

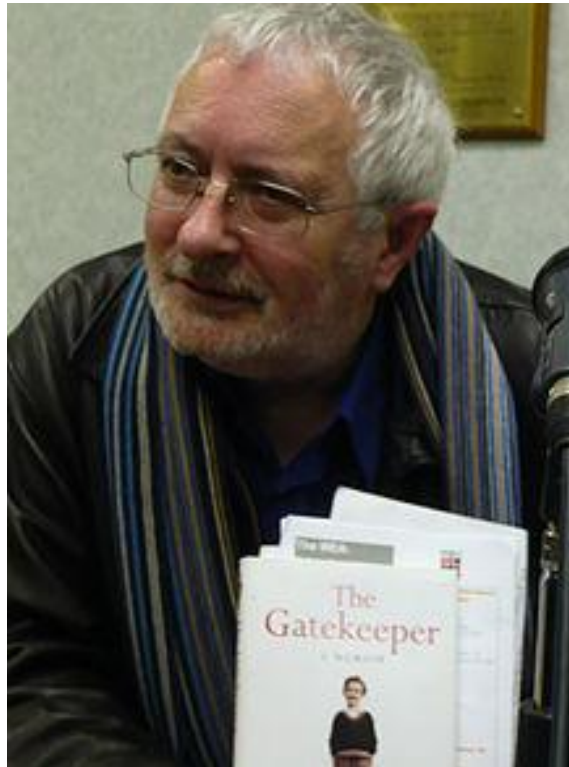
# Gender Studies in the Post-theoretical Era: A Chinese Perspective

Wang Ning

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

\* According to Terry Eagleton, the “golden age of cultural theory” is long past. Thus ours is a post-theoretical era, in which gender theory has been moving from the periphery to the center not only breaking through the traditional “male-centric” mode of thinking but also the essentialist thinking mode of sex and gender. In this new orientation of poststructuralist study of issues of sex and gender, Judith Butler’s gender theory has become more and more influential.

**Terence F, Eagleton** (1943-) is a British literary theorist widely regarded as Britain's most influential living literary critic. He was Distinguished Professor of English Literature at the University of Lancaster, and as a Visiting Professor at many Anglo-American universities.



# Wang Ning and Terry Eagleton in Cairo (2000)



\* Jonathan Culler once pointed out in 2011 that there are six major orientations for contemporary literary theory. They are: (1) the recovery of narratology; (2) more about Derrida and less about Foucault and Lacan; (3) an “ethic turn”; (4) ecocriticism and animal studies; (5) posthuman studies; and (6) the return of the aesthetic. Although Culler does not mention gender studies as a major orientation in his China lecture, he does discuss gender issues and Butler’s theoretical doctrine on several occasions in his book. Western theory could thus function effectively in China only when it is contextualized. This has been proved by the popularization of gender theory and gender studies in present day China.

**Jonathan Culler** (1944- ) is Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Cornell University. He is an important figure of the structuralist movement of literary theory and criticism.



\* I should further point out that poststructuralist theories, especially feminist critical theory was once very influential and flourishing for it did provide Chinese women with a powerful weapon in their struggle against the long-lasting male-centric society and for women's equal political and social position. But since the founding of New China, women's social position has largely been changed with Mao's emancipation of the entire Chinese women. They no longer view seeking the equal say with men as their major aim.

\* Upon entering the post-theoretical era, gender theory has become more and more popular and attractive but less challenging along with such changes of women's position in the past decades. It is true that in today's China, young female graduate students are often worried about their less competitive status in job market than their male schoolmates, but among university faculty members are quite a number of women elites, especially in the humanities departments.



- \* And those engaged in gender studies are mostly young female scholars who are dissatisfied with the long lasting male-centric mode of thinking in China and thereby have a clear consciousness of gender. They are quite familiar with various Western feminist and gender theories, and some of them even do gender studies with regard to the Chinese practice. Then people may well ask these questions: Why is gender theory or gender studies so popular and influential in today's China? Why is Judith Butler so attractive to scholarly attention in China?

\* Because there have appeared some social and cultural phenomena which can only be interpreted with the theory concerning gender in its poststructuralist sense. And because the new generation of gender studies scholars want to find something new in the old-fashioned feminist theories. In this sense, Butler, largely due to her personal charisma as well as the uniqueness of her theory, plus her border-crossing writing style, becomes another charismatic Western theorist after Derrida in China as well as elsewhere.

