



From essence to construction: feminist revisions of identity

De la esencia a la construcción: revisiones feministas de la identidad

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.48204/2805-1815.8482>

INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO	ABSTRACT/RESUMEN
Recibido el: 31/07/2025 Aceptado el: Keywords: Self, subject, social construction, identity, gender performativity Palabras clave: Yo, sujeto, construcción social, identidad, performatividad de género	Abstract: This study traces the journey of the philosophical evolution of the “self” within the background of feminist theory across its three major waves. The study investigates how feminist thought has critically interrogated and transformed traditional conception of identity. The analysis is structured in three sections: The Autonomous self, From the Private to Political, Fragmented Selves and Fluid Identities. By drawing on key feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, this article shows how feminist discourse has shifted the notion of the self from a fixed, rational subject to a dynamic, socially constructed, and performative subject. The study concludes that feminist philosophy not only challenges essentialist views of gender but also redefines subjectivity itself, contributing to broader debates in contemporary political and philosophical thought. Resumen: Este estudio traza la evolución filosófica del “yo” en el contexto de la teoría feminista a lo largo de sus tres grandes olas. El estudio investiga cómo el pensamiento feminista ha cuestionado críticamente y transformado la concepción tradicional de la identidad. El análisis se estructura en tres secciones: El yo autónomo, De lo privado a lo político, Yo fragmentados e Identidades fluidas. Basándose en pensadoras feministas clave como Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir y Judith Butler, este artículo demuestra cómo el discurso feminista ha transformado la noción del yo de un sujeto fijo y racional a un sujeto dinámico, socialmente construido y performativo. El estudio concluye que la filosofía feminista no solo desafía las visiones

esencialistas del género, sino que también redefine la subjetividad misma, contribuyendo a debates más amplios en el pensamiento político y filosófico contemporáneo.

Introduction

This study traces the formation of the self as a performative subject, constituted through lived experience and iterative engagement with social practices. The research critically examines the evolution of the self from the Enlightenment period to the postmodern age. The three sections of the paper critically analyse the concept of self, which is a performative construct rather than an innate or unchanging essence. This study offers a significant critique of the essentialist and universal framework of gender identity, as well as an opportunity to reconsider the ontology of gender identity as fluid and conditioned by political and social systems.

The autonomous self

Identity is an overarching concept in philosophical discourse. The concept of identity has evolved significantly from the modern era to the postmodern period, making a shift from the autonomous self to the postmodern subject. In the modern period of philosophy, the autonomous self is identified as stable, universal, and rational. In Cartesian philosophy, the notion of the 'self' is understood as asocial, atemporal, unchangeable and indubitable. Descartes's theory of the indubitable ego cogito is the culmination of the 'method of doubt' to arrive at the identity of the individual. Descartes' method puts everything into question including sense-testimony, truth of science, and existence itself. His search culminates into one thing, i.e., one cannot doubt one's own 'thinking.' Here, Descartes posits the theory of *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) to establish that it is a self-evident truth that can be known by reason. Descartes argues in *Meditations* that,

I think, therefore I am, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.
(Descartes, 1637/1968, p. 53-54)

Descartes's theory of the 'I' or the 'self' stands for a new paradigm in philosophy, prioritizing consciousness over the body. His contribution is novel in modern times and

ushers in a new era to think about the status of human beings. Rationalists and empiricists thinkers approach the theory of the self in diverse ways. In this context, the contribution of Immanuel Kant holds significant importance in Western philosophy. Kant reconciles both empiricism and rationalism, positing that the mind has the innate idea of a 'category of understanding' to organize and structure empirical experience. Kant elaborates on the ethical view of the self in his work *What is Enlightenment*. In Kantian philosophy, the self is an autonomous agent, meaning an individual can make ethical decisions and exercise their own free will. For Kant, the existence of individuals is intertwined with reason. The autonomous self in Descartes is epistemic in nature which means it is the foundation of knowledge while Kant's autonomous self-depicts self-legislation, especially in his moral philosophy.

The concept of the autonomous self, appeared with Descartes and Kant, severely influenced socio-political movements since then. Individual rights and autonomy laid the groundwork for the first-wave feminism, which started in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. First-wave feminism advocated that, like men, women also should enjoy all privileges that exist in the society. Feminists consider the question of gender equality as primary and aim to create gender justice to ensure equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes. First-wave feminism is a movement that advocates for equal rights for women, which came into prominence in the mid-19th century and early 20th centuries. The movement addressed the issue of disparity between men and women, particularly on the political and legal discrepancies that women faced.

