

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY, PRECARITY, AND POWER: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF JUDITH BUTLER'S CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER AND SOCIAL THEORY IN THE CONTEXT OF SWAT, PAKISTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17310542>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
18 July 2025	28 August, 2025	28 September 2025	10 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This review paper examines Judith Butler's influential contributions to feminist and sociological theory, with particular emphasis on her concepts of gender performativity, precarity, and the politics of recognition. Butler's writings, especially Gender Trouble (1990), Bodies That Matter (1993), and Precarious Life (2004), have transformed global discussions on gender and identity, offering critical insights into how norms and power relations construct and regulate human lives. The paper situates Butler's arguments within the socio-cultural realities of Pakistan, with a specific focus on Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). A region historically marked by conflict, displacement, and patriarchal traditions, Swat presents a unique ground for testing Butler's theoretical claims. Drawing on both Butler's texts and Pakistani feminist scholarship (Saigol, 2016; Shaheed, 2010; Bari, 2010), the paper demonstrates how her concepts can illuminate the struggles of women, transgender persons, and marginalized communities in Pakistan. The review also engages with critiques of Butler's theories, discussing their limitations when applied in non-Western contexts. The conclusion suggests that while Butler's work may require contextual adaptation, it remains a powerful resource for Pakistani sociologists and students seeking to understand and challenge structures of inequality.

Keywords. Gendered Precarity, feminism, Patriarchy, Bodily Inscription, Swat valley.

INTRODUCTION

Judith Butler is widely regarded as one of the most groundbreaking theorists in contemporary social thought. Emerging in the 1990s as a central figure in feminist and queer theory, Butler's intellectual contributions have reshaped the way scholars, activists, and policymakers conceptualize gender and power. Her seminal book, Gender Trouble (1990), questioned the very foundation of gender categories by arguing that gender is not an innate or fixed attribute, but rather something enacted through repeated performances. This insight fundamentally destabilized the binary view of male and female identities, offering instead a vision of

gender as socially constructed, fluid, and contingent.

In Pakistan, particularly in traditional societies such as Swat, where gender norms are heavily shaped by cultural, tribal, and religious discourses, Butler's theories provide critical tools for re-examining how gender is performed and policed. The region of Swat has witnessed deep struggles over women's education, mobility, and public visibility, especially during and after the Taliban insurgency (Bari, 2010). Butler's framework, which highlights the constructed and contested nature of gender norms, offers sociologists in Swat an avenue

to understand how women and marginalized groups resist and negotiate power in everyday life. This review paper aims to analyze Butler's contributions in detail while situating them in the context of Swat and Pakistan. It also engages with critiques of her theories to assess both their relevance and limitations in non-Western settings.

1.1 Research Methodology

This review article uses an interpretive and critical approach to research. It believes that social reality, especially when it comes to gender and power, is not fixed or already there. Instead, it is created through conversations, common beliefs, and actions people take. The article mainly uses qualitative methods, looking closely at and bringing together different theories and real-world examples to understand these phenomena in better way. Thus, the study is further carried out through Theoretical Elucidation for the sake of to systematically unpack and explain the core tenets of Judith Butler's theory.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Butler's Work

2.1 Gender as Performativity

In *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), Butler introduced the revolutionary idea that gender is performative. This does not mean that gender is a voluntary performance like acting in a play, but that it is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and norms that society enforces over time. For example, when individuals conform to expectations of masculinity or femininity—through dress, speech, or behaviour, they are not expressing a pre-existing identity but are actively producing and reproducing what counts as gender.

This concept is particularly relevant in Swat, where local customs dictate strict expectations for women's modesty, domestic roles, and public behaviour. The insistence that women wear specific clothing or avoid public spaces demonstrates how gender is constructed and maintained through repeated acts (Shaheed, 2010).

2.2 The Body as a Site of Power

In *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993), Butler extended her earlier work by examining how some bodies come to matter more than others. Influenced by Michel Foucault (1977), she argued that social norms determine which bodies are recognized as legitimate and which are marginalized. In Pakistan, this resonates with the

struggles of transgender persons (locally known as khwaja siras), whose bodies are frequently excluded from full social recognition despite legal acknowledgment of their identity.

