

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 35**  
**Judith Butler and the Unaccountable Subject**

Welcome dear friends. In the last two modules, we have looked at Butler's prominent critical work 'Undoing Gender'. Today, we shall look at some of the critical commentaries on Butler's take on subjectivity and explain why Butler shifted her focus to the concept of assembly in relation to gender politics in her later works. Butler believes that vulnerable populations coming together can result in effective forms of performances and resistance politically.

We shall look at this point extensively in the upcoming week. Today's module will outline how Butler responded to her critics like Nancy Fraser on topics such as gender and subjectivity, morality and the limits of individual resistance against social discriminations.

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The slide is titled "The Unaccountable Subject". It contains three bullet points:

- To critically evaluate Butler's position on the relationship between the construction of the subject and her idea of social subjection, we, to begin with, will look at the essay "The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency," by Prof. Kathy Dow Magnus.
- This popular article is a reflection on Butler's critical work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003).
- In the essay, Magnus highlights some of the shortcomings in Butler's earlier philosophy presented in the 1990s and also demonstrates how she responded to such criticisms in her later works.

On the right side of the slide, there is a book cover for "Giving an Account of Oneself" by Judith Butler, published by Fordham University Press. Below the book cover is a small video thumbnail showing Prof. Rashmi Gaur speaking.

Source: Fordham University Press

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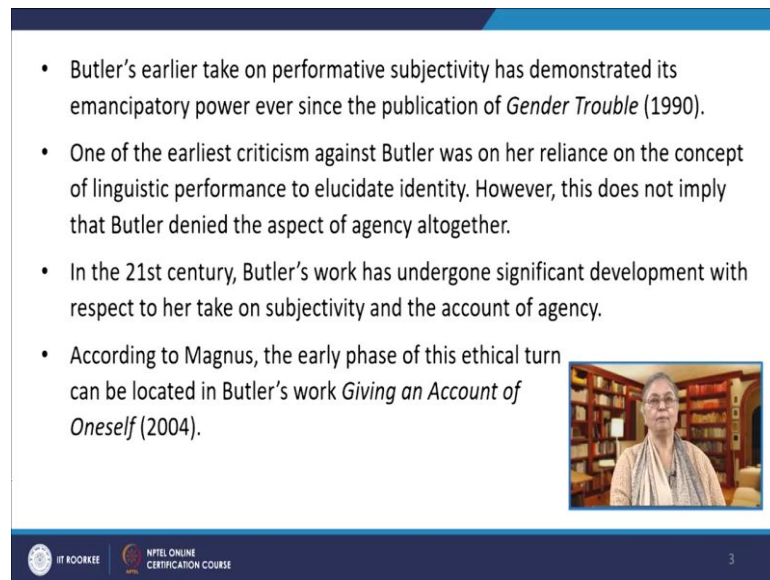
To critically evaluate Butler's position on the relationship between the construction of the subject and her idea of social subjection, we, to begin with, will look at the essay titled 'The Unaccountable Subject Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of

Intersubjective Agency’ by Prof. Kathy Dow Magnus. This popular article is a reflection on Butler’s critical work which was published in 2003 ‘Giving an Account of Oneself’.


In her essay, Magnus highlights some of the shortcomings in Butler’s earlier philosophy which was presented during the 1990s and also demonstrates how she responded to such criticisms in her later works. Understanding the ethical turn in Butler’s approaches is critically important if one has to decode with clarity her later works on assembly and human interdependence.

Butler believes that although one can reconcile societal impositions through the generation of a personal narrative an individual cannot assess their true identity in isolation. Such an approach to social spaces will shed better light on issues that affect gender minorities at large like the cases of morality and related with gender violence.

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- Butler’s earlier take on performative subjectivity has demonstrated its emancipatory power ever since the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990).
- One of the earliest criticism against Butler was on her reliance on the concept of linguistic performance to elucidate identity. However, this does not imply that Butler denied the aspect of agency altogether.
- In the 21st century, Butler’s work has undergone significant development with respect to her take on subjectivity and the account of agency.
- According to Magnus, the early phase of this ethical turn can be located in Butler’s work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2004).



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Butler’s earlier take on performative subjectivity has demonstrated its emancipatory power ever since the publication of ‘Gender Trouble’ in 1990. One of the earliest criticisms against Butler was on her reliance on the concept of linguistic performance to elucidate identity. However, this does not imply that Butler denied the aspect of agency altogether.

