

# FROM JUDITH BUTLER TO RANJANA KHANNA: LOOKING BACK ONTO SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

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## Dark Continents

The well-known metaphor of the “dark continent”, that was first passed down by explorer Henry Morton Stanley in reference to “dark” Africa, has provided the image of the woman, namely of female sexuality, as an “impenetrable mystery” since Freud’s times to nowadays<sup>1</sup>.

According to scholar Ranjana Khanna, author of the book *Dark Continents. Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003), the metaphor of the dark continent reveals that modern psychoanalysis has interpreted the “woman” in the light of categories produced in the colonial context (Khanna 2003, ix). As a matter of fact, Ranjana Khanna defines psychoanalysis as a colonial discipline, insisting on the contingency of Europe’s grand narratives (including concepts of modernity’s self, civilisation, and nationhood) with coloniality (Khanna 2003, 10). Psychoanalysis is represented as “a form of analysis based in the age of colonialism and constitutive of concepts of the primitive against which the civilizing mission could establish itself” (Khanna 2003, 6).<sup>2</sup>

In postwar France, existential psychoanalysis was unmistakably deemed to arise from colonialism and the Negritude movement<sup>3</sup>, as the

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the 1878 account of how Stanley managed to find explorer David Livingstone is entitled *Through the Dark Continent* (Stanley 1878).

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and on the epistemological question of knowledge and representation in colonial contexts, see Said 1978. On the complicity between European colonialism and cultural productions (literature, art, philosophical theories, etc.) see Said 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Birago Diop where among the black poets and intellectuals, from the Antilles and Africa, who gave birth in Paris, during the 1930s, to the so called *Négritude* Movement. *Négritude* was meant to celebrate pride in blackness and the values of African cultural specificity as well as the poetic epiphany of the lost motherland Africa. *Négritude* was

anticolonialist forewords that Sartre wrote for Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Leopold Senghor's works aptly clarify (Khanna 2003, 29). In these writings Sartre made clear that he conceives collective identity as the effect of a situation, a precise context. Every group identity is superimposed; this is the reason why every form of identification "that was not situation-bound and situation-conscious" is doomed to be inauthentic (Khanna 2003, 140)<sup>4</sup>.

It is exactly the insistence on the idea of subjectivity, meant as an "effect" of specific social-historical contexts, namely the ethical imperative to configure subjectivity as the expression of a fairer society, that situates Simone de Beauvoir's thought within the ethical question raised by decolonisation and anti-colonialist efforts.

The fact that the feminine identity was usually likened to other marginalised identities such as the Black soul and the Jewish character, all retained fixed identitarian concepts, led de Beauvoir to refuse the idea of an ontologised and substantial feminine identity, and then to insist instead, on identity being a result of a cultural-historical becoming, which the philosopher epitomised in her famous statement: "One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one"<sup>5</sup>.

In the wake of de Beauvoir, and in more recent times, a remarkable number of feminist philosophers within Western thought, ranging from Hélène Cixous to Luce Irigaray, from Julia Kristeva to Sarah Kofman, up to Judith Butler, to mention only a few, have pointed their finger at that phallogocentric system that has stressed, for ages, the relationship between woman and body, and the non-transcendence of woman<sup>6</sup>: regarded as mother and wet-nurse, affectivity and emotionality, as a space of domestic

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especially conceived as a form of cultural and political resistance to colonial assimilation and annihilation. See Chevrier 1986.

<sup>4</sup> For Sartre's preface to Senghor, see Sartre 1948. In 1945-48 Sartre wrote both *Black Orpheus* and *Anti-Semite and Jew*, very influential texts for the *Négritude* movement as well as for the psychiatric and psychological readings offered by Frantz Fanon and Octave Mannoni, whose enquiries into the psychical strife of the colonised were pivotal in linking psychoanalysis with coloniality; for Sartre's preface to Fanon, see Fanon 1967; for Sartre's preface to Albert Memmi, see Memmi 1965. For Sartre's concepts of collective identity, see Sartre 1948a.

