it is important to find one's distinguishing identity and crucially, to find ways for self-expression.
- Although, she identifies herself as homosexual, she does not necessarily subscribe to all stereotypical notions surrounding an identity category.

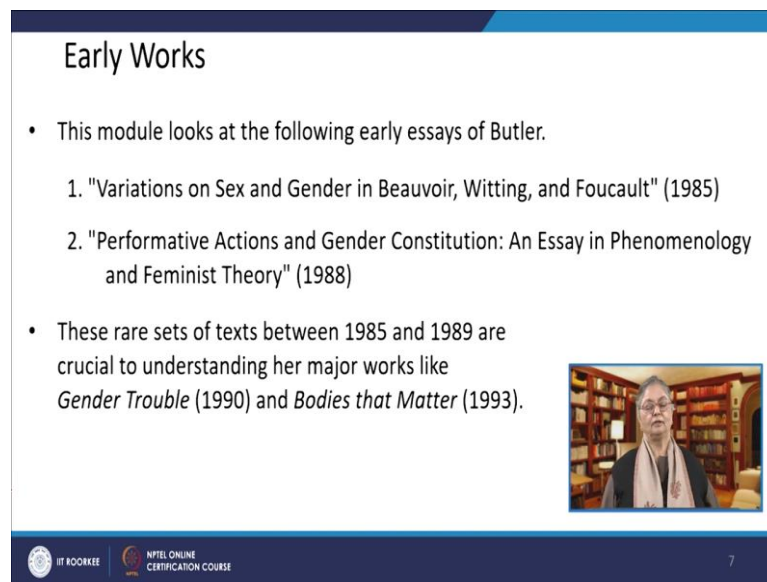


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This is an interview given for the documentary titled ‘Examined Life.’ In it, Butler has explained her Jewish identity and the unique persona which was apparent from her early years in school. Her dislike for authority and forced disciplinary rules led her to continue her education through home schooling.


Even at a very early age she was resolute in her opinion that it is important to find our own distinguishing identity and also equally crucially to find ways for self-expression. Although she has identified herself as a homosexual, she does not necessarily subscribe to all stereotypical notions surrounding an identity category.

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**Early Works**

- This module looks at the following early essays of Butler.
  1. "Variations on Sex and Gender in Beauvoir, Witting, and Foucault" (1985)
  2. "Performative Actions and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988)
- These rare sets of texts between 1985 and 1989 are crucial to understanding her major works like *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993).



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This module looks at the early essays of Butler. Today we shall be discussing two of them. The first is “Variations on Sex and Gender in Beauvoir, Witting and Foucault” published in 1985, the second was published in 1988 with the title “Performative Actions and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.”

These rare sets of texts are crucial to understand her major works particularly the ‘Gender Trouble’ and ‘Bodies that Matter’ which were published after some gap. The selected essays deal with Butler’s reflection on Simone de Beauvoir and her magnum opus ‘The Second Sex’ as well as her early descriptions on performative acts of gender.


Butler’s ‘Gender Trouble’ is featured on countless reading lists in academic departments around the world. It is famous for its wide-ranging line of inquiry, unforgiving style, and abrupt shifts which are widely lamented among its readers. Therefore, these lesser read texts written by Butler before the year 1990 can be of great help.

The first essay we are looking at is “Variations on Sex and Gender in Beauvoir Witting and Foucault” published in 1985. Butler had primarily focused on the French feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir whom we have discussed in detail in the opening week of this course. In this essay, Butler takes a deeper look at Beauvoir’s seminal book ‘The Second Sex’ which was written in 1949, but the English translation had come out only in 1951 by Parshley.

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### “Variations on Sex and Gender in Beauvoir, Witting, and Foucault” (1985)

- This essay attempts to decode the curious relationship between gender, sex, and culture.
- Butler reflects on two major ideas of Beauvoir featured in *The Second Sex (1949)*:
  1. Gender as *Project*
  2. Body as *Situation*





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This essay attempts to decode the curious relationship between gender, sex and culture. Butler reflects on two major ideas of Beauvoir featured in ‘The Second Sex’. The first is Gender as a Project and second Body as Situation. What is unique about a body is that it can both be the site of oppression as well as a means of escape. This notion is methodically explored throughout the essay in conjunction with Beauvoir’s philosophy. Butler sees ‘The Second Sex’ as potentially providing a radical understanding of gender.