In the 21st century, Butler’s work has undergone significant development with respect to her take on subjectivity and the account of agency. Magnus suggests that the early phase


of this ethical turn can be located in Butler's 2004 work 'Giving an Account of Oneself'. In her recent works, she does not see gender performativity as a mere effect of language. Instead, she incorporates an innovative account of intersubjective recognition into her discussion of the interpellated subject.

Through a creative fusion of postmodern ethics and critical theory, she demonstrates the positive ethical implications of recognition and provides a detailed commentary on how subjects account for themselves.

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**The Subjected Subject**

- The theoretical innovation in Butler's later works provides a space for more positive and empowering notion of subjective agency.
- Kathy Magnus says,
  - According to Butler, agency does not need to be understood in terms of self-reflexivity, autonomy, intentionality or choice. Since all of these presuppose political and social support systems, they do not serve as *foundations* of subjectivity. (Magnus, 2006, p. 82)
- Butler contends that presuming an autonomous subject free from social discourse takes for granted the privileging of some subjects while it denies others the status of "subject" altogether.




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The theoretical innovation in Butler's later works provides a space for more positive and empowering notion of subjective agency. Kathy Magnus says and I quote "According to Butler agency does not need to be understood in terms of self reflexivity autonomy intentionality or choice. Since all of these presuppose political and social support systems they do not serve as foundations of subjectivity" unquote.

Butler contends that presuming an autonomous subject free from social discourse takes for granted the privileging of some subjects while it denies others the status of subject altogether. Therefore, it is better to understand subjectivity as a product of social discourse and thus a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.

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- For Butler, the fact that the subject is constituted by social discourse does not mean that the subject is 'determined' by social discourse.
- She maintains that "the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency" (Butler, 1995, pp. 45-46).
- Abstaining from the language of choice and self-determination, Butler proposes an understanding of agency in terms of the process of re-signification.
- The subject produced through discourse can act by articulating words in contexts that invest them with new meaning.




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For Butler, the fact that subject is constituted by social discourse does not mean that the subject is determined by social discourse. She maintains that the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. Abstaining from the language of choice and self determination, Butler proposes an understanding of agency in terms of the process of resignification.

The subject produced through discourse can act by articulating words in contexts that invest them with new meaning. Through such linguistic performances, the subject can resist the pre-established social order that penetrates one's very being. The essay 'The Unaccountable Subject' by Kathy Magnus was written in 2006. After 2006, Butler has acknowledged the potential of subjects coming together for resistance in works like 'Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly,' which we shall look at in detail in the next week.

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Butler on her Critics

- In the interview given to LA Review of Books in 2015, Butler addresses some of the criticism aimed at her early works.
- She focuses on the accusation which states that everyone is free to take on whatever gender they want by means of performance.

[Source: LA Review of Books \(YouTube Video\)](#)

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I am sharing an interview with you. In the interview given to LA Review of Books in 2015, Butler addresses some of the criticism aimed at her early works. She focuses on the acquisitions which states that everyone is free to take on whatever gender they want by means of performance.

“The theory of gender performativity that emerged in a way in the course of those reflections was very often understood to be a theory that focused on individual acts or individual acts by which you perform a gender or take on a gender.

And some people thought it was highly volitional view that is to say that were utterly free to take on whatever gender we want and also that it was an individualistic view. So, you are free to take on your gender and I am free to take on mine and that is part of our individual liberty.

So, there was a little distressing that there was that one that was one way of reading the text I understood why people might read it that way, but I was nevertheless somewhat distressed. So, in the years that followed I tried to return to the theory of performativity in order to show its social and political dimensions.

More carefully it is true that performativity broadly understood is a comes from a theory of language that talks about how language makes things happen how certain categories can bring social realities into being or produce certain kinds of effects. It is a theory that that in some ways underscores the powerful effects of discourse. But there is a question how is it that we embody discourses especially the discourses of gender and what can we

do what kind of agency do we have in relationship to the categories that inhabit us and that we in turn inhabit.

So, for me thinking about what happens when we act in common what happens when we act in concert.

Hannah Arendt's views have been important for me as I try to think about what performative action looks like when people undertake that in common and demonstrations are of course, a key way in which that happens.

Butler says that this criticism of an individualistic view does not hold any ground because Butler had never ignored social and political dimensions of subjectivity and gender performativity. Although, performativity comes from a theory of language it is also a theory which underscores the powerful effects of social discourse, that is how language can bring about certain social realities into being.

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- The questions associated with gender performativity are not limited to questions of language and discourse; rather they prompt us to ponder on how do we 'embody' such discourses of gender.
- "What kind of 'agency' does an individual obtain or inhabit while undertaking a gender performance" -- such questions are at the heart of the earlier works of Butler; which critics tend to overlook.
- In her later works Butler addresses the criticism of neglect for communities and people acting in resistance as a group, especially after her focus on philosophers of ethics like Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt.