<sup>5</sup> See Beauvoir 1973, 301. According to de Beauvoir, bad faith, a central concept in French existentialist philosophy, consists of attributing to the verb "to be" a substantial meaning, whereas the dynamic Hegelian sense of the term, that is to say "to be" in the sense of "to have become" should be underlined. On the idea of "inauthenticity" (from which bad faith results) see Beauvoir 1973, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Kofman, for instance, re-interprets Freud in the attempt to "unmask" the Freudian image of the woman as a "riddle". See Kofman 1985.

immanence and contingency, nature and body, the woman is traditionally far from the masculine “I” that is assumed as the universal subject, defined in terms of spirituality, culture, reason and incorporeality – as Sidonie Smith has aptly noted in her study on the “subjectivity of embodiment” (Smith 1993, 7). The woman is not included in the universality that defines the masculine subject. And if such a universal masculine subject is culturally constituted as mind, spirit, reason, namely as something incorporeal, at the same time it has confined the others, among them the woman, to the status of “body” and corporeality (Smith 1993, 1-17).

### **Performing genders**

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir had already highlighted that the woman could be determined and differentiated in relation to the man, but the reverse was not thinkable. The woman is non-essential compared to the essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute, whereas she is the Other. After five decades, Sidonie Smith quotes the American philosopher Judith Butler referring to the idea of woman as “other” and “body”:

Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. [...] By defining women as “Other”, men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies – a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally – and to make their bodies other than themselves. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine “I” is the noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other – the body repressed or denied and, then, projected – reemerges for this “I” as the view of others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence (Smith 1993, 11).

Clearly, it is a dualistic thought solely featuring two identities, masculine and feminine, that are simply identified according to the kind of body in which one dwells, namely according to the different genital organ possessed. However, Judith Butler pushes ahead the reflections on this seeming dualism that has organised Western thought thoroughly, or rather the Judaic-Christian thought, as the philosopher clarifies.

Butler has deeply explored the complexity of the sex / gender relation, where sex is generally meant to be a biological and organic factor, while gender is meant to be the system of cultural significations attributed to a

sexed body. In Butler's view, accepting the exclusive existence of two genders, masculine and feminine, firstly implies that there is an absolutely mimetic relationship between sex and gender. The male sexual organ would correspond to the masculine gender, just like the female sexual organ would correspond to the feminine gender.

The problem, instead, is much more complex, as Simone de Beauvoir suggested when, in the first pages of *The Second Sex*, she wrote that being of female sex was not sufficient to be a woman, since femininity is a mystery rather than a secretion of ovaries, and it could not be dragged down by a skirt from some sort of Platonic sky. She concluded that if femininity had almost disappeared, it was because it had actually never existed.

This is the crucial intuition that Judith Butler employs when stating that there is no certain, one-to-one correspondence between sexual organ and gender. On the contrary, it is desire that "directs", "pushes" towards a specific gender. The gender towards which desire "directs", has to be "interpreted", just like a character, a role to be "performed".

Gender, then, is conceived as an *ensemble* of cultural meanings that the sexed body acquires, therefore a specific gender cannot be said to derive necessarily from one of the two sexes. Besides, between sexed body and gender there would be a drastic discontinuity. If gender reveals to be a cultural construction, not necessarily depending on the possession of female or male genitals, then the terms *man* and *masculine* can easily signify a female body as much as a male one. Accordingly, *woman* and *feminine* can signify a male body as much as a female one.

Gender, therefore, is first presented as *performativity*, namely a practice in which human beings are a result of a series of actions and modes that gradually perform and define their being, rather than a core that pre-exists their agency. In other words, identity shows its performative nature, a practice. "Identity is what you do, identity is doing" (De Chiara 2001, 66).