Pioneering women's rights figures such as Emmeline Pankhurst, Harriet Taylor Mill, Susan B. Anthony, and Mary Wollstonecraft, to name a few, largely addressed the issue of women's suffrage, property ownership and educational access. The suffrage movement was a vital campaign that aimed to seek the right to vote for women, and this movement was considered as the underlying efforts of women who fight for the social and legal difficulties that disallowed them from taking part in a democratic process. Margaret Walters writes about the suffrage movement that

The determination and the persistence with which women argued, and increasingly demonstrated, for the right to vote makes an inspiring story; all the more so given

the equal determination, and at times the virulence, with which their claims were opposed (Walters, 2005, p. 68).

In 1920, the United States passed the 19th amendment, granting the right to vote to women because of a result of tireless efforts from women.

The main aim of first-wave feminism was to abolish the societal constraints that restricted women's opportunities, and the movement advocated for other legal and social statuses of women, such as labor rights, marriage laws, and educational rights for women. From this movement, the feminists were challenged and deeply engaged in questioning patriarchal norms and discussing gender equality. Despite of this, the first-wave movement received criticism for primarily focusing on the issues of upper class and middle white class women.

Mary Wollstonecraft's contributions were a revelation in that era, and her ideas were mostly circulated through her controversial book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The book rigorously questioned women's representation in society, which was always subordinate to men. To reach gender equality, Wollstonecraft proposed the importance of rational education in women's lives, arguing that the denying of education leads to their lives becoming miserable. In the second chapter, *The prevailing opinion of a sexual character* discussed, Wollstonecraft rebukes the social standards that are enjoyed by men, asserting that women are intellectually and morally different. She claims that both sexes have the right to practice for their own development. Wollstonecraft discusses how women are always in the state of ignorance due to their innocence, which she believes is a form of tyranny. She emphasizes the necessity of women to be recognized as rational individuals capable of enjoying virtue and happiness, rather than merely as objects of men's desire (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1982, p. 19). In the book, Wollstonecraft famously asserts that "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1982, p. 77). Wollstonecraft upholds that the identity of women is confined to their body rather than their intellectual capabilities. Women are restricted to developing their rational abilities due to the constraints of social norms surroundings their body. In the first wave movement, it can be understood that the individuality of women is aligned to the reason, which was inspired by the enlightenment

period.

The renowned literary work *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf is a pioneering text in feminist literary criticism. Woolf expounds the importance of financial independence and personal boundaries in a woman's life. Woolf says "... a woman must have money and a room of her own" (Woolf, 1929/1977, p. 7) for her independence and creative freedom. Her work draws attention to the importance of freedom for artistic expression and intellectual space and points out the gender disparities that constrain economic self-sufficiency, women's education, and creative opportunities. By examining historical contexts, Woolf challenges the patriarchy that exists in literary tradition which excludes the recognition of women. Woolf argues, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown" (Woolf, 1929/1977, p.41). Woolf analyzes the historical role assigned to women, which has been enhancing and supporting the self-image of men and their greatness. Men recognize themselves as greater than women through the validation received from them. The achievements of men are underpinned by the roles played by women in encouraging their confidence. This process always places women as subordinate to men. Woolf argues for the necessity to break free from this limitation and highlights the importance of rethinking the women's role in society. Woolf offers practical solutions for women's participation in cultural and literary life to overcome their material condition under patriarchy. Woolf believes that money and freedom are key to women's autonomy to demolish the sexual inequalities, and her work stays a powerful call for women to empower themselves in cultural and professional spheres.

The First-wave movement was fundamentally grounded in the principles of equality and justice. It was greatly influenced by the enlightenment era and liberal political philosophy. It marks a turning point, where the rise of establishing and advocating for a place for women in society is recognized as a significant step toward individual identity. In early times, individual identity was always associated with the category of men. It can be analyzed that the notion of 'self' or 'individuality' was always related to the context of rationality. Patriarchy was the leading factor contributing to the lack of independence in

women, particularly through marriage, where women were denied the status of representing themselves as independent identities in a society.