Source: LA Review of Books

The questions associated with gender performativity are not limited to questions of language and discourse rather they prompt us to ponder on how do we embody such discourses of gender. What kind of agency does an individual obtain or inhabit while undertaking a gender performance? This question and similar other questions are at the heart of the earlier works of Butler which critics often tend to overlook.

In her later works, Butler has addressed the criticism of neglect for communities and people acting in resistance as a group especially after her focus on philosophers of ethics like Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt.

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**Politics and Resignification**

- For Butler, linguistic agency has two aspects: the subject depends on language for its existence, and that language is 'excitable', i.e., outside the control of its user.
- In *Excitable Speech*, she showed that while hate-speech generates consequences, there is nothing definite about the direction or shape they take.
- In Derridean terms, 'breaks' from the context of speech create the possibility of political transformation.
- Hate-speech can be, therefore, turned against its tainted past and be re-signified.

Source: Routledge Classics


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For Butler, linguistic agency has two aspects the subject depends on language for its existence and that language is 'excitable' that is outside the control of its user. In 'Excitable Speech,' she showed that while hate speech generates consequences there is nothing definite about the direction or shape they take. In Derridean terms, 'breaks' from the context of speech create the possibility of political transformation.

Hate speech can be therefore, turned against its tainted past be re signified. Although hate speech injures, Butler also sees it as presenting the initial moment of counter mobilization.

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- Butler recalls a personal experience of hers when a girl yelled at her from a Berkeley window, asking “are you a lesbian?”, Butler replied affirmatively “Yes, I am a lesbian”.
- As she recounts it, the power of her interrogator was lost. Its attempt to interpellate her or address her as an object of fear and loathing had failed.
- Butler had ‘received the term’ and returned it re-signified. Instead of accepting the speech as hate-speech, Butler reclaims it as a positive description of herself.



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Butler recalls a personal experience of hers when a girl had yelled at her from a Berkeley window “asking are you a lesbian?” And Butler had replied affirmatively “yes, I am a lesbian” and she recounts it the power of her interrogator was lost its attempt to interpellate her or address her as an object of fear and loathing had failed. Butler had received the term and returned it re-signified. Instead of accepting the speech as hate speech, Butler reclaims it as a positive description of herself.

She diffuses its harmful potential effectively. In poststructuralist terms when Butler and her confronter communicated neither is the author of the speech they use, both are engaged in recycling the language that already circulates in everyday communication among people.



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- For Butler, performative agency entails that the resisting subject can repeat words in a such a way that they enter into new contexts and develop new meanings.
- Magnus, in her essay, points out that in this conception, Butler does not explain how agents can reinscribe words into transformative contexts, given the unpredictability of the effects of speech.
- Since this transformation is affected by regulations of power and societal norms, one needs a deeper look at the political state and power structures of the context.
- Although Magnus is critical of Butler's earlier work, she lauds Butler's take on subjectivity in the works following *Giving an Account of Oneself*.



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For Butler, performative agency entails that the resisting subject can repeat words in such a way that they enter into new contexts and develop new meanings. Magnus in her essay points out that in this conception, Butler does not explain how agents can reinscribe words into transformative contexts, given the unpredictability of the effects of speech. Since the transformation is affected by regulations of power and societal norms, one needs a deeper look at the political state and power structures of the context.


Although Magnus is critical of Butler's earlier work, she lauds Butler's take on subjectivity in the works following 'Giving an Account of Oneself.' Another criticism that Magnus posits against Butler is her ambivalence or lack of elaboration on the topic of morality. This is particularly true for earlier works such as 'The Psychic Power of Life' and 'Subjects of Desire.'

At this point, Magnus admires Butler's reflections on morality in 'Giving an Account of Oneself.' In these discussions, Butler draws from the philosophy of Theodor Adorno a leading member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.


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### On Moral Agency

- Drawing on Theodore Adorno, Butler clarifies that morality is a fundamental facet of understanding subjectivity and agency. Moral issues arise when socially established ethical norms become questionable.
  - Being human, according to Adorno, means asserting "moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion." We as humans are accountable for choosing to follow moral norms. However, we cannot fully articulate or credit ourselves with an account of how or why we make the choice to adhere to morality.
- Butler concurs with Adorno and states that ethical norms should not merely be imposed upon individuals; rather, individual subjects should be able to incorporate social values in a 'lively' way, that is, in a way that accords with their subjective desires.