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### Gender as Project

- Butler reconsiders the famous quote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir, 1947).
- Butler writes that this important formulation by Beauvoir distinguishes the terms "sex" and "gender". She says Beauvoir's book suggests that "gender" is an aspect of identity which is "gradually acquired".
- There can be no separable self growing outside of culture.
- Womanhood changes across time. Beauvoir saw gender as a project, and womanhood was never a settled matter.



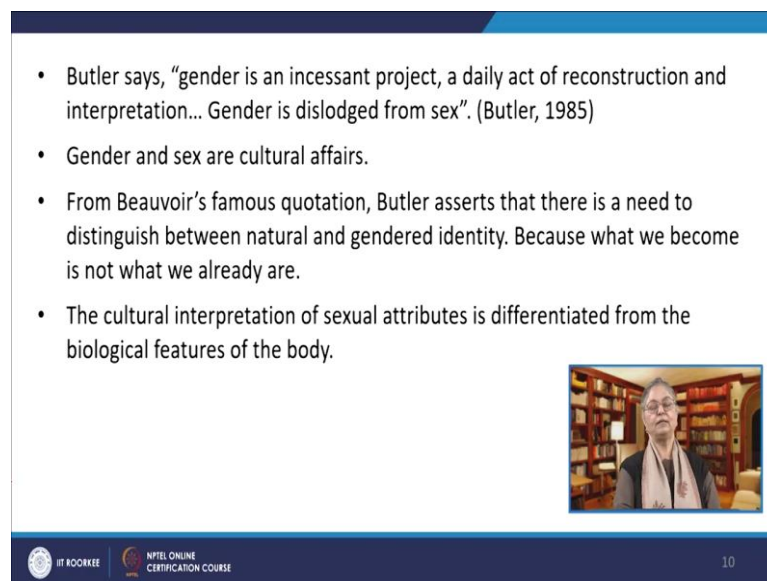
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Butler reconsiders the famous quote, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Butler writes that this important formulation by Beauvoir distinguishes the terms sex and gender, and she suggest that Beauvoir’s book suggest that gender is an aspect of identity which is gradually acquired.

There can be no separable self growing outside of culture. Womanhood changes across time. Beauvoir had also seen gender as a project and womanhood for her was never a settled matter. For both Beauvoir and Butler, there could be no separable self which precedes cultural involvement. Nobody can be an aloof thinker is steering into life from the outside. Butler agrees with this idea which had been proposed by Beauvoir that the idea of womanhood changes over time and that gender is a project.

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- Butler says, “gender is an incessant project, a daily act of reconstruction and interpretation... Gender is dislodged from sex”. (Butler, 1985)
- Gender and sex are cultural affairs.
- From Beauvoir’s famous quotation, Butler asserts that there is a need to distinguish between natural and gendered identity. Because what we become is not what we already are.
- The cultural interpretation of sexual attributes is differentiated from the biological features of the body.

Butler has said that gender is an incessant project, a daily act of reconstitution and interpretation. Gender is dislodged from sex. Gender and sex are cultural affairs from Beauvoir’s famous quotation Butler asserts that there is a need to distinguish between natural and gendered identity because what we become is not what we already are.


The cultural interpretation of sexual attributes is differentiated from the biological features of our bodies. This existentialist position of Butler implies a greatly expanded role for human behaviour. Butler suggests that both gender and sex seem to be thoroughly cultural affairs. These words of Butler were echoed in an essay that she wrote a decade later with the title of “Merely Cultural”. If genders are in some sense chosen

Butler asks then what happens to the definition of gender and how is connected to the cultural interpretation of sex.

