



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 3.4
IJAR 2015; 1(4): 357-360
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 07-02-2015
Accepted: 16-03-2015

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The question of identity in feminist thought

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Abstract

Identity is a construct of social and cultural ideologies. They pose themselves as natural and enforce norms that define what it is to be a woman, further they warn and intimidate to expel those who do not abide by these norms. No one can be a person without being male or female. The formation of gender should not be considered as something achieved by a single act; rather, it is the reiterative and citational practice, the obligatory repetition of gender norms that create and constrain the gendered subject. The naming of the girl commences the never ending process of girling, the making of a girl, through an “assignment” of obligatory reiteration of gender norms, “the forcible citation of a norm”.

Keywords: Ideology, gender, sexual identity, marginalization, gender roles

Introduction

The American philosopher Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) discusses the concept of identity and its importance for a feminist. Rejecting the notion that identity is made up of certain essential features of women, Butler proposes that identity is a construct of social and cultural ideologies. They pose themselves as natural and enforce norms that define what it is to be a woman, further they warn and intimidate to expel those who do not abide by these norms. French philosopher Louis Althusser expresses almost the same idea that ideology turns people into subjects: that is they are interpolated by forms and strategies of communication which determine their vision in a particular way and make them realize themselves as free individuals totally free to work as they wish whereas the truth is the other way round, but it is convenient for the ruling groups to make people live under this illusion.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler says gender is considered as performative, that it depends on what one does, not on what one is. It is created by one's acts, in the way that a promise is made by the act of promising. One becomes a man or a woman by repeated acts, which are, like acts of speech, determined by social conventions and cultural rules. So our being a man or a woman depends on the socially established ways, but this does not suggest that gender is a choice, and we can decide for us to be a man or to be a woman. Actually to be a subject at all is to be gendered:

No one can be a person without being male or female. “Subjected to gender but subjectivated [made a subject] by gender”, writes Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, “the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves”^[1]. Nor should the formation of gender be considered as something achieved by a single act; rather, it is the reiterative and citational practice, the obligatory repetition of gender norms that create and constrain the gendered subject.

Making her point clearer further, Butler says that the expression “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” with which a baby is received into the world is the starting point of the construction of the subject through language. The naming of the girl commences the never ending process of girling, the making of a girl, through an “assignment” of obligatory reiteration of gender norms, “the forcible citation of a norm”^[2]. To be a subject is to accomplish this “assignment” of reiteration, but as we almost always fail to secure the expected marks in the examination, some never even completely adopt the gender criteria we are forced to meet with. Therefore a gap appears for not fulfilling the “assignment”, and for Butler, this gap opens the possibilities for resistance and change. Thus, if the repetition of an utterance on a particular occasion makes something happen (you made a promise) for Austin, the

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compulsory reiteration can create social and historical realities (you become a woman) for Butler.

During the 1980s, discourses and movements based on issues of identity had a great impact on the world at large. Questions of cultural, religious, national, linguistic, and sexual identity captured the focal positions, forcing questions of economic justice, for the moment, to the background. Cultural revivalism, national liberation, religious “fundamentalism” and sexual affirmation all fused to construct some of the most vocal and perceptible political and social movements of modern times^[3]. The formation of identity is now a major concern posing difficulties for the social scientists. Identity is no more talked about in terms of identity crisis, alienation, or role conflict, but thought of in relation with the possibilities and forms of resistance expressed by fractured, hyphenated and multiple identities associated first with psychoanalytic, then structuralist and lately with post-structuralist and feminist critiques of an essentialist subjectivity on which earlier theories regarding identity were founded. One of the major issues behind this concern with identity and in identity politics is the relationship between marginalisation and a politics of resistance, and positive, empowering choices of identity and a politics of difference.

In earlier theories, the problem of identity was related to the issues of manipulation and alienation. An idealised past was always there behind the worries to define and explain identities by stable gender roles, ethnic origin, occupation, life stage and specially class. Though there was an opportunity to go beyond what they were born into through social mobility, education and through other chances that modern life offers, but it was a limited movement and they were expected not to break the stable identities.