Theodore Adorno  
Source: Spiegel,  
Getty Images




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Drawing on the concepts of Theodor Adorno, Butler clarifies that morality is a fundamental facet of understanding subjectivity and agency. Moral issues arise when socially established ethical norms become questionable. Adorno had suggested that being human means asserting moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion.

We as humans are accountable for choosing to follow moral norms. However, we cannot fully articulate or credit ourselves with an account of how or why we make the choice to adhere to morality. Butler concurs with Adorno and states that ethical norms should not merely be imposed upon individuals rather individual subjects should be able to incorporate social values in a lively manner, that is in a way that accords with their subjective desires. Butler here acknowledges that morality is a necessary aspect in the production of freedom and gender roles.

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- Both Butler and Adorno understand morality as having a resistive and critical function.
- Butler, later, takes up Adorno's notions on morality to form an ethics of responsibility.
- She proposes an acceptance of internal contradictions within a subject. To be responsible means to admit to oneself the limits of self-understanding and to accept them as the situation of human community in general.
- This acknowledgment of one's limited ability to account for oneself obliges one to forfeit the expectation that others will be able to account for themselves completely.




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Both Butler and Adorno understand morality as having a resistive and critical function. Later Butler has taken up Adorno's notions on morality to form an ethics of responsibility. She proposes an acceptance of internal contradictions within a subject. To be responsible means to admit to ourselves the limit of self understanding and to accept them as the situation of human community in general.

This acknowledgment of one's limited ability to account for oneself obliges one to forfeit the expectation that others will be able to account for themselves completely. The subject who realizes that one cannot fully account for oneself is obliged to accept the shortcomings of others. In fact, such a subject is inclined towards humane values: modesty, generosity, patience, tolerance, forgiveness; these are the fundamental virtues that work against ethical and sexual violence.

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- Butler says that, "our responsibility does not pertain merely to the purity of our souls, but to the whole of the commonly inhabited world" (Butler, 2003, p. 114).
- In other words, the limits of making a single subject responsible for an action can be replaced by a view which perceives the ethical dilemma as the complex result of the interaction between subjects and social circumstances.
- This will also put a stop to violence on minorities like homosexuals and trans community, where individual subjects will not be blamed for being different from the widespread heterosexual matrix.



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Butler says that our responsibility does not pertain merely to the purity of our souls, but to the whole of the commonly inhabited world. In other words, the limits of making a single subject responsible for an action can be replaced by a view which perceives the ethical dilemma as a complex result of the interaction between subjects and social circumstances. This will also put a stop to violence on minorities like homosexuals and trans community where individual subjects will not be blamed for being different from the widespread heterosexual metrics.


Instead of focusing on the intentions feelings or acts of individuals Butler derives a notion of responsibility from the awareness that every subject is intrinsically related to others. This conception of responsibility also begins to clarify how agency may be conceived outside of the terms of choice. For if human subjectivity is fundamentally intersubjective, then subjects cannot choose whether or not to relate to each other. They are always already related.

At this juncture in her essay, Butler refers to Nancy Fraser, a contemporary American thinker known for her 2013 essay collection titled 'Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis.' She argues that feminism must be a force working in concert with other egalitarian movements in the struggle to bring the economy under democratic control.


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## Desire and Recognition

- Nancy Fraser contends that any conceptualization of today's struggles over identity and difference is indebted to the concept of 'recognition' which is derived from Hegel's philosophy.
- Butler has closely engaged with Hegel's notion of desire as discussed in his *Phenomenology of Mind*.
- Hegel understands desire as "reflexive consciousness", whereby consciousness seeks to know and comprehend itself through mediation of otherness or alterity.
- Desire, for Hegel, is the vehicle through which the 'reflexive subject' is produced; it is the medium for producing consciousness and the subject.