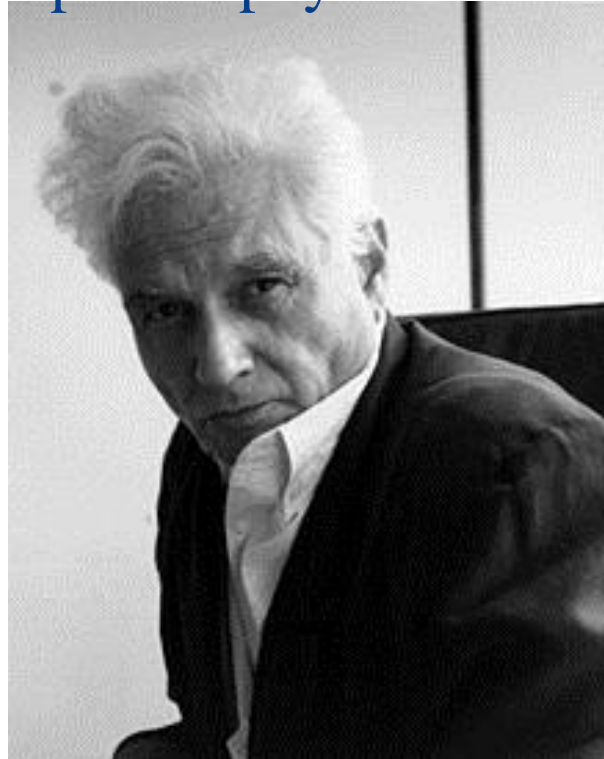
**Judith Butler** (1956- ) is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has influenced political philosophy, ethics and the fields of third-wave feminist, queer and literary theory.



# Wang Ning and Judith Butler in Shanghai, 2018



**Jacques Derrida** (1930 –2004) was a French philosopher, born in French Algeria. He developed the critical theory known as deconstruction and his work has been labeled as poststructuralism and associated with postmodern philosophy.



# Wang Ning and Derrida in Beijing, 2001



\* As we know, gender studies is a field of interdisciplinary study which analyzes race, ethnicity, sexuality and location in the context of cultural studies, with gender issues more emphasized. But I should add that gender studies pay particular attention to the social and cultural aspects of gender with theories concerning gender issues in the poststructuralist context. In contemporary gender studies, the term “gender” is often used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, rather than merely to the state of being male or female in its entirety.

\* According Butler, “gender is not a radical choice... [nor is it] imposed or inscribed upon the individual.” In the present era, anything could be changed or reconstructed, even one’s sex or gender. On the other hand, gender is also regarded as a practice, often referred to as something that is performative. In the poststructuralist context, gender studies has already changed traditional feminism into a sort of post-feminism. Its critical force and militant spirit characterized by those feminists of the older generation are much less forceful as it used to be. This is not only true of the Western countries, but also true in China, especially in those big cities where there have appeared various postmodern symptoms both in current Chinese society as well as in Chinese literary works.



\* The appearance of post-feminism has in turn affected gender studies, causing a movement in gender identity away from the concept of fixed or essentialist gender identity, to post-modern or poststructural fluid or multiple identities. Within the poststructuralist framework, masculinity can be taken as always in movement and never fixed or stable. In the past decades, along with the coming of the third wave of contemporary feminist trend, the theories of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the work of feminists such as Judith Butler have become more and more powerful and attractive to scholars.

\* They are particularly attractive among young female humanities scholars who want to be equally treated as their male colleagues. Butler as an academic star indeed enjoys very rare treatment in the Chinese context, with five of her major single-authored books published in Chinese although few readers could really understand her. According to Butler, the performance of gender itself creates gender. She also compares the performativity of gender to the performance of the theater. With Butler's theory, gender is essentially viewed as a performative repetition of acts associated with the male or female. These books are: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (by Crown Books in Taipei in 2008 and by Sanlian Press in Beijing in 2009),

\* *Body Matters: on the Discursive Limits of Sex* (by Shanghai Sanlian Press in 2011), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (by Jiangsu People's Publishing House in 2008), and *Undoing Gender* (by Shanghai Sanlian Press in 2009). There are two Ph.D dissertations devoting to Butler's gender theory: one is by He Lei of Beijing Foreign Studies University and the other by Zhao Yingnan of Tsinghua University.

