

Gender trouble essay sample



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Butler believes that sex and gender are political/ideological and cultural constructs of the body, due to her view that sex is biological and gender is a social construct. She believes that this dichotomy introduces cognitive dissonance into women, inducing them to conform to perverse standards of femininity constructs. Both Butler and Wittig say women are not a “natural group: a racial group of a special kind, a group perceived as natural, a group of men considered as materially specific to their bodies” (Wittig, 9). Butler sees that women, mostly unconsciously, conform to an artificial ‘natural grouping’ called “femininity” that men have categorized and molded to determine what the essence of a female is. Butler writes that the essence of a female is much broader, aleatoric and more in flux than the limited mental and physical prison that men have pigeonholed and reserved for women. Butler suggests that the “patriarchy” is a strawman and scapegoat that other feminists use in order to foment procedures to create a new, non-oppressive society. Butler believes that, “heterosexual melancholy is culturally instituted as the price of stable gender identities” (Butler, 70).

She sees the debilitating way in which genders unconsciously isolate and detach themselves categorically from one another as, not a conspiracy on the part of the patriarchy, a stumbling block that both genders have fallen into – allowing the great gender divide to be instituted without seeing that the genders do overlap in many ways, creating hybrid and variegated notions of sex and gender. Butler views gender as not being as stable as we’d like to think it is. Butler also asserts that, “Gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition” (Butler, 63). In this statement, Butler asserts that gender is

traditionally defined based off of what a “ man” or “ female” lacks physiologically. This is confused with sex. Hence, this is why certain females or males say that they feel trapped in the wrong genders body. Butler also notes how the incest taboo , propagated by Sigmund Freud, serves as a way to rigidly harmfully regulate gender, calcifying this inorganic construct into the minds of men and women.

The incest taboo regulates permissive heterosexuality and shunned homosexuality, so that people unconsciously conform to one or the other and fit their personalities and gender identities into what perceived connotations are aligned with each choice. Wittig differs from Butler, in that she disagrees with Simone de Beauvoir and Wittig’s notion that women represent a ‘ lack’ for which men can gauge themselves against. Beauvoir ideates, “ One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society. It is civilization as a whole, that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, described as feminine” (Wittig, 10). Beauvoir and Butler make the argument that if one strips away all the cultural and political conditioning that shapes the false latter-day notion of femininity, females would embody a much broader scope in regards to gender and identity than most people would realize. As a matter of fact, it would perhaps be difficult to draw a concrete line in the sand between man and woman. Butler and Beauvoir believe that just because the female anatomy is different than a male’s, this does not mean that her natural femininity, unadumbrated, is an objective mental projection that forms her

identity. Butler makes the case for lesbians, by stating that they sometimes embody what is typically called male ‘ machismo’ behavior and bravado.

Butler, though, does not necessarily assume, like Wittig and Beauvoir do, that there is a female self-identical being in need of being represented. She notes that Wittig’s arguments create a hypothesis where women cannot even be considered a gender. I believe that what Butler is stating is that males feel it necessary to pigeonhole and curtail the definition of femininity so that they can simplify the mating process by creating faux-identities for women that embody the exact opposite of what a “ man” is defined as being. She implies that men would feel their ego wounded if true femininity was allowed free reign, since this true femininity would often overlap into what are noted as typical zones of ‘ masculinity’. Men would feel that this “ perversion” (which is actually natural femininity being expressed), would make the mating process more convoluted and less enjoyable. Butler disagrees with the notion of Wittig’s that women are seen and constructed within a limited phallogentric language. Butler differs from Grosz in the sense that Grosz infers somatophobia to be at the heart of the gender identity problem.

She writes that, “ Since the inception of philosophy as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia” (Grosz, 5.) Grosz discusses that the body has been ignored and treated as an interference in the realm of the operations of logic, comprehension and reason. The body is looked at with disdain, and since the feminine body is viewed typically as being weaker, more dainty and supple, it is thus that early male philosophers

condescended the female body, already serving to construct a false notion of femininity as ‘base, foolhardy and fickle’. Grosz writes about Plato that, “(he) claims that the word body (soma) was introduced by Orphic priests who believed that man was a spiritual or noncorporeal being trapped in the body as in a dungeon” (Grosz, 5).

Grosz points out that ever since ancient Greek times, and possibly even before, since men have been afforded the luxury of being seen as more “spiritual” than “base” woman, they have forgiven man’s bodily structure as a vessel to be dealt with in order to address spiritual concerns, while all the while patronizing women by assuming that they have no spirituality and that their bodies are representative of how they are stuff of the earth and have no spiritual or logical inclination. Butler, Grosz and Wittig all attempt to address the problem of gender constructs and how they debilitate society and individuality. I believe that Butler’s arguments are the most succinct on the matter, because she questions and weighs the pros and cons of all the other feminists arguments, especially the arguments that have never been seen as points of contention. Butler was the first to assert that the “patriarchy” was not the problem here. Gender identity and problems of individual and cultural gender dysmorphia have more to do with comprehensive problems of specious distinctions between sex, gender, biology, physiology and cognition.

Feminists have cited lesbianism as proof that the cognitive, mental and self-reflective identity aspects of men and women can become almost asymptotic. Clearly the notions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are byproducts of the mind and all of the cultural, sociopolitical programming that one undergoes

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when partaking in human society. It can be seen that certain females ally closer with traditional ‘masculine’ mores, such as being aggressive, dominant, machismo and directive with their volition. It can also be viewed that certain males act in accordance with what is viewed as being ‘effeminate’: they act submissive, dainty, speak with affectations and are less directive with their will-power. Because of these gender “anomalies”, it can be seen that the attributes that constitute standard notions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ are made in the mind and are not representative of the objective anatomical structural differences that are truly the only real landmarks that define what is the physical difference between man and woman.

Butler realizes that to make an objective study of the minds of women and men and how their identities form condescendences due to societal influence would be an impossibility. All she can do is show that on the spectrum of femininity and masculinity, there are truly no absolutes. Each male and female lies somewhere between so-called “absolute masculinity” and “absolute femininity”. Due to this relativity imbued in the essence of gender, most people attempt to construct absolutes of gender, in order to easily create a taxonomy of female and male, which ultimately becomes exclusive and prejudicial, since not one man or woman represents absolute masculinity or absolute femininity.