Nancy Fraser  
Source: The New School for Social Research



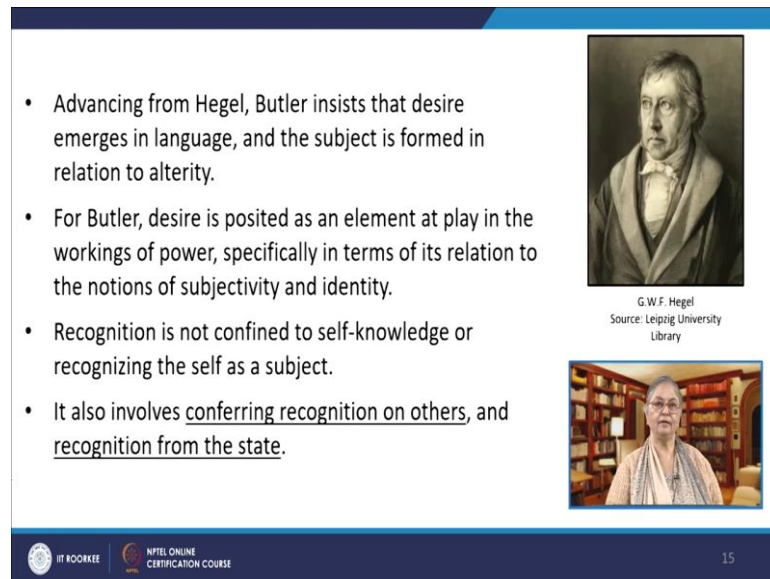
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Nancy Fraser contends that any conceptualization of today's struggles over identity and difference is indebted to the concept of recognition which is derived from Hegel's philosophy. Butler has also closely engaged with Hegel's notion of desire as discussed in his work 'Phenomenology of Mind.' Hegel understands desire as "reflexive consciousness" whereby consciousness seeks to know and comprehend itself through mediation of otherness or alterity.

Desire for Hegel is the vehicle through which the reflexive subject is produced. It is the medium for producing consciousness and the subject.


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- Advancing from Hegel, Butler insists that desire emerges in language, and the subject is formed in relation to alterity.
- For Butler, desire is posited as an element at play in the workings of power, specifically in terms of its relation to the notions of subjectivity and identity.
- Recognition is not confined to self-knowledge or recognizing the self as a subject.
- It also involves conferring recognition on others, and recognition from the state.



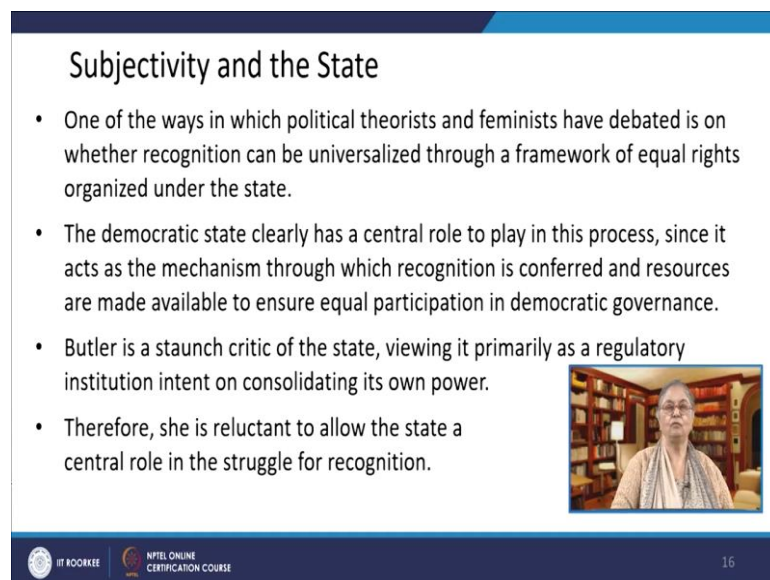
G.W.F. Hegel  
Source: Leipzig University Library



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Advancing from Hegel, Butler insists that desire emerges in language and the subject is formed in relation to alterity. For Butler desire is posited as an element at play in the workings of power specifically in terms of its relation to the notions of subjectivity and identity. Recognition is not confined to self-knowledge or recognizing the self as a subject it also involves conferring recognition on others and recognition from the state. Butler here reflects on the regulatory processes by the state as it influences the sexed and gendered desiring subjects.

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### Subjectivity and the State

- One of the ways in which political theorists and feminists have debated is on whether recognition can be universalized through a framework of equal rights organized under the state.
- The democratic state clearly has a central role to play in this process, since it acts as the mechanism through which recognition is conferred and resources are made available to ensure equal participation in democratic governance.
- Butler is a staunch critic of the state, viewing it primarily as a regulatory institution intent on consolidating its own power.
- Therefore, she is reluctant to allow the state a central role in the struggle for recognition.