\* Even the very competitive National Social Sciences Fund has offered financial support to a project directed by Du Lanlan of Shanghai Jiao Tong University who deals exclusively with Judith Butler and her gender theory. Apart from the introductory book by Li Yinhe, there have published numerous journal articles dealing either with Butler's theory proper or analyzing gender issues with Butler's theory. Obviously, literary and cultural critics want to use her theory and work to analyze some conspicuous social and cultural phenomena that have appeared in current Chinese society. While ordinary readers want to use her theory to justify the fact that gender could be changed and reconstructed thus it is both a natural phenomenon as well as a constructed one.

\* Obviously, her idea of identity as free and flexible and gender as a performance, is one of the foundations of contemporary queer theory. Butler's work, like that of other poststructuralist theorists, has ruthlessly deconstructed the artificial binary opposition between sex and gender endowing gender with more cultural and constructive elements. In Butler, gender and heterosexuality are constructed as natural because the opposition of the male and female sexes is perceived as natural in the social imaginary. When we talk about gender theory or gender studies, we simply mean the theory and study on gender issues, such as gay and lesbian and queer theory.

- \* But like what has happened in the Western academia, scholars of gender studies in China also pay particular attention to lesbian and queer studies rather than gay studies although no law has recognized the legitimacy of gay in China. As we know, according to the Confucian doctrine, women in China should observe the so-called San Gang Wu Chang (three cardinal guides and five constant virtues) as specified in the feudal ethical code. The Three Cardinal Guides are: ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife, and the Five Constant Virtues include benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity, which make up the principle of feudal moral conduct.

\* Anyone, especially women, who violates these feudal principles, will be either punished or morally criticized. A lot of tragic stories have been so far described in Chinese literary works. According to the long-dominant Confucian doctrine, a woman who does not want to get married and give birth to a child is not regarded as a good woman. If she is not regarded as a good woman, she would certainly be viewed as “queer” or abnormal. Even a divorced woman is sometimes looked down upon in her work unit or neighborhood.

- \* Like all the other “imported” or “translated” Western theories, gender theory in China has also undergone a sort of metamorphosis through dynamic translation and constructive representation. Since queer theory in the Western languages, especially in English, means something derogatory, some Chinese feminist theorists, such as Li Yinhe, try from its very beginning to subvert this long-standing ethical standard through translation. When translated into Chinese as “kuer” by her, “queer” in her translation simply becomes “marvelous” or “remarkable”, thus meaning something good and marvelous.



李银河（1952-），中国社会科学院社会学所研究员、教授、博士生导师。中国第一位研究性的女社会学家，性学家，自由主义女性主义者。



- \* Those queer behaviors according to the traditional ethical standard are thereby regarded as “normal” or even remarkable. Those who are queer are no longer looked down upon, but rather, admired by others. Following this, those young people pursuing something new or fashionable naturally like queer theory so much so that they even try to behave strange or “queer,” which find particular embodiment in the phenomena to be described later on. This obviously not only runs counter to traditional Chinese ethical standard, but also transcends over the revolutionary feminist doctrine long promoted by the feminists of the older generation.

\* As we know, modern Chinese feminist movement has already had a relatively long history since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the May 4<sup>th</sup> period, Confucianism was severely criticized and even the Confucian temples were burned or destroyed in many places. Some Western writers, such as Henrik Ibsen, were even hailed as spiritual leaders of Chinese women's liberation movement, inspired by whom, writers like Hu Shi, Tian Han and Cao Yu, have all produced literary works of feminist tendency viewing Ibsen as the spiritual leader and emancipator of Chinese women.

- \* Under the influence of Western feminism, Chinese women have gradually realized their emancipation, especially in big cities. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, women's equal rights have been further guaranteed by law. So when Western feminist critical theory was introduced into China in the 1980s, it was not so attractive to Chinese literary critical circles as that of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. By and by, the second and third wave of feminist movements along with their poststructuralist oriented gender theories have caused increasing interest among young Chinese literary theorists and comparatists.

\* As we know, poststructuralist theories were once very popular among young Chinese literary and cultural scholars who always tried to interpret literary and cultural phenomena with various poststructuralist theories. Jacques Derrida was once a champion of China's avant-garde literary criticism, and his deconstructive critical theory was used well in these critics. It is thus effective if we contextualize Western theory according to their Chinese practice in literature and culture.

