# FEMINIST THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVITY: JUDITH BUTLER AND JULIA KRISTEVA

***Roxana Elena Doncu***

***Assistant Lecturer, "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest***

*Abstract: Feminist theorists like Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva, although following the work of poststructuralist thinkers Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, who 'decentered' the traditional autonomous and rational subject, felt the need to re-think subjectivity in terms that would allow for agency and political action. Their anti-essentialism led them to construct gender identities as performative (Butler) and subjectivity as a process (Kristeva), concepts that, they argued, allowed for resistance and thus for agency.*

*Keywords: feminism, subjectivity, gender identity, abjection*

## I.Introduction

Recent theories of subjectivity stress the procesual, constructed nature of the self: poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida have envisaged the subject less in the shape of the autonomous, free-willed, pre-given self that gave birth to the Enlightenment modern project and more as a "lack", "a process", "an effect", shaped and moulded by various forces at work in the world: political power, ideology, language. The theories of subjectivity that emerged in the 20th century contested fiercely the autonomy and rationality of the human subject. Michel Foucault gave voice to this theoretical undertaking of poststructuralism: "The researches of psychoanalysis, of linguistics, of anthropology have "decentered" the subject in relation to the laws of its desire, the forms of its language, the rules of its actions, or the play of its mythical and imaginative discourse."(*Archaeology* 22) Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious as the repository of hidden forces that are beyond rational control, Jacques Lacan's symbolic order (consisting of language, beliefs, ideologies) through which the infant is alienated from the imaginary and acculturated into society, Clifford Geertz' concept of the "thick description" (anti-essential and anti-totalitarian) that ought to be the primary methodology in anthropological studies, Althusser's theory of the subject as 'interpellated' by ideology, Saussure 's characterization of language as a system of signs working on the basis of difference and opposition and later Giles Deleuze's claim in *Difference and Repetition* that difference is internal to every idea represent just a few of the most powerful contestations of the idea of the modern heterogeneous, autonomous and rational subject. This led of course to an understanding of the subject as incapable of taking any meaningful political action, of its being devoid of 'agency'. Feminist thinkers like Judith Butler, although disciples of Foucault, felt the need to re-think subjectivity in terms that would allow for agency and political action. Their anti-essentialism led them to construct gender identities as performative (Butler) and subjectivity as a process (Kristeva), concepts that, they argued, allowed for resistance and thus for agency.



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**II. Judith Butler: Gender Identity Is Performative**

Extremely critical of earlier feminist theorists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray who defined the feminine in metaphysical terms, Judith Butler set out to prove that the masculine and the feminine were not substantially opposed/different, but that gender identities are performative. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues against the notion, common in most feminist writing, that a feminist politics needs a definition of feminine identity, in which essential features of women should be included in order that women would have the same political interests and goals.

Butler begins her argument by building on the sex/gender distinction, first articulated by the Marxist feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir:

> One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (249)

Here, the link between biological sex and cultural gender is severed. The social identity that is perceived as feminine is not the result of a natural essence, but a complex product of cultural factors and historical forces that cooperate to define the norms of proper feminine behavior. Even if we are born with different body structures, this does not automatically entail that we should dress and behave differently, and that social and economic power should be distributed unevenly between the two sexes. The 'natural' distinction between men and women is constructed by culture and politics. These cultural and political constructions (which are variable historically) are imposed on the biological difference. Sex is determined by nature, and gender is determined by culture and imposed on the first.

Butler takes issue with this way of seeing things and reverses the situation by insisting that culture comes first - we construct biological truth from a specific cultural perspective. We can speculate about the nature/culture distinction only from the side of a gender system already immersed in the specific values, structures and priorities of the culture in which we live. Woman as lacking and passive is perceived in this way not on the evidence of her biological sex, but from the phallocentric perspective of the patriarchal order. When we see in nature the division into the masculine and the feminine, we do so because we are affected by the gender logic that rules our culture:

As a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings it engenders, yet it is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the "literal" and "the real". The limits of the "real" are produced within the naturalized heterosexualization of bodies in which physical facts serve as causes and desires reflect the inexorable effects of that physicality. (*Gender Trouble* 71)

There is no natural sex which precedes the social construction of gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler further argues that sex and gender are not only internalized (accepted as identities), they are simultaneously materialized (produced through the material body). The meanings that we give to the body are social meanings, constructed by society and culture and gender is performative.

