

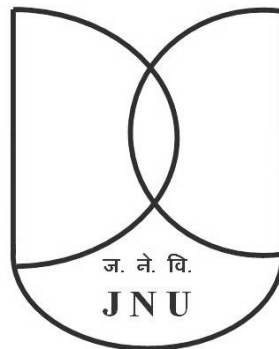
**Gender and Identity in Politics of Everydayness:
Philosophical Reflections on the works of Judith Butler**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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CENTRE FOR PHILOSOPHY

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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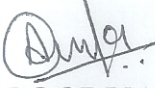
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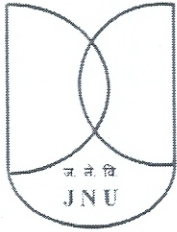
2015

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DECLARATION

I, Apoorva Hasija, do hereby declare that the dissertation entitled, "Gender and Identity in Politics of Everydayness: Philosophical Reflections on the works of Judith Butler", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is my bonafide work and it has not been submitted by me or by anyone else, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University.


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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled, "Gender and Identity in Politics of Everydayness: Philosophical Reflections on the works of Judith Butler" submitted by Apoorva Hasija for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is her bonafide work and to the best of our knowledge it has not been submitted by her or by anyone else, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or other University.

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***Dedicated to the nights I toiled
and the days I dreamt***

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Table of Contents

Title	Page No.
1. Introduction	1
2. Troubling Gender and Identity	12
2.1 Rethinking Woman, Sex and Gender	14
2.2 Theorising Gender Asymmetry	21
2.3 Concluding Remarks	28
3. Gender Performativity and the Politics of Subversion	30
3.1 Gender as an Act	32
3.2 Agency and the Possibility of Subversion	38
3.3 Concluding Remarks	43
4. Bodies and the Questions of Liveability	50
4.1 Butler’s Analysis of the Notion of Body	52
4.2 The Question of Liveability and Recognition	57
4.3 The Possibility of Social Transformation	62
4.4 Concluding Remarks	70
5. Conclusion	73
6. Bibliography	81

INTRODUCTION

I was of age seven when, I remember, my brother, aged five at the time, wished to wear bangles to a wedding. He would always watch me wear attires more elaborate than his own and he appeared to infer that there is some peculiar joy that comes from wearing bangles. Or, perhaps he simply wanted to wear them for no specific reason. We succumbed to his insistence despite our reluctance and he beamed with happiness as he wore those shiny ornaments to the wedding that day. A heightened sense of embarrassment over his act led me to make continuous attempts to hide the bangles under his shirt's sleeves, but he was too overjoyed and enthusiastic to let that happen. Exasperated with his cheerfulness, I started calling him by a feminine name in front of strangers so that at least they don't judge him as abnormal. Not only was I trying to free him from any mockery he might face, I was also bent upon saving ourselves being shamed. The evening went on smoothly, but my own extreme reactions to his seemingly harmless request still raise questions in my mind. Why did I presume that his desire to change his way of dressing would result in embarrassment and mockery? Is his identity as a boy only limited to his ways of dressing? Why did his non-conformity to popular masculine forms of dressing become a source of embarrassment for me? Did this alteration in dressing result in his loss of gender? What if he decides to act in the same way now? Will my parents be as acceptable as then? It is not just him. I myself have been reprimanded many times to speak in a manner appropriate for girls – be it the volume of my speech or the choice of my words. The level of tolerance for such non-conforming acts also appeared to reduce as we grew up and we became more aware of gender appropriate behaviour as there is no lack of continuous reminders of stating which act is suitable according to one's gender. It is noteworthy that we grow up with our mannerisms so ingrained in prescribed gender-roles that as young children, we do not even realise we are conforming to certain sanctions as dictated by social norms. In fact, not only do we ourselves conform to these behaviours, we expect others to behave in accordance to these rules of acceptable gender practices and judge those negatively who act in non-conformity. Moreover, such negative judgements appear natural and any reprimand or corrective action towards those who do not adhere to the gender norms is readily accepted.

Norms governing gender are intricately tied in our everyday mundane acts of existence. The spectrum of gender regulation is vast as it covers acts like the ways of eating or walking to instances of social interaction with individuals of same or different gender. For the most part, we act unawares of these norms operating on us and the authority of these norms is also accepted widely because gender appropriate behaviour is perceived as the natural outcome of one's biological sex. It is only in the instances of non-conformity, however small or extreme, that we become aware of the normative and coercive aspects of gender. My own interest in the conceptual analysis of the notion of gender has been a result of a constant awareness of being regulated by gender norms. My interest in analysing the conceptual and philosophical dimensions of gender was triggered by a self-directed question of reflecting whether my gender is a necessary, fixed attribute of my Self? Is my identity as a woman innately linked to feminine tendencies? Do I cease being a woman or become less of a woman if I do not act in feminine ways? My personal everyday experience of femininity as an erratic aspect of identity led me to question the necessary relation between gender and biological sex. By stating that I experience femininity in an erratic fashion, I intend to assert my own conformity with certain feminine standards and a lack of identification with many standards of femininity. I generally conform to a dress sense which would be categorised as feminine but there are times when I do not dress in a feminine fashion. In fact, if we think further, the modes of dressing get more difficult to be categorised as feminine or masculine if observed across cultures. This shows a lack of uniformity in particular standards of femininity which makes one wonder if there is one universal standard of femininity or not. It is a question worth pondering to see if there is any universal standard of femininity or if there are merely overlappings in behaviour of women across cultures. I generally dislike activities involving sports, an activity mostly associated with masculinity, but I particularly enjoy swimming. I also notice that many of my female friends excel in sports in comparison to many of my male friends but this does not make any of them less of a female nor does it make my male friends any less of a male. This further depicts that practice of gender norms is not uniform even within one particular culture. My choice of speaking is polite or aggressive depending upon the situation but I observed former being termed as feminine and latter as masculine. So, my own conformity or non-conformity to these standards is also not uniform at all times. Gender, of course, is much more than these activities of preferences but these observations concerning everyday ordinary behaviours made me wonder if my female

body has anything to do with these acts of femininity and vice versa. I can walk like a man and still be a female and my brother can do household chores (a role traditionally associated with femininity) and still be a male. Performing activities that are usually associated with the opposite gender made none of us lose our gender. But, they did at many times brought about comments of mockery or suggestions of acting in accordance with our gender from others. The acts of transgression in prescriptive gender behaviours among people of different biological sexes made me question the necessity of prescribing a particular gender to an individual on the basis of that person's biological sex. These observations led me to pursue a philosophical inquiry of gender grounded in the everydayness of experience to seek how most ordinary experiences in everyday interactions and social existence are directed and influenced by gender. The observation that certain acts of non-conformity to the prevalent model of gender in society results in varied reactions ranging from embarrassment to absolute shaming, I would pursue my inquiry by constantly putting the idea of gender under scanner to examine its relation with acceptable form of discrimination and violence. Such an inquiry would focus on the sex-gender continuum which binds the two in a necessary relation asserting that gender is a necessary consequence of one's gender. The scope of the study is, however, not limited to the analysis of sex-gender relation but aims at postulating an alternate account of gender which is not based on a coercive regulation of gender on the basis of one's biological sex. The inquiry would be undertaken to study the nature of gender as a concept and figure out if there is a possibility of an alternate understanding which would not incorporate acceptable forms of discrimination against different kinds of gendered identities. A revaluation of the sex-gender continuum allows for an examination of the role gender plays in constituting our identities and the non-recognition of certain identities as credible subjects as a result of the lack of coherence with the gendered framework of social ordering.

The concept of gender has long been approached from numerous perspectives and there is no readily available one account which is free from any contestation. The popular model of gender ties it necessarily with sex and fixes both notions as coextensive resulting in a form of biological determinism. This view on gender, motivated by biological determinism, asserts femininity and masculinity as a natural consequence of female and male body respectively. According to this idea, women are females are women and men are males and the role, place and behaviour of individuals

is a natural and necessary extension of their biological sex. Feminist thought has immensely contributed to contest such an understanding of gender by stressing that women are not wholly determined by their sex and nor should they be discriminated on the basis of it. Thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir emphasised the sex/gender distinction which was based on treating as a sexual aspect of bodies and gender as the social construct which is shaped by factors apart from sex. Feminist thinkers have focused on the social character of gender and attempted, both at the level of theory and practice, to reduce the discriminations which arises as a result of social influence of norms, laws, conventions and many other forces. Yet, the struggle continues to free the model of gender to be seen as a mere extension of the sexed nature of bodies. Gender and sex are still understood widely as complementary to each other which not only reduces individuals to their anatomical aspects, many identities whose lives do not comply with such an understanding suffer incommensurably. Any individual who does not feel comfortable with a deterministic understanding of gender suffers not only social and political discrimination, everyday social existence and interaction becomes an inevitable struggle for recognition as a credible subject worthy of acceptance and living with dignity. Another perspective qualifies gender as a result of innate psychological differences associated with female and male bodies. Such an account attributes superior status to masculinity assuming that there is inherent inequality in capacities of men and women owing to their psychological dispositions. In this framework, women are perceived as natural care givers and men are psychologically disposed to be less emotional, detached and dominant in nature. In order to break free from the psychological modelling, studies have been undertaken to suggest that difference in parenting could help in minimising such dispositions and help eliminate gender differences. This, however, is by no means an exhaustive understanding of gender as it is experienced in everyday life. There are innumerable factors which contribute to constituting gender in various ways and there is ample evidence that reports the lack of any such uniformity of psychological dispositions among men and women. A more thoroughgoing analysis of the notion of gender should begin by addressing foremost the problematic of universalising or essentializing the experience of gender. Any account which classifies all individuals into two broad categories of identity, namely, women and men and subscribes to a uniform definition of all women in opposition to all men fails to address the concrete differences within the broad identity of women and overlappings between various aspects of women and men. Moreover, it will be an

unsatisfactory perspective as it will fail to attend to normative violence which arises as a result of any essentialist and universal understanding of gender. The normative violence arising as a result of essentialist understanding of gender refers to accepted forms of discrimination and violence against individuals who do not subscribe to the strict gender norms which dictate heterosexuality and hegemony of the masculine over the feminine.

My engagement with the works of Judith Butler in the present dissertation has been a result of an attempt to tie the theory of gender with the occurrences of normative violence. The task at hand in the present work has been to examine an account of gender in which theoretical articulation leads to the possibility of a kind of practical politics that opens up space for social transformation. The guiding idea has been to bring together the ideas of theory and practice in the inquiry of gender which has been undertaken to work towards a possibility of a society of co-existence of varied identities. With this task directing the work, an attempt has been made to approach the key problematic concerns in three different chapters using insights from the vast body of Butler's works. However, the scope and objective of this dissertation guided as well as limited the issues which have been approached from within her work. Before proceeding to provide an introductory overview of the inquiry that has been undertaken, it seems appropriate to remark a little about the nature of Butler's work and her writing style. Her trajectory of work borrows from a varied range of thinkers. Her thought owes much to the works of Hegel, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Nietzsche, Foucault, Lacan, Irigaray, Wittig, Kristeva, Derrida to name some and yet, it cannot be situated singularly in any of these. Similarly, her work derives import from existentialism, phenomenology, feminism, post-structuralism as methodologies for analysis but is definitely not limited by any of these. She works with various schools of thought together which signifies the scope of her methodology as non-singular and extensive. Her writing style has been at the receiving end of criticism because it is conceived as opaque, obscure and even unintelligible by many. It can be definitely said that her manner of writing defies linear progression and a clear cut demarcation between concepts or even a definitive telos is not available straightforwardly. However, her way of writing is integral to what she is trying to posit – a lack of linear progression allows for multiple meanings and constant shifts in movement of thought which is how she sets to proceed with the analysis of the subject in her project. She is, in a way, performing the subject she is dealing with. The role and significance of performing in Butler's work will be gradually unravelled in the

present work as it progresses. Her writing style also signifies her non-conformity to the existing linguistic rules thereby showing limitations of language and resulting limits on the way ideas could be developed and expressed. This departure of lucidity and transparency in writing could be seen as revelatory of the way language functions and serves certain political interests. It must also be noted that her thought is still in continuous evolving process which although creates scope for the present work to be developed at a later stage, also limits the extent to which claim could be made on finality of her thought.

The study begins with the first chapter titled “Troubling Gender and Identity” which initiates the entry into the discourse of gender by first and foremost troubling the categories of gender and identity. There has not been a dearth of theorizing on the question of identity in philosophical discourses, but the question remains largely gender neutral. Much inquiry has been centred on the criterion of identity as immaterial or disembodied one as can be found in the discussion on the immaterial soul and pure ego in Plato and Descartes respectively. Another engaging view, held by John Locke, is that identity is a matter of psychological continuity.¹ Even when there has been a discussion of bodies with relation to our identities, the issue of gender has not been taken into account. The purpose here is to locate the question of the nature of identity within the context of gender. Many feminist scholars draw attention to the need of exploring the role of gender in identity-formation of the subject. Within the scope of the present study, the term identity will be analysed as the label which is given to individuals on the basis of their innate gendered core. On the basis of our gender and sexuality, we are ascribed various identities or rather, we are born into identities such as that of a woman, man, transgender and more. These identities, in turn, appear to be fixed, unchangeable and permanent mark of the self. Throughout the work, this understanding of these labels as fixed on the basis of gender will be questioned. The first chapter begins with Butler’s critique of the foundationalist approach of feminist thought in theorising the category of woman. According to this approach, women are assumed to share certain features which are same and fixed for any woman across the globe. This allows for developing a universal notion of a woman which then acts as the foundation for pursuing feminist

¹ The discussion occurs in the midst of Locke’s larger discussion of the identity conditions for various entities in Locke, John (1689), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 27.

goals. The chapter offers an analysis of such universalistic conception of Woman to highlight its drawbacks and failure of feminist thought to account for varied experiences of being a woman if it continues to understand identities using a general rubric. Representational aims of feminist politics assume that a universal category of woman is necessary to pursue goals of emancipation. Butler questions this necessity by revealing that such a universal notion ends up excluding varied experiences within the broad category of women and feminism undermines its own goals of extending representation to all who may identify with the label of woman. The continuous perpetuation of a definitive idea of a woman successfully sustains the hierarchical order of gender in society. By troubling these categories of gender and identity which are otherwise presumed as fundamental, the chapter examines how the governing structures of power produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of heteronormativity and masculine domination. This category of woman is discursively constituted keeping in mind certain exclusionary aims – what is supposed to mean by a woman is specified in order to legitimize heteronormativity and to continually exclude many other identities which would otherwise claim to identify with the category of woman. The category of woman is stabilised as a universal identity by taking recourse to a seemingly undeniable link between biological sex and gender. In the first chapter, this sex-gender continuum based on a necessary causal relation between sex and gender is questioned. The causal relation between sex and gender comes under scrutiny as we begin to reflect upon the necessity of a female body to be feminine and male body to be masculine. If gender is a construct, then we should be able to ascribe any gender to any body irrespective of its biological sex but the strict framework of gender in terms of heterosexuality does not allow for any such scope. In fact, any body which fails to cohere with the binary of heterosexuality is confronted with discrimination and even violent punishment. With this idea, the chapter moves forward to articulate gender asymmetry by not relying on the sex-gender continuum. This will be done by reviewing the shortcomings of account offered by some thinkers which postulate gender difference on the basis of sexual differences. The analysis will be followed by Butler's articulation of gender asymmetry through the description of a Matrix of Intelligibility² according to which genders are qualified as intelligible or unintelligible. Genders which maintain the relations of coherence and continuity of gender norms and ascribe to the binary model of gender are intelligible

² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 24.

and those which fail to conform to these norms are qualified as unintelligible. It is, however, these incoherent gendered beings which challenge the supposed naturalness of sex as their existence act as a proof of a lack of necessary relation between sex and gender. The presumption of a binary framework of sexuality in feminism itself serves to marginalize and delegitimize identities which do not fit in the given matrix. This matrix produces a specific sense of social order in which women are subjugated by male dominion and many other identities are rendered as less than human, for to be human would require being compatible this matrix of intelligibility. This analysis would culminate with elaboration on Butler's suggestion of Coalitional Politics that is based on a dialogue that accommodates divergences and breakages in viewpoints as a part of a democratic process. The approach is anti-foundationalist in nature as it entails rejection of any assumption of identity or meaning of the coalition to be decided prior to any achievement. The contention is that this might actually offer a faster course to action because such assumptions limit the possibilities of action and methods for pursuing the aims.

Butler's inquiry and treatment of the concepts of gender and identity call for a radical re-thinking in the way we perceive the category of subject. She is concerned with the formation of identity, tracing the processes by which we become subjects when we assume the gendered identities which are constructed. In her theorization, we witness a more radical use of the doctrine of the constitution that takes the agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts.³ Theory of gender in Butler, as it begins to unpack, provides for a newer and a critical rethinking of the category of subject and serves for a new kind of politics which seeks to recognize discriminated and marginalized identities. This brings us to the second chapter of the present work.