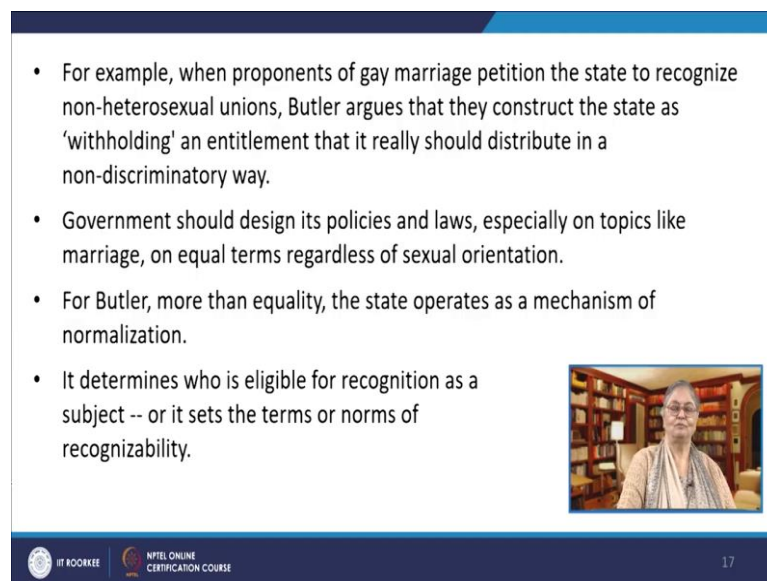


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One of the ways in which political theorists and feminists have debated is on whether recognition can be universalized through a framework of equal rights organized under the state. The democratic state clearly has a central role to play in this process as it acts as the mechanism through which recognition is conferred and resources are made available to ensure equal participation in democratic governance.

Butler is a staunch critic of this state and views it primarily as a regulatory institution intent on consolidating its own power. Therefore, she is reluctant to allow the state a central role in the struggle for recognition. This does not mean that Butler is neglecting the role of political participation and resistive movements which yearn equality.

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- For example, when proponents of gay marriage petition the state to recognize non-heterosexual unions, Butler argues that they construct the state as 'withholding' an entitlement that it really should distribute in a non-discriminatory way.
- Government should design its policies and laws, especially on topics like marriage, on equal terms regardless of sexual orientation.
- For Butler, more than equality, the state operates as a mechanism of normalization.
- It determines who is eligible for recognition as a subject -- or it sets the terms or norms of recognizability.


The slide includes a small video inset of a woman with glasses speaking. At the bottom, there are logos for IIT ROORKEE and NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE, along with the page number 17.

For example, when proponents of gay marriage petition the state to recognize non-heterosexual unions, Butler argues that they construct the state as withholding an entitlement that it really should distribute in a nondiscriminatory way. In Butler's opinion government should design its policies and laws especially on topics like marriage on equal terms regardless of sexual orientation. For Butler, more than equality the state operates as a mechanism of normalization. It determines who is eligible for recognition as a subject or it sets the terms or norms of recognizability.

The state, therefore, has an integral role in defining the prevailing norms of human intelligibility.

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- If the state is assumed to monopolize the 'resources of recognition', then it is also seen as the sole mode through which desire and sexuality are sanctioned.
- On this basis, if a subject wants recognition from others; it needs to be recognized, first, by the state.
- Butler finds this role of the state as problematic as the call for state recognition can produce new forms of social hierarchy.
- She asks how is it possible to become 'recognizable' without further consolidating existing norms of recognition and legitimacy, and without fortifying the normalizing power of the state?



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If the state is assumed to monopolize the resources of recognition, then it is also seen as the sole mode through which desire and sexuality are sanctioned. On this basis if a subject wants recognition from others it needs to be recognized first by the state. Butler finds the role of the state as problematic as the call for state recognition can produce new forms of social hierarchy.

She asks how is it possible to become 'recognizable' without further consolidating existing norms of recognition and legitimacy and without fortifying the normalizing power of the state. Butler's solution is to argue for the radical democratic transformation of the norms that structure the society.




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- Being a poststructuralist notion of democracy, Butler's conception of radical democracy is critically indebted to Paul Gilroy and Jacques Derrida.
- She says that, "we need to know that our fundamental categories can and must be expanded to become more inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations". (Butler, 2003, pp. 223-224)
- Radical democracy that Butler envisions is, therefore, constitutively open-ended.
- She assumes that power relations are intrinsic to democratic society and it is a site of constant contestation for values like equality and freedom.



Paul Gilroy  
Source: University College  
London



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Being a poststructuralist notion of democracy, Butler's conception of radical democracy is critically indebted to Paul Gilroy and Jacques Derrida. She says that and I quote "we need to know that our fundamental categories can and must be expanded to become more inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations." Radical democracy that Butler envisions is therefore, constitutively open ended.

She assumes that power relations are intrinsic to democratic society and that it is a site of constant contestation for values like equality and freedom. This presence of constant contestations and negotiations also suggest that a complete ideal democracy is not attainable.

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- A radical democratic project aims to universalize the terms of inclusion, rather than homogenizing different subject categories as one.
- The factor of universalism always leaves a possibility of exclusion. Butler provides an example: the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights assumes a male subject and thus excludes women.
- But a democratic setup also leaves space for political struggle. Women thus have campaigned for human rights that recognize the specificity of women's experiences. (This resulted in the formation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women - CEDAW).




