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## Queer Theory: A Critique of Gender Norms

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### **Abstract:**

Queer theory studies the issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity usually focusing on Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered sexuality. It is also known as LGBT(lesbian, gay, bisexual and the transgendered) studies. 'Queering' is the process of reversing heterosexuality-as-norm. It looks at the particular representation of the gay/lesbian and the transgendered people. Queer theory contests the categorization of gender and sexuality. Since personality is the sum total of internal and external traits. It cannot be judged merely by one trait i.e. Sexuality. The paper highlights the predicaments of LGBT communities by critically examining *Undoing Gender* by Judith Butler.

Judith Butler is an eminent and most celebrated philosopher who bluntly talks about the gender issues. Besides being a gender theorist, she is also a political activist exhibiting her influence on political philosophy, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and many other fields. Currently she is Maxine Elliot Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory.

In her work *Undoing Gender*, she throws light on the idea of 'gender as a social construct' and the concept of 'gender performativity'. She makes a critique of gender norms that are responsible for gender discrimination in society. In her feminist and queer ideology she has been influenced by various theorists like Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Simon de Beauvoir etc. The paper will provide a detailed study of all the about stated facets about by studying the queer theorist Judith Butler.

**Keywords: Queer, Gay/lesbian, Sex, Gender, Gender Norms, Identity, Sexuality and Heteronormativity**

Queer theory also known as LGBT(lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) studies examines the issues concerning sexual orientation and gender identity, focusing particularly on Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered sexuality. The term was introduced in 1990 by its chief advocates, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Foucault, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss. It has been named as an area since about 1990 and is a brand new branch of study which grew out of gay/lesbian studies.

Feminist studies paved the way for Gay/Lesbian studies. Queer theory follows the gay/lesbian and feminist theory by dissuading the idea of judging sexuality on biological grounds or eternal standards of morality and truth. Both work to bring a revolution by analyzing how these categories of norms are constructed, operated and enforced. The term gay/lesbian studies centers largely on the question of homosexuality.

Initially the term 'Queer' was a slang word for homosexuals but recently it has been used as an umbrella term for representing culturally marginalized sexual identities. But more than defining specific identity, Queer theory makes a critique of the categorization of sexual identities that resulted from gender norms. It indeed criticizes all that falls into the category of normality and deviant. The dictionary meaning of the word "queer" means "odd", "peculiar", "out of the ordinary".

The paper gives an insight into the lives of LGBT communities by examining *Undoing Gender* by Judith Butler. The writings of Judith Butler and other queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich and Diana Fuss largely draw upon the issues related to LGBT studies. Eve Kosofsk Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is regarded as one of the founders of queer theory. In this book Sedgwick has argued about the binary oppositions of homo-hetero sexuality and makes a critique of all those factors that characterize human sexuality. Sedgwick believes that sexuality should not be limited only to the terms homosexual and heterosexual, it should have wide range.

Adrienne Cecile Rich in her socio-political essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" has talked about the existence of lesbians highlighting their oppression in the society. According to Rich, lesbianism should be presented as an extension of feminism. Heterosexuality she asserts is a political institution which further paves way for male domination and women's subjugation. Heterosexuality is not natural or integral in human instincts; it is rather a political construction for dominating the women. Women instead of directing their energy towards men must direct the same towards other women.

The present paper undertakes to study Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*. Butler has explored the plight of LGBT communities. Judith Butler, an American Jewish Philosopher and gender theorist, is one of the most influential and widely read gender theorists in the world. She has been considered as one of the prominent voices in Queer theory. She has extended her support to lesbian and gay rights movements and has also spoken on contemporary political issues. She is currently working as Maxine Elliot Professor at the University of California in the department of Comparative literature and the program of Critical Theory.

Butler's theory of 'gender performativity' and her critique of the conventional gender norms have done a great deal in promoting gender studies. She aims at reaching greater equality between men and women and strongly critiques the assumption of traditional domination of

women by men and oppression of homosexuals and transgender persons. She has strongly condemned the gender norms that give rise to gender roles and cause gender inequality.

The term “gender” is a social construct and is quite different from “sex”. Gender implies to the social differences between males and females while sex is a biological distinction. Gender norms refer to particular type of behavior endowed by the society to a particular sex or in other words it refers to any type of particular behavior attributed by society to a particular gender. It sets the parameters to which women and men are generally expected to conform. For instance, pink color is usually considered to be girl’s color and blue color is associated with boys. Boys are expected to be strong and girls to be fragile. These types of roles or notions when once established are expected to be performed, and if one fails to act in accordance with it or attempts to deviate from it, then he/she is not considered as normal and categorized as deviant.

Stereotypes about gender and the assumptions made from such stereotypes give rise to gender binaries. Masculinity is usually considered as something that is virile and manly whereas the word feminine is associated with being womanish and effeminate. In the words of Catharine Mackinnon, an American feminist, both masculinity and femininity define sexual traits. Femininity corresponds to sexual obedience while masculinity connotes sexual supremacy. Genders she believes are “created through the eroticization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex” (Mackinnon, 113). Queer theory seeks to abolish such type of assumptions and aspires to create a genderless society.

Simon Beauvoir’s and Kate Millett have also talked about the gender issues and the role played by the social norms. Beauvoir’s belief ‘woman is not born a woman but becomes so’ reflects the role played by gender norms in determining the personality of an individual. Woman is made a woman by the societal feminine behavior. Kate Millett shares her opinion on gender inequality claiming it as “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” (Millett, 28-9). Gender she believes is “the sum total of the parents’, the peers’, and the culture’s notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interest, status, worth, gesture, and expression” (Millett, 31).

