

Lysistratism: Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity and the 4B Movement

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Movement

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In her seminal work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Judith Butler deconstructs the complex nature of gender. Her essay is striking in its assertion that gender is not an inherent identity, but a *performance* – a reality shaped and maintained through repeated actions and societal norms. Identity is not fixed, but continually reinforced until perceived as natural. While Butler acknowledges that performativity is just one plausible understanding of gender, its flexibility accounts for intersectionality, meaning the inclusion of race, sexuality, and class.

Performativity is a powerful framework to analyse why and how feminism disrupts and redefines established gender norms. Each wave of feminism — from the fight for universal suffrage (first wave) to media representation (fourth wave) — can be defined as a ‘rejection’ of the ‘assigned script’ given by society, which women are expected to follow. This defiance through each generation of feminism demonstrates a collective refusal to perform roles dictated by patriarchy.

The most recent and widespread defiance against gender norms is South Korea's 4B movement. The movement's name derives from its four tenets: bisekseu (비섹스, rejecting sexual relationships with men), bichulsan (비출산, forgoing childbirth), biyeonae (비연애, abstaining from romantic relationships with men), and bihon (비혼, rejecting marriage to men).

This paper aims to examine how Butler's theory of performativity elucidates the rise of the 4B movement, and why it is especially relevant in today's political landscape.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF PERFORMATIVITY AND THE 4B MOVEMENT

Starting from her reference to Simone de Beauvoir, who states "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman", Butler establishes the premise that gender is not a stable identity, and it is "instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, p. 519). Essentially, she challenges the traditional view that gender is directly and solely determined by one's biological sex. She argues that gender is influenced by a series of repeated actions, ("performances") which are shaped by social standards. The notion of gender is rooted in what *we do*, rather than what *we are*. Thus, this idealization disrupts the traditional binary understanding of gender and enables a more fluid one.

She draws on phenomenology to better ground her arguments. She takes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analysis of how the body is understood in a social context to portray how gender is a largely socially conditioned behavior, in turn reinforcing norms over time. The simple acts of walking, dressing, and speaking are imbued with expectations, creating the illusion of stable, natural identities such as femininity or masculinity. However, Butler does not view performativity as solely deterministic. By arguing that "it [performativity] is not a singular act but a repetition and a ritual [...] which has the potential to open up possibilities of gender transformation", individuals can disrupt them and break free from their fragility (Butler, p. 34).

Traditional feminist theory tends to group all women under a single category, a universal identity: “women”. Butler critiques this notion by emphasizing that such categories are inherently exclusionary. “By critiquing the idea of a monolithic ‘woman’”, Butler opens the door for a more intersectional feminism that accounts for race, class, and sexuality (Pilcher and Whelehan, p.34). This rethinking of feminist theory encourages an intersectional approach, which includes race, sexuality, and class.

Fundamentally, feminism is an “intellectual commitment and a political movement” that seeks to address inequalities based on gender (Pilcher and Whelehan, p. 51). Originating from the late 19th century after the Seneca Falls convention, it has evolved into four distinct waves. Each wave addressed specific issues while building on the struggles of the past. For instance, the first wave (emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) focused primarily on achieving universal suffrage and legal rights for women. The second wave (1960s-1980s) expanded on reproductive rights and addressed systemic patriarchy. Even though these first two waves were driven by beliefs in equality, they frequently excluded women of color and working-class women, establishing a ‘white feminist’ narrative which failed to account for intersectionality. They portray an example of traditional feminist theory, grouping all women under the generalized term “woman”, which did not account for the diversity in each woman’s experience. Once again critiquing traditional feminist theory, Butler asserts that “[t]he identity that is said to ground feminist politics is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, p. 25). In other words, the term “woman”, defining all women into one unified concept as the basis for feminism is not considered natural, but rather a construct formed by repeated performances and societal conventions.

