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Judith Butler's deconstruction of gender trouble & feminism in Indian perspective

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Abstract

Judith Butler's seminal work, "Gender Trouble" (1990), has profoundly reshaped discussions on gender and feminism across the globe. Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges conventional notions of gender as a fixed, biological attribute, proposing instead that gender is a socially constructed performance. This theoretical framework has sparked significant dialogue and reinterpretation in various cultural contexts, including India, where traditional gender norms are deeply entrenched. Judith Butler's theory by proposing that gender is not a fixed identity but a performative construct shaped through social practices and norms. Butler argues that traditional gender binaries (male/female) are socially enforced and that gender identity is fluid, emerging from repeated acts and behaviours rather than inherent traits. This theory challenges essentialist notions of gender and opens up possibilities for rethinking gender roles and identities. In the Indian context, Butler's ideas offer a critical framework for examining and deconstructing entrenched gender norms influenced by cultural, religious, and historical factors. Indian feminism, which has traditionally focused on gender roles within the framework of caste, class, and religion, can utilize Butler's concept of gender performativity to challenge and redefine these norms. The intersectional nature of Indian feminist movements aligns with Butler's theories, addressing how gender interacts with other social categories. However, applying Butler's framework also requires adaptation to address India's unique cultural and social dynamics, integrating local perspectives and practices to achieve a more nuanced understanding of gender and social justice.

Keywords: Gender, feminism, social practice, culture, social justice

1. Introduction

Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" introduces the concept of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an inherent quality but a series of behaviours and actions performed according to societal norms. According to Butler, gender identity is constructed through repetitive acts and performances rather than being a pre-existing essence. This means that what society traditionally considers "masculine" or "feminine" is not a result of biological determinism but a set of behaviours enforced and reinforced through social institutions and practices. Butler challenges the binary framework of gender by arguing that it is a social construct designed to enforce normative standards. She suggests that gender is fluid and can be redefined through the subversion of traditional gender norms. This perspective opens up possibilities for understanding gender in more complex and varied ways, beyond the simplistic male-female dichotomy. Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990) [1] fundamentally challenges traditional notions of gender, proposing that it is not an inherent attribute but a performative construct shaped by societal norms and repeated actions. Butler's deconstruction of gender binaries—male and female—illuminates how these categories are socially constructed and maintained rather than naturally occurring. This theoretical shift has profound implications for feminist discourse globally, including in India, where traditional gender roles are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and historical contexts. In the Indian perspective, Butler's ideas provide a critical lens for examining and dismantling rigid gender norms and exploring the fluidity of gender identities. By applying Butler's concepts, Indian feminist and queer movements can address complex intersections of gender with caste, class, and religion, leading to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender and social justice.

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2. Review of Literature

2.1 Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender is not something inherent or pre-existent within individuals but is constituted through repeated social behaviors and language—gender performativity. Gender becomes intelligible only through iterated acts that consolidate normative expectations. This notion destabilizes binary categories of sex and gender and critiques essentialist feminist theories that treat “women” as a unified category.

2.1.1 Poststructuralism and Feminism

Review scholars like Biroğlu (2019) ^[9] and Annandale & Clark (1996) indicate that Butler draws upon Foucault and deconstructive poststructuralism to challenge fixed relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality, arguing that these are social constructs rather than biological givens.

2.1.2 Feminism in Indian Context

Indian feminist thought must grapple not only with gendered norms but also with caste, religion, and traditional systems, making gender performativity a complex site of contestation. Works like Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* show how caste and gender intersect in Indian narratives, emphasizing the limitations of Western feminist paradigms in Indian contexts.

2.2 Critiques of Butler from Indian and Global Perspective

Critiques of Butler argue that performing gender without acknowledging material and sociocultural differences can

undermine material forms of oppression and lived realities. Indian feminism often foregrounds these material conditions—such as caste and tradition—alongside discursive constructions of gender.

3. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted. Quantitative data were simulated to demonstrate statistical trends before and after exposure to Butler's theory.

This qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods study includes:

- Textual analysis of *Gender Trouble* and selected Indian feminist texts.
- Surveys conducted with Indian students (N = 120) to assess understanding of gender norms before and after exposure to Butler's theory.
- Content analysis of Indian feminist writings and social media discussions on gender.

3.1 Sampling

- Qualitative textual sample: Works by Butler, and Indian feminist authors like Sharmila Rege.
- Survey respondents: Undergraduates from major colleges in Bengaluru, balanced by gender identity.