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A radical democratic project aims to universalize the terms of inclusion rather than homogenizing different subject categories as one. The factor of universalism always leaves a possibility of exclusion and Butler here provides an example the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights assumes a male subject and thus excludes women. However, as Butler has been able to point out a democratic set up also leaves the space for political struggle.

Women have campaigned for human rights that recognize the specificity of women's experiences and this resulted in the formation of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women that is CEDAW. The CEDAW convention adopted in 1979 by UN general assembly is often described as an international bill of rights for women. The convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access and equal opportunities in political and public life.

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Butler on Envisioning a New World

- In the interview for Heartland Future Talks held in 2019, Butler says that people should be able to live without the fear of persecution based on their desire and gender.

[Source: Heartland Talks YouTube Video](#)

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In the interview for Heartland Future Talks which was held in 2019, Butler has said that people should be able to live without the fear of persecution based on their desire and gender.

“Is this I think our question has to be what kind of world do we want to live in together and do we want to live in a world in which people feel fear and persecution on the basis of their desire or their gender presentation or do all of us want to live in a world in which nobody feels that fear? And it seems to me we can commit to that even though we have different experiences of sexuality and gender, but we can commit to wanting to live in that world in which persecution is alleviated for everyone. I think it is a better world.

Let me say this as well I mean when racial religious ethnic minorities make their own cultural values clear or seek to establish their own space or want their history to be known or want their religion to be understood, it seems to me that we all make space for that and we affirm that not because we are eager to recognize everybody’s identity we might be.

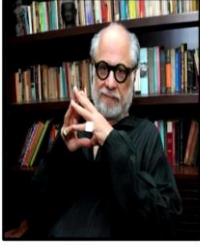
But because we want to live in a world that is opposed to racism, that is opposed to discrimination on the basis of religion. And we see that the marginalization and silencing of people on the basis of their race or their religion produces a radical inequality. We fight against inequality we fight against racism no matter who we are.”

To envision a world which welcomes radical democratic values one has to be open to the factor of newness. Butler suggests that a radical form of universal equality cannot arise from homogenizing all of humanity as one since discriminated victims are beings of varied subjectivities. To resolve this conflict between equality and universality, Butler looks at the concept of ‘cultural translation’ put forward by Homi K Bhabha.


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### Cultural Translation

- To make possible a world of radical democracy, it requires the bringing of the factor of ‘newness’ from existing discourses.
- Homi K. Bhabha introduces the idea of cultural translation in *The Location of Culture* (1994) in order to explore the question of exclusion in cultural politics.
- Cultural translation, as Bhabha defines it, is a process involving the movement of people (subjects and subjectivities), rather than the movement of texts or objects.
- The concept of cultural translation draws on several wide notions of translation from various fields such as social anthropology and sociology.



Homi K. Bhabha  
Source: Anagora.org



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To make possible a world of radical democracy it requires the bringing of the factor of newness from existing discourses. Homi K Bhabha had introduced the idea of cultural translation in his ‘The Location of Culture’ which was published in 1994. The purpose was to explore the question of exclusion in cultural politics. ‘Cultural translation’ as Bhabha defines it is a process involving the movement of people subjects as well as subjectivities rather than the movement of texts or objects.

The concept of cultural translation draws on several wide notions of translation from various fields such as social anthropology and sociology. It studies communication between groups shaped by the processes of migration in complex and fragmented societies. The broad concept of cultural translation addresses problems in postmodern sociology and cultural hybridity. It helps us to think about a globalizing world in which there is no start text and usually no fixed target text.

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- Cultural translation decodes the transparent assumptions of cultural supremacy.
- Bhabha deploys the idea of translation to draw attention to what is *untranslatable* in a culture, and thus to what cannot be transformed by a translational encounter.
- He examines the ways that the liminality of migrant dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability.
- Instead of being able to assimilate minority cultures to that of the majority, the 'foreign' elements that resist translation put into jeopardy the very possibility of a community with a new shared set of values and beliefs, or a shared language.



Source: Routledge Classics




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He examines the ways that the liminality of migrant dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability. Instead of being able to assimilate minority cultures to that of the majority, the foreign elements that resist translation put into jeopardy the very possibility of a community with a new shared set of values and beliefs a shared language so to say.