Butler derives her conception of the 'performative' from the work of J.L. Austin. Performatives are a category of verbs whose meanings do not refer to some abstract concepts outside language, but which perform the very action they name. For example "I name this child Jennifer", or "I pronounce you husband and wife"- the verbs in these sentences make things happen: a baptism, a marriage. This happens only in certain contexts, under what Austin calls "felicitous conditions": the person/people who make the utterance should be authorized to do this (only a priest could perform the baptism/marriage), the place where the utterance is said



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should be appropriate, recognized socially or legally (a church) and the person/people about whom these things are pronounced must be again socially or legally recognized as appropriate (the child should have a birth certificate, the couple a marriage certificate).

For Butler, gender works much in the same way. In order to be masculine or feminine you have perform yourself (to behave) in socially and legally recognized ways. Gender becomes thus a set of correctly performed gestures that link the subject to what is socially perceived as the standard for normal identification, and not the expression of a natural feminine or masculine sex. Drawing on the Foucaultian understanding of subjectivity as an effect of discourses instituted by power/knowledge, Butler argues that the reality of gender is the effect of public discourse:

Such acts, gestures, enactments generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the "integrity" of the subject.(*Gender Trouble* 136)

The clear demarcation between masculine and feminine is a requirement of cultures whose economies of existence are based on the normalization of heterosexual behavior. Gender is political. It points to the politics that structure a certain society at a certain historical stage. Power/knowledge represents these distinctions as natural and inevitable and subjects must conform. We pretend that our gendered behavior is authentic and spontaneous while at the same time trying to perform our masculinity/femininity in a socially sanctioned as correct way; otherwise, we risk being declared abnormal, isolated and ostracized by society.

That gender is performative means that it is built on the correct repetitions of gendered behavior. As Bultler remarked of Foucault, subjectification (and gender) are a never-ending process that depends on the correct repetition of socially approved behaviour. The failure to repeat correctly (when a man cries in public, for example, or when a woman kills her baby, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) reveals the artificiality of the gender system and at the same time gives evidence of a continuous resistance to the norms of gender. Thus, while Althusser was concerned with the ways in which interpellation successfully hails individuals into subject positions, Butler strives to prove that interpellation into specific gender positions does not always function and that there is a continuous, mostly unconscious resistance to the norms of heterosexual behavior. The fact that resistance is mainly conceived as unconscious differentiates Butler from theorists of agency, who situate agency at the conscious level of the human capacity for reflection.

**III. Julia Kristeva: Subjectivity Is a Process**

The French-Bulgarian writer, philosopher and feminist Julia Kristeva challenged conventional notions of identity through her concept of the abject and her ability to theorize subjectivity as discontinuous and perpetually in process. She drew heavily on Freud and Lacan, and yet she rejected their commitment to a hierarchical order and fixed and stable identities. She developed a model of subjectivity which brought to light the ambiguities and the uncertainties behind her predecessors' ordered thought.

Kristeva defined the abject as that which destabilizes all systems and hierarchies of meaning, truth, law and order. Her definition has much in common with postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's later understanding of liminality and the Third Space:



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> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour. (4)

How does Kristeva arrive at this conception of the abject? In *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, she takes up the Freudian theory of the formation of the conscious, rational subject through the repression of desire in the unconscious and argues that there is a zone where the repression of unconscious material is never complete. It is here that the process of abjection begins:

> The unconscious contents remain here excluded but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established… As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside. As if such an opposition subsumed the one between Conscious and Unconscious. (7)

Freud claimed that subjectivization reached stability when a dividing line was instituted between the subject's rational and social interests (what Cixous called the masculine domain of the Proper) and the repressed desires of the Oedipal stage. For Lacan, subjectivity began with the entrance into the Symbolic order, which condemned the subject to the elusive but tyrannical domination of language and simultaneously to a degree of nostalgia after the pre-oedipal stage called desire. Kristeva dissolves this model - there may be a rational attempt to repress the contents of the unconscious, yet unconscious material is not stored away in a closed box, but lingers on the borderline of the subject's self-definition. Subjectivization is thus never complete. There is no clear demarcation between subject and object, between the position of the 'I' and the outside world.