The critique of an essential and fixed understanding of gender and identity calls for an alternate understanding that does not rely on articulating gender as a fixed attribute of self. Accordingly, the next chapter focuses on an elucidation and critical examination of Butler's performative theory of gender which does not presume gender as a fixed attribute but rather, as an act. Titled as "Gender Performativity and the Politics of Subversion", the second chapter provides an alternate way of comprehending

³ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal*, p. 519.

the constructed aspect of gender. The performative theory of gender conceptualises gender as an act, a doing rather than a secondary attribute one acquires as a consequence of one's biological sex. We are categorised either of two genders the moment we are born and we become a part of a set of existing gender norms that define masculinity and femininity. These gender norms dictate the manner in which we should sit, talk, walk or even interact with the individuals of same or different gender. Gender lies in the repetition of these acts over a period of time and in order to elaborate upon how gender performativity involves repetition and signification, Butler's import from Derrida and Foucault would be discussed. These ways of doing gender define our everyday existence and interaction and any failure to cohere with prevalent gender norms results in reprimand. The first half of the chapter elucidates the notion of gender understood as an act and the second half is an attempt to examine a possibility of subverting hegemonic structures of gender. This possibility of subversion is based on an analysis of the possibility and nature of agency within the performative account of gender. As the performative theory of gender signifies gender as a process of becoming, it becomes imperative to question whether gender becomes a free choice or it has to work under certain constraints. The question of agency paves the way for an inquiry into the nature of subversive politics that might be developed from this account. Subversive politics is a result of the radical resignification of gender through performativity that aims at destabilizing the coercive and violent nature of heteronormativity. Illustration of acts of drag will be used to depict the nature of agency and subversion that is possible in the account of gender performativity. The aim is to develop an account of subversion that would result in cultural legitimacy and intelligibility to those who are marginalised and excluded under the present framework of gender.

The last chapter titled, "Bodies and the Question of Liveability", deals with the relation between gender, identity, and body. With gender now being understood as an act, the place of bodily materiality needs to be analysed in Butler's work which brings us to the third and the last chapter of the present work. While much of feminist thought has stressed on sexual and gender differences as essential and natural, Butler's performative theory treats body as not merely a material fact or as a mute facticity but the site gender performativity and subversion. She stresses on the notion of body which is accessible only through discourse which raises many questions regarding the credibility of her treatment of the notion of body as the material bodily aspect cannot be

denied. Accordingly, the chapter attempts to show that while there is no rejection of the material aspect of the bodies in her work, her claim that body is known through discourse refers to the construction or signification of bodies in particular ways. After the elaboration of the status of the body, the inquiry moves to analyse and reveal the purpose which is served by constructing or signifying bodies exclusively in the heteronormative framework. This brings us to the larger ethical concern of the violent marginalisation of certain bodies which Butler terms as 'Abject Bodies' and their subjugation to that of lives which do not matter. The chapter links Butler's concern of the construction of the body according to normative ideals and resultant exclusion of many bodies which do not fit this criterion. The underlying concern throughout this work has been of a project which culminates the novel perspective of gender and identity into generating space for a kind of social transformation. The social transformation intended is one of altering social reality incorporating an ethical and political transformation which not only challenges the coercive normative ideals but also results in a non-aggressive co-existence of recognition of all bodies. For the stated purpose, the last chapter undertakes a detailed analysis of a possibility of a radical democratic thought which would guide political action aimed at non-aggression and inclusion.

Along with the main purpose of articulating gender and identity in a way that transgresses fixed boundaries in order to combat hegemonic ordering of gender, an existential concern becomes an essential part of scope and objective of this work. The aim is to provide reflections and insights in our everyday existence by articulating the category of identity as part of a gendered discourse. By revealing the role of gender in the constitution of our identity through shaping and affecting everyday acts of existence and interaction, the focus would be to review the normative and violent dimension of such a phenomenon. By defining the scope and extent of the role played by gender in our everyday acts, an effort will be made to examine and develop the possibility of subverting hegemonic dimensions of gender ordering of the society. Politics of everydayness⁴ involves looking beyond the measures taken through state sanctioned

⁴ "Average Everydayness" is a term used by Heidegger in *Being and Time* to denote ordinary mundane life lived by Das Man (they) without reflection. It is not an inferior mode of existence but one that conceals authentic living based on self reflection. Certain experiences such as Anxiety force us out of non-reflective living towards accomplishing an authentic living. Here, it has been

policies to affect change. It involves analysis of role of gender in most ordinary of experiences and offering a possibility of engaging with those experiences differently. The possibility of collective political endeavours that aim at redefining frameworks of gender in order to make possible inclusion of varied identities which face exclusion and discrimination in present gendered settings has been the underlying guiding concern of the present work. Thus, we begin with the purpose to examine our everyday being which is laden with the politics of gender and identity and to postulate the scope available to subvert and alter the existing power structures to make scope for an authentic living that aims at social transformation.

appropriated to refer to ordinary experiences which can be engaged in differently as the notion of gender gets reviewed. New articulation of gender, in a way, creates possibility of engaging in everyday experience in an authentic and reflective manner.

Chapter - I

Troubling Gender and Identity

Chapter - I

Troubling Gender and Identity

The first chapter of the present work seeks to problematize the notions of Gender and Identity within the scope of feminist thought. In the process of unpacking these notions from their essentialist understanding, the purpose is to highlight the drawbacks and shortcomings of assuming either of these categories as exhaustive. Feminist discourse has been long dedicated to providing a better articulation of various categories it is concerned with such as Woman, gender, sex, sexuality, body etc and adapts various modes of inquiry for the analysis of these categories. Such an inquiry is a crucial aspect of the feminist discourse as it lays the foundation for several further theoretical and political goals feminism is engaged with. There has been numerous ways of comprehending these categories and no one theorization could claim an exhaustive account of the same. Apart from being a domain of theorization, feminism is predominantly concerned with a political movement associated with the goal of social transformation that aims for a better coexistence of individuals based on the ideas of equality and dignity for all. With this concern arises the affiliation of feminist thought with Identity politics. Identity politics refers to the political thought which assumes a common identity as a universal ground to pursue political aims and interests for certain groups. However, this kind of theorisation and politics which operates with an assumption of a common identity is not free from problems and has not been free from contestation. With reference to works of prominent American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, the present chapter attempts to exposit that assumption of any such universal ground of identity in feminist thought and other movements of gender, in fact, undermine the emancipatory goals of these movements aim. The purpose is to reveal the exclusionary nature the universal or essential accounts of gender which do not seem to adequately explain the experience of gender and the way our identities get constituted in the process of being gendered. Judith Butler enters this movement of thought and contributes to the debate as she argues against any essentialist theorization of gender. Her oeuvre of work is centred around exposing the implicit but violent outcomes of essentialising the category of gender for any group of marginalised individuals. In the case of establishing the essential and fixed status of identity and gender of women, such theorization proves to be coercive in nature as it excludes a

multiplicity of women and their experiences simply because they do not adhere to the fit-all one narrative of the notion of woman. Instead, it ends up silencing how their experiences of race, class, culture intersect and constitute the experience of being a woman in varied ways. There is a need to question the claims which assert that women really share a set of essential characteristics which can be accepted as a universal description of the notion of woman. If there is no such conception that defines all experiences of being a woman, then this indeterminacy of the category of woman, the subject matter of feminism, needs to be analysed. Butler not only aims to invoke a re-assessment of these categories but also seeks to examine the way the identity of subjects is constituted. The concern is not to take up an ontological inquiry that would lead us to the core of being of a woman but to bring attention to the way we experience and perform our lives and how this can make explicit how the categories of sex, gender and identity are shaped and reshaped. The guiding idea and purpose is to trouble these categories in order to reveal the trouble created by essentialising them.

I. Rethinking Woman, Sex and Gender

The category of woman forms the heart of feminist discourse and has been the central to its inquiry throughout its development. Dominant logic for understanding this subject of feminism has been through the assumption of the category of woman representing universal experience of being a woman. It both assumes and implies that there are set of certain essential features which constitute the shared and common identity of being a woman. The primary purpose of assuming a category which is universal in nature is to serve as a basis for political interests. Need for such a stable and universal category emerges as a result of political and linguistic interests. Due to the prevalent lack of a language that competently and completely represent women, such a category offers an abiding ground for linguistic representation of women and also, serves political interests by providing political visibility to women which, generally, is lacking in most cultural contexts. It is presumed that without any such unifying basis, any goals of social transformation will fall apart. Woman as a coherent identity, thus, functions to spell out (or distort) what it means to be a woman.

Although Butler recognizes the need for perceiving a coherent and universal identity as pivotal for feminism to serve political and linguistic interests, her inquiry is directed towards understanding how this category of woman comes to be perceived as universal and coherent. To pursue this inquiry, she questions the ontological security of this category i.e. she seeks to examine the undeniable existence of certain essential and natural features which can constitute this universal and common identity called woman. The parallel inquiry which frames this task is to also simultaneously analyse if this identity of being a woman is in fact existent a priori or does this identity get constituted by various factors and merely appears as a universal and coherent category.

Defining the category of woman in stable terminology seems to suggest that there is a consistent identity across cultures and contexts but mere pragmatic encounters depict that there is very little agreement on what it constitutes or ought to constitute this category of woman. Not only are experiences of being a woman varied across cultures, ethnicity, class and even, historicity, there are many individuals who do not subscribe to the presumed description of being a woman despite having the anatomy of a female and there are many individuals who recognise as a woman despite not having the female body. If we are to make sense of any of these experiences then we must first should admit that any exhaustive definition of woman would thus be limited and exclude many it itself is aiming to represent.

The need for a universal basis for feminism often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form owing to the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy.⁵ Although theorising a universal conception of patriarchy faces much criticism with its failure to take into consideration different cultural and historical contexts, it is difficult to apprehend the problem with any universal conception of women at first glance. This presumed universalisation of the experience of being a woman doesn't clarify whether this subject exists prior to oppression or emerges as a common identity owing to oppression or if there are any universal features independent of experiences of patriarchy. Any such universalisation fails or would fail to competently and completely account not only because it ignores different historical and

⁵ Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 5.

cultural contexts, it also overlooks how race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, region etc intersect to form identities. Any singular notion of identity would, thus, be misleading.⁶

Butler intends to unpack how this term is deployed in social relations of power in order to reveal the purpose served by this apparent universalisation of the experience of being a woman. She draws from Foucauldian understanding of systems of power to elaborate on the dual function of generation and prohibition of the hegemonic structures of power in society. A peripheral understanding of the governing systems of power or law is limited to a mechanism that regulates, limits, control or protect. What escapes notice is that individuals also get formed, defined and in fact produced according to the power structures they are subjected to. They are discursively constituted in particular forms by the very system that is supposed to protect and emancipate them. By setting out criterion of what counts as a credible subject in advance, domains of political and linguistic representation extend representation to only those who meet these qualifications. Instead of being accurate representation of women, feminist descriptions of the category of woman are actually mechanisms of discursive power which construct the idea of what kind of a subject is a woman and accordingly only those who conform to this idea would be accepted and recognised as women. This way the category of woman is discursively constituted and re-constituted as per the discourse and there is in fact no subject existing coherently or evidently prior to the discourse. The very feminism which is supposed to emancipate women seems to be producing this coherent subject of 'woman'. This constitution of the common identity of women is not visible because it is naturalized to legitimize law's own hegemonic structure. The continuous perpetuation of a definitive idea of woman successfully sustains the hierarchical order of gender in society. By troubling these categories of gender and identity which are otherwise presumed as fundamental, Butler seeks to depict how the governing structures of power produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of heteronormativity and masculine domination. This category of woman is discursively constituted keeping in mind certain exclusionary aims – what is supposed to mean by a woman is specified in

⁶ Butler later withdraws from her position on universality as outlined in *Gender Trouble*. She embraces a notion of open ended contingent universality by drawing on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. She reconceives it as an open-ended process, and assigns politics the task of keeping it open and contested. This development of the notion of Universal in Butler's work will be taken up in third chapter of the present work.

order to legitimize heteronormativity and to continually exclude many other identities which would otherwise claim to identify with the category of woman. As Butler writes,

the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation. Juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent.⁷

Feminist thought must take into account the constitutive power of its own representational claims otherwise it risks failure of its own goals. By asserting a definitive idea of woman presented as a universal category, feminism risks missing out on varied experiences of being a woman and the consequent failure of its own goal of extending representation and emancipation to all those who identify as women. The premature insistence on unity and universality of the feminist subject undermines the efforts and aims of feminism itself and the domains of exclusion, produced by fixing the idea of women thereby resulting in exclusion of many women who may not conform to this the fixed definition of woman, reveal the coercive and regulatory results of this construction. This reflects the limits of present state of identity politics which begins with an assumption of a shared universal identity but fails to incorporate all it seeks to represent. While recognising the coercive nature of the prevalent discourse of representation, Butler does not suggest discarding representational politics as a solution as there is no place outside the field and discourse of power. Even if we conceive of a point of final emancipation that lies outside discourse, its articulation and signification remain from within the discourse and is thus still governed by the discourse. Rather, there is a need to radicalise the articulation of fundamental categories within the discourse.

With due recognition of the constitution of identities in discourse through language and politics, Butler proposes a critical genealogy of legitimating practices in feminism. Legitimating practices refers to looking into those acts which legitimise the particular ordering of gender and identity in society. She calls this a ‘feminist genealogy of the category of women’⁸ and a ‘genealogy of gender ontology’⁹ by which she

⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

implies looking within the hegemonic structures of power and feminist thought to offer a critique of categories of identity which these systems produce, conceal, naturalise and immobilise. The term genealogy seems to suggest a historical analysis but Butler uses it in a peculiar Foucauldian sense referring to an investigation of how discourses function and the political aims they seek to fulfil¹⁰. The task of the genealogical examination is to study gender as effect of institutions, discourses and practice. Individuals would not be taken to as constituting institutions but other way round by analysing how sex, sexuality and gender is constituted by discourse. Butler clarifies in *Revisiting Bodies and Pleasure* that “Genealogy” is not the history of events, but the enquiry into the conditions of emergence (*Entstehung*) of what is called history, a moment of emergence that is not finally distinguishable from fabrication’.¹¹ Instead of assuming identities as self evident, Butler is proposing an analysis of the processes by which these identities are constructed within language and discourse. By contending that identities are constituted in language and discourse, Butler is not reducing individuals as linguistic constructions but rather stressing the need to analyse the conditions of emergence of the fixed ideas of gender and identity in discourse.

By shattering the ontological security of the subject of feminism, Butler advocates critical thinking within feminist perspective by proposing a radical rethinking of the categories of identity and gender. Her attempt is to revive feminism on new grounds or to render it free from the need of constructing a unified subject which turns out to be exclusionary. As Butler puts, “Perhaps, paradoxically, “representation” will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of “women” is nowhere presumed”¹². The idea is not to completely erase any understanding of the term woman but to rearticulate it and make it open-ended in order to pre-empt the exclusionary aspects of universalising the experience of being a woman. The category of woman is stabilised by taking recourse to an (apparently) undeniable link between female anatomy and feminine gender. Rethinking of these categories will provide a direction to rethinking of the category of woman.

⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁰ Salih, *Judith Butler: Routledge Critical Thinkers*, p. 48.

¹¹ J. Butler, "Revisiting bodies and pleasures", *Theory Culture and Society*, p. 15.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 8.

Butler analyses the sex/gender relation and questions the way this relation is conceived in order to contest the reliance on naturalist and pre-discursive assumptions. Gender came about as an empowering concept in feminism as it provided a way out of biological determinism. It helped reject the position that woman's destiny is decided by her anatomy. Simone de Beauvoir is often credited with articulating this relation with her claim 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'¹³ in *The Second Sex*. It emerged as an important milestone in feminist thought as it offered a possibility of altering the life of women through a political struggle as role of a woman could no longer be perceived as fixed. Butler is not undermining the value of this conception but questions the presupposition of sex to gender. The sex/gender relation, as generally perceived, specifies sex as the natural bare biological fact of the body and gender as a cultural imposition on that body such that culturally determined gender comes after the fact of natural sex. Butler rejects any implied causal relation between sex and gender by taking the distinction to its logical limit. As gender is a cultural construct, it should in no way necessarily follow sex in particular fixed ways. This is to state there is nothing that should mandate that gender construction of a man in the form of masculinity should be limited to a male body or that of a woman in the form of femininity should be limited to a female body. In fact, there is nothing that should compulsatively restraint the number of genders to two even if sex is, for the time being, taken as binary. Gender in a way becomes a *free floating artifice*¹⁴ with no compulsory mimetic ordering via sex and there could be various significations of any sexed body. Thus, we are now confronted with a radical discontinuity between sex and gender.

However, the question that remains is whether sex is a necessary presupposition of gender- Is the compulsory binary order of the sexes really a natural given or is any way affected by the discursive construction? It has been explained that if sex is a biological fact and gender is a social construct, then nothing should mandate that masculinity follows from male body or femininity follows from female body. Stated in other words, Butler intends to highlight the gendering of bodies which mandates that the perception of a male body as masculine or female body. The available vocabulary of sex/gender relation overlooks and conceals the fact that sex itself is perceived through gendered lens. As this gets explicit, naturalness of sex is problematized by contending

¹³ Salih, *Judith Butler*, p. 295.

