

A Performative View of Gender Roles: Judith Butler

Büşra Çınar¹

Abstract

This paper presented a view regarding to the concept of performativity in gender roles. This concept was supported with Judith Butler's ideas and the embodiment of binary oppositions described in gender norms and gender roles. The normative structure of gender was determined through naturalization of norms and reproduction of these norms by society. This approval of heterosexuality in society was described with a feminist approach.

Keywords: *Performance, Performativity, Gender, Gender Role, Imposition, Heterosexuality, Norm, Normative*

A Performative View of Gender Roles: Judith Butler

The concept of gender is exposed to particular norms in society, and causes people to think within the context of binary oppositions such as male and female, man and woman, nature and culture. Some sort of identities and gender forms are imposed on people. A person experiences some threats such as isolation, othering, being cast out of society in the event that he/she does not fit into all these norms that are imposed on them. In this study, types of identities are discussed through the argument of the artificiality of genders, gender roles and gender norms. They are represented as unnatural categories produced and reproduced by society.

¹ Büşra Çınar, Lecturer, Istanbul Aydın University

The concept of gender does have a specific role in sexuality and captures a person's ability and right to choose on a large scale. Unless the concept of gender abandons thinking in the context of binary oppositions and perpetuates its norms insistently, it will not be open to necessary changes and differences. According to Judith Butler, the concept of gender must be extended by accepting variations, forms and views that do not fit into norms. Butler defines the concept of gender as follows: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (Butler, "Gender Regulations" 43). In other words, gender is a concept that reflects limitations, stability and reconstruction, supported by the notion of heteronormativity, which means the acceptance of heterosexuality as a natural and social norm. So, this permanent, long and well-established structure of genders may be destructed through the subversion of gender roles and creating different performances.

Judith Butler, in her prologue that she wrote in 1999 to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, describes her book as a provocative intervention to feminist theory and one of the basic texts of queer theory. She explains her aim in this way: "*In 1989 I was most concerned to criticize a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory*" (Butler, 7).

Actually, Butler objects to the concept of gender's being performed on masculinity, femininity and its being reduced to this. She thinks that feminist theories that make their discussions and defenses by accepting these norms limit themselves. She is oppose to accepting certain notions of sexuality as stereotyped norms. She explains clearly that her aim is not an insistence of certain realities or patterns about gender on the reader.

According to Butler, it must be possible to evaluate some sexual practices that exist as minority and make them be considerable in the matter of gender. Because, the reproduction of gender roles within the feminist theory drags itself to an exclusive attitude. "Briefly, one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose

something of one's sense of place in gender" (Butler 11). That is to say, the sovereignty of heterosexuality that exists in society is powerful enough to determine the functions of man and woman. In the event that a person questions this, it threatens the man and the woman - especially the woman - in the matter of decreasing or disappearing of the sense of belonging.

Butler expresses that the normative structure of sexuality might manage the gender. The determinant nature of gender does not allow people inevitably to question gender roles and norms. Butler includes Catharine MacKinnon's opinions in her first prologue of *Gender Trouble* and criticizes her idea by quoting. According to Catharine MacKinnon, the hierarchical structure between man and woman creates the concept of gender. On the other hand, according to Judith Butler, the one that creates gender is not this hierarchy between man and woman, but the determinant heterosexuality in society.

Butler claims that there is a difference between the two approaches about gender: The approach related with sexuality and the feminist approach. In the approach related with sexuality, the dominant idea is that a woman might be a woman only through the approval of heterosexuality. On the other hand, in the feminist approach, there is a defense about the fact that gender must be eliminated. The two approaches are contrary to each other.

Performance is the totality of acts and behaviour of a person in life according to their genders and sexes in society. However, a performance is not related to sexuality or sexual practices according to Butler. She does not make a definition of the concept of performativity. Furthermore, she mentions that it is difficult to say what it is and what it is not. "*The anticipation conjures its object*" (Butler 14). She approaches to the concept of performativity with this reading and she envisages that this concept must be evaluated in this way: "*Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration*" (Butler 15). Here the author claims that performativity is not a temporary concept. Besides, it might be seen as a habit that is suitable for being repeated. That is to say, the concept of performativity must be maintained through different and new performances without limiting ourselves with gender roles. Performances are changeable, but they might be described as habits that can be repeated.

Butler asserts that the thing that we name as the interior is actually something that we produce ourselves. She thinks that the interior of the soul must be questioned. While she mentions her own experiences about gender, she refers to works, researches and activities that the concept of gender initiates and expresses that she is satisfied with her text's attracting attention out of the academy, too.

Butler states that it is difficult to show the violence and determination in the structure of gender. She explains this with two acceptances of society. Firstly, gender is the shape of existing of sexualities. Secondly, this concept is a cultural norm that is not possible to be changed easily. *"It was difficult to bring this violence into view precisely because gender was so taken for granted at the same time that it was violently policed. It was assumed either to be a natural manifestation of sex or a cultural constant that no human agency could hope to revise"* (Butler 19-20).