\* As I have previously mentioned that the reason why gender theory is so popular and attractive to critical attention is largely due to, apart from the enthusiastic promotion and introduction by its Chinese practitioners, the fact that there are some social and cultural phenomena which cannot be interpreted with traditional feminist theories. It is true that upon entering the new century, along with the acceleration of China's market economy in the process of globalization, consumer culture has been more and more powerful in deconstructing the established canonical culture and its product, elite literature and art.

\* Women, especially young and fashionable beauties, have become objects of people's consumption. On the one hand, the rise of consumer culture has weakened the official discourse, depoliticizing literary and cultural production and criticism. And on the other hand, it has also deconstructed the dominant position of elite culture, paving the way for a real pluralistic orientation of contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Under the influence of consumer culture, there have appeared some phenomena which cannot be interpreted with traditional feminist theories.

\* For instance, the popularity of Furong jiejie (Sister Lotus) among young college students has deconstructed the traditional idol-worship among today's young people; the enthusiastic promotion of the “chaoji nüsheng” (“super-girl’s voice”) has damaged the traditional aesthetic standard of lofty music, emancipating the musical and other artistic imagination; the sudden rise of the girlish TV star Xiao Shenyang has attracted numerous “potential” young film or TV stars viewing him as their new idol, which has certainly deconstructed the authenticity of sex and gender with androgynous phenomena becoming more and more popular in people’s live entertainment.



芙蓉姐姐（1977-），陕西咸阳人，原名史恒侠（笔名林可），陕西工学院机械系毕业，由于网络拍客将其照片上传到水木清华、北大未名等网站上，成为了网络上人气火爆的红人，被称为芙蓉姐姐。



李宇春 (Chris Lee, 1984-) 出生于成都，中国流行女歌手、词曲创作人、电影演员、演唱会导演。2005年，李宇春获得“超级女声”比赛全国总冠军，同年10月登上美国《时代周刊》亚洲版封面。



小沈阳（1981—），本名沈鹤，生于辽宁省铁岭市，中国二人转和小品演员。



\* The popularization and wide influence of Han Han's internet literary writing has diminished both the realistic principle of writing for life's sake and the modernist principle of writing for art's sake. The appearance of his photo on the cover of American magazine *Time* has all the more encouraged numerous Chinese citizens in their writing and publishing practice. All the above has undoubtedly proved that the traditional principle of beauty has been challenged and sex is no longer regarded as naturally fixed.

韩寒（1982-），出生于上海。中国职业拉力赛及场地赛车手、作家，《独唱团》杂志主编，并涉足音乐创作。他被认为是80后的领军人物，是80后名气最大的一位、同时也是出道最早的代表人物。




\* It could be socially and culturally constructed, according to poststructuralist gender theory, so it is performative and could be “performed” like playing a role in theater. Gone are the days when classical beauties so attractive among contemporary men as the above male and female stars are far from being beautiful or handsome according to the classical standard. This has certainly to some extent paved the way for the rise of Butler’s gender theory in the Chinese context.

\* But the above are just few particular phenomena that have appeared in some big cities among young intellectuals. Since China is such a large country with majority people being peasants and workers it has long been a male-centric society where ordinary women are still struggling for their equal social and cultural status. For instance, some good-looking migrant female workers working in big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou try to permanently remain there by marrying local men with a registered residential identity (hukou) so that it is possible for them to become permanent urban residents.





\* But they are only very few lucky dogs, while most of them have to stay in small townships or even go back to their native villages to get married with local men. Although women on the whole have liberated themselves from their dependence upon men as they used to, they have on the other hand become a sort of products consumed by men as we can see beauties on the covers of many fashionable magazines. In comparison, few handsome men are fortunate enough as to have their photos appear on the covers of those fashionable magazines.



\* Young beautiful female film stars are often used to advertise for big enterprises or transnational corporations with their beautiful and sometimes even sexy pictures appearing on the covers of fashionable magazines or TV advertisements. But when they are old, they will be much less valuable. According to the statistics in the anti-corruption campaign, most of the high ranking party and government officials dismissed from their posts exclusively have some mistresses, while few of their female counterparts have male lovers.

- \* People usually have such a consensus: a successful man could marry a much younger wife if he has divorced, while a successful woman is on many occasions destined to remain single becoming a sort of *shengnü* (left-over woman, or broadly referring to those of educated, professional, elite urban females aged 27-35 who have failed to find ideal husbands). Such stories are often described in contemporary literary works. Thus the real equality between different sexes has not yet been totally realized.