¹⁴ Butler's articulation, *Gender Trouble*, p.9

that sexed bodies are not empty matter on which gender is constructed but rather they themselves are discursively constructed. Sex appears to be natural given because we perceive sexual classification as a result of classification based on biological givenness but we do not categorise bodies as constitutive of XY or XX chromosome¹⁵ reflecting their sex but rather sex is perceived in the binary frame of male and female. In this way of operating, sex operates as a regulatory ideal producing sexuation of bodies it governs¹⁶. The demarcation of male and female is not descriptive but normative. When an infant is called as a boy or a girl, it is not a descriptive claim, but a normative one. In the act of naming or pronouncing an infant as a boy or a girl, our utterance makes or constructs infants into girls or boys. We engage in activities that make it seem as if sexes naturally come in two arising from objective facts in the world but rather it is us who are constructing the framework of sex from a gendered perspective. In performing such function, sex acts as a regulatory ideal as it functions to exclude and marginalize those whose anatomy does not adhere to binary parameters of heteronormativity. That is why Butler contends that sex does not exist outside cultural and social meanings. It is as socially constructed as gender. She does not deny materiality of sexed bodies but, she takes our understanding of this existence to be a consequence of social construction. Gender is no longer the cultural interpretation of sex but sex itself is a gendered category¹⁷. In fact, gender designates the very apparatus of production which establishes the sexes. Gender is not an expression of sex but the mechanism through which binary sex is formulated and sustained. By revealing the gendered nature of sex itself, Butler breaks the necessary continuum assumed between sex and gender i.e. we now become aware that necessary link between male body and masculinity and female body and femininity is a construct in itself.

This appearance of sex as prior to gender is concealed and legitimized as natural to maintain the binary matrix of heterosexuality. Butler's purpose is to make explicit how categories of sex and gender are part of a heterosexual framework which, in turn, is coercive in nature as it excludes all those who do not fit in this matrix. This also sets out Butler's political goal which underlies most of her work which is to make life possible for those who are considered presently as incoherent identities, identities which are

¹⁵ Chromosomes representing male and female genitalia.

¹⁶ Butler, *Bodies that matter*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.10

socially unacceptable. Accordingly, she aims to come up with an alternate theorisation of gender and identity which would challenge the prevalent coercive framework that legitimises only binary relations of heterosexuality.

II. Theorising Gender Asymmetry

As sex is revealed to be gendered all along and gender becomes the means through which an illusory conception of a pre-discursive sex is perpetuated, a reformulation of gender is required. If gender is constructed, it needs to be seen if this construction is determined and normative or if it is volitional and choice based. When we see gender differences accepted and operating along the heterosexual sexes, then gender increasingly appears as fixed and determined. Bodies seem to be passive recipients of cultural interpretations of gender where gender differences are only sanctioned along the axes of heterosexuality. Butler perceives body itself as a construction¹⁸. That is not to deny the materiality of body but rather to assert that we know bodies only in a discourse. The preceding section already elaborated the way bodies are signified by sex assignment and this signification is normative and not descriptive¹⁹. The construction of gender does not imply a free choice but living within the law or a culture sets our limitations to the possibilities of gender. According to Butler, one's gender cannot simply be reinvented but there has to be a radical resignification of the category of gender. We cannot know bodies or their gender outside of social meanings. In order to make scope for radically resignifying gender, we first need to understand the existing framework of gender asymmetry.

To explain how gender hierarchy and male domination is produced, Butler analyses the claims of certain thinkers who have attempted to theorize this gender asymmetry. She examines theorisation of gender asymmetry by Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray in their respective works. Both offer accounts of sexual differences which present to us two different ways of appropriating subject and gender – one that works within the conceptual framework of self and the other signifying masculine as the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹ We will return to the status of the notion of body in Butler's works in the form of a detailed analysis in the third chapter of the present work.

self and feminine as the other; and another that altogether dispels the possibility of any theorising about the feminine in available frameworks. Beauvoir sketches a life story of a woman in *The Second Sex* reflecting on the roles in which a woman figures in society and the way her own body and society limits her own self. As she discusses lived experiences of a woman, there is a merger of political, personal and philosophical; and a kind of a phenomenological analysis of woman could be seen as a lived reality comes across. She writes on how different ideals of masculinity and femininity produce a naturalised inferior status for women in the society. Existential underpinnings of Beauvoir's work are quite visible through her famous claim "One is not born a woman, but, rather becomes one"²⁰ which emphasises on woman's own role and responsibility in formation of the self. The claim is taken to have brought about the widely accepted sex/gender distinction as she argues that it is not the biological condition of women *which determines the status of women in society* but it is how a woman construes this condition which decides the course. While describing the concept of 'woman', Beauvoir uses Sartrean framework of the Self and the Other according to which our perception renders persons as objects to our gaze and they are defined by us. She applies this idea to men's perception of women and argues that woman is always the other because the male is the seer. Man is the subject and woman the object. Woman is the other, the lack; defined by the man. Woman is dependent and imprisoned by her body and inferior to man. For Beauvoir, it is only the feminine gender which is marked where as masculine gender and the universal person are coeval. Her theorisation, of one becoming a woman rather than being born as one, points to a crucial aspect of construction of gender – that there is an agent who acquires gender implying the role of choice in this process of becoming. In this context, a woman's body offers the vantage point of ambiguity as it can be site of either freedom or oppression depending upon the choice that is made.

The question that needs to be now contemplated is whether choosing one's gender could be a volitional and variable act as Beauvoir's claim emphasises on the role of an agent who takes on a gender. But if sex is also gendered and there is no moment when we are gender-less as Butler contends, then what can we make of this choice? In her essay "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", Butler acknowledges gender as a choice but rejects that mode of choice which can be made from a distance

²⁰ Salih, *Judith Butler*, p. 301.

by a genderless agent which suggests an ontological juncture between the choosing agent and the chosen gender. She writes,

Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. The choice to assume a certain kind of body, to live or wear one's body a certain way, implies a world of already established corporeal styles. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them anew. Rather than a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms.²¹

This passage brings notice to Butler's is cautious reminder that while it is possible to exercise or play an active role with respect to one's gender, there are certain constraints set up by the cultural setting one is in. Apart of one's own tendencies towards femininity or masculinity (irrespective of one's anatomy) or perhaps even a lack of either, the choice of gender and subverting one's gender is curtailed by the social meanings one is already in. The way to exercise this choice is not by radically creating a whole new gender for oneself at any point of time but it involves redoing the sequence of acts in which we are already engaged. This does not imply a possibility of a certain moment's time whence one can dissociate oneself from a social meaning and take on or become a new gender. Furthermore, although there is a compulsion of becoming a gender in Beauvoir's claim, there is nothing that necessitates that this compulsion comes from sex i.e. nothing to mandate that a woman is necessarily a female.²² In the same vein, Butler manages to free Beauvoir's formulation of gender from being a mere extension of sexual differences which Butler perceives as being normative and exclusionary but there remains one crucial point of departure between both the thinkers which will now be elaborated upon. Beauvoir theorises feminine as the other, the lack which is doomed to immanence and limited by its embodiment where as masculine enjoys the privilege of transcendence as it is conflated with the universal person with no constraints by the body. As she conceptualises the masculine as signifying the disembodied self where as feminine is subjugated as the embodied other, she calls for the emancipation of women by asking them to become existential subjects, deploying their bodies not as limiting factors but as the site of freedom. Although Butler gives

²¹ Butler,. "Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*." *Yale French Studies*, 1986, p. 40.

²² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 11.

credit to the synthesis of mind-body that Beauvoir is trying to achieve, she wonders if this synthesis is based on and in fact maintains the mind-body distinction which denotes hierarchy of mind over body signifying hierarchy of the masculine over feminine. She reads Beauvoir work as an uncritical preservation of this distinction as mind not only subjugates the body, but also at times entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment.²³ If the mind/body distinction remains implicit in any theorisation that aims to attack present structures of gender asymmetry and hierarchy, then it must be rethought for it undermines the very aims of dispelling phallogocentrism.

In the quest of a better comprehension of gender asymmetry, Butler now collates Beauvoir's theorisation with Irigaray's. She turns to works of Luce Irigaray who, on the other hand, does not ascribe the status of lack or the other to the feminine but rather of the unrepresentable. As she perceives the whole language and economy of the discourse as masculinist and phallogocentric, there is no room for representing the sex or gender of women. The whole language signifies one domain and that is of the masculine; female sex is simply relegated as the unrepresentable sex. She does not adhere with the Sartrian frame of Subject and the Other but proclaims both these categories as masculine and excluding feminine completely. As the whole model of signification is inadequate, women are not those who are represented falsely but rather those who cannot be represented at all in the given models of discourse. It is not that the feminine is not marked, but it can never be a mark of gender in the given language which is essentially feminine. Irigaray is not only commenting on the shortcomings of such a discourse but also on the sexuation of it. In her essay "The Language of Man", she questions the neutrality and universality of such a discourse. She points that we overlook the fact that this so called neutral discourse is determined by a sexual being. And any attempt to ignore this facticity neglects much that is relevant. This is why she is suspicious of any claims which are supposedly neutral. According to her, a sexed subject imposes its imperatives as universally valuable when it is actually a particularist agenda camouflaged as universal one which everyone is expected to follow. She illustrates this in the same essay as she writes,

The problem of the sexuation of the discourse has, paradoxically, never been posed.....A perpetually unrecognized

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

(*meconnue*²⁴) law prescribes all realizations of language(s) (*langage[s]*), all production of discourse, all constitution of language (*langue*), according to the necessities of *one* perspective, *one* point of view, *one* economy: the necessities of *man*, supposed to represent the human race.²⁵

The passage depicts that Irigaray endeavours to expose the hegemonic masculinist tendencies that underscore the apparent universality of the available discourse. While Beauvoir understood feminine as the other, Irigaray would read this otherness as an extension of masculine. Such stark differences in formulations of accounts of gender asymmetry only reinforce the need to rethink the categories of identities. Butler gives much credit to Irigaray's critique of masculinist signifying economy which broadens the scope of feminist thought but points to the kind of essentialism it commits. Irigaray's account fails to take into consideration different cultural forms of gender oppression itself and Butler term this as a kind of epistemological imperialism²⁶. While feminist critique needs to examine the totalizing claims of oppression, there is a need to exercise a self-critique within its thought to keep a check on totalizing gestures of feminist thought lest it shall commit the mistake of mimicking the strategy of the oppressor. Her reason for examining these theories which seek to explain gender asymmetry was to caution feminist thought of any theory which naturalises sex as a pre-discursive category and as prior to gender. Her task is to expose the unnaturalness of the necessary relation between sex and gender. By breaking the continuous necessity between sex and gender, one can offer a radical interpretation of gender and a possibility to subvert gender asymmetry. Butler's interpretation of both Beauvoir and Irigaray can be questioned but she does take the feminist discourse further by contesting the understanding of sexual difference as natural, a position which both of them maintain.

Another methodology of offering freedom from gender asymmetry is by envisioning a gender-less identity which falls outside the hierarchical ordering of the gender. To inquire the viability of this method, Butler discusses Monique Wittig's

²⁴ Feminine past participle of *méconnaître* which means- to not recognize or be unaware of, also means (by extension) - To ignore someone by pretending not to know them and (figuratively) –To fail to treat someone in the way they deserve; not appreciate a quality, something they merit.

²⁵ Irigaray, "The Language of Man", *The Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 191-192.

²⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 18.

theorisation of gender relations through which Wittig aims to rescue a kind of personhood from the shackles of sex and this necessary binary framework. She believes this is possible by overthrowing or transcending the framework of heterosexuality altogether. Like Beauvoir, Wittig conceives women as the mark of gender and universal subject as conflated with the masculine. It is only with the destruction of sex that women can aspire for the status of a universal subject by realizing concrete universality. This concrete universality becomes possible by emergence of a third gender which she terms as ‘the lesbian’²⁷. As such, it is outside the heterosexual matrix and will transcend its binary framework and result in a person who will reflect true humanism Wittig appears to fall back on those pre discursive and naturalist of identity which Butler is rejecting. Butler finds it problematic with going back (or forth) to a notion of a pre-gendered person as she ponders over a retrievable sexuality that can be said to exist before, after or beyond the law.²⁸ She rejects any conceptualisation of gender that envisions freedom from gender asymmetry by relying on some coherent gender-less identity. A gender-less identity would imply an individual whose existence is external to social meaning and discourse. She views this as a fictive foundation which itself is both produced and concealed from within the discourse. A critical genealogy of categories would not result in envisaging a gender-less identity but would be an ongoing process to surface how coherent identities are produced. To investigate gender asymmetry, we need to examine the basis on which identities such as woman and man are taken to be universal, coherent and stable and study its effects on the discourse of gender identity. Philosophical debate regarding identity centres much on interrogating that internal feature of a person which establishes continuity or self identity of that person through time. It is then generally assumed that a discussion on identity should precede any conceptualisation of gender identity. Butler reverses the order as she seeks to elucidate the implicit normativity in such a conceptualisation of identity so far as it is sustained through the categories of sex, gender, desire and sexuality.

To elucidate the existing order of gender relations in society, Butler conceives of a Matrix of Intelligibility²⁹ according to which genders are qualified as intelligible or

²⁷ Wittig , “One is Not Born a Woman”, p. 53. Also see: Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, pp. 9-20.

²⁸ Butler, *Gender trouble*, p .39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

unintelligible. Intelligible genders are those which maintain the relations of coherence and continuity of gender norms and those which fail to conform to these norms are qualified as unintelligible. It is, however, these incoherent gendered beings which challenge the supposed naturalness of sex as their existence act as a proof of a lack of necessary relation between sex and gender. The presumption of a binary framework of sexuality in feminism itself serves to marginalize and delegitimize identities which do not fit in the given matrix. This matrix of cultural intelligibility produces normative conditions which define who all can be recognized as legitimate subjects and those who fall short on these norms are not even recognized as viable subjects who can pursue a recognizable life and this she refers to as normative violence³⁰. This matrix produces a specific sense of social order in which women are subjugated by male dominion and many other identities are rendered as less than human, for to be human would require being compatible this matrix of intelligibility. The reason for gender asymmetry is revealed to be the supposed natural and universal relation between binary sex and gender as this relation further dictates norms of social existence befitting one's gender. The critical genealogy of feminism would require rethinking of categories of woman, sex and gender in ways which are not exclusive. A suggestion that occurs quite early in *Gender Trouble* is a possibility of a coalitional politics³¹. Any universalizing claim of femininity or any theorisation which insists on a coherent and shared unity of woman fails to account for multiple intersections that play a role in the concrete ways in which the category of woman is constructed. Coalitional politics would involve an ongoing emergence of an assemblage of positions which cannot be prefigured. The idea proposes an engagement of dialogic encounters of differently placed women articulating separate identities without a pre-defined teleos in mind. Ensuring an ideal form in advance might guarantee a unity of the coalitional structures but would affect and act as an obstacle to self shaping and self limiting dynamics of coalitional. Butler is questioning and contesting the need for unity in form as a necessity for political action as she suggests that nature of a dialogue is to accommodate divergences and breakages in viewpoints as a part of a democratic process. It is important to note that the understanding of the concept of dialogue is also cultural specific and where one may be certain of a dialogue happening, another may not be. The power relations which shape dialogic encounters

³⁰ Butler's articulation, *Gender Trouble*, p. XX.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

need also to be constantly examined. Butler's approach is anti-foundationalist in nature as she rejects any assumption of identity or meaning of the coalitional to be decided prior to any achievement. She supposes that this might actually offer a faster course to action because such assumptions limit the possibilities of action and methods for pursuing the aims. Regarding the aims too, she suggests leaving scope for continually growing concerns and issues. In such a framework, meanings of gender would be in a continuous process of evolution. Provisional unities arise in given contexts and have a purpose other articulation of a coherent identity. This essential incompleteness allows a permanently available site for contested meanings which allows for a normative ideal free of a coercive force.³² Coalitional politics would allow for identities to come into being and dissolve depending upon the concrete demands and purposes of the process. Without a definite foreclosure and dictating normative ideals, the framework allows for various convergences and divergences. Gender now becomes not a static coherent category but a complexity whose totality is never attained.

Concluding Remarks

The present chapter has been an attempt to initiate a rearticulation of categories of woman, sex, gender and identity. With Butler's perspective in view, this has been attempted by gradually removing the garb of essential framework and fixed meanings these categories are situated in. The purpose behind rearticulation of these categories is the failure of definitive conceptions in their capacity of accounting for all experiences of gender. As seen in the elaboration of the notion of woman, far from proving to be essential for development of feminist thought, it becomes a limit to expansion of feminism in its universal and fixed understanding. Not only are all experiences not accounted for, many individuals are excluded from the sphere of dignified living if they do not conform to the essentialist binary framework of gender. F femininity and masculinity are universalised and naturalised in exclusionary ways. By revealing the shortcomings of any essentialist understanding, the space for rearticulation of gender is created by making explicit that there is no necessary continuum between sex and gender. Butler's project to understand gender is not to lay out ontology of gender that

³² Ibid., p. 21.

traces gender meanings to some essential core but rather to understand the discursive production of gender as a binary relation and its coercive regulatory framework. Genealogy of ontology of gender in Butler reveals how gender is naturalized and in that revelation, opens up space for rethinking and resignification of these categories which would be more inclusive and reflective of existing different contexts.

Theoretical model of coalitional politics offers a novel way to articulate and signify gender by de-fixing its meaning and allowing for a continuous questioning and development of the concept. The basis of this model could be located in the critical genealogy Butler favours. By conducting a genealogical study of the notion of gender, that is, by studying how the prevalent understanding of gender is produced within hegemonic structures of power, a possibility of providing a new understanding of gender emerges. Such an analysis has enabled Butler to develop a performative theory of gender which reveals the coercive nature of and foundationist understanding of gender and also allows for a possible reinterpretation of gender which is based on inclusion rather than exclusion of various identities.

