Lin-jie Wang
Research Scholar
Department of English
National Kaohsiung Normal University
Kaohsiung City, Taiwan, Taipei
j613622@gmail.com

Using Judith Butler’s Gender Performativity to Investigate the Subversion of Gender Identity in *The Danish Girl*

Abstracts

This paper intends to use Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity elaborated in her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). The purpose of this thesis is to use Butler’s gender theory to analyze the gender identity of the protagonist in the *The Danish Girl*. *The Danish Girl* is based on a true story about the life of Lili Elbe, who is one of the first persons to undergo sex reassignment surgery in the world. Through the novel, we can see the Lili’s transgender process from male to female, including external appearance changes and internal transformation of mind. Also, we can know his mentality change during that period, and the reason why Einar decides to choose to live with the identity of Lili instead of his original sex and life. Finally it makes the decision of sex reassignment surgery to change his gender. I will examine the protagonist’s mental confusion and struggle in the process of identification, his/her gender crossing emotions and the vague zone of the traditional binary gender boundary. I will also explore the society’s attitudes...
towards the concept of gender, and whether gender identity is a natural formation or a social construction.

Keywords: Judith Butler, gender performativity, gender identity, *The Danish Girl*

This paper intends to use Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to analyze the gender identity of the protagonist in the *The Danish Girl*. *The Danish Girl* is a novel by American writer David Ebershoff, published in 2000 and was adapted into a feature film directed by Tom Hooper in 2015. It is based on a true story about the life of Lili Elbe, who is one of the first persons to undergo sex reassignment surgery in the world. The novel is also a remarkable love story inspired by the lives of Einar Wegener and Gerda Wegener. However, their marriage and work evolve as they navigate Lili’s groundbreaking journey as a transgender pioneer. Through the novel, we can see the Lili’s transgender process from male to female, including external appearance changes and internal transformation of mind. Also, we can know his mentality change during that period, and the reason why Einar decides to choose to live with the identity of Lili instead of his original sex and life. Finally it makes the decision of sex reassignment surgery to change his gender.

Judith Butler said, “I’m permanently troubled by identity categories, consider them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as sites of necessary troubled. (14)” Butler argued that identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes. If we respond to the call for our identity, the mechanism of the call will be more consolidated. Butler understand that discourse or theory is a double-edged sword, either edge will injury yourself. If she establishes a conclusive gender identity, she will instead colonized by this identity sign. Thus, for Butler, to raise a theory of homosexual is not to create a fixed discourse, instead, you have to avoid making the sign of homosexual visible and to make the meaning of this sign stay in an ambiguous status.
Therefore, Butler uses the strategies of disclaiming which she does not either denies or confesses. In other words, she would not say that she is not homosexual or heterosexual, but she also will not say what exactly her gender identity is straightforwardly. When we are claiming who we are, we have already fallen into the pattern defined by hegemony. Butler questions the mechanisms and norms identity; she argues that identity is not stable but a repeated performance, a process of identification and a constructed result. As a result, Butler proposes the theory of gender performativity and uses imitation as an opposing strategy.

Butler’s essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” which was published in 1989 and collected in Diana Fuss’s Inside/out: lesbian theories, gay theories in 1991, during this period, Butler published her Gender Trouble, which is the important work of gender study. We can see the basic issue and concept about the theory of performativity in this essay. The aim of this essay is to resist homophobic regulatory oppression through rethinking gender and sexuality. She points out that identity categories are tools of oppressive regulatory systems and the sign of gender is always opaque and the identity cannot be a transcendental existence. From this, both sexuality and gender are the construction.

Butler in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” emphasizes that the boundaries of gender cannot be distinguished and defined clearly. She says:

To claim that this is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalization of this ‘I.’ But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself. In other words, such a statement presupposes that the ‘I’ exceeds its determination, and even produces that very excess in and by the act which seeks to exhaust the semantic field of that ‘I.’ (15)
Whether there is a stable and fixed “I” that can claim my own identity? For Butler, the answer is negative. She considers that when someone claims who he/she is, he/she claims who he/she is not at the same time. That is to say, the “is” has to exclude the “is not” so that it can be established. However, the relation between “is” and “is not” is not mutually exclusive, instead they exist simultaneously. In other words, a person can be “is” and “not is” at the same time. Therefore, when we say who “I” am, there are some part of “I” that exceeds the “I” what I said and the excess part can be explained for the ambiguous and uncontrollability of “I.”