2.3 Precarity and Vulnerability

In her later works, particularly *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), Butler introduced the concept of precarity—the condition of being socially and politically vulnerable. This idea is deeply relevant in conflict-affected regions like Swat, where women, internally displaced persons, and minorities face heightened vulnerability due to both structural inequalities and violence.

3. Gender Performativity and Identity

Butler's notion of gender performativity destabilizes the idea of fixed identities. In the Pakistani context, this allows sociologists to analyse how gender is reproduced in educational institutions, workplaces, and households. For instance, girls in Swat are often told that higher education is unnecessary because their primary role is marriage and domestic labour (Khattak, 2018). These repeated statements and practices constitute gendered expectations that shape women's identities.

By applying Butler's theory, one can see that these roles are not natural but socially imposed. Moreover, resistance such as women pursuing higher education despite opposition—can be viewed as subversive performances that challenge dominant gender norms (Butler, 1990).

4. Precarity, Power, and Resistance

Butler's concept of precarity emphasizes that some lives are more exposed to harm and less valued than others (Butler, 2004). This resonates strongly with the experiences of women in Swat during the Taliban insurgency, when female education was banned and schools were destroyed. Women's lives were not only made precarious but also symbolically devalued by being excluded from public spaces.

Sociologically, this framework allows for an examination of how state policies, cultural norms, and militant violence intersect to make some groups more vulnerable. At the same time, resistance, such as Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education—illustrates how precarious subjects can challenge oppressive systems.

5. Butler in Dialogue with Pakistani Feminist Scholarship

Pakistani feminist scholars have long critiqued patriarchal structures and cultural restrictions on women. Rubina Saigol (2016) emphasized how women's bodies are used as markers of national and cultural identity, while Farida Shaheed (2010) analysed the ways in which religion and politics intersect to reinforce gender inequality. Butler's work enriches these insights by providing a theoretical framework that highlights the constructed nature of gender norms and the vulnerability of marginalized lives.

For instance, when analysing the gendered impact of Talibanization in Swat, Butler's ideas of performativity and precarity help explain why women's education was targeted: it threatened the reproduction of patriarchal norms (Bari, 2010).

6. Implications for Sociology in Swat and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

For MPhil sociology students at the University of Swat, Butler's theories offer valuable perspectives.

They allow researchers to:

Examine how cultural performances enforce gender roles in Pashtun society.

Analyse how conflict produces precarity and vulnerability for women and minorities.

Explore how resistance and subversion of norms occur in everyday acts, such as girls continuing education despite restrictions.

This localized engagement with Butler's work demonstrates the potential of global theory when contextualized within Pakistani realities.

7. Critiques of Butler's Work

While Butler's theories are groundbreaking, they have also been criticized. Some argue that her writing is unnecessarily abstract and difficult to apply in practical contexts (Nussbaum, 1999). Others contend that her focus on discourse neglects material conditions such as poverty and class, which are central to the Pakistani context.

Moreover, critics highlight that Butler's theories, developed primarily in Western contexts, may not fully account for the complexities of societies like Swat, where religion, tribal traditions, and conflict deeply shape gender relations (Weiss, 1998). Nonetheless, with careful adaptation, Butler's ideas remain valuable for Pakistani sociologists.

8. Conclusion

Judith Butler's work has profoundly transformed global debates on gender, identity, and power. By challenging essentialist notions of gender and highlighting the vulnerability of marginalized lives, her theories provide crucial tools for analysing social structures in contexts like Swat. While her ideas require contextual adaptation, they resonate with the struggles of Pakistani women, transgender persons, and minorities facing patriarchal and structural constraints.

For sociology students and researchers in Swat, engaging with Butler's writings alongside Pakistani feminist scholarship can foster a more nuanced understanding of gender and power. Ultimately, Butler's theories encourage critical reflection on how identities are constructed, regulated, and resisted, making them a powerful resource for both academic inquiry and social transformation in Pakistan.

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