The protests for suffrage, property rights, and access to education aimed to establish women as autonomous individuals with equal political and legal recognition, like men. From the background of the suffrage movement Susan B. Anthony argues, "...woman's need of the ballot, that she may hold in her own right hand the weapon of self-protection and self-defense" (Stanton et al., 1881, p. 22). This quote emphasizes that the right to vote, acts as a necessity for women to protect and defend their own interests. The power to vote fosters democratic engagement, giving women a voice in shaping the laws and policies that affect them. Here, the ballot is considered a powerful weapon for women's empowerment, serving as an indispensable aspect of their fight for freedom and equality. Thinkers like Wollstonecraft argue that, due to their exclusion from the public sphere, women are restricted from acting as independent agents in society. Individuality and reason should not be restricted to the category of men; they should be considered qualities that everyone can attain through rational thought, and they are not restricted to one gender.

From the private to the political

Second-wave feminism appeared in the 1960s and 1970s as an extension of first-wave feminism, expanding its aims beyond suffrage and property rights for women. Second-wave feminism addressed a broad range of issues such as gender role stereotypes, reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and sexual liberation. Feminists primarily advocated access to abortion, contraception, equal pay in the workplace, laws against domestic violence, and challenged stereotypical gender roles within the family. Feminists sought to reconstruct the norms related to gender and sexuality. The slogan of second-wave feminism "the personal is political," signifies that a woman's experiences are not only personal but are also the result of larger social structures and power dynamics. For example, issues like domestic violence are not caused solely by the subjective experiences of a woman but are deeply rooted in gender inequalities within society. Through this, feminists aim to highlight how the experiences of women are profoundly influenced by social and political factors.

Body politics was a central idea in second-wave feminism that recognized the significance of women's autonomy over their body. The movement emphasizes raising awareness among women about their rights over their own bodies. It scrutinizes issues of objectification and violence against women, and reproductive rights which are beyond the purview of women and are controlled by men. In second-wave feminism, feminists primarily argued for bodily autonomy to establish the existence of women as having control over their own bodies. Feminists particularly focused on issues related to reproduction. At that time, women were often unable to make decisions about their own bodies, especially concerning pregnancy. The movement emphasized political engagement, encompassing campaigns advocating for women's access to contraceptives, the right to abortion, and the legislation of safe pregnancy termination. It successfully elevated knowledge about women's bodies, comprehensive sex education, and lobbied for maternal healthcare facilities to guarantee safe childbirth and postpartum care. Even though the significance of bodily autonomy had been identified and discussions on the notion of gender began, it emphasized that "Gender and second-wave feminism were born together"(Segal, 1999, p. 38). A prevailing idea that existed in second wave feminism was that the body is natural and gender is constructed.

The most celebrated work of this period was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, considered a foundational text of feminism that investigates the historical and cultural treatment of women. For de Beauvoir, femininity is a construction arrived through socialization, keeping male dominance. The book explores the historical and social contexts that subordinate women from men and examines how women are identified as passive, emotional, and nurturing to justify their marginalization.

The Second Sex mainly addresses the myths and stereotypes regarding the existence of women in society, de Beauvoir points out that "Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 29). The actions of women in this feminine world are considered natural and related to biology. For de Beauvoir, femininity is a social construction rather than biological one; she posits, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 273) which means

that the traits and behaviors of being a woman are constructed and developed through social norms rather than inborn qualities. De Beauvoir emphasizes the process of 'becoming' and rejects the idea of essentialism. She posits that femininity is fluid and can vary across different historical contexts. The process of becoming a woman involves internalization of societal norms within a given social context.

This is exemplified through the gender roles that are culturally constructed. From the period of childhood itself, societal practices and cultural norms shape individuals based on their biological sex. For instance, within families, girls are often involved in activities associated with the notion of femininity, such as playing with dolls and adopting nurturing behaviors from their mothers. On the contrary, boys are engaged in activities related to physical strength. This process of socialization leads to the 'becoming' of an identity. De Beauvoir underscores the importance of cultural practices and institutionalized frameworks that shape an individual into a state of womanhood.