In contrast, third-wave feminism (1990s) “intertwined the personal and political while acknowledging the complexity of identity” through the civil rights movement (Pilcher and Whelehan, p. 62). Both the third and fourth waves (2010s), which pushed for digital activism through the #MeToo movement, allowed space for the subversion of gender identity, especially for women. By subversion, this refers to the active rejection and defiance of societal norms that impose rigid gender roles, challenging and overturning the "assigned scripts" that dictate how women should behave. This greater space for subversion has enabled women to completely deviate from the constricted norm associated with the term “woman”, which is how the most recent wave, the 4B movement, has been able to flourish.

A movement is defined as “a collective effort by people who share a common interest in bringing about or resisting social, political, economic, or cultural change” (Pilcher and Whelehan, p. 112). The 4B movement, deemed a ‘radical feminist and misandrist’ group, was born in 2017 in South Korea, after its predecessor, the “Escape the Corset” movement in 2016. It is based on four pillars: bisekseu (비섹스, no sex with men), bichulsan (비출산, no giving birth), biyeonae (비연애, no dating men) and bihon (비혼, no marriage with men), creating its name: ‘4B’. A term that various scholars agree characterizes this movement best is neo-Lysistratic feminism.

Neo-lysistratic feminism takes inspiration from Aristophane’s Greek comedy *Lysistrata*, where women withheld sex to challenge male dominance and reclaim their rights. In the comedy, *Lysistrata* herself declares, “We’ll compel the men to peace by keeping away from them” (Aristophanes, p. 62), mirroring a sentiment that resonates with the 4B’s acts of refusal towards imposed performativity. By refusing to participate in marriage, childbearing, and

traditional romantic relationships, the movement altogether tears down traditional gender norms, while still associating with womanhood and the identity behind the term “woman”. By completely rejecting the “assigned script” and thus disrupting performativity, the 4B movement reveals the weakness of patriarchal structures and overturns long-standing social norms.

The country, facing alarmingly declining birth rates, an aging population, and a now strictly conservative government in place, has significantly pressured women, taking away fundamental rights and even blaming them for these struggles. In response, this movement has served as a public critique against the state's use of women's reproductive roles to secure national interests. Butler's assertion that “performativity can subvert norms by exposing their contingency” (Gender Trouble, p. 34) is evident in the movement's rejection of roles that are socially constructed rather than inherent. Globally, this movement has reached back to its roots, in the United States, after the 2024 presidential elections, creating a positive feedback loop.

APPLICATION AND RELEVANCE

Donald Trump's re-election for 2025 sparked radical reactions in the United States, dividing the nation with a gender-war, similar to how South Korea's population is divided by its conservative government. Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law on December 3rd, 2024, catalyzed this divide within the nation. His subsequent impeachment on December 4th, further deepened this divide. The rise of extreme right-wing governments has given leeway for patriarchal

society to marginalize those outside of the status quo, especially women. Trump's project 2025 aims to roll back reproductive rights and reinforce traditional gender roles, while Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law marks a suppression of political dissent, exposing how authoritarian regimes use patriarchal dominance to exert control. Yoon, faced with economic and demographic crises has mirrored Trump's traditionalist reforms by holding women accountable for the nation's pressuring decline. Both government's policies seek to regulate women's bodies under the guise of societal stability. These examples demonstrate how performativity may also reinforce gender standards in patriarchal settings, however, this gives the opportunity to break free from them. According to Butler, "[p]ower is produced through reiteration, but its very repetition also creates opportunities for subversion," (Performative Acts, p. 526). The reiteration of conservative gender norms by Trump and Yoon reveals how fragile they are, as feminist movements (such as 4B) challenge their stability through performative resistance.

In highly patriarchal and traditionalist societies, Butler's works become crucial to understand and avoid oppression caused by fragile and constricted gender norms. Across South Korea, the United States, and globally, countless women and non-gender conforming individuals of all identities continue to face inequality set up by patriarchal structures. These structures are built on narratives of superiority that lack substantive justification, relying instead on constructed hierarchies that marginalize and exclude. With the rise of right-wing governments globally, there has been a notable shift in priorities, where women's and minority rights have been cast aside as secondary, in favor of being promised better economies. Thus, with this complete political turnover, I firmly maintain the view that movements such as the 4B (as radical as they may seem)

have become the most attention-grabbing resort to remind the public that everyone deserves equal rights, rather than being forced to conform to a strict set of norms.

