Queer Butler?

HATEM Youcef
Department of English/FLL

Because "[e]ven the most common and unremarkable title, the bare name of a novel's central character, will tell us something in advance about how to read" (Mullan, 2006:16), the choice of a question and the selection of the weird word queer and the proper name of a thinker as a title for the following article is not fortuitous; it purposes to shed light on one of the most controversial theoretician and philosopher of the modern times. Right away, we have to underscore the fact that the name Butler is not a distinctive feature of this wo/man thinker at issue i.e., Judith Butler. In fact, Samuel Butler (1835-1902) popularized the name in question thanks to his famous *Erewhon* (1872) "in which an imaginary utopian community in New Zealand serves to satirize the follies of contemporary England as he saw them" (MacArthur 1992:169). However, it has been Judith Butler who has recently caused this patronymic to enjoy the fame which is its nowadays.

Judith Butler's first contribution to the realm of theory came in the form of a dissertation[1] submitted in 1984 at Yale University and entitled *Subjects of desire.* The text was revised for publication in a book form in 1987 and reprinted in 1999. *Subjects of Desire* or a piece of juvenilia, as Butler tenderly calls it, is a philosophical text that deals with Hegel[2] and some outstanding French philosophers. It encapsulates some of Butler's principal ideas which are found again in her later publications. Hegel holds sway in Butler's earlier work, and later work too as she admits it, "'[i]n a sense, all my work remains within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions: What is the relation between desire and recognition, and how is it that the

constitution of the subject entails a radical and constitutive relation to alterity?' (qtd in Salih, 2002:20).

Beside Hegel, Foucault and post-structuralism (deconstruction)[3] constitutes the essential source of inspiration for Butler who undertakes to deconstruct the traditional binary opposition between male and female. Foucault and Derrida are by far crucial sources for Butler's theories about gender/sex, subject, etc. She draws from the former the central concepts of genealogy and power and deconstruction from the latter. Butler's theoretical alignment with Foucault, Derrida and also Althusser made some categorize her in the post-structuralist school albeit her oeuvre also lends itself to a psychoanalytic categorization through her reliance on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. On the other hand, the influence of feminism is easily discernible in the writings of Butler especially the French Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig along with the American anthropologist Gayle Rubin. This blend of theories adds to the queerness of Butler's thought[4]. Her deep concern in the process of construction of the unstable subject and her negation of established constructs such as gender and sex are what makes of Butler the representative of queer theory[5] *par excellence*. Queer theory does not adhere to the 'straight culture' and its emergence rightfully coincided with the trailing of gays and the eventfulness of AIDS. It is enough to write that queer theory "remains a nebulous and unwieldy category of critical practice" (Helmers, 2011: 798) to daunt any interest on the part of the reader.

The same nebulosity is found in Butler's thinking. However, for Salih, "Butler's work has changed the way we think about sex sexuality, gender and language" (Salih, 2002: i). If anything, Butler is closely associated with theorizing gender and subjecthood. She examines the processes through which the individual becomes gendered. Butler's relationship with gay and lesbianism has been

demonstrated and she avows to have worked "with an extraordinary group of activists first as a board member and then as board chair of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (1994–7), an organization that represents sexual minorities on a broad range of human rights issues" (Butler, [1990]1999: xviii).

Though she is closely associated with Queer theory, Judith Butler belongs in more than a trend of literary and cultural   theory. In fact she contributed to the enrichment of psychoanalytic theory postmodernist theory, poststructuralist theory, feminism, gender studies and last but not least philosophy. Butler's most famous book is the seminal and canonical *Gender Trouble* (1990), yet *Bodies That Matter* (1993), *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), *Antigone's Claim* (2000), *Undoing Gender* (2004) and other works are all equally important and essential for an insightful seizure of this enormous theoretician who answers to the name of Judith Butler. Her books are also intimately interrelated in the sense that they treat, extend and expand central issues which are moulded in unanswered questions-Butler's trade mark-that trouble feminists, non-feminists, linguists psychoanalysts, philosophers, sociologists and politicians alike.

In response to those who disapprove of her style, Butler iconoclastically directs the readers' attention to the ideological undercurrents that permeate style and grammar. For her, "neither grammar nor style are politically neutral », and "[l]earning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself" (Ibid: xix). According to Butler "[i]f gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given" (Ibid:xx).

Indeed, language is undermined and as often as not,

> [t]he demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly "clear" view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, "let me make one thing perfectly clear" and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of "clarity," and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of "clarity" and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does "transparency" keep obscure?
>
> (Ibid: xx)

As a matter of fact, reading Butler is not a sinecure. In her *Judith Butler* (2002) Sara Salih rightly points out that, "the movement of her thought would resemble a Mobius strip, or a series of Mobius strips exemplifying how her theories curve or circle around issues without attempting to resolve them" (Salih, 2002:3).