The process of 'becoming' a woman is deeply interconnected with the notion of the 'other' in de Beauvoir's philosophy. In patriarchal society, women have historically been positioned as the 'Other,' while men are always identified with their own identity and individuality. De Beauvoir argues that, in legal contexts, the terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically, but in practice, the relationship between the sexes is treated as unequal. Men are represented as universal and viewed with qualities of both positive and negative, but women are defined by specific limitations and portrayed with negative connotations. Men's views are not considered questionable; on the other hand, women's views are treated as invalid. Aristotle describes the state of women as lacking quality, and St. Thomas calls them an 'imperfect man,' an 'incidental' being. A woman's identity is always related to her biological traits and often sees her as an object. Women are defined in relation to men; they do not have a status apart from a different sex. While women are considered secondary and aligned with sexuality, they exist only in relation to men (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 15). De Beauvoir says, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other" (1949/2011, p. 16).

The notion of the 'Other' takes away women's identity and independence. The identity of women is always acknowledged as a secondary position in society and subordinated to men. For de Beauvoir, the 'Other' is not a result of biological reality; rather,

it is an effect of social norms and cultural frameworks. When de Beauvoir discusses women's freedom, she draws upon Sartre's notion of freedom. Sartre argues "To be free is to be condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943/2003, p. 152). This quote emphasizes the dual nature of the state of freedom, which simultaneously acts as a privilege and as a burden. Sartre highlights that human beings are not constrained by a preordained essence or divine plan; rather, we create our essence through our actions, and freedom is inherent to human existence. The state of freedom is inescapable because it is a condition that is thrust upon human existence, and, in parallel, we cannot avoid the responsibility of our actions.

De Beauvoir was deeply influenced by the ideas of Sartre, particularly the notion of freedom. In a patriarchal society, women are assigned the role of the 'Other' as opposed to the absolute and superior powers that men enjoy. The process of 'othering' limits the possibilities of freedom and restricts women to the traditional roles of femininity. De Beauvoir wants to point out that for women to be absolutely free, they must break away from the social and cultural roles imposed upon them. De Beauvoir argues that a woman is inherently free and autonomous, just like any other person, but she is compelled to take on the role of the 'Other' under the patriarchal superiority. Here, a woman is labeled as an object and leads a life confined to a state of immanence by limiting her potential capabilities. Similarly, women, considered as 'Other,' do not transcend her aptitudes and remain curbed by the male superiority.

The 'immanence' in question is tied to a woman's body. For de Beauvoir, female embodiment is the objectified way of internalizing the gaze of others and constructing the body as an object for others. Women's bodies are constructed through societal influences from an incredibly youthful age. Girls learn about the societal meanings of "pretty" and "ugly" from cultural ideals presented through images and stories. They try to align with the beauty standards set in a society and adopt behaviors that seek validation. De Beauvoir wants to point out that the objectification of a woman's body is constructed through social norms and cultural frameworks. The female body becomes a site of oppression, influenced by societal pressures like gender roles, beauty standards, sexuality, and the tension between self-affirmation and societal pressure. For de Beauvoir, the body is represented as an experienced reality, which has its own identity

and lived experience. De Beauvoir argues that “it is not the body-object described by biologists that actually exists, but the body as lived in by the subject” (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 65).

For Beauvoir, the body is not merely a physical entity; rather, it is shaped by societal taboos and laws. She argues that the subject is aligned with specific values and is not merely rooted in biological facts (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 63). When we try to understand the body of a woman, it is limited to biological facts, but de Beauvoir contends that “Woman is determined not by her hormones or by mysterious instincts, but by the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself”(de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 681). As a result, a woman’s experiences and capabilities are reduced into her physicality alone, and on the other hand a male body is viewed as active and free and stands to define meanings beyond its physicality. De Beauvoir does not see gender identity as an expression of biological sex, but rather as a cultural construction. She argued that gender identity is socially constructed. One is said to be masculine or feminine, not by any inborn essence in the body but on the other hand, by culture and history put together.

The Feminine Mystique, a pioneering work by Betty Friedan, played a significant role in the Second-wave movement. Friedan illustrates the problem with stories of severely unhappy stay-at-home spouses from the United States who struggled for fulfillment despite living in comfort and having seemingly “perfect” families. The book addressed the state of identity crisis of women in the role of a wife, mother, and homemaker, with women always acting according to the social expectations in their gender roles. Friedan coined the term ‘feminine mystique’ to idealize the image of femininity in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was also the post-World War II period where more restrictions were placed on women’s activities, confining them largely to domestic chores and discouraging them from pursuing public education and careers. In the chapter *The Problem That Has No Name*, Friedan explains how the suburban stay-at-home spouses openly express their resentment towards merely fulfilling the duties of wives and mothers and confining themselves to the domestic chores. Most women of the time recognized from within a yearning for liberation. A liberation, not merely being a stay-at-home spouse but something beyond. Friedan explains it like this: “she was not talking

about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name” (Friedan, 1963, p. 19). Friedan points out that women felt a quiet longing in their lives, seeking personal growth and identity beyond their traditional gender roles. Friedan highlights the relevance of recognizing the emotional and psychological needs of women, which were dismissed during that era.