\* In face of all the above phenomena, how shall we deal with them? In this sense, we should say that theory is not dead, nor is it so effective if it were used to interpret particular social and cultural phenomena like the above. Among various poststructuralist theories, the one of gender studies might well be effective to interpret the above phenomena, but it should be contextualized with Chinese practice. That is to say, when theory travels from the West to China, it is always subject to metamorphosis, in the process of which some transformed versions will appear.

\* But in any event, after the impact of poststructuralist gender theory, gender is no longer regarded as being natural born only; it could also be socially and culturally constructed. In this aspect, Judith Butler's poststructuralist gender theory could be used to interpret the above newly emergent social and cultural phenomena after being contextualized.


\* People might think that Butler is chiefly a philosopher rather than a literary theorist, but she builds up her theoretical system based on both her reading of philosophical and literary works. Since she writes in a border-crossing manner, she is more influential in literary critical field than in philosophical field. The same is true of her influence in China. The above mentioned books or dissertations are all written by China's literary scholars who have a clear consciousness of interdisciplinary studies of literature. So it is not surprising that Butler has been more recognized in literary studies circles than in philosophical field. Just as Culler points out the literariness in Butler's theory,

\* Butler's use of *Antigone* in an argument about the legitimacy of models of kinship and politics shows that literature is better to think with---in that its language provides powerful resources for a critique of constructions that it has been used to sustain and thus of the institutional arrangements it has helped to support.

\* That is, according to Culler, Butler's theory is more effective if it is to be applied to literary criticism and studies. For as a philosopher who has a profound attainment in literature, Butler stands on a high plane to observe literary phenomena thus reaching a conclusion that cannot be reached only from a literary perspective. Then what has Butler contributed to the development of contemporary feminism? This is what we want to highlight before using her work to interpret some Chinese phenomena. Just as Culler sums up, if we say that feminist politics requires a notion of "feminist identity, of essential features that women share as women and that give them common interests and goals", then



\* [F]or Butler, on the contrary, the fundamental categories of identity are cultural and social productions, more likely to be the *result* of cooperation than its condition of possibility---more performative effect than constative truth. *Gender Trouble* does not deny that there are biological differences between sexes...; but one can take gender to be the cultural interpretation of biological difference.




\* That is to say, according to Butler, gender is performative just like theatrical performance: “gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real.” To be a man or woman is nothing but “playing a role” on stage. If we start from this to observe the above Chinese social and cultural phenomena, we could find tentative replies.

\* But not all the theorists are sympathetic toward Butler's work as her way of doing academic research is very controversial among and even conflicts with those of the mainstream Euro-American scholars. For Martha Nussbaum, one of the eminent American philosophers and humanities scholars, in sharply criticizing Butler's "bad style" of complicating simple things, points out:

**Martha Nussbaum** (1947- ), is an American philosopher with a particular interest in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, political philosophy and ethics.



\* So what does Butler's work add to this copious body of writing? *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* contain no detailed argument against biological claims of “natural” difference, no account of mechanisms of gender replication, and no account of the legal shaping of the family; nor do they contain any detailed focus on possibilities for legal change.



\* Maybe it is noticed what Nussbaum expects of Butler is nothing but the fighting role of the feminists of the older generation who always speak for those oppressed and unequally treated. But since many of the poststructuralists do believe that if they cannot shake the state apparatus, they could at least shake the linguistic structure. They are actually engaged in another sort of politics.

\* Similarly, if the post-feminists cannot change the social and cultural inequality between men and women, they could at least play with sex-gender and make fun of the sexual difference. Perhaps it is this playful and performative attitude of Butler and other post-feminists that invites criticism and attack. And it is also one of the reasons why the majority of women in China do not appreciate her gender theory although it is extremely popular among some young intellectual women who have an avant-garde sense.

- \* As I have already pointed out that Butler and her gender theory are still controversial although very valuable and influential in the Western academic and critical circles despite the fact that she has a considerable personal charisma among quite a number of young intellectuals both in the West and China, not only for her “bad style”, but also for her unique gender theory and broad human concern. The same is true of poststructuralist gender theory in general. Just as Derrida was controversial and even “marginalized” in French and European academia, he was much more influential in North America, especially in American literary critical circles.