Now the subject has been deconstructed of its centrality and identities have become multiple, fractured and layered. But this decentring of the subject is often viewed less as an indication of marginalization and oppression than as the basis for a politics of difference where marginal identities become a source of empowerment and resistance. Identity politics is now considered as an area of cultural and political resistance within society and is often seen as indicative of a turn to a new type of postmodern or late-modern society. The space of identity is heterogeneous, folded, fragmented and paradoxical in which a clear singular subject position is not possible. So, in a world where identities cannot be fixed to singular uncomplicated subject positions, identity becomes all about multiple location and performativity within that location. In this condition the main issue attached with such spatial uncertainty is identification. It is through identifications with others, identifications that can be multiple, overlapping or fractured, that identity-that sense of self recognition and belonging with others-is gained.

The reference to “the subject” here can be understood in at least three ways. Firstly, it implies the human subject and the concepts of what it means to be called, or to name oneself, ‘a woman’ or a ‘a man’. Related with this is the notion of a *collective* subject, ‘women’: feminists generally speak about women as a group, some even use the term “class”, with common needs and purposes. The third meaning of ‘subject’ is subject as a discourse. We can take feminism itself as a subject, a subject of inquiry, and ask what are the implications of this preoccupation with the human subject for the political and intellectual practice of feminism.

The subjectivity based on the theories of Lacan and

Althusser, that decides identity as not something fixed or essential but located in language and ideology came to be regarded as the product of an interpellating process in which individuals seemed to be located apparently as free agents, but actually were the products of the ideologies of capitalist societies. Foucault sees subjectivity as historically and discursively constructed. According to de Certeau discourses locate subject positions within a space of power-knowledge where we can write, not life scripts but little stories, poems, language games, in which we can rearrange our identities and our identifications with others in partial and changing ways. While this space in which identities are constructed can be viewed as all pervasive, it provides to some people a freedom in which anything and any kind of identity is possible within a post-modern world. The rejection of an essentialist view of the subject has not taken to the over determination of identity by discourse but to arguments about a new voluntarism and vitalism in which identity becomes a matter of choice and style^[4]. This is what has come to be known as identity in the post-modern world. There is no master script, a super model which we can look up to shape our own identity. Whether we accept this reality or not, it is around this issue that the current problem of identity is situated. “This is the world of identity as difference and as recognition; dominant identities which defined themselves against a host of others, whose Otherness was something dangerous and marginal, have lost their hegemony”^[5]. However, this difference is not just at the peripheries and beyond but is prevalent and everywhere, having become, if not hegemonic, then at least something that is to be taken into consideration; a powerful place from which the vestiges of the old but significantly weakening authority of essentialism is challenged. Making this concept more clear Hall argues that the non-essentialist conceptions of identity grow around a play of difference within identity positions which are expressed through dialogues between their constituent parts. He says that a Black cultural identity is constructed through the different positions of presence Africaine, presence European and presence Americaine and this difference is used to form a unity and sense of shared identity^[6].

For Bhabha this difference is not always an uncomplicated location. It does not clearly define what is central and what is marginal: rather it operates through a changing similitude of different locations from which identities or pieces of identities-emerge, often in tension and partial connection with others. It is not just those who have been pushed to the margins experience the identities in difference, rather it is a condition which everyone experiences in society. We may have privileged subject positions as men, as middle class, as White, as Westerners, and so on but it is also possible at the same time to have marginal positions. A young White, rich, Western man may still have the marginal position in terms of his sexual orientation or in terms of some disability on his part. The opposite is also true. Those whose identities are situated on the margins: working class Black men, for example, may still have better positions than others-Black women for example. However, it is very difficult to say anything with certainty. There is no fixed classificatory method by which degrees of difference and marginality can be measured and ranked.