Like Mary Wollstonecraft, Friedan emphasizes the significance of education as a vital tool for empowerment, and she argued that a well-rounded education was essential for women to achieve self-actualization and break free from the constraints of the ‘feminine mystique.’ By accepting and fulfilling these social expectations, women do not recognize their own identity, and a plethora of abilities are in store.

The most notable contribution of Second-wave feminism was that it was able to instill in women a notion of their own identity. It also opened debates on those social structures that shaped women’s identity. While the first-wave movement focused more on acquiring legal and social rights, the second wave highlighted the cultural dimension of gender inequality. Feminists analyzed not only the explicit problems of women but also investigated the root causes of all their problems. From the slogan “the personal is political” to Friedan’s statement “the problem that has no name,” feminists emphasized the importance of equality and voiced against their subjugation based on gender. Both movements also realized that the existing social power structures contributed to it.

Another renowned American philosopher of feminist ethics and political philosophy, Marilyn Friedman argues that women have “suffered in many ways from social relationships, including the denial of whatever degree of personal autonomy might otherwise have been theirs (Friedman, 2000, p. 219)”. She argues how the traditional conceptions of autonomy did not understand the impact of social relationships on individuals, especially on women. She emphasizes that women’s freedom and personal autonomy have historically been constrained by various societal structures, and most of them result in various forms of suffering and limitation. The Second-Wave Feminist Movement questioned those prevailing patriarchal norms which considered women to be homemakers and caregivers. The significance of women’s autonomy marks a significant turn in the second-wave movement. In that period, women gained access to

reproductive rights, the legalization of abortion, and access to contraception, which until then was a monopoly in the hands of men. Women, who were confined to the private spheres of the family, began to fight for autonomy and individual freedom. The focus on individual liberation challenged the ideologies that constrained women's autonomy, and this moment placed a crucial step in the evolution of feminist philosophy.

The limitations of Second-Wave feminism led to the emergence of Third-Wave Feminism in the 1990s, which addressed the issues of diverse sets of voices and experiences. Sarah Gamble, a British academic and a feminist theorist argues that "Third wave feminism is characterized by a desire to redress economic and racial inequality as well as 'women's issues'" (Budgeon, 2011, p. 310). The movement analyzes how a woman's experiences are shaped by several factors like class, sexuality, race, and nationality. It represents the voices of women from marginalized groups, and the Third-Wave movement continued to challenge the foundational assumptions of existing feminist frameworks that the culmination of a unified feminist subject is the result of that form of a feminism which focuses more on how the individual women understand and claim their own feminist identities (Budgeon, 2011, p. 9).

In earlier feminist movements, particularly in the Second-Wave, a unified experience of womanhood and their problems was analyzed, rather than drawing attention to the diversity of women's experiences. In the Second-Wave, though the issue was initially considered to be discrete problems of women from certain sections, in the later stage it was seen to be a widespread issue affecting a large group of women. And it should not be forgotten that these disparities were caused by the then existing societal structures. This awareness helped them to understand that personal struggles were no longer mere personal' but they were addressing much larger social issues of gender inequality (Snyder, 2008, p. 184).

Fragmented selves and fluid identities

Third-wave feminism advocated the freedom to express one's own identity, whether that includes embracing traditional gender roles or rejecting them, and challenged the societal norms around gender and sexuality. Feminists were aware that the individual issues vary significantly across distinct cultural contexts. Unlike the First-Wave and the Second-Wave,

the Third-Wave movement witnessed the presence of various media platforms for activism. Third-Wave feminism critically analyzed traditional norms of gender and sex and tried to understand the intersectionality of individual experiences. Unlike other feminist movements, the Third-Wave focused on how gender and sex are influenced by intersecting factors like race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. The primary concern of the movement was to deconstruct those binaries of gender and establish that gender and sex are socially constructed rather than biologically given entities.