\* The same is almost and will be true of Butler. According to Nussbaum, a prominent senior American scholar of humanities and social sciences who also writes in a border-crossing manner, all Butler's work is nothing new but following other people's ready-made findings:

- \* Butler's main idea, first introduced in *Gender Trouble* in 1989 and repeated throughout her books, is that gender is a social artifice. Our ideas of what women and men are reflect nothing that exists eternally in nature. Instead they derive from customs that embed social relations of power.
- \* This notion, of course, is nothing new. The denaturalizing of gender was present already in Plato, and it received a great boost from John Stuart Mill, who claimed in *The Subjection of Women* that "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing."...

- \* ....Long before Butler came on the scene, many feminists contributed to the articulation of such an account.
- \* ....Before Butler, MacKinnon and Dworkin addressed the feminist fantasy of an idyllic natural sexuality of women that only needed to be “liberated”; and argued that social forces go so deep that we should not suppose we have access to such a notion of “nature.” Before Butler, they stressed the ways in which male-dominated power structures marginalize and subordinate not only women, but also people who would like to choose a same-sex relationship....

\* Before Butler, the psychologist Nancy Chodorow gave a detailed and compelling account of how gender differences replicate themselves across the generations: she argued that the ubiquity of these mechanisms of replication enables us to understand how what is artificial can nonetheless be nearly ubiquitous. Before Butler, the biologist Anne Fausto Sterling, through her painstaking criticism of experimental work allegedly supporting the naturalness of conventional gender distinctions, showed how deeply social power-relations had compromised the objectivity of scientists....


\* Before Butler, the political theorist Susan Moller Okin explored the role of law and political thought in constructing a gendered destiny for women in the family; and this project, too, was pursued further by a number of feminists in law and political philosophy. Before Butler, Gayle Rubin's important anthropological account of subordination, *The Traffic in Women* (1975), provided a valuable analysis of the relationship between the social organization of gender and the asymmetries of power.

\* Obviously, Nussbaum in her influential but controversial essay could find more evidences showing Butler repeats her previous ideas or something not first discovered by herself. But I would argue that Butler's theoretical perspective is entirely new from which she interprets literary and other humanities texts. It is true to some extent that Nussbaum's words are bit radical and even sharper. But we should not forget that Butler's findings and theoretical innovation are based on her education she has received in the Western context. Since her academic fathers and mothers have shadowed her in her theoretical innovation she cannot avoid a sort of anxiety of influence and make path-breaking innovations like some of her contemporaries.