The gender norms put a lot of stress on male and female to act in a certain way and also sometimes make them feel uncomfortable. For instance if a boy’s color is pink he wants to have pink bike, he will be forced to buy a blue one or some other color because pink color is associated with girls. Butler strongly critiques such types of norms that are widening the gap between sexes.

Gender Butler believes is performed and the doer’s persistent actions create the illusion about the particular type of gendered behavior that continues to exist in society as an ideology. Gender is a “doing” rather than a “being”. Gender identity is built by the performing the gender roles. Butler says: ‘There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender;

...identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.’ (*Gender Trouble*, 25). Identity is not determined on the basis of gender but rather on the basis of performance, our behavior at different situations. Gender is not a biological factor it is rather an achievement. Gender Butler believes should be seen as free-floating and fixed entity.

She argues that the conventional gender roles give rise to inequality of the sexes and aims at deconstructing the fixed masculine/feminine gender binaries. Masculine and feminine are socially constructed, they are not biologically fixed. She believes that the lot of the women in the society can be improved by deconstructing the way society views gender roles. Queer theory challenges and criticizes such type of conventional and normative constructions that results in sexual orientations. It strongly criticizes the division between sex and gender, or biology and culture.

One of the key concepts in queer theory is the idea of “heteronormativity”. Heteronormativity implies to the accepted or preferred sexual orientation that is considered normal in the society and promotes heterosexuality which conforms to the codes of normality. Queer theory argues that this notion of heterosexuality serves as a tool of power and control that put constraint on both straight and gay individuals through socially accepted gender norms.

Queer theorists contest against the strict demarcation between male and female. They condemn the conventional notions or opinions of the people regarding the terms ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’. These two terms queer theorists believe should not be seen as parameters of determining someone’s sexuality. While hinting at the historian Michel Foucault , queer theorists assert that sexuality is just a matter of choice and should not be determined on the basis of heterosexuality or homosexuality. It’s just some people like same sex partners and others opposite. Homosexuality should not be considered as a taboo.

Butler’s *Undoing Gender* is a key text in Queer theory. The book reflects on her ideas on sexuality, gender, psychoanalysis and the medical treatment of intersex people. It accentuates the question of undoing by revisiting her idea of doing or performativity in her work *Gender Trouble*. *Undoing Gender* indeed continues her idea of gender performativity presenting it in a new dimension. ‘Undoing gender’ means undoing/deconstructing the normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life created by gender performativity. Doing/performing the gender is not an automatic or mechanical act. It is performed unconsciously as it is embedded in the psyche of the doer.

*Undoing Gender* exposes that the foundational categories of sex, desire and gender are results of specific power structures. Gender is defined as something which is never out of ideology and is always seen within a social context. Butler writes in her introduction to *Undoing Gender* that *Undoing Gender* proposes an understanding of undoing the restricted normative concepts of sexual and gendered life.

Butler further debates that the desires of the individual are also determined on the basis of social norms. Each individual desires of living his/her life to the fullest but the conditions or social norms set up by the society make life quiet unfeasible. Social and cultural norms prevent the individual from living a feasible life. The individual will not be accepted if his/her desires don't conform to the normality. To make her ideas more explicit Butler draws upon the story of David Reimer who finds it difficult to survive with the newly assigned identity and ultimately committed suicide at the age of 38. His life was ruined completely by the gender norms governing what is worth living and what not.

David Reimer was born a male but after a botched circumcision made a female. He was named as Brenda. The doctors removed the testicles and performed surgical operation to create a vagina. Brenda was given training at John Money's Gender Identity Institute for adapting to being a girl. Brenda's successful development as a girl at John Money's Gender Identity Clinic "offers convincing evidence that the gender identity gate is open at birth for a normal child no less than for one born with unfinished sex organs or one who prenatally over or underexposed to androgen, and that it stays open at least for something over a year at birth" (Money and Green, 299). Thus the two terms feminine and masculine have no fixed meaning or internal destiny and can be altered. In this context Kate Millet too has argued that biology is not destiny, it is a malleable entity.

David was also transformed from a male to female. He was also offered estrogen by the psychiatric team that was monitoring him but he refused. Money also talked about getting a real vagina by showing her (Brenda) pictures of the same and even pictures of women giving birth so that Brenda might be able to give birth if she acquired a vagina.

David was quite uncomfortable with it, and subsequently at the age of eleven his boyish habits, likes and dislikes made him realized that he was actually not a girl. His desire for toys like guns and trucks, his act of urinating while standing etc, was making his life quite uncomfortable. He once got death threats from other girls at school when he was caught urinating while standing. David had understood that he is supposed to live up to the feminine norms, but failed to do so.

Subsequently Brenda was treated by another set of doctors, a team of psychiatrists at Brenda's local hospital. She was told to change paths and prefer male activities which she readily accepted. After receiving male hormone shots and removing breasts, a phallus was constructed for him between the age of fifteen and sixteen which only approximates to some of its expected functions. David thus ambivalently entered into the gender norms.

Unfortunately at the age of thirty eight David committed suicide and the reason behind it was not known. But it is quite apparent that his life in his gender was always questionable. His whole time was like a pendulum fluctuating between the two genders and trying to fit to it. He

failed to accomplish a sustainable and recognizable living according to the set norms of the society and decided to end his life.

The case of Brenda/David brings to light the brutal acts performed on intersexed infants. Through the case of David Reimer, Butler actually wants to interrogate the society that has created gender binaries and do not accept something which is not beyond normality. Through *Undoing Gender* Butler is trying to construct a future of resistance. It propose to create a world of people with mixed genital attributes, a world where they are welcomed and loved without being transformed to normative version of gender. Butler pleads for more liberal and free life unquestioned by such type of social condition and norms. Butler's writings indeed have proved fruitful as it has altered the lives of several people who were subjected to violence, oppression and exclusion because of their genders, sexualities and desires.

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