Third-Wave feminism focuses on the fluidity of identities and the rejection of essential paradigms. Judith Butler is a prominent figure in the Third-Wave feminist movement. Her works contributed significantly to the Third-Wave movement as a critical lens to destabilizing the gender binary. Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) is a revolutionary text in feminist and queer theory. Žižek considered *Gender Trouble* as a political practice and the anti-identitarian turn of queer politics (Žižek, 2000, p. 132). Butler claims to create and open a space for subjects who are marginalized by society because of denied recognition and the right to a livable life within existing social norms. With the saying "I want to make room" (Butler, 2004, p. 224)," Butler establishes a political action that challenges the social structure that serves inequality and exclusion. Butler's philosophy is not based on theoretical assumptions, rather it is woven into the fabric of culture.

When Butler proposes the theory of gender performativity, it encourages a more intersectional understanding of gender identity that extends beyond the binary frameworks. Butler also claims that the meaning of the body is understood within a discursive paradigm. Seyla Benhabib writes about Butler's idea of the construction of the body. She argues: "the already sexed body is the epistemological equivalent of the myth of the given: just as the given can be identified only within a discursive framework, so too it is the culturally available codes of gender that "sexualize" a body and that construct the directionality of that body's desire (Benhabib, 1995, p. 21). The body is not a pre-existing natural entity but can only be known through the cultural and discursive framework and is constructed through the cultural codes of gender.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explores the notions of gender, power, and the body as

discussed in the works of Julia Kristeva, Monique Wittig, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Lacan, and Sigmund Freud. It is in the last chapter of *Gender Trouble* that she elaborates on the idea of performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler seeks to show the idea that all identities are constituted through power relations and discursive practices. For Butler, gender is not an inherent or pre-given identity; rather it is a cultural performance regulated by compulsory heterosexuality. Sara Salih, a renowned scholar in Butler studies, argues in her book that “all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence” (Salih, 2002, p. 62). There is a distinct differentiation between performance and performativity in Butler’s theory of performativity. In a 1994 interview, Butler gives the pivotal distinction between performance and performativity: performance presupposes a pre-existing subject, while performativity contests the very notion of the subject (Butler, 1994, p. 33). For Butler, gender cannot be considered like a theatrical performance of an individual. Butler points out that “theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Butler employs the term ‘performativity’ to highlight the act of ‘doing’ rather than the concept of self-being, which has real effects in society and has power to create an identity. Through performativity theory, Butler rejects the notion of the ‘self,’ which leads to an act: “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Butler intends to establish that the construction of a subject is not a representation of the inner self; rather, it is an effect of repetitive performance. Butler argues:

performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction (Butler, 1988, p. 528).

According to Butler, the concept of the ‘I’ is an illusion, and there is no pre-given identity in an individual. Butler asserts that human beings are all subjected to frameworks of power, and all subjects are produced in this matrix of power. For Butler, “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” (Butler, 1990, p.33). Butler follows Nietzsche’s philosophy of the metaphysics of substance to display that sex and gender are merely illusions of the subject. Butler needs to deny the ontological status of gender, which leads to gender performance. Here Butler follows Nietzsche’s argument that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, acting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction imposed on the doing — the doing itself is everything” (Nietzsche, 1887/1996, p. 29). For Butler, the performance of a performer is paramount, and the subject is constituted through this performance. The performance is an ongoing process that has no definitive end.

Through performativity, Butler was not proposing an abstract idea or theoretical model in philosophy; rather, she was more concerned with human existence as it is affected by social conditioning. Performativity does not imply that there is an actor who chooses to act according to a predefined script. Butler explains that the performance of various gender acts may differ from one performer to another.

Conclusion

This study has traced the evolving conception of the self, beginning with the Enlightenment ideals of rational agency in Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings, moving through the critiques of domesticity and feminine mystique in the mid-20th century with Betty Friedan, and the nuanced exploration of gendered interiority and creative autonomy in Virginia Woolf’s work. These thinkers laid the groundwork for understanding the self as a historically situated and gendered subject. Building upon this, Judith Butler’s philosophy marks a significant shift by theorizing the subject not as a fixed identity but as a performative and socially constituted construct. Butler’s intervention highlights that subjectivity is not pre-given but continuously produced through repeated social performances and discursive norms. The journey from the autonomous self to the postmodern subject thus reflects a deepening critique of essentialism, revealing identity as dynamic, contested, and deeply embedded in cultural practices.

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