



Research Paper

## Recognition and Otherness: An Emphasis on Gender

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**ABSTRACT:** Gender has always been a key constituent of our identity among other things, though it is debatable of whether it is necessary or not. In this paper, an attempt will be made to explore some of the basic questions that is attached to a gendered other who needs appropriate recognition of their difference because being othered means that one is either individually or collectively different from the rest. Therefore, some of the basic questions of who, what, how and why a other, which is usually the marginalized, desires and demand recognition and the probable implications that follow like that of representation and categorization needs to be understood carefully as Judith Butler argues that a subject desires recognition of their difference as a collective, in order to procure legal protection, but who they are as a collective should not be definitive of what they are as individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, identity, recognition, otherness, difference

Received 01 Dec., 2022; Revised 08 Dec., 2022; Accepted 10 Dec., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The quest of being(s) brought about issues relating to identity. Identity is vague, yet an important determinant of the legitimacy of our existence. The very root of the term is controversial in that, it means the same, yet it implies a certain amount of similarity and difference (Buckingham, 2008). For example, to be identified as a human means that one shares something similar with the class of humans. But also one can belong to the class of humans yet may bear certain differences in the case of race, gender, etc. It is on the one hand a kind of identification that we share that makes one similar but on the other it just marks the differences within that identification.

Literally, the other is someone or something different from the self and the same yet it is very important for acknowledging the reality of oneself. Though different from the self, it may very well form part of it, that is, the otherness of the other which is a person's non conformity to the norms or the given social identity may very well be the defining identity of that other and mainly constitutes the who and what the other is. Thus, peculiarity and difference mark otherness and this places one not in the center but at the margins and boundaries. This understanding opens up partly to singularity and partly to interrelationality. It is very complex to define this concept as we are always in the othering process and at times, it is difficult to pinpoint who the other is as we are always other to someone else and vice versa. The uniqueness of each person brings in the othering process but this has led to ascribing a negative connotation to the other as marginalized as it stands out from the crowd. According to Foucault, the othering process is strongly attached to power structures in the sense that when we other another group or person, we are actually pinpointing the other's weaknesses and makes ourselves seem stronger.

The very concept of other pervades through literature, philosophy, sociology and the like thereby making it versatile through different forms and in different contexts. A major concern to be taken up in the paper is the otherness of the other of gender and sexuality and the norms attached to it like that of male/female, masculinity/femininity, man/ woman, etc. In other words, the other which will be concerned here is an embodied subject who is a normative other, that is, the other who is responsive to and evaluable under a norm or norms.

Gender is one of the common markers of identity and it is on this basis that othering takes place. It seems to occupy a very important place in the construction of our identity though it is questionable of whether it is necessary or contingent, especially in feminist debates and contours. Throughout history, we have seen that conventional gender constitution brought about inequality among genders and the fault lies in the cultural set up being patriarchal in nature. This implies, as mentioned earlier, that it is a matter of how power is being structured and distributed, pace Foucault. Thus, it is seen that women were othered and being a member of that class meant that one is defined by their weakness and lack. But in contemporary times, gender has moved beyond the either-or to the neither-nor or the use of both the either-or and the like. There is a shift of the otherness of gender from woman occupying the minority to yet another level of minorities that are differentially arranged like that of transsexuals and the like. Their arrangement may not be something of a new origin but there has been an ever growing discussion of it in recent times. Kristeva caught a glimpse of how feminism took a turn to these areas of discussion. According to her, feminism begins with the assumption that women are subjugated thereby demanding equality with men; then proceeds to the rejection of patriarchy over a separatist matriarchy and then goes into the realm of deconstructing the whole idea of gender itself (Waugh, 2006). As a movement, feminism has in one way or the other tried to equate women to the levels of men by assimilating them in terms and norms created by or defined and shaped by men. In other words, the otherness of the other, here of women, (as they have always been marginalized and placed at the borders or being side lined) is being repressed by assimilating it into the realm of the same. Equality among the genders were met out by identifying and assimilating the other in the realm of the same and rejecting to focus on their difference that forms the core of their identity. But this assimilation brought about further problems. As has been mentioned, the norms were made and defined by the dominator and they were made to favour men in general. So mere shift of center, that is, from men to women will only reverse the hierarchy or equate the other in terms of the dominator. Thus, it was through the work of postmodernists and poststructuralists like that of French feminists (Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva) and Judith Butler, among others that have grasped the importance of understanding who the other is and how the other is being perceived that have at most times been neglected by including the other only to exclude it. This may very well apply to the case of transsexuals too. They therefore deconstructed the very idea of gender in order to make it more inclusive or to put it in other words; they are focusing on the fluidity of gender and sexuality. It implies that, categories of gender (man/woman) and their constitutive masculinity and femininity which are usually considered as water tight compartments actually have certain leakage wherein there is a possibility of being intermixed and that masculinity can be possessed by a woman and femininity can also be present in men. This makes transsexuals and the other categories of gender more inclusive.