The subject is not a fixed system, with a clear boundary between conscious and unconscious and occasional outbreaks of irrational displacements, like in the Freudian model. The boundary is never completely established and so the subject is never formed. It oscillates at the gates of being, where this being generates intense feelings of ambivalence. "The subject does not perceive itself to be ordered and knowable. It feels it is constantly under threat, disrupted, in a state which is "as tempting as it is condemned" (1).

Our subjectivity, Kristeva claims, is inevitably linked to the perception of our physical body. The imaginary boundary which both separates our body from the exterior world and gives the illusion of bodily integrity is the basis on which we establish our sense of selfhood. In reality, this separation is highly problematic, as the imaginary unity of the body is uncertain (broken by flows of matter that cross the boundary) and provisional (threatened by death).

The separate and whole body is the body proper ("le corps proper"), a fantasy of a clean, stable, well-defined body which we maintain daily in order to feel safe in our sense of subjectivity. "Le corps propre" is what we imply by using the grammatical 'I'. It outlines a subject which is totally in control of his body and of himself. Nevertheless, this sense of selfhood that we nurture through the care of the body proper is not permanent. It is a fantasy controlled by ideology. Even though we are constantly in a defensive position, trying to draw the line between outside and inside, the boundary of the body proper is punctured by physical flows: mucus, sweat, tears, blood/menstrual blood, semen, vomit, urine, etc. These phenomena challenge the body proper, undermining its cleanliness and our sense of ownership and control.

The defensive position we take in front of these transgressions is the most obvious sign of the drama of abjection. We try to get rid of the evidence of these physical flows in order to feel secure in our sense of selfhood, closely tied with wholeness and cleanliness of the body. The self, Kristeva argues, attempts to define itself by excluding the evidence in a process of



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alienation: "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (3) However, neither the definition, nor the exclusion is ever complete and so "a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself"(1). We remain forever torn between the summons of the self and the repulsion towards transgressive matter –"matter out of place"[1] in Mary Douglas's definition (36). That is why things that cross boundaries unsettle us. We feel threatened by whatever seems to belong to both sides of the demarcating line between things. This line can be both physical and metaphorical. Kristeva exemplifies our horror of the physical abject in two common phobias: the repulsion we see at the sight of the skin on the surface of milk (indicative of the dividing line between liquid and air) and at a corpse (the ambiguous line between life and death).

The horror of the abject is the horror of the ambiguous, the undefined, the mixed and inter-polluted. This applies not only to the level of physical things and states, but also to abstract systems of power, law, order and truth. The subject's maintenance of the body proper, its careful exclusion of everything ambiguous and transgressive constitutes the basis for the political and social stability of the patriarchal order. In every political, cultural and religious system there is a continuous battle between the law and abjection, which defies and unsettles the law. Kristeva exemplifies this continuous struggle with examples from the Old Testament (Leviticus), in which animals defined as pure (and suitable to be eaten) are only those which keep inside their domain: pasture, sea or air.

Although both Butler's and Kristeva's theories were seminal in defining feminist thought, they came under intense criticism from some neo-Marxist postcolonial thinkers such as Aijaz Ahmad or the Subaltern Studies group, who argued that the poststructuralist/postmodern conception of a split, fragmented and unstable subject cannot accommodate the idea of a minimum agency that is necessary for the postcolonial subject in order to resist the strategies of colonial and neo-colonial power.

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[1] In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas analyzes dirt as an essentially ambiguous and anomalous matter and emphasizes that our culture regards dirt as "matter out of place" (36)



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