Butler accepts her effort to *"denaturalize"* (20) gender and emphasizes that the reasons behind this are not transitory. She questions whether or not there is a probability of living without fitting into certain norms, limitations, and leaving the act of being a normal human being as norms require. Criticizing the system of normative structured society, Butler alludes to a real life example to the situation of making other(s) in society and mentions what her uncle has experienced. She talks about her uncle who was taken away from his family, friends and kept in a hospital due to the fact that his body shape was abnormal in that it did not fit into the norms of society actually. This personal example given in the prologue of the text puts forth Butler's point of view about gender and its rules. As parallel to her opinions can be said: The factor of gender stands as a mountain in front of people who do not fit into its norms and takes their right to see the sun and be able to survive.

Established binary oppositions that exist in the society's mindset, such as man woman, rich poor, strong weak, bring limitations to society and people's lives. They do not give an opportunity to think a third alternative and they remove the probability of accepting different situations that are contrary to norms.

Butler actually shows a part of the reality of violence that remains behind gender by giving a personal example although she says it is difficult to show this. At this point, the author questions some sort of restrictions imposed on the human body and this comes together with the concept of performativity. The author explains that she does not propose such a dogma that elimination of gender makes life beautiful. She presents two evaluations as normative and descriptive related with the concept of gender. The descriptive evaluation involves thinking gender and the conditions that ensure its existence. The normative evaluation discusses the suitability of gender expressions. According to Butler, discussing this shows the normative structure behind the system in any case. Therefore, gender's being described might not be thought separate from its normative structure.

Butler continues her argument with a question: How does the normative gender place its boundaries as to accept or not to accept certain norms? She questions the determinant structure and limits of the concept of gender. She argues that there is "the sense of gender reality" (Butler 22) in every person and we base the reality of gender on the body that we see through this sense.

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of these perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks "reality" and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance (Butler 22).

Here Butler discusses the concept of performativity with these statements. She questions people's probable mistakes in their frame of mind and visual perception. She shows that our established point of view and norms might make a mistake. By putting forth this reality, she proves that the concept of gender is changeable, convertible, questionable and reproduceable.

As a response to the normative structure of gender, Butler suggests the concept of "drag" in addition to "*performativity*" as a solution. She claims: "*Drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not fixed as we generally assume it to be. The purpose of the example is to expose the*

tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms" (Butler 23-4). To move on with this thought, in addition to the fact that rules that gender reveals are determinant, and they regard themselves as responsible to declare what is legal and illegal. Butler's concept of drag is a concrete example that will resist this sovereignty.

Butler shows that her theory, especially her concept of performativity, does have not only theatrical but also linguistic dimensions with these statements: *"Moreover, my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions"* (Butler 25).

To look at the author concept of performativity only as theatrical or only as linguistic will bring us to a wrong evaluation on the way of being a starting point to the concept of gender.

In her article titled *"One Is Not Born a Woman"*, Monique Wittig questions the building of concepts that we accept as natural about gender and makes an explanation about what we naturalize as human beings.

By admitting that there is a *"natural"* division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that *"men"* and *"women"* have always existed and will always exist. Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently we naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible. (Wittig, *"One Is Not Born a Woman"*)

Here Monique Wittig shows the reality that a human being, who is accustomed to the process of naturalization of certain norms in society reproduces and rebuilds these norms, and she claims that it removes the probability of change. Butler, when they are compared, is more hopeful than Wittig about the probability of change in the matter of gender.

"The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the

naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). With this statement, it seems that gender identities are produced forms. They must not be described as natural. It seems probable that they might be changed or eliminated.

In her article “Gender Regulations”, Butler also talks about the effect of norms on gender. The gender norms not only determine what enters their area but also dominate over what surrounds them. Any base related to gender might be evaluated only through the opposite of itself or a principle that is different from itself.

Judith Butler brings the concepts of performativity, drag –which means wearing clothes that are associated with the opposite sex as a performance– as solutions to the gender by which heterosexuality is accepted naturally. While she suggests gender must be developed and broadened, she also makes an effort at this point. She puts forth performativity against the naturalization of gender identities and its fulfilment. So this natural state of genders and gender roles must be questioned. Some sort of identities imposed on genders must be reconsidered through the concept of deconstruction and subversion of gender roles.

REFERENCES

- [1] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- [2] Butler, Judith “Gender Regulations” *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- [3] Butler, Judith. “Gender Regulations” *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 40-57.
- [4] Carole Mccann, Kim Seung-kyung. “One Is Not Born a Woman” *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, 2013. 246-252.
- [5] Carole R. McCann, Seung-Kyung Kim. *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2003.