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- Drawing from Bhabha's cultural translation, Butler argues that there are different cultural versions of the 'universal', rather than a single transcultural form.
- One universal may treat a given set of rights as pertaining to all humans, whereas in another case 'those very rights mark the limit of universalizability'.
- As an example, she suggests the case with gay and lesbian human rights, wherein 'various cultures and various mainstream human rights groups' do not view gays and lesbians as part of the 'human' to whom human rights belong.
- In order to develop a more substantive and inclusive conception of the universal, it is necessary to identify ideals that determine the grounds for exclusion.

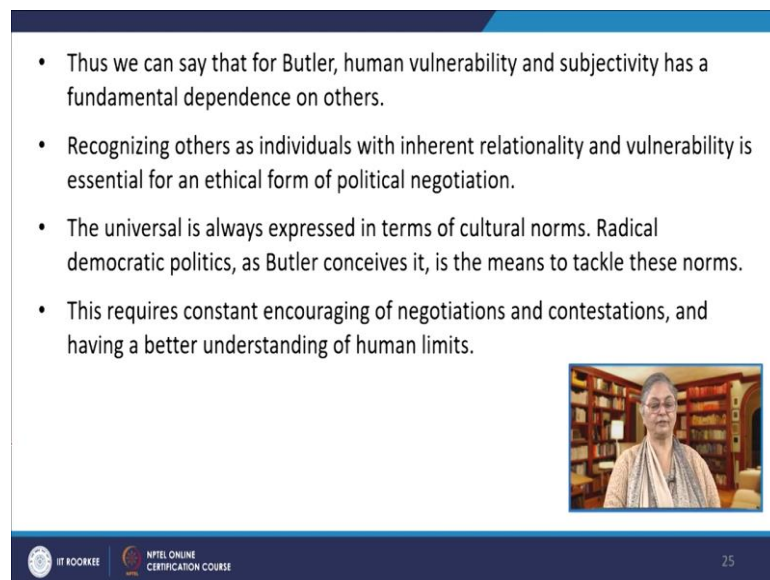


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Drawing from Bhabha's idea of cultural translation, Butler argues that there are different cultural versions of the universal rather than a single transcultural form. One universal may treat a given set of rights as pertaining to all humans, whereas, in another case those very rights mark the limit of universalizability. As an example, she suggests the case with gay and lesbian human rights wherein various cultures and various mainstream human rights groups do not view gays and lesbians as part of 'human' to whom human rights normally belong.

In order to develop a more substantive and inclusive conception of the universal it is necessary to identify ideals that determine the grounds for exclusion. Therefore, when translation strategies are employed for gendered communities, it opens up interesting avenues which study the interplay between biological socio cultural and grammatical distinctions among genders.

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- Thus we can say that for Butler, human vulnerability and subjectivity has a fundamental dependence on others.
- Recognizing others as individuals with inherent relationality and vulnerability is essential for an ethical form of political negotiation.
- The universal is always expressed in terms of cultural norms. Radical democratic politics, as Butler conceives it, is the means to tackle these norms.
- This requires constant encouraging of negotiations and contestations, and having a better understanding of human limits.




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Thus, we can say that for Butler human vulnerability and subjectivity has a fundamental dependence on others. Recognizing others as individuals with inherent relationality and vulnerability is essential for an ethical form of political negotiation. The universal is always expressed in terms of cultural norms. Radical democratic politics as Butler conceives it is the means to tackle these norms. This requires constant encouraging of negotiations and contestations and having a better understanding of human limits.

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- Butler's works such as *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* mark an evolution in her ethical philosophy of the subject.
- From the previous focus on linguistic performance and discourse, Butler now engages with the limits of individual resistance and the vulnerabilities of existence.
- The prominent concern about Butler's earlier thoughts among the critics was on the factors of existence and resistance being constrained at the individual level.
- By extending the question of performativity from realms of language and discourse to viability of human life, Butler effectively takes an ethical turn which creates a significant influence in feminist, gay and lesbian politics.



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Butler's works such as *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* mark an evolution in her ethical philosophy of the subject. From the previous focus on linguistic performance and discourse Butler now engages with the limits of individual resistance and the vulnerabilities of existence. The prominent concern about Butler's earlier thoughts among the critics was on the factors of existence and resistance being constrained at the individual level.



By extending the question of performativity from realms of language and discourse to viability of human life Butler effectively takes an ethical turn which creates a significant influence in feminist gay and lesbian politics. This understanding of subjectivity agency and recognition in Butler's philosophy led her to examine alternative ways of political struggle like how vulnerable populations fight against inequality in assembly or as a community.

In the coming week, we shall look at these new approaches in Butler's gender politics. Her concepts such as precarity and performative theory of assembly which will pave the way for our critical inquiry into global gender movements.

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Thank you.