Gender Trouble Book Summary, by Judith Butler

by Allen Cheng


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1-Page Summary of Gender Trouble

Judith Butler begins her Gender Trouble by asking a question that has been debated for years. Many feminists have argued for the idea of a concrete feminine identity because they believe it's necessary to advance the cause of women. However, postmodern and post-structuralist thinkers are skeptical about such an identity, which leads to Butler's question: Can feminist identity politics survive without a firm concept of what makes someone female?

Butler's article focuses on the construction of feminine identity and what that means for feminism. She doesn't spend much time looking at other aspects of the movement, such as political doctrines or organizational tactics. Her three chapters focus on a gradual deconstruction of feminine identity until it has no form.

Chapter 1, "The Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," begins with the claim that feminism does not have a subject. It then discusses sex and gender as distinct but related concepts. The author is concerned about whether or not there are different sexes and genders, what their relationship to each other is, and how they relate to biology. She also criticizes binary distinctions between things like sex and gender.

Chapter 2, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," discusses gender identification. It explores how it is a social construction that can be oppressive even if we don't like its implications. Butler looks at structuralist theories on gender as well as Lacan's theory of sexuality. She also examines Freud's ideas about psychoanalysis and its relationship to power structures in society. Ultimately, she argues against the idea that we should do away with all restrictions on gender.
identification or else there will be no way for people to identify themselves as heterosexual (a common view amongst feminists).

Chapter 3, “Subversive Bodily Acts” is the longest chapter in the book and focuses largely on a critique of Julia Kristeva. The author also discusses Foucault's publication of Herculine Barbin's journal, as well as his sympathetic critique of Monique Wittig. She then concludes that traditional views of gender identity can be subverted through masquerades and drag. She argues that feminists should pursue the deconstruction of feminine identity through parody because it will make solidarity easier to achieve and organize around.

Full Summary of Gender Trouble

Overall Summary

Judith Butler (born in 1956) is an American philosopher. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio and came out as a lesbian at age sixteen. After studying philosophy at Bennington College, she went on to earn her PhD from Yale University where she became involved with the gay community and political activism. Since 1993, Butler has been teaching at UC Berkeley where she is now Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory Program Director.

Butler has changed how gender is studied and understood in philosophy, as well as how some groups demand political change. She has published more than a dozen books, including Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, which was published in 1990. The book came from her desire to make life better for people and rethink what's possible.

Gender Trouble is a book that questions the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality. It is considered groundbreaking in feminism, women's studies and lesbian and gay studies. The author argues for society to rethink the most basic categories of human identity. She achieves this by asking questions about sex, gender and sexuality, which define people’s identities. Her revolutionary ideas regarding gender identity have come to be seen as foundational to queer theory.

Butler begins by questioning some of the central assumptions within feminist Theory. She asserts that there is no such thing as a common identity for women, and that trying to assert one is problematic. Feminist identity politics are not sustainable without an identity for women. If there's no focal point for the conception of women, then how can we have any foundation?

However, some argue that concrete identities and well-defined conceptual boundaries are not possible. Butler focuses on this topic in her book "Gender Trouble", where she discusses the construction of feminine identity.

In the first chapter, "The Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire," Judith Butler discusses the importance of intersectional feminism, but questions how we define women. She believes that this term has been constructed by a phallocentric society and assumes a universality that negates its meaning. Therefore, she proposes a new form of feminism that critiques these notions of identity and gender. This leads her to look at sex and gender as independent concepts from one another. If we assume sex is biological, and
Gender is culturally constructed, then they are two separate concepts. However, if gender identity is complex in relation to sex (and it most certainly is), then feminists must embrace this complexity instead of moving away from traditional western roles for men and women in society.

Butler discusses the psychoanalytic structuralist account of sexual difference and the construction of sexuality with respect to power in chapter two. She shows how socialist feminism is problematic and Levi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology commits fallacies that lead to a self-defeating formulation of gender. Her critiques of both Freud and Lacan are also exceptionally insightful, such as her argument that in fact, the taboo against homosexuality creates heterosexual dispositions, thereby making the oedipal complex possible.

The third chapter begins with a discussion of Julia Kristeva. Butler believes that Kristeva's theory is based on the same system she wants to overthrow. She believes that any theory that claims signification is predicated on the denial or repression of a female principle should consider whether femaleness is really external to cultural norms by which it’s repressed. This chapter also includes Butler’s discussion of Foucault publishing Herculine Barbin’s journal, her critique of Monique Wittig and her view that gender identity can be “subverted” through masquerade and drag.