In conclusion, Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a much deeper understanding of feminism in its objective to oppose oppressive gender norms by opposing performativity. Performativity also explains the development of feminism – from the first to the fourth wave – in its opposition to patriarchal systems of power in both historical and contemporary contexts. Butler's observations are especially relevant today, exemplified by South Korea's 4B movement and its international reactions to patriarchal leaders like Yoon Suk Yeol and Donald Trump. This movement is a prime example of how resistance can occur when political and cultural systems use the repetition of established gender norms as a weapon. Feminists continue to reshape the world by opposing reproductive pressures, societal expectations, and the brittleness of gendered performances.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Aristophanes. *Lysistrata*. Translated by Alan H. Sommerstein, Penguin Classics, 1973.

Aristophane's ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* (411 BC) provides a historical context to the concept of women turning towards radicality to strike and regain back fundamental rights. The myth of *Lysistrata* tells the story of a woman's extraordinary mission to end the [Peloponnesian War](#) between Greek [city states](#) by denying all the men of the land any sex, which was the only thing they truly and deeply desired. Understanding the concept of *Lysistrata* is key for contextualizing the 4B movement's neo-lysisratic tents.

Baumgardner, Jennifer, and Amy Richards. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

These two authors provide a summary and analysis of all four waves of feminism, with an in-depth look at their history and objectives. This ranges from the struggle for fundamental rights such as suffrage, to the digital age and Butler's notion of intersectionality. There is also a mention of how Butler's idea of gender as performative within each wave is relevant.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531.

This is the foundational text I base my arguments on, mostly looking at the concept of gender as performative, and how she explores the concept of gender as radically shaped by societal

norms. Essentially, identity is continually constructed through repeated actions and societal expectations.

Her ideas help portray the waves of feminism and the 4B movement in a new world order governed by politicians like Donald Trump, cutting down many women's rights.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

This is a secondary text I use along with Butler's main essay, to help me further conceptualize her foundational idea of performativity and deconstruct one of the central assumptions of [feminist theory](#): that there exists an identity and a subject that requires representation in politics and language.

South Korea's Radical Feminist Movement: Meet the Women Rejecting Marriage, Sex, and Relationships with Men. BBC News, Directed by Laura Bicker, 2019.

This documentary by BBC, a credible documentary source, gives an insightful look at South Korea's conservative political landscape and the current government's laws in place. The documentary is effective in explaining how there is a pressing 'gender-war' and why women are rebelling through the 4B movement. Through interviews and analysis, it explores the movement's four key tenets: rejecting sex, dating, marriage, and childbirth with men, which participants view as a form of resistance against imposed patriarchal norms. This source aligns with Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity by subverting traditional gender roles in radical ways.

Park, Hye-Kyung. "The Rise of South Korea's '4B' Feminist Movement." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 135–153.

Park Hye-Kyung's exploration of the 4B movement deconstructs its neo-lysisratic principles which are: bisekseu (비섹스, no sex with men), bichulsan (비출산, no giving birth), biyeonae (비연애, no dating men) and bihon (비혼, no marriage with men). Park discusses women's opinions and responses considering the ever-growing misogyny and patriarchal law enforcement, especially culturally, politically, and economically. She also explores the grave consequences of low birth rates in South Korea which conflict the nation. Additionally, she mentions its rapidly growing worldwide influence especially in the U.S, from which it took inspiration (the #MeToo movement).

Pilcher, Jane, and Imelda Whelehan. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Sage Publications, 2004.

This book introduces the key theories, concepts, and terminologies for gender studies, useful for this paper. It includes the theories coined by Butler, but also dives deep into notions such as patriarchy. Designed for students and those new to gender studies, it provides clear, accessible explanations that help frame current debates and evolving ideas in the field. By addressing the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality, Pilcher and Whelehan highlight the diversity within feminist perspectives, making this book a useful guide for understanding complex social dynamics.