Chapter -II

Gender Performativity and the Politics of Subversion

Chapter -II

Gender Performativity and the Politics of Subversion

The previous chapter exhibited a dialectical engagement with three significant categories of feminist thought and their role in identity politics. A careful and critical analysis of the categories of Woman, Sex and Gender revealed that they are constructed in a particular manner so as to appear coherent and universal. The influential thinking in feminism necessitates the need for common stable identity which can be taken as true across different discourses and cultures. It serves to function as a foundation or a starting point in feminism and is considered as a necessary requirement in representational politics to pursue emancipatory goals. With an aim to show that this way of conceptualising categories is a limit on progressive thought rather than being essential to it, Butler brings the whole discourse of feminism under the lens of scrutiny. She spells out the task confronting feminism in her essay “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalysis” as ‘either redefining and expanding the category of women itself to become more inclusive’ or ‘to challenge the place of the category as a part of feminist normative discourse’³³. The first alternative was gradually shown dissatisfactory in the previous chapter as any formulation of woman understood in stable unified terms, even if more inclusive than the one rejected, would always be exclusionary. It will fail to exhaust and account for all the possibilities of kinds of woman that exist. Butler clearly engages in the second alternative using an array of arguments that are intended to reveal that none of these categories can be understood properly in an essentialist manner. Reinterpretation of the sex-gender distinction showed how both these categories are naturalised as heterosexual i.e. people whose sex is coherent with their gender (as in the case of masculine men and feminine women) are considered intelligible and normal in the present order. Understanding of both sex and gender is informed by the prevailing heterosexual hegemony which implicates those as unintelligible who fail to subscribe to this matrix of social order. Essentialist understanding of gender and identity becomes coercive and exclusionary and fails precisely those aims of feminism which it was supposed to pursue and achieve. In order

³³ Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic discourse”, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 1990, p. 325.

to offer a better comprehension of various gendered identities and to address the exclusionary nature of the present hegemonic order, Butler perceives gender not as a noun, but as always a doing³⁴. Gender is no longer to be seen as a descriptive essential attribute but as a process or an act.

Rethinking the category of gender in this new light, much can be sought from Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one becomes a woman. The claim of 'becoming' rather than 'being' a woman implies that gender is not a reference to an inner core but an act. Understanding gender as a process of becoming is not to understand it as a set of free floating attributes which can be freely acquired but requires an examination of the practices and acts that produce gender. On the similar lines of viewing gender as a becoming, Butler provides for a radical rethinking of gender to be understood as a continuous process. She offers a performative theory of gender which is perhaps the most influential concept attributed to her. Her account is indeed indebted to Beauvoir as she proceeds to analyse gender as a dynamic process rather than a category which is complete in itself. This idea appears quite early in *Gender Trouble* where she explains gender as '...a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame...'³⁵. Accordingly, the aim of the present chapter is to undertake an examination into the nature of gender as a continuous process. The analysis in this chapter is dedicated to offer a comprehensive account of what Butler terms as 'Gender Performativity' and to inquire into the possibility of agency and subversion within that framework. As the overarching aim of Butler's work is to combat the hegemony of heterosexuality and to offer due recognition to gendered identities which are excluded in present dyadic model of sexuality, the issue of possibility of subversion under the new model of gender becomes one of prime importance.

I. Gender as an Act

After rejecting the idea that biology is destiny, feminist discourse embraced the idea of gender as a social construct. Albeit this move, understanding of gender remained within the frame of dyadic sexuality, that is, the intelligible genders are only the ones which

³⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

arise inevitably from male and female bodies in the form of masculine and feminine genders respectively. Even though gender is supposed to be understood in terms of a social construction which hints towards a break from anatomy playing a decisive factor in deciding one's place and role in society, acceptable forms of gendered identities remained that of a masculine male and feminine female depicting a strict continuum between one's sex and one's gender. This results in an account of gender which is as much exclusive and deterministic as the one that relied on anatomy as a determining factor of one's identity. Those who do not conform to the strict binary frame of heterosexuality are not recognised as valid or intelligible subjects and are subjected to violence and punitive consequences for being different than the norm. There is a certain cultural configuration of gender as a heterosexual matrix which is taken to be natural without any contestation and has a hegemonic hold in deciding which genders are normal and which are aberrations or disorderly on the basis of success or failure to conform with the matrix. It has been seen that the violent and coercive nature of this present social ordering of gender by claiming that understanding of gender as a fixed attribute, albeit an acquired one (as it is presented), is an erroneous understanding. To counter such an understanding, she proposes a radical rethinking of gender as performativity. Such a radical reconceptualisation will not only allow for rethinking of gender but also provide for the possibility of subversive action by proliferating and mobilizing fixed theorizing of categories of gender and identity. By conceiving gender as performative, Butler contests the notion of gender as having an essence or core and reconceptualises it as the site of redoing one's gender, of not having to force oneself in the binary frame of gender to be recognised as intelligible. Such a deconstruction or rather, a reconstruction offers a possibility of a more equal and equitable social order where gender does not get to qualify which lives matter more than the other.

The performative theory of gender is in agreement with the traditional theory of gender in so far as it claims that gender is a social construct. However, the stark difference between the two conceptions emerges as a result of the way this construction of gender is understood. The traditional conception allowed for two forms of gender, masculine and feminine, which were in direct symmetry with the binary model of biological sex. This conception then formed the basis of feminist thought to undertake any inquiry about gender asymmetry or the hegemony of one gender (masculine) over another (feminine). This ends up being a failure on two grounds— one, such an inquiry

universalises the meaning of woman and man across cultural and historical contexts and fails to account for diversity. Second, this model does not account for various other gender identities (say, transgender, intersex, queer and so on) which might depict a clash of the sex-gender continuum. The account of gender performativity seeks to address these shortcomings and illustrate the constructed nature of gender by revealing the manner in which heterosexuality is naturalised. It attempts to explain gender as an act, a doing rather than a secondary attribute one acquires as a result of one's biological sex. The moment we are born and are categorised as male or female, we become a part of a set of existing gender norms which define masculinity and femininity. These gender norms dictate the manner in which we should sit, talk, walk or even interact with individuals of same or different gender. We incorporate these ways of doing gender in our everyday existence and interaction. If a man behaves in a feminine manner, say for instance he walks with a swish of hips or a woman behaves in a masculine manner exhibiting strength in both language and behaviour, it is followed by shaming, mocking, corrective measures or even punishment. Any failure to cohere with prevalent gender norms is met with reprimand. Gender, thus, lies in the repetition of these acts over a period of time. A woman is feminine as long as she performs the feminine acts. There is no form of an existing coherent gender identity behind expressions of gender. Rather, a particular gender identity is naturalised as a coherent identity as a result of these repetitive acts. Instead of an essential core or identity being a reason of a particular gender, gender is constituted by performative acts which are enacted at particular times. What appears to us as a natural, unified identity is actually constituted by these very acts that are supposed to be resulting from being a particular gender. Femininity or masculinity is a result of these acts rather than these acts being a result of innate femininity or masculinity.

In an interview with Liz Kotz³⁶, Butler explains gender as an impersonation of an ideal that nobody actually inhabits. Gender acts involve gestures and practices which seek to adhere to ideals of masculinity and femininity. Performativity of gender refers to a stylized repetition of acts, a copying or an imitation of the dominant conventions of gender. Gender, as a performative act, is both a linguistic and bodily activity— involving corporeal behaviour, gestures, practices which designate a particular gender and also linguistic norms determining the meaning of these bodily activities. In the act

³⁶ "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler," *Artforum* 31, pp. 82-89.

of performing these conventions, we embody the prevalent gender roles and make these social conventions appear as natural and necessary. Corporeal activity has, for long, been dominated and regulated by a particular set of norms which adhere to the heterosexual model dictating that corporeal behaviour should either be masculine or feminine and sexual behaviour ought to be heterosexual. Gender norms subsist and persist through being enacted continuously and these repetitive acts produce and project gender as a natural identity that subscribes to the existing heterosexual matrix.

As gender performativity involves corporeal gestures and acts, it involves various practices through which we relate ourselves to one gender over another and signify our bodily selves in different ways. Body is not to be understood merely as a mute facticity as gender performativity is a 'corporeal style, an act'³⁷ and not an enactment of some interior self. These stylized acts bear no relation to any essential truth about one's core nature or one's body but are an imitation of certain ideological gender norms. This might seem like an individualistic account of enacting one's gender and appear as a failure to explain overlapping of similar practices across different subjects. However, it is only misleading to assume that performative theory of gender is only able to explain gender as an enactment of certain norms by different individuals because these ideological norms have a history which goes beyond the subject who enacts these conventions. In her essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", Butler elaborates on performative acts of gender as she writes,

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script which survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again.³⁸

The stated passage calls attention to view body as not merely a natural fact but also as a historical idea. Understanding gender entails understanding how the body acquired its present gendered form. Body as a historical idea is not an abstraction but

³⁷ Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory." *Theatre journal*, p. 522.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 526

means that human body has come to have a specific meaning within a historical context. It is a situated body, given in a particular socio-cultural context. Thus, we come to know our body not as a blank slate but as a historically signified entity. Lived experience of the body is always gendered which implies that at no given point in time do we experience our bodies without gender, knowledge of our bodies come to us only through gender norms. Gender is produced in its present form through a repetition of acts whose script is already in place, that is, these acts are in accordance with gender norms already prevalent in a particular historical context.

Although Butler draws an analogy from an actor's performance in the above passage, gender performativity is quite different from the performance of an actor who enacts a scripted role. The crucial difference lies in the assumption of a doer or an actor – there is no pre-given essentially coherent self that performs gender acts. Rather the self itself gets constituted through these acts. On the other hand, a theatrical performance assumes an actor who acts and requires a certain distance between the actor and her acts. This is not to deny agency to individuals who enact gender but to assert that the agent itself is being constituted in a particular manner through these acts. Performativity is not a performance or show that we just put for others but involves the condition that we live in and incorporate acts which constitute our own bodily selves which inform and construct our gender. Gender is, thus, to be understood as an enactment whose appearance as an internal truth is produced and preserved by the norms obliging us to be either of the available genders of the strict binary frame of heterosexuality. The hegemonic standards of heterosexuality work and sustain through a continuous repetition of gender acts in everyday situations of even the most mundane nature. Gender is produced and reproduced as it appears owing to our repetitive acts which are stylized in a particular fashion to produce desired appearance of natural masculinity and femininity. However, realizing this nature of gender is not a moment of freedom which would suddenly offer a choice to completely redo one's gender or to perhaps don a new gender everyday but is rather a realization of a trap one is inevitably in and how one's own self gets constituted in the process. This radical resignification of gender does not allow one to abandon and pick and choose a particular style of gender acts but to understand how one's gender is being continuously produced and reproduced and that in turn forms one's identity. In the same essay, Butler explores the phenomenological discourse of acts as it involves routine ways in which 'social agents

constitute social reality, language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign'³⁹. They refer to mundane repetitive ways in which you engage with your everyday reality. Rather than assuming an agent who governs and performs these acts, the focus is on the phenomenological accounts which consider the agent as an object instead of a subject of these acts. Body becomes its gender as the subject gets constituted through a series of repetitive acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time. Although the common point between gender performativity and certain accounts of phenomenology would be the manner of engagement with everyday life, the point of departure is marked by stress on individual acts in phenomenology which might undermine the scale and character of women's oppression.⁴⁰ The collective dimension of gender performativity arises from the aspect of shared social reality of gender norms. This aspect again highlights the crucial role of elements of historicity and conventionality in gender. A performative act thus involves both a collective and an individualistic element as gender norms outlast those who enact them signifying the collective dimension but still require individuals who follow these norms in order to sustain them and ensure that particular genders continue in a particular fashion. A gendered identity is thus produced through particular bodily gestures, practices, actions and movements, making it an effect of doing gender.

With the assertion that the gendered identity gets constituted through performative acts, it might appear that it is an entirely voluntary act without any constraint. It seems to imply that one can, at least in theory, vary one's gender. Such an understanding is misleading because it fails to take into account the cultural and historical contexts which define the gender acts. Our gender acts are affected by the manner in which we ought to talk, sit, speak, walk, look etc. Our becoming a gender is always constrained by and defined according to cultural norms, taboos, conventions and laws. Gender is not an 'unsituational Cartesian act'⁴¹ which is decided and enacted completely as per subject's own choice. Gender is not chosen from a distance by the subject implying an ontological gap between the two, but the subject itself gets constituted through the performative acts of gender. Gender is a process of interpreting a cultural reality comprising of sanctions, taboos and laws. Such a choice to assume a

³⁹ Ibid., p. 519.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 525.

⁴¹ Butler, "Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*.", p. 37.

certain kind of body, to live one's body in a particular way implies a world of already established corporeal styles. This is why those who fail to conform to prevalent gender norms are severely punished. However, this does not mean that there is no possibility of alteration or resistance with respect to gender norms. At this juncture, it becomes imperative that we examine the possibility of agency in the notion of gender performativity.

II. Agency and the Possibility of Subversion

The notion of agency or the capacity to act in a given situation is generally located within a concept of a subject which has some stable identity or a fixed existence. With gender now explained as a performative act which also constitutes the subject who is engaged in performing gender practices, it will be a curious inquiry to examine the place of agency in the account of gender performativity. Prima facie, it seems that the notion of gender performativity is based on a paradox as we try to place it in the discourse of free will and determinism, a discourse which has usually been referred to check to check the possibility of agency in any given philosophical model. On one hand, it seems to offer a possibility of alteration and resistance as the subject can deliberately fabricate and resignify one's gender according to one's will where as on the other hand, it reveals the model of gender according to which subjects are discursively created and constituted by various vectors of power. To understand the possibility of agency that might offer a site of resistance and subversion, we need to examine the dialectic of these two oppositions in the notion of gender performativity.

One predominant way to conceptualise agency in philosophy is through an assumption that agents are free, autonomous beings, independent of the socio-cultural world and have the capacity to implement action as per one's will. This line of thought underlies much of emancipatory and reformist accounts of feminism which assume that human beings are autonomous agents who can create their history and shape future through a collective political action of social transformation. On the contrary, feminists influenced by the works of Foucault, Beauvoir, Marx and psychoanalysis are cautious and wary of adhering to this assumption of a free willing, completely independent autonomous agent. Rather, the envision subjects as embedded in particular situations

and facticity of life. Agency in such accounts is seen as conditioned by culture, class, race etc. This second view comes close to Butler's own formulation, but there is one major point of difference. Even though the limitations arising due to situatedness of the subject is acknowledged, room for agency is created by perceiving the scope that the subject can escape from the situations and make choices. Although a complete overhaul of the situation is not considered possible in these accounts, the basis of agency is dependent on taking recourse to some pre-discursive ground that is free from facticities. Butler does not recognize any such scope or even believes that it is possible to have access to any pre-discursive domain from where one can proceed to act. It becomes increasingly difficult to appropriately place the account of gender performativity in the debate of free will and determinism which has led to different readings by different reviewers and critics of Butler. In her influential response to Butler in 'Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism', Seyla Benhabib writes

If we are no more than the sum total of gendered expressions we perform, is there ever a chance to stop the performance for a while, to pull the curtain down, and let it rise only if one can have a say over the production of the play itself?⁴²

It is clear from the above passage that Benhabib interprets Butler's account as that of a theatrical performance where the subject is a cumulative summation of those gender roles and perhaps one can take on a role of gender by exercising volition and. Such an interpretation is grossly misreading as subject gets constituted in a particular manner through the gender acts it performs but is not limited to those acts. It basically asserts that subject is not gender less at any point in time and we know ourselves in a particular manner (i.e. as masculinity or femininity prescribing our manner of behaving and living) through the discursive lens of gender. Butler only makes use of theatrical acts to highlight and explain the collective dimension of performativity. In her critique, Benhabib acknowledges the situatedness of the subject in a particular historical and cultural context and the limitations which arise from that but see it as a failure in Butler's account for lacking a scope for an autonomous agent for she considers it as inevitable requisite for feminist politics. Without any such scope, the performatively constituted subject has no scope of determining its own future. On the contrary, another

⁴² S. Benhabib, 'Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism', p. 215.

reviewer of Butler's work, Amy Allen states that in the account of gender understood as performative, as individuals are discerned as performing heterosexual norms, a possibility of volition emerges. Instead of rendering subjects volition-less, the account provides an opportunity to consciously and wilfully decide upon the manner of enacting gender.⁴³ It remains to be seen how a subject constituted by certain structures of power and defined in many ways by them can resist them. So, on one hand it appears that gender performativity lacks an autonomous agent which is seen as crucial for exercising agency and on the other hand, it appears to provide for a site of agency and change against those very powers which define it.