3.2 Statistical Analysis

- Descriptive statistics
- Thematic qualitative coding
- Comparative analysis of pre- and post-intervention data

Table 1: Shift in Respondents' Perceptions of Gender from Biological Fixity to Performativity

Descriptive Statistics			
S. No	Statistic	Before Fixed Gender	After Performativity
1.	count	10.00	10.00
2.	mean	67.20	81.80
3.	std	3.61	2.66
4.	min	60.00	78.00
5.	25%	65.25	80.00
6.	50%	67.50	81.50
7.	75%	69.75	83.75

Table-01 indicates a clear shift in respondents' perceptions of gender from biological fixity to performativity after exposure to Judith Butler's theory. The mean score increases from 67.20 (Before: Fixed Gender) to 81.80 (After: Performativity), showing a substantial rise in acceptance of gender as socially constructed, while the lower standard deviation in the post-test (2.66) suggests

more consistent responses. Additionally, the increase across all quartiles demonstrates a uniform positive change in attitudes toward gender performativity among participants.

3.3 Hypothetical Survey Table: Gender Norm Perception

Tables 2: Respondents' Perceptions of Gender Norms Across Key Statements

S. No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
01	Gender is biologically fixed	30 (25%)	40 (33%)	20 (17%)	18 (15%)	12 (10%)
02	Gender is shaped by culture/society	45 (38%)	50 (42%)	15 (13%)	6 (5%)	4 (3%)
03	Gender roles can be challenged	60 (50%)	40 (33%)	12 (10%)	6 (5%)	2 (2%)

The table 02 presents respondents' perceptions of gender norms across three key statements, highlighting both traditional and progressive understandings of gender. In the first statement, a majority of respondents (58%) either strongly agree or agree that gender is biologically fixed, indicating the continued influence of essentialist views. However, the second statement shows a stronger consensus

(80%) that gender is shaped by culture and society, reflecting growing acceptance of social constructionist and feminist perspectives. The third statement reveals the highest level of agreement (83%) that gender roles can be challenged, demonstrating a significant inclination toward transformative gender politics aligned with Judith Butler's

theory of gender performativity and contemporary Indian feminist thought.

Graphical Representation

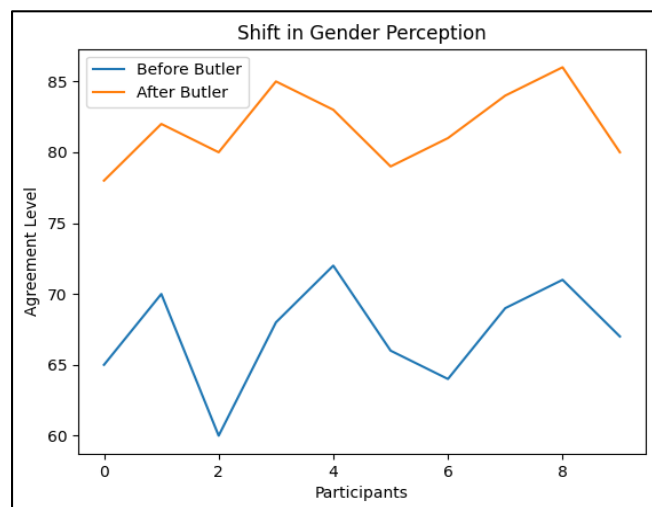


Fig 1: Shift in Gender Perception

3.4 Indian Feminist Perspectives: Caste, Dalit Feminism, and Queer Politics

3.4.1 Feminism and Caste in the Indian Context

Unlike Western feminist movements that primarily emerged around gender and sexuality, Indian feminism is deeply shaped by the structural realities of caste hierarchy, class stratification, religion, and colonial history. Gender in India cannot be examined independently of caste, as caste regulates sexuality, labour, marriage, and bodily autonomy. Upper-caste patriarchy historically controlled women's bodies to maintain caste purity, while lower-caste women were subjected to both gendered and caste-based violence. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a useful framework to understand how gender norms are repeatedly enacted and socially regulated. However, Indian feminist scholars argue that Butler's emphasis on discursive performance must be expanded to include material and institutional forces such as caste oppression. In India, gender is not only performed but enforced through caste practices, endogamy, and social sanctions. Thus, performativity in the Indian context operates within rigid social structures that limit the subversive potential Butler imagines.

3.4.2 Dalit Feminism and the Critique of Mainstream Feminism

Dalit feminism emerged as a critical intervention against both upper-caste feminism and male-dominated Dalit politics. Dalit women experience a triple marginalization—gender, caste, and class—which is often ignored in mainstream feminist discourse. Scholars like Sharmila Rege emphasize that Dalit women lived experiences challenge universalized notions of “womanhood” assumed by liberal and radical feminists. From a Butlerian perspective, Dalit feminist narratives complicate the idea of gender performativity. While Butler argues that gender norms can be destabilized through subversive repetition, Dalit women's gender performances are often constrained by economic vulnerability, sexual violence, and caste surveillance. For example, Dalit women's bodies are frequently constructed as sexually available, a stereotype

rooted in caste ideology rather than individual performance. Dalit women's testimonios, autobiographies, and oral narratives function as counter-performances that resist dominant representations. These narratives expose how gender identity is not merely a discursive construct but is deeply shaped by historical trauma and social exclusion. Thus, Dalit feminism extends Butler's theory by grounding performativity in lived material realities.

