

Critically discuss butler's contribution to a new understanding of gender

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Critically discuss Butler's contribution to a new understanding of gender The binary gender system has been doubted after the rise of feminism in the twentieth century. Especially, arguments about the relationship between sexed body and gender is a core issue in feminism, as for the contemporary feminists, the current and prime task is to question the existing fixed binary system of sex and gender is disputable in the modern era (Donovan, 2003: 4). From Butler's perspective, the aim of gender equality is not only for women but also for those " who are gender different, who are nonconforming in their gender presentation" (Butler, 2011). In this sense, Butler brings her idea of gender as performativity, which provides a new way to look at gender identity and therefore influences profoundly on gender practices in various fields. Hence, this essay will begin by considering Butler's critique of Beauvoir's idea about gender. Secondly, it will discuss the Butler's idea of gender as performative. Lastly, it will take the androgyny model trend in fashion industry as an example to consider the possibility for subverting the existing stable binary gender frame in related to Butler's idea toward a new understand of gender identity. The existing gender binary has been radically questioned by many feminists with arguments on gender practices in various fields. Butler starts from developing her gender theory by critiques of Simone de Beauvoir's sex/gender formulation, and later she brings out the concept of performative gender (Storey, 2009: 160) to reconsider the gender identity. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir says " One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Donovan, 2003: 5) to indicate that one's gender is not natural but is acquired. In other words, gender is constructed by the outside environment of which an individual is in rather than inside condition of which

an individual is. Beauvoir further separates gender from sex, and asserts that feminine gender is social and cultural that is different from sexed female is physical. Although, on the surface, Beauvoir makes a clear distinction between natural biological essential sex and social 2 cultural constructed gender, it lurks the possibility of gender that is no longer rely on the sexed body to exist (Salih, 2002: 10). Hence, Butler argues that " There is nothing in Beauvoir's account that guaranties that the one who becomes a woman is necessarily female", the correspondence of sex and gender should be broken (Butler: 1990: 8). In this case, it can be possible to have a male body to present both femininity and masculinity, vice versa. This, in some way, liberates gender from the dualism toward the pluralism that is gender should be diversity. On the other hand, from Beauvoir's notion " one is not born but rather becomes a woman" also implies that there is a compulsory power which drives one to become a woman. Butler attributes it to the social heterosexual system, which therefore is not related to the simply biological environment but is related to the social environment which indeed reflect the institution power that declines and operates individual's choice of gender (Salih, 2002: 49). This is not only to limit gender forms but also to impede gender practices. Hence, in regard to how to resist the institution power as well as to subvert the heterosexual norms, which become Butler's the main thinking of gender practices. Butler focus on the word " become" that is from Beauvoir's notion " one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" to highly emphasis the becoming process of gender. In this sense, Butler considers that " Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regularly frame that congeal over time to produce the

appearance of substance, of a nature sort of being" (Butler, 1990: 33).

Gender, for Butler, is a verb which is in a produce-and-preproduce dynamic process. She introduces the concept of "performative" into gender that gives a new interpretative way to understand how to produce gender identity and she makes the notion of gender as performative (Salih, 2002: 10). To consider the performative process, in a 2011 internet media Bigthink interview, Butler explains the idea and the 3 meaning by the following content: For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduce all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start (Butler, J. (2011) Your Behavior Creates Your Gender, Available: <http://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>. Last accessed 2013, 3, 21.). Hence, Butler tries to use the idea of "gender is performative" as a way of overturning the conventional sense of reality of gender as well as the traditional gender norms in order to resist the compulsory institution of heterosexuality. The next section of the essay will discuss the increasing popular trend that happen in modeling industry as an example to consider the possibility for subverting the existing stable binary gender frame in relation in Butler's idea "gender is performative". According to Time Style, it indicates that androgyny models have been embraced in the fashion industry especially for male modeling as women, which is showing in the public's eyes by the promotional media and fashion shows in the recently years, "but it's still rare – if not unheard of – for a woman to sign a contract

to model men's clothing exclusively" (Lapinski: 2012). The image below of Sadoris's photo(2012) is the character in the article, Casey Legler. She is the first and only woman working as a male model in the world. As it can see from the image, Legler presents both femininity showing sexed body and masculinity smoking like a man. Maybe it could be like a usual photoshoot that can easily find on the Internet. However, when it 4 appears on the one of influentially modeling agencies' official website (www. fordmodels. com) with the word " man", it becomes a powerful photo to persuade people believe that she is a man. (Sadoris, J. (2008) (Fe) Male: Casey Legler, Faded and Blurred, Available: <http://fadedandblurred. com/blog/female-casey-legler/>, Last accessed 3, 21, 2013) On the other hand, referring to androgyny model, Andrej Pejic, who may be regarded as the prettiest male model in the world, is probably the significantly representative that evokes the cross-gender-hit in the fashion industry. As New York Magazine reported that " Many people are blessed with beauty. Some even make a career of it. But very few can work both sides of the runway" (Morris: 2011). In fact, according to the New York magazine's interview, Pejic could not find a job as a male model in the beginning until he has started at the shooting for female garments, his traits is recognized special and unique by the fashion industry then though the media 5 spreading to the world. From the image below of New York Daily News's photo (2013), it can see that Pejic presents strongly femininity showing a size two or four body and dressing a sophisticated female garment. When this kind of image appears on the cover of ELLE, which is a famous female fashion magazine, it is natural that people think he is a woman. Besides, ELLE in French means " she or her" that also emphasizes

the purpose of this cover, which intended to represent an ideal woman look within a male body. (Kuruvailla, C. (2013) Androgynous model Andrej Pejic pushes gender boundaries on the cover of Serbian Elle magazine, New York Daily News, Available: <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/fashion/androgynous-model-covers-serbian-elle-article-1.1231968m/blog/female-casey-legler/>, Last accessed 01, 03, 2013) This essay by looking through the examples above in order to consider in what extends Butler's idea to gender practices may have the possibilities against the institutional power toward gender diversity. As a result, it seems that these two 6 examples successfully demonstrate Butler's idea "gender as performative". On the surface, both of them, in some way, subvert the fixed binary of gender identity. However, it may be a contingency happening in a specific group of people (have better appearances) at a particular space-and-time (fashion arena) with a potential business demand. Moreover, the idea of "gender as performative" is ambiguity because it may be easily to be representing into gender as performance by the other's misinterpretation and especially by the promotional media. Hence, it should be noticed that when gender practices becomes a be-consumed subject, the ethos of gender equality would easily vanish in the consumerist society. 7 Reference Butler, J. (2011). Your Behavior Creates Your Gender. Available: <http://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>. Last accessed 2013. 3. 21.

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