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**Bodies: The Site of Oppression/Means of Escape**

- Butler asks, “How can gender be both a matter of choice and cultural construction?”
- She addresses Beauvoir’s use of the word *situation* to describe the body’s status.
- How can the body be a means for “re-articulation”?
- Beauvoir proposed the term situation to define the body’s positioning. Through our bodies, we can reinterpret existing norms, customs and expectations.
- Our bodies can challenge the norms we encounter, but we can also recreate those norms through our bodies.



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Butler asks simply how can gender be both a matter of choice as well as cultural construction. And she addresses Beauvoir’s use of the word ‘situation’ to describe the status of the body. How can the body be a means for re-articulation? Beauvoir propose the term situation to define the body’s positioning. Through our bodies, we can reinvent existing norms customs and expectations.

Our bodies can challenge the norms we encounter, but we can also recreate these norms through our bodies. While never outside a social context the body is also consistently active and its social involvement can be experienced as a kind of oppression. But body’s social involvement also grants a license for liberation through re-articulation or self definition. Bodies therefore, are both the site of oppression and the means of escape.

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### What it means to choose a Gender

- In this early piece, Butler had already settled on a style characterized by a readiness to tackle contradictory aspects of gender.
- She says, “Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality ... To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew” (p. 40).
- Although Butler agrees with Beauvoir on the nature of gender to a certain extent, she aims to distinguish between gender and sex with better clarity.
- When the body is conceived as a cultural locus of gender, it becomes unclear what aspects of this body are natural or free of cultural imprint.



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In this early piece, Butler had already settled on a style characterized by a readiness to tackle contradictory aspects of gender. She says that becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality. And I quote, “to choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew.” Unquote.

Although Butler had agreed with Beauvoir as far as the nature of gender is concerned to a certain extent, she still aims to distinguish between gender and sex with better clarity. When the body is conceived as a cultural locus of gender, it becomes unclear what aspects of this body are natural or free of cultural imprint. Butler asks a series of questions after reflecting on ‘The Second Sex’.

For example, how are we to find the body that pre-exists its cultural interpretation. If gender is the acculturation of the corporeal, then what is left of nature and what has become of sex? To address these questions, she turns to French feminist and philosopher Monique Wittig. Monique Wittig is a French author philosopher and a feminist theorist in the latter half of the 20th century.

She wrote about overcoming socially enforced gender roles and had also coined the phrase ‘heterosexual contract.’ Wittig considers Beauvoir’s distinction between sex and gender as obsolete and anachronistic. Her article with the title “One is not Born a


Woman” has been borrowed from Beauvoir’s stated formulation. It was initially presented at the Simone de Beauvoir conference in New York City in 1979.

We can say that she picked up where Simone de Beauvoir had left off. She has extended Beauvoir’s theory on the ambiguous nature of gender identity. The positions of Beauvoir and Wittig though different in crucial respects commonly suggest a theory of gender that tries to make cultural sense of the existential doctrine of choice.

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### On Monique Wittig

- Butler asks, “If gender is determined in the dialectic between culture and choice, then what role does “sex” serve”?
- Monique Wittig’s article “One is Not Born a Woman” describes a unique take on sex and gender, and Butler responds to Wittig in her essay.
- Both Beauvoir and Wittig write against essentialist doctrines of femininity.
- Butler reflects on Wittig’s concept of “heterosexual regime.”
- For Wittig, the very discrimination of “sex” takes place within a political and linguistic network that presupposes, ensuring that sex remains a binary of male and female.




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In this context Butler further asks if gender is determined in the dialectic between culture and choice, then what role does sex serve? Monique Wittig’s article describes a unique take on sex and gender, and Butler responds to Wittig in her essay. Both Beauvoir and Wittig have written against essentialist doctrines of femininity. Butler has reflected on Wittig’s concept of ‘heterosexual regime.’

For Wittig the very discrimination of sex takes place within a political and linguistic network that presupposes ensuring that sex remains a binary of male and female. Although Wittig and Beauvoir occupy very different sides of the feminist political spectrum they are nevertheless joined theoretically in their refusal of essential doctrines of femininity. Wittig saw sex as a category that required the political imposition of heterosexuality which in her opinion should be called as the ‘heterosexual regime.’