“Acts of recognition infuse many aspects of our lives: receiving a round of applause from a rapt audience; being spotted in a crowded street by a long-forgotten friend; having an application for a job rejected because of one’s criminal record; enjoying some words of praise from a respected philosophy professor; getting pulled over by the police because one is a black man driving an expensive car; fighting to have one’s same-sex marriage officially sanctioned in order to enjoy the same legal and social benefits as heterosexual marriages.”(McQueen, 2015, p1). Recognition has always played an important role in shaping and forming a liveable life and also to legitimise the concepts of freedom and justice. Gender constitutes a fundamental truth in us which we recognise in others and others recognise in us (McQueen, 2015) and that which forms the othering process wherein basing on the power structure, one lies in the majority and the other is the minority. To gain recognition as a sexual minority is a difficult task in the existing social structure as it is highly normative.

### **The Othered Subject: Judith Butler**

In the following section we will try to understand Judith Butler’s idea of an othered subject and how it takes shape in the othering process that makes gender more inclusive.

Butler’s philosophy has always centred around her analysis of the subject which fails to identify itself with the norm and how it takes shape in the othering process and the subject is a socio-political concept (Kelz, 2016) Butler’s idea of alterity is understood through her analysis of the Self and Other which is a reflection and examination of Hegel in her *Subjects of Desire*. Her understanding of the Hegelian dialectic is the encounter between one concrete subject with another concrete subject, with her dialectical model being an open ended process that tries to oppose and cancel each other but never reaching a final certainty. As the Hegelian subject, her subject also desires recognition to gain their autonomy and self recognition. But what hinders such recognition is that the subject is also a gendered subject. Thus, she breaks down the sex/gender distinction and considered sex which is usually believed to be a biological category is actually a social construction, and gendered identities are mere repetitions of that construction (Kelz, 2016). By doing so, the dichotomy between

the two no longer stands and, sex is gender, and, gender here is performativity. For example, the utterance, 'It's a girl' at the time of birth reveals just that. Here, the term girl which usually is considered to be the sex of the child actually carries with it a social connotation of gender norms that she has to dress in such a way and has to behave in such a way. The very utterance of it makes the subject a non sovereign subject as it has to internalize the norms which are already given in order to be recognized, though it may not be definitive of who or what they become or chooses to be. These social norms takes the form of laws which may annihilate the subject but may bring about the subject's relation to power. Also, since Butler is more concerned with the processes on how one comes to take such a position, this utterance also implies that the subject here is constructed through repetitive acts that such a construction connotes. It is not an act done by the subject but imposed upon it and the subject is just an effect, and this act of identification is linguistically and discursively constructed. This has led to deconstructing the very notion of gender in order to pave the way for each subject to freely construct its own subjectivity. Deconstruction here becomes very significant in that a subject has to first accept the given subjectivity but such subjectivity can be subverted and can reverse the power structure. As gender is a choice, no doubt it is not a free agent but there is a possibility of it to interpret received gender norms that can organise them anew (Salih,2002), and not be restricted to male strictly possessing masculinity, rather male can also possess femininity or both and likewise in the case of female too. However, it is only through accepting the trace of the other that one can subvert the law and exist in ambivalent relation to power structures that it desires (Butler, 1997).

By having such an understanding, the other genders apart from the conventional ones can somewhat be included of their being different, but recognition of their difference and their gaining the status of a sexual minority is not an easy task in the existing social structure (Butler, 1990) but yet it is something inescapable and necessary, for gender cannot be separated from its normativity and cultural and political intersections. If we struggle for recognition, it implies that that particular group is struggling for rights not merely that attaches to personhood but also for being conceived as persons (Butler, 2004). This is so, because by doing one's gender differently that is not acceptable in the existing social structure, one is not being acknowledged of being person though they may have their personhood as already defined and acceptable to them.

Another point that needs to be mentioned here is that, when a particular group is struggling for recognition, it means they have a common identification that they can be grouped together. As Judith Butler argues that a subject desires recognition of their difference as a collective, in order to procure legal protection, but who they are as a collective should not be definitive of what they are as individuals (Butler, 2004). This sounds quite problematic for representation through a group is necessary but not definitive to individuals. What can be grasped from here is that the idea of a subject is unstable yet there is a need of a stable identity for protecting and gaining appropriate recognition. It is understood that the ordering of the power structure has not been reversed but within the existing structure, recognition can be made possible through their norms.

As have been pointed above, a problem arise when a subject is also a gendered one, for this brings about the play of otherness which can have a negative bearing and it is only through deconstruction that one can exist in ambivalent relations with each other. To some extent, such an understanding leads to being more gender-neutral and rearranging a setting which is genderless. No doubt, such kind of setting does help in the society being more inclusive but othering will still be there for if the binaries of gender are no longer being looked at as opposites, some other binary oppositions will exist like that of race, color, etc. Also another question that needs to be pondered upon is whether we can really have a genderless setting? And is it plausible to be gender neutral? For whatever the case may be, one always needs and desires for recognition, either of their difference or similarity. Another point is if recognition of such an unstable individual subject be made through the lens of the seemingly stable identity of a group, can individuals be ever given an appropriate recognition of who and what they are.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Gender is no doubt one of the important markers of our being that give us a sense of identity. But, a careful understanding of it is important for after making genders more inclusive through deconstruction, what is to come is unpredictable as there is a certain sense of ambiguity relating to their recognition as groups and individual recognition. If by being recognised in an appropriate manner and being protected by law as a group, what emerges is a seemingly stable category and as deconstruction suggests, that as nothing can ever be stable, there is an ambiguity of whether it be a negative or a positive aftermath as the power structure has not changed completely but rather it still work through its norms.

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