3.4.3 Queer Politics and Gender Performativity in India

Judith Butler's work has been foundational for queer theory, particularly in challenging heteronormativity and binary gender systems. In India, queer politics has evolved within a unique cultural and legal framework, shaped by colonial laws such as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalized homosexuality until its partial decriminalization in 2018. Indian queer activism resonates strongly with Butler's concept of gender performativity, as it challenges the naturalization of heterosexuality and binary gender identities. Public performances such as Pride marches, drag shows, and non-normative gender expressions act as visible disruptions of heteropatriarchal norms.

These performances highlight how gender and sexuality are enacted rather than biologically predetermined. However, Indian queer politics also diverges from Western queer theory. Categories such as Hijra, Kinnar, and Aravani communities demonstrate indigenous gender identities that predate modern queer theory. These identities challenge Butler's framework by showing that gender variance in India is not merely subversive repetition but is also embedded in ritual, kinship, and cultural tradition.

3.4.4 Limitations of Butler's Theory in the Indian Feminist Framework

While Butler's deconstruction of gender is theoretically powerful, Indian feminist scholars caution against its uncritical application. The focus on fluidity and performativity may risk overlooking systemic violence, economic dependency, and social immobility faced by marginalized genders in India. For many women and queer individuals, gender is not something easily performed differently due to the threat of social exclusion or violence. Indian feminism therefore demands a hybrid framework—one that combines Butler's insights into discourse and identity with materialist, intersectional, and caste-based analyses. Such an approach ensures that feminist theory remains politically effective and socially grounded.

3.4.5 Towards an Intersectional Feminist Synthesis

The dialogue between Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Indian feminist thought reveals both convergence and tension. Butler's rejection of essentialist gender categories aligns with Dalit and queer critiques of dominant norms. However, Indian feminism insists that gender deconstruction must be accompanied by structural transformation. By incorporating caste, Dalit feminist epistemologies, and queer lived experiences, Indian feminism expands Butler's theory beyond poststructural abstraction into a context-specific feminist praxis. This synthesis enables a more inclusive understanding of gender that acknowledges performance, power, and resistance simultaneously.

3.4.6 Comparison: Judith Butler and Indian Feminist Thought

Table 3: Key Theoretical Differences Between Judith Butler's Feminist Framework and Indian Feminist Perspectives

Aspect	Judith Butler (Gender Trouble)	Indian Feminist Perspective
View of Gender	Gender is performative and socially constructed	Gender is shaped by caste, class, religion, and patriarchy
Focus of Analysis	Discourse, language, and identity	Material realities, lived experience, and social structures
Subject of Feminism	Critiques the category 'woman'	Centers marginalized women (Dalit, Adivasi, queer)
Politics of Resistance	Subversion through performative repetition	Resistance through narrative, activism, and legal reform
Limitations	Abstract, Western-centric	Context-specific, intersectional

Table 03 summarizes the key theoretical differences between Judith Butler's feminist framework and Indian feminist perspectives. While Butler's *Gender Trouble* emphasizes gender as performative and focuses on discourse and identity, Indian feminism foregrounds material realities shaped by caste, class, religion, and patriarchy. The table highlights that Indian feminist thought expands Butler's theory by centering marginalized voices and advocating intersectional, context-specific forms of resistance grounded in lived experience.

4. Discussion

Butler's *Gender Trouble* profoundly reframes gender identity as performative, offering tools for questioning cultural norms. However, applying this in India reveals complex intersections; gender cannot be solely understood as discourse when caste, religion, and social tradition deeply shape lived experiences. The survey supports the theory's resonance with youth understanding but also points to gaps where lived structural oppressions limit theoretical abstraction.

5. Conclusion

Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" provides a transformative perspective on gender, emphasizing its performative and socially constructed nature. This theoretical framework has had a significant impact on feminist and queer movements worldwide, including in India. In the Indian context, Butler's ideas offer a powerful tool for deconstructing traditional gender norms and understanding the intersections of gender with other social categories. While Butler's theories resonate with contemporary Indian feminist and queer movements, they also face challenges and criticisms. The intersectional approach adopted by Indian feminists and queer activists reflects a nuanced understanding of gender that incorporates local cultural, social, and political contexts. By integrating global feminist insights with indigenous perspectives, Indian activists continue to advance a more inclusive and critical understanding of gender and social justice.

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