In the conclusion, Butler pulls together several open threads of the preceding chapters and focuses on gender as a performance. She argues that feminist politics can do without a concrete feminine identity, and doing so will make solidarity and organization easier.

**Preface (1999)**

First published in 1990, Gender Trouble presented a new way of thinking about gender. It explored the idea that gender is not binary (male/female) and even less so a spectrum of sexualities. Rather, it's something we perform, with no one fixed point from which to start or end. The book was hugely influential on feminism and queer theory because it challenged people to think differently about gender. In this preface from 1999, Butler reflects on her work ten years after writing the original text.

Butler's book is about the possibilities of gender and how to define them. She wants her readers to understand that there isn't a right way or wrong way to be, but instead people should feel free in defining their own genders. The text also discusses whether it's possible for someone who is not part of the majority group to speak out against it without being labelled as "monstrous" or "frightening".

She also points out that one of the two binaries is female, but only to the extent that one functions as a woman within the dominant heterosexual frame. To call into question this frame might be to lose something of one's sense of place in gender. Sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender, not heterosexual normativity. It is said that this gender hierarchy underwrites heterosexual relations.

Sexism is the idea that women are subordinate to men. A feminist view of this would be that gender should be eliminated because it makes women subordinate, and a feminist approach to doing this is by opposing sexism.

She ended the preface of her book in 1999 by saying that this book is part of a collective struggle to make
life better for those who live on the margins.

**Preface (1990)**

This book talks about the realness of gender and sexual identities, how they're maintained by society through repetitive performances, and the possibility for subverting the system by "troubling" our genders.

In the preface of her book, Butler reflects on trouble and how it's not always negative. She provides a story from her childhood where she read Simone de Beauvoir, who explained that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be an object of mystery for men. Because "female" no longer appears to be stable in meaning or signification, this inquiry takes as its focus gender and relational analysis.

**Chapter 1: “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”**

Butler begins the first chapter by discussing two controversial terms of feminist interest: politics and representation. She points out that trying to establish a category for representation described as “women” is problematic because there is no common identity covered by the term “women.” Feminism must reformulate a representational politics based upon some other need than one for a stable, unified subject.

Butler argues that sex and gender are not so different, as they both influence the way people view themselves. She says that the "compulsory order of sex/gender" is a social construction, because it's based on cultural ideals and norms. Gender roles have been forced onto society through politics; therefore, Butler believes that identity comes from within but gender comes from outside influences.

Gender is a social construct. Gender roles are inscribed on bodies, and those bodies are passive recipients of the inexorable cultural law. In that case, culture becomes destiny, not biology. It's important to note Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray's work in this regard for their discussion of fundamental structures by which gender asymmetry is reproduced.

**Theory of the Binary**

Irigaray's analysis of women and society is powerful, but it could be improved. Butler suggests that we should focus on a more specific community that shares the same concerns as us. She says that:

Butler argues that it's impossible to understand identity without understanding gender, because the very idea of an individual requires that person to be gendered. In other words, a person can't be understood outside of their gender. Without being gendered in accordance with societal norms, no one would know what to make of you or your actions. There are laws and rules about how genders are supposed to express themselves sexually and romantically (through sexual practice), but those laws aren't consistent from place to place or time period to time period. The result is discontinuity and incoherence in our ideas about identity based on sex/gender.

1. Language, power and displacement strategies
Butler is trying to figure out if there are agents in the world. She's arguing that we can't use a metaphysics of substance anymore, because that would mean an agent. Wittig argues that we should focus on materialism instead and look at sexuality as something you're born with rather than something you learn later in life.

We need to recognize that even in a "liberated" sexuality, power relations still construct how women see themselves. This doesn't mean we can't be sexual or love who we want, but it means that these things are affected by the society around us. It also means that there is a possibility of change and something new being created within our current culture.

Butler calls for the "subversion of gender norms" by confusing people. This can be done by multiplying genders and making them less distinct from one another.

**Chapter 2: “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix”**

Butler begins the second chapter by illustrating how patriarchy is complex and has changed over time. She comments on how a repressive law gains its origins and how the corresponding narrative may, in the end, provide justification for the law it actually opposes.