Gender performativity is a never ending process; it is a 'daily act of reconstitution and interpretation'⁴⁴. Gender norms are culturally conditioned but the process through which they are enacted and thereby appropriated; the possibility for transformation is generated. The role of agency in gender performativity cannot be understood in terms of complete freedom but has to be presented as the dynamic of volition and control. Therefore, rather than attempting to place Butler on either side of the ongoing debate of free-will and determinism, it may be better to perceive Butler's articulation of gender performativity involving an account of agency that moves beyond both these concepts. Maya Lloyd sees this as a creation of political action which overcomes or dissolves this binary⁴⁵ Butler's articulation of gender allows for practices that produce gendered identities to also become the sites of agency. Revealing the nature of gendered acts as exclusionary and evaluate, the idea is to not merely limit ourselves to a negative evaluation of these acts but to view as possibilities of social transformation. For her, the site of subversion is not a domain which is pre-discursive or outside culture and history in any way but the possibility of subversion resides within the discourse. The site of gendered acts also becomes the site of subversive acts. The gendered subject is constituted but not determined. The subject is constituted through repetitive acts of gender but not determined which would imply lack of agency. The repetitive acts comprise of gestures and styles which produce gender as an effect. Body being the primary site for gender, it is through the proliferation and alteration in

⁴³ Allen, 'Power Trouble', p. 460.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁵ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p. 60.

corporeal styles that available gender norms can be interpreted and organized in new ways.

Agency is not to be perceived as some innate quality of the subject but rather as an element of signification and repetition.⁴⁶ In order to elaborate upon how gender performativity makes the scope for subversive acts through repetition and signification, Butler draws on from Derrida and Foucault. Derrida perceives the use of language involving a citational practice and depending upon a kind of general iterability⁴⁷. Citation here means repetition of linguistic signs and iterability means being repeatable in different contexts. Such an understanding of language assumes dependency on certain conventions of language use in utterances. It is due to this fact of citationality that we are able to understand same words in different contexts and are able to differentiate between different words. Language performativity, thus, poses a challenge to the idea that a speaker has a complete control over the words s/he speaks and in the manner s/he speaks. Our language usage is dependent on conventional usage of words, but this doesn't mean that meanings of words are permanently fixed. In recitation, words can be recited in novel and unprecedented ways and convention only plays a partial role in conditioning the way we use language.⁴⁸ In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes gender performativity as a reiterative or citational power of discourse.⁴⁹ She adapts the citational model of performativity to the notion of gender to elucidate how repetition of particular gestures and corporeal styles generate the effect of a gendered identity. The feminine subject is feminine as a result of this repetition. Gender is not a result of an act of volition but a result of the 'forced recitation of norms'⁵⁰ This force of the norms comes from the fact that they have consolidated and gained authority over time and to continue this authority, repetition is necessary. A particular behaviour is recognized as feminine or masculine because that behaviour recites those particular practices which have come to be associated with feminine or masculine, the ways we talk, sit or speak.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁷ Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, pp 80-111, p.103

⁴⁸ Derrida himself interpreted language as a form of repetition and iteration by drawing from J.L Austin's work on speech act theory in *How To Do Things With Words*.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

In return, we are reprimanded or rewarded depending upon if gender is done rightly or wrongly as per these norms. The recitation and repetition of the norms become pressing if a person is to be counted as a credible gendered person throughout life.⁵¹ These norms are inescapable as they operate from the very moment of sex assignment in either of the two sexes on birth and gender becomes incomprehensible outside this process of repetition and reiterability. Gender performativity is, thus, much underlined with constraint than what appears *prima facie*. When one acts in opposition to these norms then either that person is severely punished or it created room for contesting and transforming heteronormativity. Butler's model seeks to offer a way to combat coercive nature of heterosexuality and prevalent gender norms without taking recourse to a utopian imagination of an autonomous free agent who is free to completely change her situation. To explain the how the performative aspect itself offers a juncture of subversion, Butler draws on Derrida's departure from Saussurean understanding of language. Saussure held that signs have particular meanings owing to their differences from other signs within a linguistic system, but post-Saussureans have argued that meanings of signs get defined differently through a process that occurs over a span of time. Meanings of linguistic terms are never fixed but undergo alteration with every event of speech. Each time a term is used, it is placed in a new relation with other terms. This redefines the meanings of all the terms as their places in the network of signs are altered. So, all terms undergo resignification which modifies and redirects meanings which were naturalised before. This resignification is a result of temporality and instability of meaning itself. Similar articulation informs gender performativity as linguistic norms concerning gender organise and regulate our gender acts. Norms concerning femininity and masculinity are dependent on corporeal acts. These corporeal acts shift the meaning of gender norms with gradual re-enactments over time with respect to changing socio-cultural and historical contexts. The gender norms are not as fixed in meaning as it might appear. This becomes visible through a critical genealogy of gender in different historical contexts and its understanding by different individuals across culture. It is in this vulnerability of norms that we can place the possibility of subversion. To further explain the possibility of subversion in the performative aspect of gender, Butler turns to Foucault's notion *assujétissement*, generally translated as subjectivation or subjectification, which Foucault uses to refer to the constitution of

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 7-8.

the subject through the practices of subjection.⁵² In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Butler interprets this idea as “the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming the subject”⁵³. A subtle moment of agency is created when an individual is subjected to power, this moment of subjection constitutes the subject in a particular way and she also becomes capable of action. In the context of gender, it means that the moment one is subjected to gender norms; an individual becomes a gendered person who also becomes capable of resisting those very norms. The fact that gendered norms must be repeated creates the space for them to be repeated differently and makes subversive action possible.⁵⁴ The compulsion to repeat allows for enactments that contest those very norms they are intended to consolidate. Agency is not to be uncovered as an innate capacity of an individual but lies in this very operation of gender norms. Gender is unstable in its structure and constitution and only appears natural and firm owing to the repetition of particular practices over time. Agency to contest and resist the prevailing coercive norms of heterosexuality exists in the very practice of performing gender i.e. the element of performativity makes norms vulnerable to reinterpretation and resignification. These gender norms are not always effective and bound to succeed and can very well be exploited and contested. The pre-existing meanings of these norms are themselves a result of reinterpretation over a period of time. As some hegemonic elements get preserved, some are transformed; for corporeal activities and practices enact norms in various ways which alter their meaning. Reinterpretation of norms occurs continuously at the level of corporeal acts as we take up inherited meanings of gender norms of a particular culture. In this manner, the notion of performativity entails the possibility of subversion in its citation structure. Subversion is a form of reinterpreting the existing standards of gender norms. It involves resignifying those very norms so to alter their meaning and significance. Gender is both an apparatus of restraint and agency at the same time.

A politics based on performative acts will redescribe and resignify the manner we perceive different gendered identities at present and will also prescribe the kind of gender reality which should exist. The prescriptive aspect has two functions. First is to

⁵² M. Foucault, ‘An Aesthetics of Existence’, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, p. 50.

⁵³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p.65

recognize the practices which produce an illusion of a coherent gendered identity and this recognition will reveal that gendered identities are not coeval with any inner truth. The second function of the prescriptive aspect of performative politics would be to give due recognition to the complexity of gender and allow this complexity to exist without any vindicatory consequences for anybody.⁵⁵

The nature of subversive politics becomes clear with insights drawn from Butler's critique of feminist thought. She is not pursuing the goal of a society free from coercion by seeking rights for the marginalised through legislation nor does she envision a complete overthrow of the law and current social order through some utopian alternative. Rather, as an outcome of her radical resignification of gender through performativity, she proffers a particular kind of politics through performativity which offers a ground for subversion. The critical target of subversive politics is the power of heteronormativity when it operates as a norm.⁵⁶ It is a politics of troubling or destabilizing the coercive and violent nature of heteronormativity. This troubling of heteronormativity must come from within the culture, history and discourse as any pre-discursive realm outside the culture is merely a false projection of a particular set of discursive activities themselves. The final chapter of *Gender Trouble* initiates the articulation of a viable politics of subversion which operates from within the culture and not an external overthrow of the structures of power. Subversion would thus be immanent to culture and would refer to a critical practice of working on gender norms from within, eroding their efficacy, bringing them into question by revealing their nature or by challenging their status.⁵⁷ This practice would endeavour to seek cultural legitimacy and intelligibility to those who are marginalised and subjected to exclusion under heteronormativity.

As discussed before, agency lies in signification and resignification of gendered practices and gestures. Performing subversive acts would involve these practices of continuous signification and resignification which would create possibilities for

⁵⁵ Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory." *Theatre journal*, p. 530

⁵⁶ Samuel A. Chambers and Terrel Carver, *Judith Butler & Political Theory: Troubling Politics*, p.137

⁵⁷ Samuel A. Chambers and Terrel Carver, *Judith Butler & Political Theory: Troubling Politics*, p. 142.

alternative domains of cultural intelligibility. Butler terms these subversive acts as “parodic styles”⁵⁸ Parodic refers to the characteristics of mimicry and copying and hints at the repetitive element of performativity in this context. By being imitative, subversive acts would reveal the constructed nature of gender. Butler deploys the use of the practice of Drag to elucidate the parodic styles. Drag refers to clothing associated with one gender role when worn by a person of another gender. Accordingly, a drag act is one when performs a gender role (generally, reversal of what one is associated with) and is practiced by people of all sexual orientations and gendered identities.

An act of drag could reveal that there is no such notion as a ‘true’ or ‘false’ gender and there is nothing innate about being a particular gender, that is to say that one’s gender need not necessarily follow from one’s biological sex. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler states that an act of drag can illustrate that there is no such notion as one’s primary gender. The impersonation of femininity by men in drag depicts that femininity is not some attribute natural to women but is a result or effect of certain gestures and practices. Drag denaturalises the continuum between sex, gender and desire. This continuum is perpetuated by heteronormativity which naturalises that masculine gender and feminine gender follows from male and female sex respectively and the natural form of desire is only that of the heterosexual nature. Drag, on the contrary, reveals the constructed nature of gender and makes explicit the clash between sex, gender and desire. In a way, it reveals that all gender is a parody. This is shown by illustrating in the act that there is no gender which naturally belongs to any sex. There are no original or natural genders; drag is a copy of a copy. Although seemingly original, Gender itself is a copy because there is no body which inhabits or exhibits the perfect prototype of a masculine or feminine gender, so all gendered identities are in a way copy of ideal genders which are mere normalised abstractions.

Drag’s significance lies exactly in its capacity to reveal how heteronormativity naturalises the relation between sex, gender and desire. Subversive resignifications display that gender is an enactment and reveals its unstable nature. Drag in this way re-enacts established gender norms but, in the process, displays itself as a copy of these norms, exposing their instability and lack of any natural truth in heteronormativity. However, it will be wrong to assume that subversive politics of gender is essentially a

⁵⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.176

politics of drag. Subversion is not to be equated with drag. Drag has merely been used by Butler to stress and explicate the parodic nature of gender. In fact, the act of drag is not always subversive but only under sufficient conditions where it destabilizes heteronormativity. Many a times, it might actually reinforce naturalised status of heterosexuality. Drag acts enacted by those who are heterosexual and performed in coherence with heteronormativity are not subversive and reinforce the heterosexual norms without any inquiry into their nature. Even drag performances by those who are not heterosexual are not subversive; many of them effectively reinforce the hegemonic ordering of gender. This means that resignification of corporeal enactments of norms which undermine traditional meanings of gender may or may not take a subversive form. The ongoing process of resignification makes subversion possible but does not necessarily result in it. Many a times it can take conservative forms. For instance, demand for LGBT marriage re-signifies meaning of marriage but in a traditional way. So there needs to be differentiation of resignifications which subvert the present status of heterosexuality or despite being resignification, they reinforce the heterosexual hegemony. Also, Drag can be seen as a subversive act only when it destabilizes heteronormativity but this does not guarantee that it will weaken the system. Such a radical resistance might, in fact, result in violence intended to suppress any change in prevalent gender norms. Subversion would thus, be said to have been able to contest heteronormativity only when it validates different gendered identities through its process of denaturalising heterosexuality. It will not only lead to an increase in genders but will also reveal the failure of heterosexual order in fully containing its own ideals by displaying its coercive nature. This would be an attempt towards altering the terms of cultural intelligibility of different genders.

At this point, it might seem that Butler's suggestion of a subversive politics is grossly impractical as it appears individualistic, especially with the illustration of drag—everyone cannot, surely, adapt a livelihood of drag in everyday existence. To address this, it is significant to recall Butler's proposal of coalitional politics which has been discussed in the first chapter of the present work. Putting these two ideas together could eventually help one make sense of the direction which feminism can take in order to pursue its goals. Subversions can effectively undermine the established meanings in the longer run when they are repeated consistently over a course of time and enough number of times in order to prevent the return to a conservative model of gender.

Subversion, as both the tool and goal of coalitional politics, can offer a form of life in which empowerment is not a result of disempowering others. Feminist thought need not pursue its representational goals that end up oppressing and excluding women which do not identify with the presumed sense of the term but rather can proceed with the acts of including different identities and not pursuing emancipatory goals that ignore discrimination of many. Coalitional politics was based on the idea of coming together of different identities whilst allowing scope for identities that may emerge and dissolve along the course, in order to realise goals which are at hand. Gender in such a complex model is a notion whose totality would be permanently in a continuous process and never fully realised at one particular time. By continuously revealing the constructed and violent nature of exhaustive and fixed models of gender through acts of subversion, gender as a process could offer for an alternate gender reality which does not subsist in excluding and punishing those who may not adhere to gender norms prevalent at a particular time.

Concluding Remarks

Rather than affirming the binary model of sex and gender and then suggesting ways to overcome hegemony of one gender over another, Butler's radical theorisation of gender as a process offers a way to deconstruct and resignify meaning of gender. Overcoming hegemonic elements of gender is sought precisely through this resignification.

The process of resignification of gender is a never ending one, as the nature of gender lies in it being performed. We are continuously engaged in performing gender norms and constituting ourselves in return. Casting gender in performative theory explains the many ways our identity and gender gets constituted in a continuous manner. If gender has been a result of some inner truth as many theories proclaim i.e. if gender followed from sex in such a way that women were always feminine and men were masculine naturally, then there would have been no moments or instances which would depict a discontinuity between biological sex, gender and desire. Even a heterosexual woman who conforms and relates with the feminine ways of performing her bodily self, might not feel feminine at all moments or might resignify persisting values of femininity. This is to say that a woman whose has biological sex is female and

also displays feminine traits might not agree to all norms pertaining to femininity. This can be exhibited from an act as simple as a dancing style. It is not uncommonly to see a woman dancing in a manner generally agreed upon as masculine. Same can be imagined for a masculine man. And even such a small act of non-conformity to gender ideals leads to mockery and shaming. However, such instances of everyday life pose significant doubt on the stability of sex-gender continuum as per the heterosexual model.

Gender understood as a performative act liberates us from the strict garbs and coercive nature of heteronormativity. Not only does it welcome different genders and sexuality in its domain, norms determining the codes of heterosexuality are also up for review. It would, thus, not be completely justified to state (as many assert) that Butler's reformulation of gender takes a complete turn towards queer politics. There is no doubt that Butler's account attempt to bring fore the punitive consequences for those who, deliberately or without choice, fail to subscribe to the heterosexual model; gender performativity also prepares for a new direction to address subjugation of women and caters to goals of feminism. Without having to list down universal features of being a woman which might fail to include various kinds of women across different socio-economic contexts, the account provides for a collective politics based on shared historical contexts and overlappings across cultures.

There is also a novel perspective on subjectivity which arises from this account. As the subject itself gets constituted through these acts, there is no inner truth towards the realisation of which one is to be directed. Although Butler is highly influenced by the Hegelian process of dialectic, unlike the Hegelian subject, her subject is not driven a pre-defined telos. Understanding gender by rendering it anew as a performative account confronts us with the trap of norms and power structures we are placed in and yet provides for a possibility to reinterpret and reformulate these norms which govern us by revealing that the norms are inherently unstable and depend upon our repeated enactment of them to subsist.

One aspect that certainly baffles any reader of Butler's is that she builds her work and thought process through a critical analysis of other thinkers and one has to draw out different threads of her thought from these critical reflections and there is no straightforward answer present. This, however, could be taken as indicative of the scope

she wants to leave in developing her own theory—a scope of resignifying and reinterpreting her own work. Her writing becomes an extension and reflection of her thought as it takes on a performative dimension that is always up for scrutiny.

Chapter -III

Bodies and the Question of Liveability

Chapter -III

Bodies and the Question of Liveability

The analysis of the performative theory of gender in the previous chapter emphasised the role of corporeal gestures and practices in constituting gender and the subject itself. Body is not taken as a mute facticity but the site of gender performativity and subversion. This account of gender entails the rejection of any pre-gendered formulation of the body and biological sex. While the feminist thought has accorded much impetus to biological and sexual differences as pre-given facts which are essential and natural, Butler's theory confronts us with a notion of body which is always accessible only through discourse. Many questions were left unanswered regarding the claim that body is not a mute entity but a constructed aspect of our everyday existence. A clarification is needed regarding the materiality of the body and whether it has been ignored conveniently in our analysis of the performative account of gender. Keeping in line with the concerns and questions that arise out of the theory of gender performativity, the present chapter is an attempt to clarify that the concept of body in Butler's work does not render bodily experiences as disembodied ones. While there is no denial of the material aspect of the bodies in her work, an extensive attempt has been made to exposit her claim that discourse plays a vital role in constructing or signifying bodies in particular ways. After the elaboration of the status of the body, the chapter inquires the purpose served by constructing or signifying bodies exclusively in the heteronormative framework. This brings us to the larger concern of violent marginalisation of certain bodies which she terms as 'Abject Bodies' and their subjugation as irrelevant lives, lives which do not matter. The purpose of this chapter is then to link Butler's concern of the construction of the body according to normative ideals and resultant exclusion of many bodies which do not fit this criterion. The latter part of this chapter deals with the question of liveability of all bodies and seeks to offer a constructive methodology of recognising all kind of bodies as relevant and worthy of being counted as humans. If power and discourse affect our every day existence and social relations in the manner as Butler claims, then there must be some way of altering social reality for an ethical and political transformation. This chapter is an effort to inquire if Butler's theory offers a way to implement the subversive practices not only to challenge the coercive normative ideals but to result in a non-aggressive co-existence of recognition of all bodies.