Ultimately, this means that there is no possibility to find a core, an essence of the subject directly deriving from his / her biological sex. There is only a "staging" of the subject, his / her "performance", a "mise-en-scène" of the subject that deploys his / her being in a constant "becoming".

As Ranjana Khanna notices, whereas Western feminism has initially stressed the question of inequality between women and men, and among women themselves, both on the political level as well as on the level of representativity, in the 1990s there was a remarkable turning point suggested by Lacanian psychoanalysis and centred on the theory of desire, that has proved to be a very useful tool for socio-cultural identification

(Khanna 2003, 217). In her notable study *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler tightly dialogues with Lacanian psychoanalysis, thus launching future struggles in *queer* theory.

The encounter with psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the unconscious, the sexual drives, the hidden desires, the repression mechanisms and the body's denied reasons have led to theorisations of the feminine identity that are definitely opposed to those elaborated by a centuries-old patriarchal discourse (aptly termed "phallogocentrism" by French feminist thought during the Seventies).

Judith Butler's thought intertwines Lacanian psychoanalytical intuitions with Michel Foucault's episteme<sup>7</sup>. Butler elaborates a notion of identity as something originating from a very complex dialogue between desire, on the one hand, and *law*, on the other. The *law* Butler refers to, following Michel Foucault, is a system that labels subjects according to their sexualisation. Indeed, in Foucault's view, the distinction between sexes represents the main framework pursuing the normalisation and surveillance within the social body. Sexualisation would then be uncovered as the law that "normalises" human bodies, providing the frame to interpret the whole social body and knowledge itself (Butler 1990, 16-34).

Butler notes that identity is governed by normative discourses, practices and institutions that always constitute the subject as a "subject before the Law". Consequently, subjectivity cannot be easily accomplished in itself, since it manifests itself as a normative ideal on which an alleged consistency and continuity between sex and gender, desire and sexual practices, is projected.

However, this notion of subject or human being – absolutely coinciding with unspoken normative requirements – falls into a crisis with the appearance of modes that are inconsistent and discontinuous compared to the pre-established and culturally internalised gender norms. This is the case, also, of the several forms of homosexuality and transvestism, that are explicit instances of a failed coincidence between the "biological" element, namely the sexual organ, and the manifested gender desire, as Butler remarks in *Gender Trouble* specifically referring to Foucault's studies on the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin<sup>8</sup>.

Interpreting identity as a "performance", "mise-en-scène", "staging" of the subject occurring due to "desire", would be of help for psychoanalysis to overcome its limits.

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<sup>7</sup> Butler refers especially to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1980).

<sup>8</sup> See Foucault 1980a.

## Unanswerable questions: the transsexual woman

As recently underlined by transsexual philosopher Fabrizia Di Stefano in her interesting essay “Perché gli uomini non piangono”, published in 2009 on the journal *DWF*, the question to which psychoanalysis (since Freud) refuses to give an answer is: what is a woman, what is a man? There were, actually, other kinds of questions connected to desire and the relation between sexes. Therefore, if the transsexual cannot be a woman *tout-court*, it is first of all because such being is beyond the reach of both psychoanalytical and philosophical formulations. The philosopher confirms that being, as such, is beyond *sense* as far as sex is concerned. Hence, the definition of sense *in itinere* enunciating itself: the transsexual woman.

The famous question posed by Simone de Beauvoir, “what is a woman?”, also echoes in Fabrizia Di Stefano’s remarks on the current status of psychoanalysis and philosophy, when she reminds us that the free unfolding of a “becoming” subject requires an alert “ethical” attention meant to welcome the many and different tones and inflections of subjectivity.

Are we ready, for instance, for an ethos that envisages the free unfolding of transsexuality? What is the high price that transsexual people pay nowadays in terms of psychic and physical violence?