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- Wittig says that we “have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us.”
- For Wittig, when we name sexual difference, we create it; we restrict our understanding of relevant sexual parts to those that aid in the process of reproduction, and thereby render heterosexuality an ontological necessity.
- Gender is a norm that we struggle to embody.
- What politically distinguishes the sexes are the anatomical features.



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Wittig says that we have been compelled in our bodies and also in our minds to correspond feature by feature with the idea of nature that has been established for us. For her, when we name sexual differences, we create it we restrict our understanding of relevant sexual parts to those that aid in the process of reproduction and thereby render heterosexuality an ongoing necessity.

Gender is a norm that we struggle to embody throughout what politically distinguishes the sexes are the anatomical features only. Wittig had argued that erogeneity - the body's sexual responsiveness - is restricted through the institutionalisation of binary sexual difference. Like Beauvoir Wittig also understands gender as a proscription as well as a task and in effect gender is a norm that we struggle to embody in our lives throughout.

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### Wittig and the Heterosexual Regime

- Wittig contests the social practice of valorizing certain anatomical features which are definitive of sexual identity and determine the child's social destiny.
- This is structured by a gender system predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and, consequently, heterosexuality.
- Hence, in differentiating infants in the ways that we do, we summarize heterosexuality as a precondition for human identity, and posit this constraining norm in the guise of a natural fact.
- This concept of 'heterosexual regime', therefore, has its similarity with Butler's later descriptions of the "heterosexual matrix."



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Wittig has contested the social practice of valorizing certain anatomical features which are definitive of sexual identity only and also in this process determine the social destiny of the child. This is structured by a gender system which has been predicated upon the alleged naturalness of binary oppositions and consequently heterosexuality.

Hence in differentiating infants in the ways that we do; we summarize heterosexuality as a precondition for human identity and posit this constraining norm in the guise of a natural fact. The concept of heterosexual regime therefore, has its similarity with Judith Butler's later descriptions of the heterosexual matrix.

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- Wittig's theory finds support in Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.
- For Foucault, the binary organization of power, including that based on strict gender polarities, is effected through a multiplication of productive and strategic forms of power.
- Although Butler agrees with the politics of compulsory heterosexuality that Wittig propounds, she distances herself from Wittig's vision of emancipation through a sexless society.
- Butler disagrees with Wittig's idea that sex, as a category, should be rejected altogether. Butler calls this approach "alarming."



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Wittig's theory also finds support in Foucault, particularly in the first volume of his 'The History of Sexuality'. For Foucault, the binary organization of power including that based on his strict gender polarities is effected through a multiplication of productive and strategic forms of power.


Although Butler agrees with the politics of compulsory heterosexuality that Wittig has propounded, she has also distanced herself from Wittig's vision of emancipation through a sexless society. She has disagreed with Wittig's idea that sex as a category should be rejected altogether and Butler finds that this approach is rather alarming. Wittig has also given certain examples to illustrate her perspective.

She says that when a child is born, we do not ask what species or what type of earlobes does the baby have instead we immediately ask about certain sexually differentiated anatomical traits. Because we assume that those traits will in some sense also determine the social destiny of a child. For the emancipation from gender impositions at childhood Wittig envisions a sexless society and argues that sex like class is a construct that must inevitably be overthrown. Butler finds this approach problematic.

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### Butler's Criticism of Wittig

- Butler comments on Wittig:  
"On the one hand, Wittig calls for a transcendence of sex altogether, but her theory might equally well lead to an inverse conclusion, to the dissolution of binary restrictions through the proliferation of genders." (Butler, 1985)
- Wittig's strategy was more sweeping than Butler's. Rather than subversion, Wittig argues for an end to sexual division itself.
- Butler argues that cultural innovations should be favoured over myths of total elimination of sex.



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Butler comments on Wittig and I quote, "On the one hand Wittig calls for a transcendence of sex altogether, but her theory might equally well lead to an inverse conclusion to the dissolution of binary restrictions through the proliferation of genders." Unquote. Wittig's strategy was more sweeping than Butler's rather than subversion Wittig has argued for an end to sexual division itself.