I. Butler's analysis of the Notion of Body

The concept of the body has occupied a prominent place in feminist discourse and its role and place in feminist thought has been speculated in various ways. Different frameworks dominate the conception of body. Treating body as a bare biological entity, appeals have been made to reclaim the authentic female body from the clutches of patriarchal subjugation and thereafter to serve as a universal basis for feminist thought. Any such viewpoint assumes that sexual differences are essential and indispensable for formulating any viable account of oppression and emancipation. Previous chapters in the present work have examined the assumed status of sex as the natural criteria of gender difference and it has been shown that prevalent understanding of sex also presupposes a gendered form. Rather than following the trajectory of making an appeal centred around the treatment of the body as a natural bare fact, Butler has been concerned with discerning the interests which are served by essentializing and naturalising sexual differences. However, Butler's theorization of the body has met with severe criticism for the lack of attention to corporeal realities that are peculiar to womanhood such as the experience of birthing, lactation and even rape. Martha Nussbaum in her highly critical essay titled 'The Professor of Parody' remarks that Butler's work fails to take into account particular bodily aspects of women which are not amenable to variation with respect to different cultures as there are certain bodily needs which are peculiarly tied to having a woman's body⁵⁹. Here, one must be reminded of Butler's treatment of the category of woman itself which any such criticism overlooks. While there has been no denial of similarities in experiences of women across cultures, the problem according to Butler arises when such similarities are essentialized and naturalised as defining features of being a woman. Any strict and exhaustive formulation inevitably ends up excluding many women who do not, deliberately or otherwise, undergo these bodily experiences. Nonetheless, it needs to be examined whether Butler renders her account of gender a disembodied one, for such an account would defeat the purpose of her endeavour to acknowledge and expisit the everyday lived experience of gender.

⁵⁹ Nussbaum, 'The professor of parody', p. 8.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler addresses the issue of the embodiment as she acknowledges the undeniable facticity of bodies. She concedes that bodies do live and die, eat and sleep, feel pain and pleasure, endure illness and violence. She acknowledges that these primary bodily experiences have something necessary and inescapable about them that cannot be denied or refuted.⁶⁰ In no manner does she reject this evident experience of corporeal reality but, at the same time, she is cautious as to not develop this experiential evidence as the universal basis of feminist inquiry. Therefore, instead of presenting an analysis of the nature of facticity of the body, the inquiry has been driven by the motive to explore and understand how we come to know our bodies in their present form and signification. The focus with the concept of body is to examine how sexual differences are invoked as material differences and what functions are served in the stabilisation of this link between sexual and material differences as natural. Two points must be stated at this juncture. First, sexual differences are not merely a function of material differences which, in turn, are not free from the discursive practices or significations through language. Consider the cases of women who have undergone breast removal surgeries due to a particular kind of cancer. In such cases, we do not thereafter pronounce that such individuals cease to be women due to a lack of a particular organ. This would be an extreme, but a clear case which casts enough doubt on essentializing sex difference as definitive of a person's gender and throws much light on the coercive ways bodies are signified. Second, insisting that sexual differences are affected by discursive practices does not imply that discursive practices cause or give rise to sexual differences. Butler's articulation of gender involves an examination of the processes and forces which have led to essentializing certain bodily features as sexual differences (instead of asserting that certain discursive practices give rise to certain sex). Her analysis of signification of body by discursive practices results in her contention that body is known in and regulated (and not caused by) through discourse.

The assertion that knowledge of the body is regulated through discourse leads to misinterpretations that her account renders bodily experiences as disembodied one. The claim that body is known through discourse is an assertion that we come to know our bodies through language – this is not an ontological claim about the nature of bodies but an epistemological one regarding how we acquire the knowledge of our bodies in terms of essentialised sexed nature. To make matters clearer, let us examine the role language

⁶⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. xi.

plays in essentializing the sexed nature of bodies in terms of binary sexual apparatus. The very act of pronouncing the sex of a baby at the time of birth results in the constitution of the person in terms of a sexed body. The medical act of naming shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that, the girl is “girled,” and brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender”⁶¹. This is the first in the set of linguistic practices which determine the place of the child within a sexed and gendered culture. The gendering doesn’t end here but is continuously reiterated by various authorities which reinforce this naturalised effect.⁶² This further initiates a series of pre-determined behaviour with the child according to the assigned gender and defines the treatment which will be bestowed upon the child by others. Sexual differences are, thus, marked by such discursive practices, but this is not a denial of the materiality of body. The tacit point being emphasised here is that sexual differences are not limited to the materiality of the body and this materiality is, in fact, constituted in a particular manner by the discourse. Body is never free of a ‘cultural sign’⁶³ i.e. there is no body which exists free from the influence of culture. The notion of body can only be fully comprehended within a given historical, cultural and linguistic context.

An account which states that we can have access to body or sex only through language could be taken to imply the position of linguistic constructivism. It would follow that body is a figment of linguistic fantasy amenable to any changes which, of course, is an erroneous ignorance of the material reality of the body. It is to be noted that Butler denies that her theory reduces bodies to mere linguistic constructions. The problem of mistaking her theory for linguistic constructivism arises as a result of positing corporeal materiality of the body in contradiction to the idea that body gets constituted by discursive practices. She contrasts her position with any such mistaken understanding of her theory. The claim that we have access to our bodies only through language does not mean that bodies are created or generated through language. Nor does it mean that bodies are purely determined by language. Body is in no way a linguistic fiction and material reality of the body definitely asserts some influence upon us.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶² Ibid., p. 7-8.

⁶³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 90.

Through her exposition, Butler is only examining the relation of the body to language by emphasising that language affects our knowledge of body. She writes,

Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different.⁶⁴

Such an analysis of the relation of body and language or materiality and discourse draws attention towards the manner in which linguistic practices constitute the body. The underlying contention of the claim is that we never know bodies apart from these practices. In the present context, neither is language or materiality conceived independently of each other; nor are they completely dictated by each other.

To clarify the position further and elaborate the role and place of the notion of body in her work, it is important to refer to the concept of materialization (rather than construction) which she proposes in *Bodies That Matter*. Body is reconceptualised as a ‘set of boundaries’⁶⁵ and materialisation is the process which produces and stabilises these boundaries over a period of time. It refers to the particular ideas which have come to exist about the body, how these ideas define reality and how they have emerged as a naturalising force in a way that body is understood only within the framework of binary sex. This is not a reduction of bodies as linguistic constructs but an analysis of the exclusive appearance of bodies only within the heteronormative schema. The erroneous assumption is to think of the body as stable, fixed and free from any signification. Butler’s theorisation of gender in terms of performativity is an attempt to demonstrate that our daily acts or practices signify bodies in a particular fashion. Understanding of the term ‘construction’ needs to be rethought. The concept of construction is generally understood in opposition to the notion of essentialism and in such a binary understanding, construction appears to imply artificiality. Instead of limiting the notion of construction as all that is artificial, Butler understands it as a ‘constitutive

⁶⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 69.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

constraint'⁶⁶. The phrase means that when it is stated that bodies are constructed, the claim is that bodies appear only within the constraint of highly gendered schemas. Construction is, thus, not to be taken as a process of acting on a blank surface of bodies but involves recognizing that what is natural is also signified by historicity. In this way, the concept of materialisation makes explicit the difference between material and materiality of body. Material of the body refers to the fixity, contours, movements and materiality refers to the various ways body is signified by the discourse laden with hegemonic practices of heteronormativity. Butler is engaged with the latter phenomenon.

Another misreading of Butler's account is to take this account as a deterministic position. This, again, would be a gross misunderstanding as materialisation is not a simple act which results in a set of fixed effects. Subjects and the bodies are not simply materialised once and for all. It takes place over time as a consequence of reiterative practices but is never a complete process. Just as the categories of 'gender' and 'sex' depend upon reiterative practices to be stabilised and naturalised over times but are subject to resignification, bodies are never exhaustively naturalised. By virtue of these reiterative practices, sexual differences acquire natural character but also result in certain gaps which create the possibility of redoing or undoing the hegemonic norm.⁶⁷ These instabilities then make space for questioning the regulatory force of heterosexual hegemony. Thus, this process of stabilisation of boundaries of bodies itself creates a possibility of change. A possibility of change in bodies is by no matter a suggestion that bodies can be altered at will, it only suggests that bodies could become sites of subversion.

Thus, it has been seen that although Butler gives due recognition to the facticity of body, she avoids her account to be viewed as a position which limits body as a mute facticity or being reduced as a linguistic construct. The purpose of elucidating how the body gets constituted in a particular form in discourse is to highlight the normative violence that is involved in the process of materialisation. Recognition of only those bodies which adhere to the compulsory order of binary sex exposes how this process of categorisation of bodies into either of the sexes ascertains which bodies are supposed to

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. xx.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. xix.

be counted as a properly sexed body. The major concern which directs her work is to speculate why some bodies matter more than others.

II. The Question of Liveability and Recognition

Construction of gender on the basis of heterosexual matrix operates through exclusionary means which result in creating the category of human in opposition to the category of less-human. The exclusionary means involve foreclosures and radical erasures of certain individuals and results in the categorisation of persons on the scale of more human, less human, less-human and humanly unthinkable.⁶⁸ The domain of anything less of a human is termed by Butler as 'abject'⁶⁹ as she draws from Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection⁷⁰. According to Kristeva, Abjection is a process of radical exclusion of the unclean, repulsive and improper from the existence of the speaking subject and the symbolic. Expulsion of the impure is seen as the assumption for culture to exist. This does not mean the domain of abject is an outside which lies beyond the discourse implying an ontological there-ness but is rather a domain which is constituted through the discourse as its own impossible limits. The abject, although excluded, exists to disrupt and haunt the security and stability of social ordering. It remains very much a part of the order, excluded but as a threat.⁷¹ Butler draws ontological import from Kristeva's idea as she theorises abjection as the process which excludes individuals from subjecthood because they fail to conform to existing normative ideals and resulting abject persons are categorised as less real or even unreal. These abject bodies constitute the 'others' against whom those who cohere to the normative standards are seen as subjects. They become the criteria against whom subjecthood is ascribed to individuals. Heterosexual matrix is an exclusionary schema which constructs or materialises subjects in the strict binary frame of sexuality and in doing so, produce the domain of abject beings. The crucial point to note is that although abject bodies do not count as real, they very much exist physically representing a shadowy life, a life which is not qualified as

⁶⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁶⁹ Abjection literally means to cast off, away or out.

⁷⁰ Can see: Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.

⁷¹ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p. 74.

legitimate, real or even as thinkable.⁷² The abject bodies, thus, come to denote the unliveable parts of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subjects.

An overarching aim of Butler's work could be seen as enhancing life by expanding the field of bodily lives. She proceeds to do this by politicizing abjection and the process of materialization to determine which lives matter. By theoretically and politically questioning the authority of the criteria which demarcates individuals as subjects and abject bodies, she attempts to uncover the ways heteronormativity crafts sexual and political matters. To be able to be recognized, individuals are supposed to conform to the heteronormative schemas. The process of materialisation, thus, insists on identification with heteronormative codes and deliberate non-recognition of certain other ways of living (which do not cohere with heterosexual schema). As this scenario is unveiled, it becomes necessary to expose the criteria which qualify the bodies which matter, which lives count as livable, which lives are worth protecting and which lives are worth grieving.

'Grief' becomes an important aspect in this examination as lives which are not valued or considered as livable are lives which are not worth grieving for or, stated more clearly, lives whose deaths do not matter. Let us consider the example of the Sati practice (now socially condemned as a practice and banned by the Indian law) in Indian tradition to illustrate the importance of lives which are grievable and non-importance of lives which are not grievable. As the life of a woman after the death of her husband ceases to be worth living, her life and death becomes unworthy of grieving for. In fact, the violence inflicted on her becomes a matter of celebration and becomes a form of violence which is not only sanctioned by law but also acceptable. As the life of a widow is not worth grieving over, she is reduced as less than a human and her life is easily sacrificed in the name of tradition. In this discussion regarding which bodies become are valued and which are not, Butler's treatment of the concept of body becomes clearer as her concern is not the matter of body as such but the process of materialisation or the mechanism which values certain bodies and devalues certain others. The regulatory mechanisms constitute not only intelligible bodies but also unintelligible, abject ones.

⁷² Meijer, Irene Costera, and Baukje Prins. "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler." *Signs*, p. 277, 281.

Underpinning this sanctioned relation between bodies which matter and normative violence is the ethical concern to account for individuals who are not recognized as subjects. The notion of abjection introduces us to Butler's body politics through which she tries to understand the human condition and extend the conditions of liveability. The heterosexual matrix acts a mechanism of governing and regulating rules for categorizing individuals as intelligible or unintelligible on the parameters of sex, gender and sexuality. It sets up the norms and standards for accepting (or not accepting) individuals as socially coherent subjects. Accordingly, many are abjected and rendered as incoherent and unintelligible beings. Intersex population or people born with mixed genitals are a stark example of this exclusionary mechanism as there is no space at all in this model to recognize these individuals as subjects or to even accommodate their lives as liveable. This normative and violent aspect of gender norms is capable of undoing one's personhood and undermines the capacity to lead a liveable life.⁷³ A livable life constitutes a life of recognition as real persons or subjects.

Butler uses the term 'undoing' to illustrate denial of personhood in cases when there is a complete lack of recognition of certain individuals, but also in cases where an offensive form of recognition is offered when individuals are asked to embrace norms which they repudiate. The first scenario is a case of clear non-recognition of certain individuals or groups as humans or credible subjects because they do not conform to the normative ideals of sexuality and other parameters. Consider the members of the Hijra or Kinnar community in India who are treated as lowly subjects or individuals not even worthy of subjecthood owing to their lack of conformity to heteronormative standards. The latter scenario can be exemplified through instances or cultural contexts where women are offered token recognition as subjects secondary to men or of being less-humans than men. Even though women in such scenarios are recognized as subjects, they are hardly granted subjecthood in real sense. In both the cases, individuals are equally undone. In both kinds of scenarios, individuals are vulnerable to acceptable forms of violence and discrimination of various kinds.

Abjection is, however, not only limited to sex, gender and sexuality but 'refers to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to "lives" and whose materiality is

⁷³ Butler, Judith, *Undoing gender*, p. 1.

not understood to “matter”⁷⁴. In her essay “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics”, Butler states her general concern with the idea of precarity, a term that denotes living conditions or existence without any sense of security, to ‘focus on conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one’s control’⁷⁵. As the precarious life of various gendered identities is the result of being born into certain social customs and taboos, their lives being declared unworthy of living and facing a constant threats of violence is living a life outside their own control. With the idea of Precarity, we can talk about the populations which are starving or about sex workers who face both street and state violation. It is only the limitation of the scope of the present work that we refer mostly to the heteronormative frameworks as vectors of power. She writes in the same essay,

Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics; who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; who will fail to be protected by the law or, more specifically, the police, on the street, or on the job, or in the home. Who will be stigmatized; who will be the object of fascination and consumer pleasure? Who will have medical benefits before the law? Whose intimate and kinship relations will, in fact, be recognized before the law?⁷⁶

We, thus, see that Precarity gets linked with the notion of gender performativity as we discuss about those abject bodies that do not conform to intelligible normative ideals of sexuality and gender and face a heightened risk of violence and harassment. Equally coercive models of power operate on the basis of ethnicity, class, caste, race and more as ‘precarity becomes a rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor and the stateless’⁷⁷. In a crucial ethical turn, Butler reformulates her task as one to articulate a reorganisation of the world to ensure a

⁷⁴ Meijer, Irene Costera, and Baukje Prins. "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler." *Signs*, p. 281

⁷⁵ Butler, ‘PERFORMATIVITY, PRECARITY AND SEXUAL POLITICS’, *AIBR, Antropólogos Iberoamericanos en Red*, p. i.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

respectable survival of all kinds of bodies. Thus, the subversion of gender norms “must be guided by the question of what maximises the possibilities for a liveable life, what minimises the possibility of unbearable life, or indeed, social or literal death”⁷⁸. Her work takes on a form of an ethico-political project.

