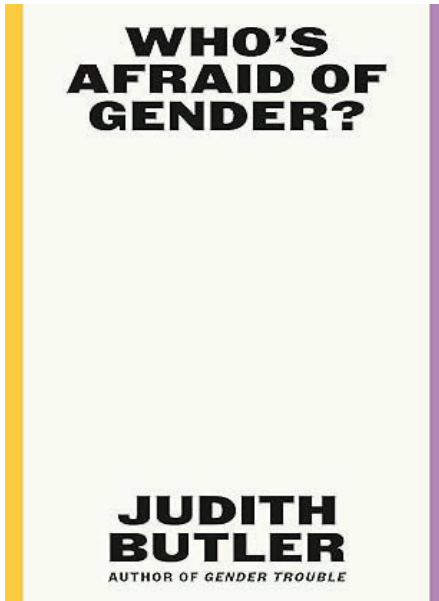


Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?*

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Who's Afraid of Gender?

Judith Butler

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It is ironically regressive that Judith Butler, who, in writing *Gender Trouble* in 1990, has permanently changed the epistemological direction of western feminist and queer theories, would publish a book in 2024 titled *Who's Afraid of Gender?* If, by comparison, the new title sounds anachronistic, then that is the point Butler makes, rather passionately, often angrily,

in their¹ new book: the world is sleepwalking to authoritarianism. Gender is the homogenous scapegoat, the political phantasm, deliberately instrumented to take the postmodern clock back to the time of a homogenous patriarchal order that never existed. Readers may pay particular attention to the dedication page and the note of acknowledgements before they delve into the book of 300-odd pages, divided into ten chapters plus an Introduction and a Conclusion. The dedication, “For the young people who still teach me”, establishes the temporal tone of the book. 68-year-old Judith Butler, whose esoteric and enigmatic writing style has given them the status of an impenetrable mystic, would now write for young people, the Generation Z and Alpha, who probably are more used to watching YouTube videos and listening to bitesize podcasts than to reading theoretical books. The Acknowledgement provides a loose context and the purpose of the book. Butler conceived the book's idea after an attack they encountered in São Paulo, Brazil, in 2017. Saved by two opposites in the scene, their partner, Wendy Brown, and a stranger young man, Butler became curious about questions of “spontaneous ethics” and “political solidarity” (289) and the book became forthcoming.

¹ Judith Butler uses they/them as their pronoun. Therefore, I have used they/them throughout the text to refer to their pronoun. I am aware of the inconveniences this may cause to the readers.



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Readers following Butler's body of work would not be surprised by their preoccupation with ethics and political solidarity. Indeed, most of Butler's writings, books, interviews, and public talks in the last two decades (after the so-called 'War on Terror') have engaged with the question of ethics, the idea of grievable life when the representation of war frames some lives more grievable than others (Butler, *War*). As gender became mainstream both in academia and outside of it, and Butlerian terms such as "performative", "heteronormative matrix", "the repeated stylization of the body" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 47, 175) have become academically common phrases, although not unproblematically, Butler, the theorist, seemed to move on from gender discourse, journeying into the core realm of philosophy: ethics and politics – what makes life livable and how do we coexist in an increasingly divided world? One can question why Butler felt compelled to return to the gender question and how this gender question would fit into their questioning of ethics and politics. This book brings all these issues together as Butler argues that the political fear-mongering around gender in contemporary times is at the heart of many unethical policies and practices that hinder the possibilities of life. Countering this would require a reimagining of feminist politics of resistance based on "transnational coalitions" (28) of shared goal to challenge oppressive forces of authoritarian power.

The Introduction, 'Gender Ideology and the Fear of Destruction', gives an overview of the topics that the book aims to cover with varied success. Butler does not claim to define gender; rather, at the book's onset, they remind readers that while gender is now commonplace, it does not always follow an agreed-on definition. For Butler, the open-endedness of the term gender, much celebrated as a form of postmodern fluidity, also makes it vulnerable to be an "empty signifier" or an "overdetermined rhetoric" (30), quickly filled up with right-wing political rhetoric and religious dogmatism, especially at a time and age of global precarity and disinformation. Gender is central to the local, regional, and global 'rises' of nationalism, religious and cultural fundamentalism, leading to xenophobia and brutal hatred at individual and community levels. Drawing on French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche's concept of fantasy as a social instead of an individual location of desire and anxiety, Butler suggests that Laplanche's theory of "phantasm" or "phantasmatic scene" can be appropriated to shed light on how "gender substitutes for a complex set of anxieties and becomes an overdetermined site where the fear of destruction gathers" (26), contributing to proliferating an anti-gender political ideology. Given the centrality of this concept to substantiate the book's overarching claim to find a counter-narrative (or imagination) to combat this threatening phantasm, it is limiting that in subsequent chapters, the idea is sidetracked or is left unattended until the Conclusion, where concepts of anti-gender as phantasm reappears.