Since the ethical question in feminism is undeniably pivotal, the term “ethics” has proved to be hard to decipher: it ranges from indicating a generic idea of “fairness” to what is acceptable or unacceptable before the Law, therefore regarding locally recognised behavioural codes. In other cases, the term would coincide with what is political, meant as the specific ground of ethical agency (Khanna 2003, 209). Feminism has always had to privilege a pragmatic vision directly engaged with the contingent needs of women, and that is the reason why ethics and politics are almost synonyms in feminist thought<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Due to this union between pragmatism and ethics, that is mostly rooted in Simone de Beauvoir’s thought and in Joan Rivière’s theorisations on feminine performativity too – Joan Rivière also authored the famous 1929 essay “Womanliness as a masquerade” – not to mention, in more recent times, Butler’s contributions – that refer to Rivière through Lacan’s insistence on the “comedic” dimension of sexual ontology – we can detect the intuitions of the lamented “mother of modern Feminism”. I would also like to mention that Khanna polemically claims that performativity theorisations did not pay enough attention to the seminal role played by racial difference in this “performance” (Khanna

In the final part of *Dark Continents. Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Ranjana Khanna describes the melancholic shadow with which feminism is saturated, in Europe and in the United States, after Simone de Beauvoir's death, the mother of modern feminism. While seeking a common term able to recognise all the different political collectivities, the so-called "post-feminism", also viewed as a "transnational feminism" that, then, got lost in the multiple differences deconstructing the univocity of the term "woman", often featured some kind of nostalgia for a more "ethical", political and reliable feminism, such as the one represented by de Beauvoir (Khanna 2003, 208)<sup>10</sup>.

For this reason, in Ranjana Khanna's chapter dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir, the epigraph quotes the words Luce Irigaray wrote when de Beauvoir died in 1986. Irigaray wanted to remind us that Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical and practical work, always pursuing social justice, has left an enormous legacy, mainly consisting of having opened a wide horizon of liberation for a lot of men and women<sup>11</sup>. This is, indeed, her ethical and libertarian call that still stands although so much time has passed.

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2003, 48). Rivière's "Womanliness as a masquerade" is contained in Burgin, Donald and Kaplan 1986.

<sup>10</sup> As Khanna clarifies, feminism became subdivided not only in various forms of feminist activism and feminist theories, but also in several further particular feminisms, all struggling with the limits of a feminist universalism. One of the pivotal questions is how to remain "ethical" when facing gender politics that are not part of one's own context. This fracture within transnational feminism is also a sore spot for international feminist coalitions (Khanna 2003, 209).

<sup>11</sup> "Equal or Different", 1986; quoted in Khanna, 207, from Whitford 1991, 32.

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Simone de Beauvoir had introduced me to Jean Genet and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom I had interviewed. But she hesitated about being interviewed herself: "Why should we talk about me? Don't you think I've done enough in my three books of memoirs?" It took several letters Simone de Beauvoir had introduced me to Jean Genet and Jean-Paul Sartre, whom I had interviewed. Butler of course, can be considered the grand dame of current gender ideology and is an enthusiastic proponent of the frankly ludicrous idea that biology is a social construct. Using Butler's rationale, it's easy to see why all this batshit gender bonkers is causing so much mayhem in political parties, schools, universities, and women's groups up and down the country. In fact it's not just the UK that's affected by Butler mania and the queer as fuckery ideas she and her ilk birthed. Queer Theory, and it's bastard child, trans activism is now the dominant ideology among progressives in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and much, much further afield. Is it fair to place all the blame on Butler? Not all of it certainly, but co Simone de Beauvoir held that human experience is intrinsically ambiguous and that there are no values extrinsic to experience, but she also designated some actions as absolute evil. This essay explains how Beauvoir utilized an intrinsic absolute value to ground an action-guiding principle of freedom that justifies her notion of evil. Morgan's analysis counters Robin May Schott's objections that Beauvoir failed to systematically justify her notion of absolute evil and that Beauvoir shifted from a "logic of action" to a "logic of history" when she utilized the concept. View. Show abstr