Butler argues that cultural innovation should be favoured over myths of total elimination of sex. In other words, Butler believes that a new found creativity is required for fruitful gender politics rather than a myth of rising above all distinctions. The similar arguments are carried forward with a richer critique in the second essay also.



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**“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution:  
An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988)**

- This influential essay was published in *Theatre Journal* in 1988.
- It makes the seminal argument which brought Judith Butler to the spotlight among contemporary philosophers.
- The central argument of the essay is that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler, 1988).
- The arguments presented in this essay were instrumental and paved the way for her famous work *Gender Trouble* (1990).




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The second essay was published in 1988 in *Theatre Journal* with the title “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” It makes the seminal argument which had brought Judith Butler to the spotlight among contemporary philosophers.

The central argument of this essay is that gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions and taboos. The arguments presented in this essay were instrumental and paved the way for her famous work ‘Gender Trouble’ which was published 2 years afterwards in 1990. It is through this essay that Butler has made her celebrated argument that gender is a performative act that is socially and historically constructed.

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- This essay is divided into three parts:
  1. Sex/Gender: Feminist and Phenomenological Views
  2. Binary Gender and the Heterosexual Contract
  3. Feminist Theory: Beyond an Expressive Model of Gender
- Through this essay, Butler deconstructs several essentialist claims on gender by scrutinising a philosophy of gender rooted in the metaphor of theatrical acting.



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This essay is divided into three parts the first is, ‘Sex/Gender: Feminist and Phenomenological Views.’ The second is ‘Binary Gender and the Heterosexual Contract.’ The third is ‘Feminist Theory: Beyond an Expressive Model of Gender.’ Through this essay, Butler has deconstructed several essentialist claims on gender by scrutinising a philosophy of gender rooted in the metaphor of theatrical acting.

In the first part of the essay, Butler looks at some of the existing views on sex gender and culture. She refers to critique like Simone de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty. In the second part, she has reflected on the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender. In the final part, Butler ponders over how various feminist theories can evolve in the future.

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### Historical Arguments on Gender

- Butler traces previous efforts at differentiating sex and gender.
- Butler says, "In distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience."
- Both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty refer to 'body' as a "historical idea."
- In Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he takes the issue of gender with accounts of bodily experience and claims that the body is "a historical idea" rather than representative of "a natural species."



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Butler traces previous efforts at differentiating sex and gender and she says that in distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theories have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experiences. Both Beauvoir as well as Merleau-Ponty have referred to body as a "historical idea."

In Merleau-Ponty's work the 'Phenomenology of Perception,' the issue of gender has been taken up with accounts of bodily experiences and has claimed that the body is a historical idea rather than a representative of a natural species. Importantly, it is this claim of Merleau-Ponty that Simone de Beauvoir has cited in a work 'The Second Sex' when she sets a stage for her claim that woman and by extension any gender is a historical situation rather than a natural fact.

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### Against Essentialist Claims

- In the essay, Butler argues that gender is not a starting place.
- “Gender is an identity repeatedly constructed through time, and it is always constructed through the body.” (Butler, 1988).
- There exists freedom to construct a new *identity*. Because gender identity is constructed through acts, there exists a possibility to construct a different gender by any other act.
- Butler tries to show that naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently.




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In this essay Butler had argued that gender is not a starting place. Gender is an identity she says and I quote, “repeatedly constructed through time and it is always constructed through the body.” Unquote. There exists freedom to construct a new identity in her opinion because gender identity is constructed through acts; there exists a possibility to construct a different gender by a different act. Butler has also tried to show that naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and therefore, capable of being constituted differently.

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### Theatrical Acting and Gender Performativity

- The strong presence of a “shared social structure” heavily influences individual performances.
- Butler differentiates between an actor’s act (on stage) and a performative act in society.
- Butler’s essay introduces the idea of theatrical acting to contrast the actor’s act and the performative act. While actors are aware that they are acting, the performing gender is not fully aware of its performance.
- We take our gender as natural, and forget that it is naturalized through performative acts.
- Butler argues that bodies become gendered through a “legacy of sedimented acts” which are reified over time.