The book's ten chapters can be divided into two broad terrains: political and theoretical. The first five: 'The Global Scene', 'Vatican Views', 'Contemporary Attacks on Gender in the United States', 'Trumps, Sex and the Supreme Court', 'TERFs and the British Matter of Sex' are context-specific elaborations and analysis of the rise of anti-gender ideology and political position across many parts of the world, including in the western liberal states. The Global Scene is undoubtedly broad brush, and deliberately so. Butler avoids the trap of dividing the world in the so-called 'global south' or 'north', arguing that whether it is Vladimir Putin's Russia, Georgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy's ascension to power, or Hungary's ultra-nationalistic political ideology to protect and promote Hungarian families to combat immigration, in European contexts, conservative gender ideologies are dominating election-winning manifestos. While the Roman Catholic Church's view on sexual differences between men and women and heterosexuality as the central mandate to form families may have a strong influence in the Eastern European context, Butler is no less critical to suggest that in the United States, the land champions to celebrate individual freedom, federal states increasingly control ranges of rights, from women's reproductive rights to what children can read in schools and libraries. Only recently (in May 2024), Harrison Butker, American football player, blamed "gender cultural ideologies" for making educated young women forget that their ideal role is at home, as a homemaker, wife, and mother, bearing testimony of Butler's concern (Looker).

For the UK context, Butler's exclusive focus on specific feminist ideas, which they define as "anti-gender ideology" (142), is disproportionate to the enormity of the religious/state nexus presented in the US and other global contexts. Reviewers of the book have rightly criticized Butler for their inability (or unwillingness) to differentiate between authoritarian regimes and feminists with alternative viewpoints on complex issues such as transgender rights and the boundary of women as a category (Özkırmılı; "From Ivory Tower"). Butler takes issues with British writer J.K. Rowling's position to differentiate between transgender women and natal women to ensure women's access to safe space. They have failed to develop a critical dialogue with British feminist philosopher Kathleen Stock, whose book, *The Material Girl*, they cite profusely, only to dismiss. Butler seems to sidetrack the fact that Stock's writing was mainly about the loopholes of the statutory law called 'Gender Recognition Act' introduced in 2004 in the UK, which making it a statutory law to recognize people's acquired gender, identity, has over the years raised genuine concerns around women's access to female only space (such as public toilet) and transgender rights. Only in April 2024, the National Health Service (NHS) published a full and independent report on the health and care needs, challenges, and services for a growing number of

young people needing clinical/care intervention around their gender identity (Cass). Stock's points are crucial, and dismissing her points as mere transphobic feminism as Butler does is intellectually counterproductive.

The final five chapters are theoretical, drawing from a wide range of local epistemological resources that powerfully counter the dominance of the western theoretical premises shaping gender discourses. Topics such as 'What About Sex?' 'What Gender are you?' 'Nature/Culture: Toward Co-Construction' may seem resurrecting from the post-Beauvoirian era. However, they are essential topics that need continual discussion. One of the long-standing criticisms of the cultural/postmodern 'turn' of gender theory from the 1990s is that this body of theory undermines the material reality of the sexed body, an issue Stock takes up in her previously mentioned book, especially against Butler's cultural theory of gender. Within this context, Butler returns with the argument that the binary of sex as natural/gender as cultural is epistemologically flawed, in part because sex is always social, hence semi-imaginary and semi-mandated by socio-cultural and economic norms. In other words, celebratory phrases such as 'it is a boy or a girl' are always social, although the identity is assigned based on biological marks. As gender theories are typically embedded in humanities and social sciences, it is easy to forget that the term gender most primarily appeared as a medical (instead of social or cultural) term with John Mooney's now infamous Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins (1966-1979), where Mooney, through a series of cruel surgical process, attempted to bring sex and gender alignment for babies born with intersexed bodies. Butler needs to be appreciated to remind their readers the biological/experimental origin of the term. When sex is already gendered and gender is an arrangement to align sexed bodies, how can we reconcile, yet again, the decade-long debate of sex versus gender as nature versus culture? Butler proposes the term 'co-construction' to move beyond the binary framework because human lives, indeed any life, are "born into a state of dependency that makes its life processes social from the beginning" (210).

The final two chapters, 'Racial and Colonial Legacies of Gender Dimorphism' and 'Foreign Terms, or the Disturbance of Transition' revisit the historical trajectory of heterosexualisation of male/female relationship as a colonial/imperial project that violently undermined the indigenous, localized, non-institutional ways of bonding relations across genders. Earlier in the book, Butler articulates clearly, "World Bank and the EU cannot, and should not, be the representatives of gender freedom and equality" that may "confuse exploitation with freedom" (62). To conclude, Butler wishes that feminists across border will take the responsibility of creating a world of freedom and equality, for who translation will be an ethical responsibility to counter the western epistemological hegemony: "Because no

national language can supply an adequate framework for understanding gender, translation becomes one important scene for an anti-colonial alliance” (242). “Alliance, translation, and a counter-imaginary” are needed to make gender a collective instrument of political change. Butler, one of the influential thinkers shaping the 21st century’s epistemology, urges feminists to take politics of coalition and resistance at the heart of feminist discourse because, without politics, feminism can be a neoliberal lifestyle choice, an academic consciousness with little bearing on reality, and an easy political weapon to divide and conquer anxious electorates.

Who’s Afraid of Gender? is a book with specific yawning gaps. With robust editing, it could have been half the size. Butler’s reluctance to engage critically with broader feminist voices questions their capacity to handle academic critique, and their sparsely referenced writing style can easily confuse graduate students who are constantly penalized for not adhering to academic integrity. Beyond these and many other gaps, this book discusses issues that affect individuals at local, national, and transnational contexts of our living time. It is commendable that Butler has used their public intellectual status to write a book that brings gender, politics, and ethics into one collapsing frame, asking feminists of the future to be proactive to create a just world for all.

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