

## Book Review

Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2024), ISBN: 978-0-374-60822-4 (Hardcover).

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At its core, politics is all about inclusion. To be heard, to be counted, to be treated fairly. However, if history is any guide, we fail miserably short of the ideal of inclusivity time and again because we are too smug to prick our intellectual bubbles. We imagine these bubbles to be our creation, the aggregate compendium of our rational deductions from the world as we encounter it. We fail to see that our encounter with the world is not a random encounter; we encounter the world as a result of a history of which we know little, and that history implicates all we know. Today, we face a phantasm created around gender that has, in fact, very little to do with gender. It is a diversion and Judith Butler's mission is to expose it for all to see.

For those who dismiss gender as just a liberal conspiracy, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* is a reminder that gender is a historically loaded concept which cannot be simply dismissed as propaganda. Butler leaves no stone unturned in this monumental work to counter the misconceived notions of anti-gender proponents that privilege sexual dimorphism and label any other conception of sex/gender as an assault on familial values. Butler makes clear at the very beginning that her task in this book is not to theorise on gender - which she has done previously in her other works – but to pointedly expose the follies of anti-gender proponents (p. 23). Whether it is anti-gender rhetoric of the political far right, the trans-exclusive radical feminists (TERF), or ecclesiastical misgivings against gender, Butler boldly engages and then exposes falsehoods that are hurled at gender-sensitive feminists. As Butler is cognizant that much of the anti-gender propagandists refuse to acquaint themselves with the vast academic literature on gender (p. 19), the book is an attempt to address feminists of various shades who are experiencing trouble processing the virulent tirade against gender.

The anti-gender ideology movement has usurped the family as a site of contestation and unsettled the international norms of gender equality (Choi et al., 2024). Findings by Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) likewise show that anti-gender ideology movements have emerged as globally coordinated campaigns that aim to reassert conservative moral authority. Butler's analysis resonates with this broader scholarly consensus. In an age where disillusioned populations look to alternative modes of organisation, the state, the Church, and nationalist movements are increasingly employing anti-gender ideology as a means to hold on to their diminishing power. The papacy, as Butler points out, is fixated upon

the norm of heteronormative families. In its quest to discredit any other way of imagining the family, the ecclesiastical machinery has launched a crusade to label those championing trans rights as purveyors of sexual violence against women and children. Given the Church's controversial history with sexual abuse, the irony is not lost on Butler.

Beyond the gimmicks of demagogues, attacks on gender are sinister attempts to mobilise support for the authoritarian state that professes itself to be the moral conscience of the people, much like the Church. Butler clarifies that anti-gender proponents are not against the concept of gender. Their very purpose is to establish a particular conception of gender (p. 18). However, their blueprint for gender is an exercise in exclusion, dogma, and control. The attack on gender, therefore, is a new facet of biopolitics which seeks to sabotage all debate and critical thinking. While Trumpism and the attendant rhetoric against Critical Race Theory are already well documented, Butler does well to turn our attention to gender-critical feminism in Europe. The rot within feminism is not that its house is divided. Feminism never has been a monolith. But with the phantasmatic fearmongering about gender, feminists have begun to turn on themselves. The TERFs betray years of feminism-led struggle for inclusivity and impale the rights of trans people out of sheer erroneous understanding about what the feminist struggle has been all about.

An interesting section of the book deals with J.K. Rowling's controversial statements about trans people on social media. Given Rowling's popularity, Butler rebuts Rowling's duplicitous concerns in detail. Butler is correct to point out that Rowling fails to see that women have never been in danger from a particular genitalium; it is patriarchal socialisation that is the real enemy. However, Butler misses the point that Rowling's concern for the safety of women stems not from trans people per se but from people who may be tempted to purposely misidentify themselves to take advantage of women in closed spaces. Rowling's concern is already echoed in debates on gender-segregated spaces (see Pearce et al., 2020) and Butler's admonishment of Rowling – though justified – fails to answer how concerns raised by Rowling may be practically addressed. While the traditional feminist discourse distinguished between "sex" (biological) and "gender" (social), Butler had provocatively problematised "sex" in *Gender Trouble* (1990) by asserting that the so-called objective fact of sex is soaked in established power dynamics. The materiality of sex is hence never in question; what is needed is the understanding that material and social construction go hand in hand. The binaries of nature and nurture, or natural and cultural, are never only matters of the body. Our ways of knowing, history, and social relations structure our understanding of thinking about sex and gender. Sex as a category, establishes Butler, is complicated. If John Money's corrective surgeries on intersex infants are any indication, then the objectivity of science regarding sex is a façade that rests on brute racism, unethical experimentation, and wholesale

patriarchy. The 2021 Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations released by the International Olympic Committee likewise recognises that genitalia and hormones cannot serve as markers of identity, especially when such an identity is probed externally.

Butler best identifies the psychosocial fantasy against gender in the inversion of constructs about sexual identity that the colonial enterprise created. Inclusive constructs of gender in post-colonial environs are now labelled as a liberal project imposing western and unethical ideas. The erasure of history and tradition by coloniality is conveniently repackaged by the hysteria in the Right. Destructing any mode of traditional understanding of sex beyond dimorphism, a phantasmatic spectre of fear is created. Whether berated as a foreign colonial project or a linguistic barrier that is best not overcome, the anti-gender ideology movement succeeds not by addressing gender but by denigrating the term 'gender' itself.

In the concluding chapter, Butler points out that mushrooming rhetoric against gender seeks to displace our attention from impending dangers that would hold the state and religious authorities liable. As a diversion, a phantasmatic fear is manufactured – gender feminists upending life as we know it. From xenophobia to anti-abortion policies, the agency of vulnerable sections has become a battleground for authoritarian trends across the globe.

There is no doubt that the book is an erudite defence of an inclusive variant of feminism. However, it is not without its faults. The order of chapters in the book lacks a defining structure, which reflects the chaos around the book's subject. Nonetheless, it does complement Butler's persuasive style of writing. Another issue is Butler's use of the term 'phantasmatic' to club together all arguments of anti-gender proponents. More nuance is needed than Butler is willing to admit. Lastly, while the book is categorically devoted to rebutting anti-gender proponents and TERFs, Butler would have done well to at least devote one chapter to highlighting what a trans-inclusive understanding of feminism and gender entails.

Therefore, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* is a timely intervention by Butler that endorses reason and critical thinking amidst the pandering of propagandist anti-intellectualism. All shades of feminism must recognise that, at its very core, inclusion is the thread that defines feminism. The attack on gender is an attack on every inclusive imagining of politics. At a time when divisive politics is on the rise, internal rancour is debilitating feminism's call to solidarity. Butler's intervention is, therefore, both timely and necessary.

## References

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