In analysing which bodies matter, relational aspect of our subjecthood is revealed i.e. our existence as subjects being validated through recognition by others and also, non-recognition of certain others. Not only are we recognized as subjects by others but we recognize this subjecthood in opposition to certain others being denied this status. Butler develops this relational aspect of subjecthood by deploying the Heideggerian term ‘Ek-stasis’. The term refers to the state of being beside one’s self, to be outside one’s self. Butler brings in this term to factor the role of ‘otherness’ in being recognized as a subject and to stress the dependency on the other in the understanding of own self. The conceptualisation of the subject as determined by factors other than itself has been present in her work from the beginning as she speculates the manner in which identities get constituted with respect to norms. The same thought now gets extended as she elaborates on the relational aspect of subject to depict the role of others in the constitution of our identity. In ‘Psychic Life to Power’ she traces the vital role of others in formation of our identity as she writes of the ‘primary vulnerability to the other’⁷⁹ as observed in the case of an infant who is dependent on other for all physical and mental needs. In this sense, subjects are actually incoherent and divided from the start.⁸⁰ All individuals acquire identity through the sense of attachment and dependency on others but as we grow up this primary relationship is repressed. Bodies are vulnerable to others as we are exposed to gaze, care, touch and even violence by others. In fact, this corporeal vulnerability to others marks our continued existence as recognized social subjects. From the vulnerability as an infant to later experiences of love, betrayal, grief, anger, mourning, our bodies are exposed to others.⁸¹ The idea that our bodies are always exposed to and dependent upon others challenges the idea of bodily autonomy and the continuous vulnerability of bodies to others refers to the numerous ways our identity gets constituted by and is dependent upon our relations to

⁷⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 19.

⁸¹ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p. 189.

others. Not just our bodies are exposed to others; others are also exposed to us in similar ways and might even illicit violence from us. We are not only in a position to be cared by and harmed by others; we can also wound them up. This opening up to and with others is what makes up our ek-static existence.

Reflecting on the question of bodies which matter, she positions the subject as relational emphasising our relations with others and our existence in a world governed by norms which are not chosen by us. The reason for bringing in the relational and ek-static character of our existence is crucial to depict how the norms of recognition affect our encounters with others. Our embodied existence is a ‘struggle with norms’⁸² as norms dictate which bodies are to be loved, cared for, attended to and which are to be condemned and inflicted with violence. This corporeal vulnerability subjects us to actions of others, known and unknown to us. By tying together the concept of ek-static existence with exclusionary norms of recognition, Butler engages in the twofold task of a) challenging the idea of an autonomous subject by showing the necessity of presence of others as a condition of our existence, and b) exploring the different kinds of ethical encounters we have in our engagements with others.⁸³ These tasks constitute the force of Butler’s ethico-political project of conceiving a society build upon the principles of ensuring liveability for all and a sense of responsibility towards all. She envisions a global political community which acknowledges an inevitable interdependency among its members. It needs to be now seen if there is a way to offer a social transformation in which corporeal vulnerability paves the way for an existence based on inclusion rather than exclusion and aggression.

III. The Possibility of Social Transformation

As our constant exposure to others make us susceptible to violence from them and vice versa, Butler claims that the experiences of the states of grief and mourning are capable of replacing the language of violence to that of non-aggression. The states of grief and mourning enable us to experience the precariousness of life and vulnerability of the other and shatter the illusion of an autonomous existence. These states confront us with

⁸² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 13.

⁸³ Lloyd, *Judith Butler* p. 138.

our dependency on recognition from others to mark our lives as liveable or to live lives which matter. In the instances of grief and mourning, we are revealed to ourselves as these experiences make bare our ties with others and we realise that we are constituted and shaped by these ties. Our own loss of self is felt in these moments of loss of others and our dependence on others becomes fully explicit. Such an experience is a peculiar one as the loss is experienced in one's own self, not by one's own doing but is triggered by the loss of another. We ourselves come undone as others are lost to us. This loss of a part of subject's own identity is lost results in an experience of being dispossessed, being undone by the other. Thus, our being-with-other as a crucial aspect of our existence is revealed in these states of dispossession.⁸⁴ Butler views these moments as being beside one's self and becoming foreign to one's own self and these moments become the 'source of my ethical connection with others'⁸⁵. These experiences act as the source of ethical connection because they enable us to recognise the others as bodies which matter. The possibility of grief and mourning then become conditions for recognising lives which matter. The lack of these for certain individuals and groups result in their lives being decreed as unliveable or unworthy of mattering. Our lack of identification with their suffering results in non-recognition of their lives as liveable. If we can progress or direct our political movement towards identifying other bodies over their suffering and their exclusion, we would be able to include them in the apparatus of bodies which matter. Butler draws attention towards the assaults on women, name calling and violence against the LGBTQI⁸⁶ community and even racist murders. Acts of violence performed against whole groups and particular identities have basis in the corporeal vulnerability of being human. To address this kind of normative violence which arises due to the vulnerability of certain identities in the face of others, she calls for measures of recognition in her framework of identity and body politics. This move becomes urgent as not only are people dependent on each other, but our relations with others are framed and governed by normative ideals.

⁸⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 28.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ LGBTQI is an accepted abbreviation for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, Queer and Intersex populations. It must however, be kept in mind that there is a possibility of a multitude of gendered identities which do not identify with either of these. This, itself, is a growing term.

Recognition is articulated as a reciprocal process between individuals. Understanding recognition as a reciprocal process has Hegelian import as according to Hegel, we as subjects experience the desire to know ourselves not in isolation but this desire figures with respect to others who provides us a sense of self⁸⁷. Butler, however, moves beyond the Hegelian use of the term as she contends that while the reciprocal process of recognition defines individuals as subjects or real humans, many a times it also acts to deprive certain individuals or groups of that status on the basis of sex, body, race and other factors.⁸⁸ This results in the differentiation of humans and less-human s; livable and unliveable lives with less-human s leading their lives as abject bodies, lives which do not matter. The process of recognition works as per the set of norms which dictate who can or who cannot be recognized as humans. The process specifies not only what one can “be” but also states whether or not one can recognize (or be recognized by) the other in the first place.⁸⁹ In *Precarious Life*, Butler uses the phrase ‘violence of derealisation’ to refer to this act of not recognizing certain individuals or groups as human or real subjects and rendering their lives unintelligible and unliveable. This violence of derealisation operates at the level of discourse when certain people or groups, albeit recognized as some form of bodies, are prohibited the status of real subjects. When physical or any other form of violence is inflicted upon these groups, it is an extension of the violence which is being already carried out in discourse. Any kind of violation in these cases is a result of ideas which are already present socially, culturally and historically. The act of violation stems from an established status of the individual as less than a human or not-human-enough. Another manner of derealisation occurs through an omission or complete erasure of certain individuals or groups from the discourse as their existence is deemed unthinkable altogether. This tool of omission works in a violent manner as it not only renders certain populations as less-human but the failure to even name them results in a greater form of non-recognition and dehumanization. When reporting media fails to cover violence against certain communities, it results in derealisation through omission. In such cases, ‘it is not that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable’⁹⁰ because ‘there never was a human,

⁸⁷ Can see: Hegel, Chapter 4, “Self-Consciousness”, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁸⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 22.

⁹⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 35.

never was a life, and no murder (or death) has, therefore taken place'⁹¹. The existence of such bodies is completely erased as they were not recognized as humans in the first place. Lack of recognition as subjects leads to lack of identification over their suffering which amounts to a lack of grief over their lives and deaths. It has been discussed before how grief is a condition for considering which lives matter and which don't. Lack of grief allows the privileged groups to escape the feeling of responsibility as the suffering and deaths of abject bodies are not relevant to one's social existence.

Once the relation between ethical concerns of liveability and mechanisms of normalization becomes evident, it is not a farfetched inference to understand that state also acts as one of the vectors of dictating the norms of exclusion. It determines the criteria of intelligibility of humans on the basis of sex, gender and sexuality among other factors and plays a regulatory role in the continuous reinforcement of the prevailing norms. In order to find modes of alternate solutions apart from appealing to the state, Butler suggests a radical democratic transformation of societal norms. This move is only an extension of the idea of coalitional politics which Butler introduced in *Gender Trouble* and has been discussed in detail in the first chapter of the present work. Like the concept of coalitional politics, this idea of radical democratic transformation is also an open-ended process which aims towards creating space for more inclusion of different identities. In her discussion of possibilities of subversion, she relies on the instabilities and gaps created precisely in the process which sustains the prevalent norms. In the same vein, she advocates in unending contestation of present norms. There is a need to expand our fundamental categories of differentiation so they become more encouraging. More responsive, more inclusive model of recognition results in acknowledgement of the full range of the cultural population.⁹²

A radical democratic movement is based upon an open-ended contestation of the prevalent categorical division of individuals as humans, less humans and humanly unthinkable. It would aim at concrete results of inclusion but would not be an exhaustive account at any given point of time. This lack of teleological completion creates an ever present possibility of the scope of including populations and individuals which may have been left behind. It is a project which would be dedicated to extend

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 147.

⁹² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 223-224.

recognition to those disqualified for the status of real subjects under present schema. Being a continuous process, the radical democratic movement would never reach a perfect state but this does not mean the idea is idealistic and beyond reach. Rather, it recognizes that there would always be some exclusions and a scope must always be maintained for a better model. For example, look into the struggle for rights of same-sex marriage. It might result in inclusion of gays in the institution of marriage from which excluded them before, but it also creates domains realms of exclusion among gay community as those unwilling to marry or any form of relationships which do not qualify for marital recognition falling outside the newly expanded norm of recognised relationships. Radical democratic thought would, thus, offer a model of inclusion which seeks to universalize the terms of inclusion while continuously engaged in a revision of those terms. Any understanding of human which might be presupposed as universal and inclusive of all individuals at one given time would be open for contestation as any foreclosed category would end up being exclusionary if there is no scope for redefinition. In *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality*, Butler describes the concept of universal as a universal bound in culture. She explicates that the idea of universal is always shaped by the cultural norms that particular idea is part of. The notion of universal is, in fact, a ‘temporalized’ dynamic concept⁹³ which is framed by particular contexts it is a part of. Accordingly, different political movements would have different conceptions of universal and there cannot be one single political direction to guide the movement of expanding the radar of liveable lives and bodies which matter. This is not to be seen as a hindrance towards attaining a better model of inclusion as the idea of radical democratic movement is based on the possibility of contestation and different conceptions would enable a rigorous examination of different conception. However, this must not result in relativism amounting to mere acceptance of different conception but different viewpoints and their contestation must guide and aim towards a more inclusive universal notion. There is a need to interrogate and continue the usage of the notion of universality at the same time. If the term no longer signifies the previous meaning attached to it, it mean that it has no meaning for us but that it needs to be rearticulated and not to be taken as an unquestioned premise for a political argument.

⁹³ J. Butler , E. Laclau, and S. Žižek. *Contingency, hegemony, universality: contemporary dialogues on the left*, p. 24.

This kind of radical democratic political thought is one of ‘establishing practices of translation’ amongst conflicting universals.⁹⁴ As there are different versions of universal rather than one singular notion governing all cultures and contexts, the absence of cultural consensus might result in disagreement.⁹⁵ In a situation of competing universals, it would be crucial to develop a more inclusive model by identifying exclusions and limits of existing norms. Such a situation could be expected when someone or a group which has been so far categorized as unintelligible or unrecognizable demands recognition as in the case of gay community claiming recognition for same-sex marriage or when women asserted recognition of equal rights as men. In such cases, current norms of recognition are called into question and a possibility of resignification or rearticulation of norms is produced. As Butler writes about such a scenario as ‘an invocation that has no prior legitimacy can have the effect of challenging existing forms of legitimacy’⁹⁶. At such moments, there is a clash of universals between one that is culturally prevalent and another new, more universal, form demanded by those who have been excluded previously. By demanding a rearticulation of the universal, the unrecognized section make explicit the exclusionary framework of the existing universal with its existing norms regarding who figures in the category of a real subject and who does not. In allowing this situation of contestation to reach a consensus aimed at a more inclusive model, radical democratic politics opens up space for rethinking the domain of possible and questions the normative violence that determines who counts.⁹⁷ Such a discursive and political engagement should result not only in possible alternate ways of interpretation of fundamental categories but also incorporate rejection on any kind of interpretation or practice that might involve exclusion and normative violence. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler states that ‘basic terms are all tainted, and that to use such terms is to reinvok[e] the contexts of oppression in which they were previously used’⁹⁸. Through rearticulation and resignification we can ascribe new purpose to the categories for which they were not intended. The crucial point is that these categories do not have essential meanings which can be yielded out from their contexts nor are they completely bound with historicities. The task is to

⁹⁴ Butler, ‘Competing Universalities’, p. 167.

⁹⁵ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p. 151.

⁹⁶ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p.147.

⁹⁷ Lloyd, ‘Performing Radical Democracy’, *The politics of radical democracy*, p. 37.

⁹⁸ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p.160

compel the categories of recognition to embrace those they have traditionally excluded, and to be fully aware that such an embrace would not be easy. It is not a simple assimilation and accommodation of what has been excluded into existing categories but rather the admission of a sense of difference.⁹⁹

It is important to bear in mind that any kind of resignification of existing categories would not do as this ability to resignify is not restricted to those groups who seek to obtain inclusion into norms or gain access to rights or recognition.¹⁰⁰ When on one hand the ambiguity involved in the practice of resignification offers site for subversion and transformation, it can also be used by a wide array of groups who might articulate terms resulting in social harm than social welfare as has been witnessed in the case of appropriation of the concepts of socialism and democracy by the Nazi regime. Butler herself recognises this unwanted and dangerous shortcoming of her account as she argues for a contextualization of resignification. She asserts that ‘in order to qualify as a radically democratic practice, resignification must be expansive and inclusive, extending norms to those who are disenfranchised, and working towards a less violent future.’¹⁰¹ To ensure the progress towards the model of inclusion of more bodies, a constant scrutiny of frameworks of gender and other normative ideals is necessary. The practices of translation, thus, involve the process of challenging the existing forms of normative ideals by way of recognizing the excluded groups and their resulting inclusion in the present models of existence. By taking account of the violent exclusion of the abject bodies, we would be able to identify with their sufferings and grieve over their lives and deaths making way for their inclusion. The realm of universal emerges as an open-ended ideal which has not been foreclosed by a given set of conventions and rules of recognition. Practices of cultural translation as directed by radical democratic thought do not operate with a set of pre-determined goals or models of inclusion nor is it a mere synthesis of existing conflicting views. It is a difficult and laborious process which requires that each of the competing universals have to undergo some change in order to accommodate and understand the other and hence, give up some of their

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁰⁰ Schippers, ‘Judith Butler, Radical Democracy and Micro-politics’, *The politics of radical democracy*, p. 80.

¹⁰¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 223–5.

foundational assumptions.¹⁰² In order to achieve the desired model of inclusion, each side must evaluate its limitations and assumptions and proceed with an open-minded attitude towards other frameworks. The process of re-articulation and resignification would involve illustrating the vulnerability of the fundamental terms that would result in an unexpected progressive interpretation of that term which would always be open for a more progressive interpretation. The notion of universal is no longer to be treated as a foundation upon which to build nor is it a presumption that allows us to proceed but it has become an anti-foundationist concept which can be rearticulated to become more inclusive. We need a radical and constant re-articulation of the universal itself with a sustained scope for unknowingness about what might include. The category of human will not denote one single understanding. In fact, it will have no ultimate form and will be one that is constantly negotiating sexual difference in a way that has no natural or necessary consequences for the social organization of sexuality. As Butler writes,

Distinct from a view that casts the operation of power in the political field exclusively in terms of discrete blocs which vie with one another for control of policy questions, hegemony emphasizes the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power. Power is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense.¹⁰³

By insisting that this will be a persistent and open question, Butler is only advocating that we make no decision on what sexual difference is, but leave that question open and evolving so as to not end up in another violent exclusive schema. The radical democratic movement thus operates upon incompleteness of fundamental categories and this might then serve as a normative ideal free of coercive force. Such a radical instability questions the foundational restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only with respect to genders and bodies but of politics itself.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Lloyd, 'Performing Radical Democracy', *The politics of radical democracy*, p. 37.

¹⁰³ Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, , p. 13-14.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 143.

Social transformation aiming towards better understanding of what it means to be human involving refined norms of recognition based on non-aggression is an everyday engagement and not a task achieved in a particular, defined moment of time. There shall always be room for improvement and that forms basis of the radical democratic thought which is advocated by Butler. Norms for corporeal vulnerability or public recognition for one's subjection to violence is unevenly distributed as determined by hegemonic structures of power and abject bodies which fall outside these regulatory norms are more susceptible towards corporeal vulnerability than others. A change would be brought about not only by rallying mass numbers in favour of a cause but through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated, and new conceptual horizons are opened up by subversive practices.¹⁰⁵ Butler's politics of human life operates at the level of everyday interaction and re-articulation and reproduction of social life.¹⁰⁶ Social transformation would occur through everyday resignification and re-articulation of social relations in order to open up new conceptual horizons and better model of coexistence. It would consist in engaging in political practices which engage everyday social relations for the purpose of social transformation.

Concluding Remarks

Butler's engagement with the hegemonic framework of gender revealed that we as subjects are constituted in particular forms by these frameworks and our relations with others which are also affected by the schema of power we live in. This shows that the realm of daily social relations and interaction is neither pre- nor non-political; in fact it is the domain where relations of power are lived, reproduced and challenged on a daily basis.¹⁰⁷ This is the reason why Butler is constantly at pains to explain how matrix of power affect everydayness of our existence including even the most minute of our encounters with others and seeks transformation which can be brought about by attempting these encounters differently, at both individual and collective level. As

¹⁰⁵ Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism', in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁶ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁷ Schippers, 'Judith Butler, Radical Democracy and Micro-politics', *The politics of radical democracy*, p. 74.

everyday aspect of our life including our gender and sexuality is impacted by power, hegemonic structures need to be challenged in their everyday manifestations which results in a broader idea of politics with its terrain not limited to that of state.