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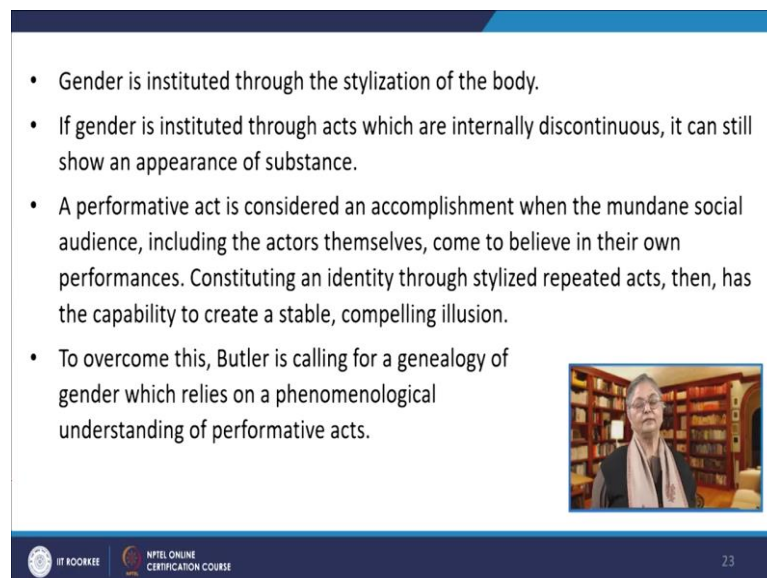
It is also important for us to distinguish between the theatrical acting and gender performativity. The strong presence of a shared social structure heavily influences individual performances, but Butler has differentiated between an actor's act on the stage and a performative act within the society.

Butler's essay introduces the idea of theatrical acting to contrast the actors act and the performative act. While actors are aware that they are acting, the performing gender is not fully aware of its performance. We take our gender as natural and forget that it is naturalized through performative acts.

Butler argues that bodies become gendered through a legacy of sedimented acts which are reified over time. Performative acts which construct gender may also appear as a personal choice, but they always work within the existing frameworks of cultural sanctions in shared social structures.

Butler has rejected gender as coming from any internal essence or any predetermined structure. Performative acts include both habitual acts of the individual as well as the accumulation of gender norms.

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- Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body.
- If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, it can still show an appearance of substance.
- A performative act is considered an accomplishment when the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe in their own performances. Constituting an identity through stylized repeated acts, then, has the capability to create a stable, compelling illusion.
- To overcome this, Butler is calling for a genealogy of gender which relies on a phenomenological understanding of performative acts.

Gender is instituted, according to Butler, through the stylization of the body. If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous it can still show an appearance of substance. A performative act is considered an accomplishment when the mundane


social audience, including the actors themselves come to believe in their own performances. Constituting an identity through stylized repeated acts then has the capability to create a strong and compelling illusion.

To overcome this Butler is calling for a genealogy of gender which relies on a phenomenological understanding of performative acts. According to Butler, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a stylization repetition of acts. The mundane ways in which bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. Decoding this appearance of gender would reveal a constructed identity.

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### Binary Genders and the Heterosexual Contract

- In the second part of the essay, Butler acknowledges the existence of an agency which constructs the binary gender system as determinate.
- By putting gender into binaries, we are forced to do gender in polarity. By naturalization of gender binaries, anything outside of this heteronormative lens will get ostracized in social dialogues and discourses.
- “The performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within a binary frame.”  
(Butler, 1988)
- For Butler, “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent.”



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In the second part of this essay, Butler has acknowledged the existence of an agency which constructs the binary gender system as determinate. By putting gender into binaries, we are forced to do gender in polarity. By naturalization of gender binaries anything outside of this heteronormative lens will get ostracized in social dialogues as well as discourses. The performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within a binary frame as Butler has remarked.


For Butler, genders can be neither true nor false neither real nor apparent. When this essay was written in 1988, it was a radical argument to make, when anything outside of heterosexuality was considered to be a taboo. Individuals who were not heterosexual had to hide their sexuality from the public or they had to adopt asexuality as a defensive

strategy. Culture then punished or marginalize those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism.