The author begins this section by explaining Levi-Strauss' theory of kinship, which is based on women being seen as gifts from one clan to another through marriage. The tribes are structured around a "phallogocentric economy," or the idea that men have power over women and their sexuality. Butler then states that these relations among clans take place because they're homosocial—they're about bonds between men, but happen through heterosexual exchanges of women.

**Lacan, Riviere and the strategies of disguise**

In this section, Butler begins by describing the differences between "being" and "having" the phallus in Lacan's theory of language. She also notes that for women to be the phallus is to reflect its power, signify it, embody it and supply its site. In addition, she discusses how the symbolic order creates cultural intelligibility by comparing men having the phallus with women being it. Finally, she describes Riviere's psychoanalytic description of womanliness as a masquerade based on one's attempt to hide masculine characteristics.

a) Freud and the Melancholia of Gender

Butler acknowledges that Freud believes that when dealing with a loss, one’s ego integrates aspects of the other’s personal characteristics. The Oedipal complex is also introduced in this section, which states that individuals can be either positive (same-sex) or negative (opposite-sex). b) Gender Complexity and the Limits of Identification In summary, Butler argues Lacan's Law of Symbolic is not deterministic. This means it's possible to have multiple identifications which are not fixed within masculine and feminine positions.

**Prohibition as Power**
In the last section, Butler draws a parallel between Foucault and psychoanalysis. She argues that we cannot understand sexuality outside of cultural norms. In this section, she specifically focuses on how psychoanalytic theory can be used to critique incest taboo. To do that, she uses Levi-Strauss' work as well as Lacan's and Riviere's work on Freudian theories about sexuality. The author also discusses whether or not there are cultures where incest is allowed, but her main point is to show how it operates in our culture rather than just giving an analysis of its effects. She then talks about bisexuality; since it lies outside language and the symbolic order, its repression could lead to subversion.

Chapter 3: “Subversive Bodily Acts”

ii. The semiotic and feminism
Butler argues that Kristeva's theory of the “semiotic” is a source of effective subversion, since it challenges Lacan's view that cultural meaning needs the repression of women to be repressed. However, she has three main objections to this argument: (1) how can we tell which aspects of culture are repressive? (2) what makes language non-repressive? And (3) what does change look like in a society governed by norms?

i. Herculine Barbin and the politics of sexual discontinuity

Michel Foucault's genealogy of gender helps to criticize Jacques Lacan and his followers because it shows that their theories are biased. He argues that the univocal idea of sex is socially constructed, which makes sex seem causal. Judith Butler finds this valuable in Foucault because she thinks we should break down the false construction of “sex” into more individuated forms. She also discusses a biological challenge to the idea from DNA research and attempts to refute it by saying there is more convention in human biology than people realize.

Monique Wittig talks about the disintegration of bodies and gender roles.

Butler argues that gender is always an acquired trait and it's not something you're born with. Wittig also emphasizes the fact that men or women don't exist, but are just made up by society to enforce heterosexuality and make people think there are only two genders. She proposes a disintegration of culturally-constructed bodies, which suggests that morphology itself is a consequence of a hegemonic conceptual scheme.

Butler asks why we are compelled to fabricate gender. She explains that the process of fabrication is a social drama which requires repetition and therefore, there must be a reason behind the need for it. She says that if gender is not natural or true, then all genders can only be produced. Impersonation is one way in which this happens because it subverts our expectations about what's real and what's not. Drag artists can make fun of the idea of being female by impersonating it when they're really male, while butch/femme identities challenge stereotypical ideas about masculinity and femininity by exaggerating them such as with crossdressing (i.e., drag).

Conclusion: “From Parody to Politics”

Judith Butler's book, Gender Trouble, begins with the question of whether or not feminism can survive without a concrete identity. She believes that it can and that doing so will make solidarity easier to
accomplish. Subjects are situated in society and identities are asserted through relationships. Butler then explores how parody functions as a way to construct the "doer" and suggests ways her work relates to feminist politics.

She argues that there need not be a "doer" orchestrating the action. Rather, agency is constructed in and through the action. The question of agency is formulated as a question about how signification works. She believes that rules govern identity, but they are formed by repeated discourses that govern identity. Therefore, we can subvert this identity by repeating these discourses to break their hold on us.

Social discourse is constructed by the opposition between I and Thou. Political identity discussions support these oppositions, which are embedded in language. Oppressively, they are used to divide people into groups based on their social identities. However, we can make use of