Einar, for example, is defined as a male because of the inherent biological sex but considers himself a female. He dresses up like a woman and learns the demeanor of a woman. He marries a female, but he is into the male at the same time. Therefore, what is the gender of Einar? Does he fundamentally turn into a female after the sex-change surgery? What could be the meaning of gender if we do not have the gender characteristics? How could my gender be defined if I have two gender characteristics simultaneously, such as Herculine Barbin? How could I define my own gender if I encounter with the gender identity disorder? Is the definition of the gender dualistically defined into male and female without the possibilities of others? I think through explores Butler’s gender theory, we will find some answers of these questions.

On the section of “On the Being of Gayness as Necessary Drag” of Butler’s assay, she expounds the concept of the “performativity” and takes her own experience for example that she was invited to Yale’s conference on homosexuality as a lesbian. She asked what is the meaning of going to conference “as” a lesbian or to “be” a lesbian? If she has already been being a lesbian for so long, but still has to “be” a lesbian to participate. It means that when she participates, she is “playing” a lesbian. But, as Butler said, “To say that I ‘play’ at being
one is not to say that I am not one ‘really’; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that ‘being’ gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed.”(18)

Therefore, this kind of play is not a cosplay or a role playing, instead, it is a performativity. Because I cannot separate with this lesbian identity that I played, I am the result of the repeated play not the cause. And every time, this “I” will replace by the next “I.” Although every play is similar, every similarity cannot completely interpret the “I.” As a consequence, there is no priori existence of “I” to perform the gender, it is through the repetition of play that makes one a heterosexual or homosexual. So Butler elaborates:

What “performs” does not exhaust the “I”; it does not lay out in visible terms the comprehensive content of that “I,” for if the performance is “repeated,” there is always the question of what differentiates from each other the moments of identity that are repeated. … This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, and this “I” does not play its lesbianism as a role. Rather, it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the “I” is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian “I.” (18)

In the novel, Einar dressed up as a woman, named herself Lili, and attended the prom. It was kind of a cosplay at that moment, but through continuously repeated performed as Lili, Einar gradually explored his true gender. That is, the appearance of Lili is the result of the repeated play, not the reason. The “play” here not only is when Einar dressed up as a woman, but also can refer to when he was in a man’s dress up. Because Butler said that gender identity is not a priori existence, it is an identification processes through repeated performativity. And the sign of identity is a strategic provisionality, so the gender identity can be an open and flowing field which is constantly being revised and shaped. Therefore, Einar
did not have a priori gender identity exist originally, but through his repeated performativity, he finally determine which is his gender. In other words, we generally considered that the male Einar is his original gender, but actually the male Einar is only a gender identity we preset at first. The female Lili is the outcome and also Einar’s real gender identity.

Therefore, Butler mentions that the sign of gender is always unclear and not self-evident. The identity is also not a transcendental existence, but an identification process through repeated bodily performativity. Furthermore, Butler thinks that the sign of identity is not equivalent to the identity itself because if we think of this sign as strategic and temporary, then the identity of course can be an open and flowing field which is constantly being revised and shaped. Butler extends Foucault’s concept of subject formation by using social constructionism and poststructuralism to criticize that the traditional epistemology will default a subjectivity category which exists prior to the speaking subject. Butler claims that no non-self-evident ontological subjectivity exists, and mentions that what we comprehend “authenticity” of gender identity is actually a hallucination produced by constant repetition, a mistaken cognitive of hallucination.

Butler thinks that the consistency and coherence among sex, gender, sex awareness, sexual orientation and sexuality are all illusory imagination. But, why this kind of coherent phenomenon maintains? It is because under the heterosexual mechanism, those who are not compliant with the specification will be excluded, ignored and depressed. Regarding the concept of gender dichotomy, Foucault thought this kind of gender characteristic is usually a random occurrence and history formed by chance, rather than a certain and transcendental existence. If so, the gender role is not unchanged after it is confirmed, but will change because of the surrounding environmental stimuli. Additionally, Butler quotes Nietzsche and
emphasizes that no transcendental or essential subject exists. The reason why performativity can generate meaning is the action rather than transcendental existence.
Works Cited