Dealing with the question of identity Julia Kristeva reaches at the conclusion that all identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and consequently,

the identity of the speaker. She calls this instability of language, meaning and subjectivity, the “subject in process” to convey the incomplete condition of the subject which is always becoming but never stable. Here ‘process’ beside being the process in the literal sense is also a legal process where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are always questioned, brought to trial, over-ruled”^[7]. Jaqueline Rose mentions that the *prescriptive* (what women *should* do) and *descriptive* (what is demanded of women, what they are *expected* to do) nature of patriarchal culture frustrates any attempt of stable identity. She calls it “failure” of identity. But this “failure” is not a moment to be repented in a process of adaptation, or development into normality, which ideally takes its course. “Instead ‘failure’ is something endlessly repeated and relieved moment by moment throughout our individual histories”^[8]. It can be seen not only in the symptom, but also in dreams, in slips of the tongue and in forms of sexual pleasure which are pressed to the margins of the norm. Thus “failure” is not the inadequacy of certain individuals to achieve full subjecthood but rather that “resistance to identity at the very heart of psychic life”^[9]. Linking psychoanalysis with feminism, Rose calls it “one of the few places in our culture where it is recognised as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their rules as women, if indeed they do at all”^[10]. Freud also accepts this increasingly in his work. He turns from his earlier controversial description of the little girl struck with her “inferiority” or “injury” in front of the anatomy of the little boy and wisely accepting her fate (“injury” as the *fact* of being feminine), to an account which quite clearly explains the process of becoming “feminine” as an “injury” or “catastrophe” for the complexity of her earlier psychic and sexual life (“injury” as its *price*).

Both Julia Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose recognise that there are psychological and political arguments to support this figure of the fragmented, unrealized female subject. Kristeva thinks that to function in the system, the individuals need to attain a certain type of stability. Though this stability is an illusion which is frequently challenged, but it is an important illusion to maintain our everyday living. At the same time women need a different notion of subjectivity, if any political change is desired, that can represent women as capable and purposeful. Feminism has to manage a way between psychoanalysis and politics and, as Rose thinks, the idea of the subject as at odds with social norms presents a useful point of disjunction for any radical politics. It is an inconsistency in the social system which feminism can exploit.

Catherine Belsey also explores the construction of the individual through and in language. “The subject is constructed in language and in discourse and, since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology, in ideology”^[11]. It is in this sense that ideology, as Althusser argues, constructs individuals as subjects where subjectivity appears “obvious” that they are autonomous individuals, having subjectivity and consciousness which is the source of their beliefs and actions. “That people are unique, distinguishable, irreplaceable identities is ‘the elementary ideological effect’”^[12]. Though the obviousness of subjectivity has been challenged by the linguistic theory originating from Saussure, Emile Benveniste argues that it is only in language that we can posit ourselves as the subject “I” of a sentence. Realization of the self is possible only through contrast, differentiation: “I” cannot be thought of

without the conception of “non-I”, “you”, and dialogue, the fundamental condition of language, implies a reversible polarity between “I” and “you”. “Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as ‘I’ in his discourse”^[13].

But within ideology it appears “obvious” that the individual speaker is the source of the meaning of his or her utterance. Post-Saussurean linguistics gives a more complex relationship between the individual and meaning, because it is language itself which, by making difference between concepts, offers the possibility of meaning. In fact, it is only when the individual takes up the position of the subject within language that it is able to produce meaning. As Jacques Derrida puts it: what was it that in Saussure in particular reminded us of? That ‘language [which consists only of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject.’ This implies that the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-conscious) is inscribed in the language, that he is a ‘function’ of the language. He becomes a *speaking* subject only by confirming his speech ... to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences....^[14].

Thus ideology conceals the role of language in the construction of the subject. As a result people ‘recognise’ (misrecognise) themselves in the ways in which ideology “interpellates” them. They start working by themselves and “willingly” accept the subject-positions necessary to their participation in the social formation. Here the subject is not only a grammatical subject, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions, but also a “subjected being” who succumbs to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, the boss, Man, conscience):

The individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection^[15].

But this construction of identity is done differently in different cultures, so there is no single identity. Judith Butler defines this destruction of identity as a liberating opportunity for the construction of new subjectivities and new political configurations. She sees feminism’s loyalty to identity politics as restrictive and limiting. The new way for women lies in the “subversive” practices, in the devices of performance, parody and pastiche to undermine the status of “the real” and “the natural”. Butler says, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”^[16]. Thus what our culture comprehends by feminine behaviour is not the result of a feminine identity; instead, our understanding of a feminine identity is produced, within signification, through the repeated performance of words and actions which we code as “feminine”.

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