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**Subversive Performances**

- The raising of awareness on the binary restriction of gender will also open up possibilities for subversive performative acts.
- Butler says, “To do, to dramatize, to reproduce, these seem to be some of the elementary structures of embodiment.”
- “Gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual” (Butler, 1988, p. 526).
- For Butler, one can try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than assuming gender is an essence or a fact or something natural which is incapable of change and evolution.



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The raising of awareness on the binary restriction of gender will also open up possibilities for subversive performative acts. Butler says and I quote, “to do to dramatize to reproduce these seem to be some of the elementary structures of embodiment.” Then again gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual unquote.

For Butler, one can try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than assuming gender is an essence or a fact or something natural which is incapable of change and evolution. So, it is possible to perform against the expected acts which are based on stereotypical social scripts.

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### Feminist Theory: Beyond an Expressive Model of Gender

- In the final part of the essay, Butler concludes that without a radical critique of gender constitution, feminist theory fails to take stock of the way in which oppression structures the ontological characters through which gender is conceived.
- She refers on Gayatri Spivak to show that there is an existence of a false notion of a universal order of 'women'.
- Butler says that to advance a feminist political program, one does not need a universal definition of 'woman'. Because the category of 'woman' is not singular and limited, but is made of multiplicity that rebels against any instance of homogeneity or sameness.



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In the final part of the essay, Butler concludes that without a radical critique of gender constitution feminist theory fails to take stock of the way in which oppression structures the ontological characters through which gender is conceived. She also refers to Gayatri Spivak to show that there is an existence of a false notion of a universal order of women.

Butler says that to advance a feminist political program one does not need a universal definition of woman. Because the category of woman is not singular and limited, but is made of multiplicity that rebels against any instance of homogeneity or sameness.

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### Conclusion

- Butler concludes that, "Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure." (Butler, 1988)
- With the performative nature of gender in mind, it becomes important to re-read the texts of Western philosophy from various points of view that have been excluded.
- This kind of a re-reading will offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions to establish philosophy of gender as a cultural practice.



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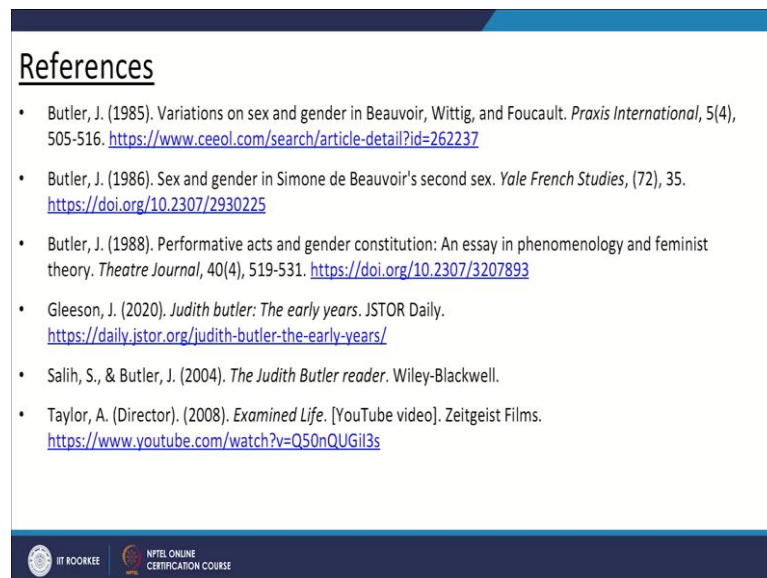


Butler has concluded that “gender is never passively scripted on the body and neither is it determined by nature or language or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender according to her is what is put on invariably under constraint daily and incessantly with anxiety and pleasure.” With the performative nature of gender in mind it becomes important for us to re-read the text of western philosophy from various points of view that have been excluded.

This kind of a re-reading will offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions to establish philosophy of gender as a cultural practice. So, we can see that these early essays are helpful by giving a foundation to understanding Butler’s chief contributions to gender studies in the 1990’s in the next two modules we will be looking at Butler’s first major critical work ‘Gender Trouble’ in detail.

Thank you.

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