Butler has been criticised to have produced a conceptually hollow account of radical democracy. Against such criticisms, it is to be noted that firstly, her work on radical democratic thought is relatively new and is in a process of building up. Nonetheless, her ideas could be traced back to her initial accounts of coalitional politics and subversion and it would be clear that it is only a progression from her early writings. Secondly, she speaks of radical democracy not as a readymade political structure at hand but refers to a kind of democratic ethos or manner of pursuing political interests in order to target and transform the oppressive character of hegemonic matrix of recognition of who counts as a human.

Constant questioning of the efficacy of the political projects of feminist thought, Butler is able to confront us with the limitations of politics based upon merely appealing to the state. As the state itself is a mechanism of sustaining injustices in the name of protection, Butler calls for an expansive and more inclusive model of politics which offers a stronger participatory dimension than the existing one. It allows for anybody, anywhere to challenge, resignify and subvert existing norms, both as an individual and as part of a group or community. Such a strong participatory dimension allows for subversive political practices, especially for those abject individuals who are marginalised or even completely ignored and lack in social power. Furthermore, this facilitates the articulation of topics which may not pass through the filters of the formal institutions.¹⁰⁸ The guiding aim is to result in novel and alternate possibilities of politics which operates at an everyday level and is more encompassing of opposition and contestation rather than one based upon the subjugation of varied claims.

The most significant aspect of Butler's project in tying normative violence with corporeal vulnerability is the newfound basis in ethics of non-violence. Her examination of infliction of violence against marginalised bodies is driven towards an attempt to construct an ethical system of recognizing the abject bodies and to develop a model sharing their sufferings by way of identifying them as humans and credible subjects, thus replacing aggressive tendencies with non-aggression and inclusion. By making

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

their lives count, shared vulnerability becomes a crucial feature of our everyday existence. On the basis of this shared corporeal vulnerability, Butler envisions a better future of recognising various identities communities resulting in coalitions progressing towards ‘more radically egalitarian international ties’¹⁰⁹. The idea of a political thought based on shared bodily experiences of suffering, grief and loss certainly offers a novel ethical perspective to any movement involved in inquiring the status of present norms of gender and identity.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 40.

CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to consider theoretical contestations of the notions of gender and identity in order to postulate the scope and possibility of social transformation at the level of everyday existence and interaction. For this purpose, various key concepts in the works of Judith Butler have been elucidated, examined and reflected upon. Her work is not singular in character and makes use of a myriad of approaches including feminist, existential, phenomenological, structuralism, post-structuralism, political, historical among others. Accordingly, this character of Butler's work shaped the tools of analysis used in the present endeavour and the results are far-reaching and not limited to a particular domain. The inquiry has been purposefully limited to the discourse of gender keeping in mind the broader concerns of the study but as various concepts have been articulated and signified in new ways, the methodology and resulting perspectives can very well be appropriated in domains apart from the ones stated. Engagement with Butler's works offered a continuous destabilization and resignification of categories and this critical exercise helped in making explicit the limitations, instabilities and scope in prevalent gender norms.

The study began with calling the ontological security of the feminine subject into question by contesting the uncritical assumption of the term Woman in the feminist thought. Rather than perceiving Woman as a fixed notion understood as universal on the basis of a set of common characteristics, Woman becomes a term-in-process which is open to resignification. Heteronormativity dictates a biologically female body to exhibit femininity and a male body to exhibit masculinity and no other possibility is seen as intelligible and is in fact met with reprimand. Butler's analysis of sex-gender continuum revealed that when we fixate masculinity and femininity in the strict model of binary sex, then even sex is understood in gendered terms and gender as a social construct makes little sense. By limiting male body to masculinity and female body to femininity, we are subjecting sex to a discursive gendered understanding and if gender is really a social construct, then it should have been possible to consider any body with any kind of traits and necessity of sex-gender continuum shouldn't have been upheld. Within the necessity of sex-gender continuum, that is, the necessity that a certain gender is a natural product of a certain biological sex, Sex-gender distinction is not really a

distinction. For gender to be understood as a becoming, it is to be understood as a process independent of biological sex.

Similarly, the analyses of various accounts of gender differences revealed that any account that aims to explain gender differences on the basis of sexual differences is again falling prey to the necessity of sex-gender continuum and limiting gender to the contours of the body. The analysis of the Matrix of Intelligibility offered another way of conceptualising gender asymmetry. This matrix works on the norms of heterosexuality and extends acceptance and sanction of the appropriate gender to those who conform to heterosexuality and everybody else is categorised as unintelligible. The appropriation of genders into heterosexuality also strictly governs the norms of femininity and masculinity and perpetuates the superiority of the masculine over the feminine. Moreover, the essentialist claims regarding femininity end up oppressing all those women do not conform to these supposedly universal characteristics. Thus, in any universalist and essentialist account of gender, we fail to acknowledge different kind of identities that exist and there is a lack of accountability of the intersectionality of culture, history, context, ethnicity, race, class among other factors in the experiences of gender.

Apart from destabilizing the fixed definitions of the terms woman, sex and gender, a possibility of a genealogical analysis of gender was considered which can result in a kind of coalitional politics that can serve the task of resignifying these categories in an open-ended sense and offer a basis of a novel understanding of gender. Genealogy of gender does not imply tracing the historical emergence of the term but an analysis of the processes which constitute the meaning of gender in a particular fixed way. The genealogical analysis is a methodology proposed by Butler to refer to an examination of how gendered identities are culturally produced and constituted within different contexts. It allows accounting for the multitude of experience in understanding the category of woman while connecting them together based on the overlappings in their historicity, the experience of oppression, feminine practices and more. Rather than identifying certain features as definitive of what a woman and setting them as criterion for identifying women resulting in excluding many individuals, this kind of analysis offers a way to understand the experience of being a woman without necessitating any unity of experience. Not only would this result in acknowledging individuals who identify as women but might have not been recognised under the strict binary

framework of gender, this mechanism also makes possible targeting the violent exclusionary practices of discrimination on the basis of gender. This idea, then, gets developed into a possibility of a particular kind of Coalitional Politics that creates political space for collective action which proceeds not with a unified understanding of gender or woman or any kind of identity but proceeds along with differences with certain overlappings that leads to emergence and dissolution of short term goals depending upon concrete requirements. Owing to shared historicity and contexts, there would be certain overlappings in experience which can give rise to a collective action that does not require a pre-defined unity among women. As this space for political action would be open-ended, differences would always be accounted for and coalitions could take a new shape, dissolve and emerge according to a continuous analysis of meaning and signification of gender and identity.

Having dealt with the shortcomings and drawbacks of an essentialist account of gender and postulating a possibility of freeing gender from the garb of strict binary framework being considered, the study has provided a detailed analysis of a performative account of gender and the scope of subverting present hegemonic structures of gendered reality. To attempt an examination into the nature of gender as a continuous process, a comprehensive account of what Butler terms as 'Gender Performativity' has been offered which was followed by the inquiry into the possibility of agency and subversion within that framework. As the perceived task has been to look out for ways to combat the hegemony of heterosexuality and to offer due recognition to gendered identities which are excluded in the present dyadic model of sexuality, the possibility of subversion in the new articulation of gender was discussed in detail. A performative account of gender articulates gender as an act, a doing rather than a secondary attribute which one acquires as a result of one's biological sex. We are categorised as male or female from the moment of our birth and we become a part of a set of existing gender norms which define masculinity and femininity. These gender norms dictate the manner in which we should sit, talk, walk or even interact with the others so much so that these ways of doing gender get incorporated in our everyday existence and interaction. If a man behaves in a feminine manner or a woman behaves in a masculine manner, it is met with shaming, mocking, corrective measures or even punishment. Any failure, deliberate or non-deliberate, to cohere with prevalent gender norms is met with reprimand. Gender lies in the repetition of these acts over a period of

time. Gender, as a performative act, could be perceived as both a linguistic and a bodily activity as it involves corporeal behaviour, gestures, practices which designate a particular gender and also linguistic norms determining the meaning of these bodily activities. It is, thus, definitely a construction but does not refer to any inner truth as a consequence of biological sex as there is no form of an existing coherent gender identity behind expressions of gender. Gender lies in repetition of certain norms. In fact, a particular gender identity is naturalised as a coherent identity as a result of these repetitive acts. Instead of an essential core or identity being a reason of a particular gender, gender is constituted by performative acts which are enacted at particular times. Femininity or masculinity is a result of these acts rather than these acts being a result of innate femininity or masculinity. This idea confronts us with an account of gender that is not fixed but is stabilised through repetition over a significant period of time. Moreover, although gender is enacted by individuals, it certainly has a collective dimension owing to the shared social reality of gender norms. It cannot, thus, be reduced to an individualistic volitional act of putting on a gender as gender norms have a history which goes beyond the subject who enacts these conventions. In fact, the identity of the subject itself gets constituted in the process. Gender as a performative act is not a mere performance which can be taken up and dropped at a whim's notice. Performance would involve an actor who is at a distance from the act and assumes the role of an actor without the act but gender as a performative act constitutes the subject and is in turn constituted by the act. Agency becomes a crucial issue at this juncture as generally any account of agency proceeds with a stable definition of an agent but in the case of gender performativity, agent itself is being constituted. Further analysis showed that the possibility of agency in the performative model of gender can neither figure as an account of free will nor a deterministic one. Rather, a possible answer lies in moving beyond this binary. The role of agency in gender performativity has to be presented as the dynamic of volition and control. Having exhibited the nature of gendered acts as exclusionary, the idea is to not evaluate these acts negatively but to view as possibilities of social transformation through exercising agency and performing subversion. The site of agency and subversion is not to search for a domain which is pre-discursive or outside culture and history in any way, but the possibility of subversion resides within the discourse. The site of gendered acts also becomes the site of subversive acts. Gender norms are culturally conditioned but the process of performativity through which they are enacted and thereby appropriated, possibility for transformation is generated. Using

the Derridian concepts of citation and reiteration which were discussed in detail in the second chapter, it was shown that the scope of agency and subversion emerges as a result of the repetitive character of performative acts. The acts have acquired a particular form as a result of a strict repetition which has been forced on us by the structure of heteronormativity but, at the same time, this very act of repetition also creates a scope for re-enactment of those norms in ways that their signification and meaning could be altered. Norms concerning femininity and masculinity are dependent on corporeal acts. These corporeal acts shift the meaning of gender norms with gradual re-enactments over time with respect to changing socio-cultural and historical contexts. The gender norms are not as fixed in meaning as it might appear. A subtle moment of agency is created when an individual is subjected to power, this moment of subjection constitutes the subject in a particular way and she also becomes capable of action. In the context of gender, it means that the moment one is subjected to gender norms; an individual becomes a gendered person who also becomes capable of resisting those very norms. It is in this vulnerability of norms that we can place the possibility of agency and subversion. A significant point to note is that every act of subversion may not result in social transformation. A politics of subversion aiming at change must include the practices that reveal the illusion of a coherent gendered identity and show that gender is not representative of some inner truth. This should result in the recognition of the complexity of gender and allowing this complexity to exist without any vindictory consequences for anybody. A detailed analysis of the practice of Drag has been explicated in the study to exemplify the nature of subversion and possibility of transformation it can create and it must be pointed again that Drag has merely been used by Butler to illustrate and explicate the nature of gender. And as stated about the acts of subversion above, an act of drag is also not always subversive but only under sufficient conditions where it destabilizes heteronormativity. The idea of coalitional politics might be recalled at this moment. Subversion as both the tool and goal of coalition politics can offer a form of life in which empowerment aims at inclusion and is not a result of disempowering others. Successful subversive acts can effectively undermine the established meanings in the longer run when they are repeated consistently over a course of time and enough number of times in order to prevent the return to a conservative model of gender.

With the rejection of any presumed unity required for understanding gender and resignifying gender norms through subversion, a critical issue that emerges is regarding the shared experience of certain bodily experiences such as menstruation and pregnancy which are tied to female body and can act as the universal basis of identifying women across cultures. This question was taken up in the beginning of the last chapter to clarify that Butler's account is not based on ignorance of this materiality of the body and there is, in fact, acknowledgement of these irrefutable features. However, the idea has been to destabilise the category of woman and make it move beyond certain biological experiences as instead of these aspects acting as a basis of unity, they end up ignoring a vast number of women whose experiences may or may not abide by these experiences. It is easy to imagine women who may not experience pregnancy or reproduction or undergo hormonal changes to have disruptive menstrual cycles or trans-women who do not undergo any such experiences. The reason for not focusing on experiences of anatomy is to first, reveal the non-necessity of sex-gender continuum and second, to not necessitate a universal basis of feminist thought based on these experiences which are although self-evident but contingent and vary not only across cultures but within cultures. Therefore, a lot of effort has been put into clarifying that the account of gender performativity is not a disembodied account but to stress that the focus has been to develop an account of gender which does not rely on the unity of any bodily experiences. To have done that would have defeated the purpose of developing a theory which rather than unifying experiences focuses on different identities which have different bodily experiences. The analysis of Body in the present work has been focused on examining how we come to know bodies through discourse. Bodies acquire particular forms, gendered styling and certain signification through linguistic and corporeal practices we are engaged in. This should not result in reducing material bodies as linguistic constructions but analysing how bodies themselves get constituted through language. It is not to say that contours of a body undergo shift but to assert that the meaning we ascribe to bodies is known and formed through discourse. To explain this kind of construction of the body, the concept of Materialization has been referred to. It has been used by Butler to refer the particular ideas which have come to exist about the body, how these ideas define reality and how they have emerged as a naturalising force in a way that body is understood only within the framework of binary sex. It is, thus, not a reduction of bodies as linguistic constructs but an analysis of the exclusive appearance of bodies only within the heteronormative schema. Construction of gender on the basis

of heterosexual matrix operates through exclusionary means and results in creating the category of human in opposition to the category of less-human. Thus, we have certain bodies which are intelligible as per the heterosexual matrix recognised as human and those who do not conform to this matrix are rendered as less-human. To elaborate on this, the notion of abjection and abject bodies has been explored in the study. Abjection is the process which excludes individuals from subjecthood because they fail to conform to existing normative ideals and resulting abject persons are categorised as less real or even unreal. These abject bodies constitute the 'others' against whom those who cohere to the normative standards are seen as subjects. They become the criteria against whom subjecthood is ascribed to individuals. Heterosexual matrix is an exclusionary schema which constructs or materialises subjects in the strict binary frame of sexuality and in doing so, produce the domain of abject beings. The abject bodies, thus, come to denote the unliveable parts of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subjects. Dealing with the notion of abjection and exclusion of certain bodies from dignified social existence, an attempt has been made to seek out ways to implement the subversive practices not only to challenge the coercive normative ideals but to result in a non-aggressive co-existence of recognition of all bodies. As their lives are not recognised as worth living and the suffering is not recognised, individualised are de-realised or their lives are undone as a result of not fitting into the heterosexual schema.

This leads us back to the idea of possibility politics aimed towards social transformation which has been central from the beginning of this work. Once the relation between this ethical concerns and mechanisms of gender normalization becomes evident, it is seen how the criterion of intelligibility of humans is developed on the basis of sex, gender and sexuality among other factors. The study sought modes of alternate solutions apart from appealing to the state and this resulted in the suggestion of the radical democratic transformation of societal norms. Like the concept of coalitional politics, this idea of radical democratic transformation is also an open-ended process which aims towards creating space for more inclusion of different identities. The lack of a pre-defined telos, creates a continuous possibility of including populations and individuals which may have been left behind. It is a project which would be dedicated to extend recognition to those disqualified for the status of real subjects under present schema. Being a continuous process, the radical democratic movement would never

reach a perfect state but this does not mean the idea is idealistic and beyond reach. Rather, it recognizes that there would always be some exclusions and a scope must always be maintained for a better model. Social transformation involving continuous refining of gender norms is an everyday engagement and not a task achieved in a single moment of time. There shall always be room for improvement and that forms the basis of the radical democratic thought. The examination of infliction of violence against marginalised bodies is driven towards an attempt to construct an ethical system of recognizing the abject bodies in order to develop a model sharing their sufferings by way of identifying them as humans and credible subjects, thus replacing aggressive tendencies with non-aggression and inclusion. The possibility of an ethical co-existence based on the politics of everydayness is, perhaps, the most significant aspect of the present work. It is not, thus, at the level of mass protests or pre-decided gatherings that this political and theoretical action would take place. Rather, this kind of analysis and action would operate at the level of everyday existence and interaction.

The study has been an attempt to not only develop alternate conceptions of terms which have been taken for granted for long but also to develop a an account of political activity which can be taken up at a collective level to result in recognition of various identities resulting in a model of social coexistence of inclusion. The analysis enabled us to propose alternate understandings of the notions of gender, sex, woman, body, universal, agency and subject. An important aspect of all these terms is that these are terms-in-process and progress and not static, fixed conceptions. The study took the form of a project as it explores possibilities of political action along with theoretical speculations and interrogation. Yet, it can be said without faltering that the scope of this study itself is still open to progress and would remain-in-process to formulate better understanding of these notions. Any claim of an exhaustive account will defeat the purpose of proposing a theory of gender which is ever growing and makes space for various identities in this process of growth and development. The present dissertation has been, thus, an attempt to philosophically analyse the notions of gender and identity in an open-ended manner that creates space for further debate while providing a new perspective.

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