Butler questions and quests about identity and subjectivity; the gendered identity which is 'constructed for us' according to her (Ibid:2). 'Subjecthood' and the process whereby the subject is brought into existence constitute the essential of Butler's thought. Unlike so many thinkers, Butler does not pretend to supply answers to the questions she asks in her various formulations; she favours the Hegelian dialectic which entails a thesis negated by an anti-thesis which abuts to a resolution or synthesis which is not definitive , but rather constitutes the ground of another thesis. Open-endedness is the principal characteristic of dialectic and Butler's theorizing. Butler rebukes final resolution which she regards as anti-democratic and oppressive (Ibid: 4). Like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Butler's thought is concerned with identity and subject as a limitless and continuous process. Butler resorts to Freud and borrows his 'melancholy' to expound her melancholic heterosexuality which is a

4

"structure of identity which is based upon a socially imposed primary 'loss' or rejection of homosexual desire." (Ibid: 9). Queer troubles the hitherto constructs of gender, sex, subject by reversing the traditional conception and 'construction' of identity. In sum, the subject/individual does not frame institutions, practices and discourses, but are shaped and effected by them and Butler envisages other ways of effecting the subject. Hence her theory of performativity; a coinage that is not easy to decipher and should not be confused with performance. Butler introduces the word performativity in *Gender Trouble* and assets that: 'gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed' (Butler, 1990:34). 'Subject-in-process' is the other neologism we owe to Butler who borrows this conception from Hegel whose Phenomenology is framed like a bildungsroman (initiation from ignorance to knowledge), thus the Butlerian subject passes from stages through which it passes from misrecognition to recognition.

Butler refutes the pre-existence of a subject called 'woman' as feminists assume; she aligns with De Beauvoir in underlying the fact that gender is what we **do** not what **are**. For Butler gender identity results from language, i.e.it is language and discourse which constitutes our identity as male or female. This very idea meets the demand of my thesis since I contend that Hardy, the author constructs the gender of his female and male characters subversively. Language in general and discourse in particular, have much to do with this process of construction of the identity; Butler does not mean performative in the Austinian[6] sense, i.e., an action or performance performed by a doer. In fact, she distinguishes performativity from performance and states that:

> [. . .] performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names [.. . .] The regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality

of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.

<div align="right">(Butler, 1993:.2)</div>

Needless to say that behind every text is somehow or other a palimpsest in that it vehicle a subtext which tells the ills of the author. *Gender Trouble* and the other Butlerian texts innuendo to the earlier years of Butler when she

> grew up understanding something of the violence of gender norms: an uncle incarcerated for his anatomically anomalous body, deprived of family and friends, living out his days in an "institute" in the Kansas prairies; gay cousins forced to leave their homes because of their sexuality, real and imagined; my own tempestuous coming out at the age of 16; and a subsequent adult landscape of lost jobs, lovers, and homes.

<div align="right">(Butler, [1990] 1999: xx)</div>

This article has been a tentative to familiarize the novice with Judith Butler albeit queerness surrounds her much more once one has read the article and her multiple books. Butler is fascinating because she is the philosopher *par excellence;* she speculates, theorizes and philosophizes *ad nauseam* and this fits amateurs of philosophy, but repulses the believers in the line of least resistance. Butler aligns with Judith/Jack Halberstam, Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, Gayatri Spivak Homi Bhabha, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir and the substantial group of women thinkers who not only challenged the androcentric tradition in knowledge, but outwitted men in many domains. Butler's books are all seminal; *Gender Trouble (*1990) is the landmark in her career. It was followed *inter alia* by *Bodies That Matter: On the Limits of "Sex"* (1993), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), *Undoing gender* (2004), etc. Judith Butler co-authored other

<div align="center">6</div>

important books with other theorists like Seyla Benhabib, Žižek Slavoj,etc.

References

Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. London and New York: Routledge.

----------------- (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of the "Sex"*.New York and London: routledge.

Castle, Gregory. (2007). *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Helmers, Mathew. (2011). 'Queer Theory'. in *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Vol I, II & III, edited by Ryan Michael, London: Wiley-Blackwell.

MacArthur, Tom, eds. (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English language.*Oxford and New York: Oxford university Press.

Mullan, John. (2006). *How Novels Work.*Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryan, Michael, eds. (2011). *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory.* Vol I, II & III, London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Salih, Sara. (2002). *Judith Butler.* London and New York: Routledge.

1 - Many founding texts began as dissertations such as Boumelha's, Millet's, etc.

2 - Immanuel Kant (1724-184), G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), Edmond Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean Paul Sartre (1905-8) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) delved in phenomenology which is the study of consciousness, i.e. how the mind perceives the external world.

3 - Post-structuralism and deconstruction are sometimes used interchangeably as they overlap and both react against structuralism which they claim to develop and elevate.

4 - Queer Theory supposedly arose from he coalescence of post-structuralism psychoanalysis and feminism.(Salih 2002:8)

5 - There is no room for definition, fixity and stasis in Queer theory; it deconstructs sexed and gendered identities and differs from feminism, gay, lesbian studies and gender studies which problematize woman, gender and sex through the assumption that the subject is already there.

6 - J.L. Austin is worldwide famous for his *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) in which he underscores the cruciality of discourse and introduces the dichotomous **performative** vs **constative** utterances. Whereas the former imply action and dynamism, the latter are mere statements. For Butler a statement such as the famous 'It's a girl'
which a nurse or a midwife utters at the birth of a girl is not constative, but rather performative in that by such an utterance, a process of 'girling' takes place.