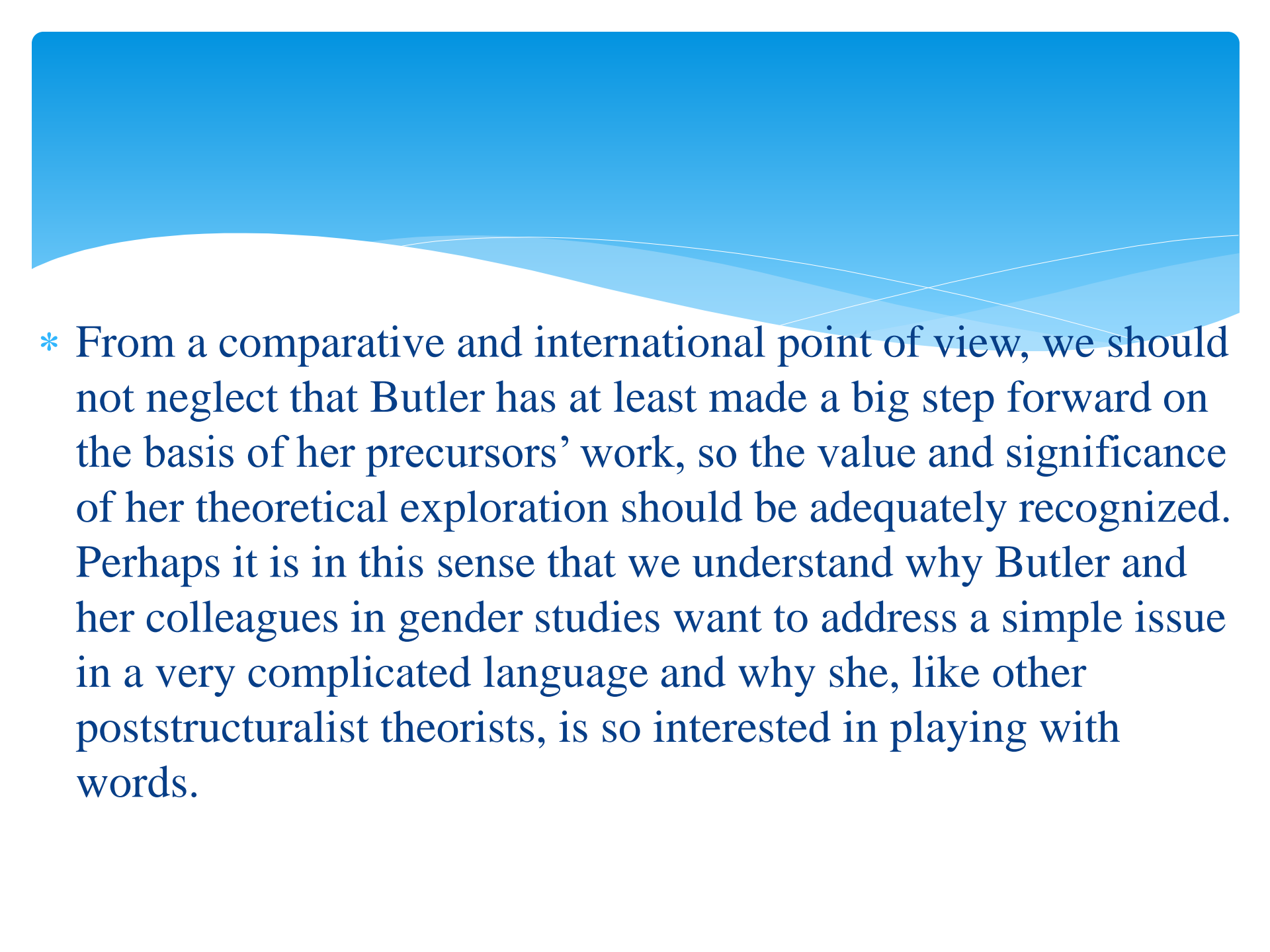
\* What could she and other postfeminist theorists do then? To Harold Bloom, the only way out is to misread the old texts in the process of which some new and insightful ideas could be put forward. But to Butler, what she could do is nothing but questioning or challenging the established theoretical convention and trying from a different perspective to retell the old story in the process of which something new could appear. Only by this can contemporary theorists make new innovation.

\* Therefore, as literary critics and humanities scholars, we should not find fault with Butler while neglecting her theoretical exploration and innovation which should at least be regarded as relatively new if not completely new. Although the above quotation from Nussbaum's critique of Butler is a bit long, it at least indicates that Butler's theoretical innovation is not completely new in the Western context as many of her precursors have already addressed the similar issues before her.






\* But once translated into China her theoretical doctrine will appear entirely new and challenging as China has long been male-centric and Confucianism-dominated for thousands of years. Contemporary China needs someone like Judith Butler to reverse the foundation of such male-centric mode of thinking as modern China did need someone like Ibsen to have women emancipated. That is one of the reasons why we have invited Butler to address us here.



\* From a comparative and international point of view, we should not neglect that Butler has at least made a big step forward on the basis of her precursors' work, so the value and significance of her theoretical exploration should be adequately recognized. Perhaps it is in this sense that we understand why Butler and her colleagues in gender studies want to address a simple issue in a very complicated language and why she, like other poststructuralist theorists, is so interested in playing with words.

- 
- \* As she is a philosopher very good at rhetoric and writing across borders, it is not so difficult for her to play with words although it is indeed difficult for her as well as all the contemporary theorists to produce something completely new. It is perhaps the limitation of all the poststructuralist gender theorists who are much less militant as those of the older generation. It is probably one of the reasons why I should call ours as a post-theoretical era in which theory is no longer so powerful and ubiquitous as usual but still effective if used to interpret literary and cultural phenomena only.

- \* Gender studies as well as its major theorist Judith Butler are still popular and increasingly influential not only in the West but more in China since many literary and cultural phenomena can be interpreted with this theory or from this theoretical perspective. But as we know, Butler's work has also been very influential in other fields apart from feminist and queer theory, such as cultural studies, international politics and continental philosophy. Butler is considered by many as "one of the most influential voices in contemporary political theory" as she herself is also an important political figure.

\* Since she is still very active in many fields constantly offering her theoretical insights to contemporary intellectuals, and since she has a strong humanities concern for those who are still oppressed by violence and power, we cannot discuss all her theories here. What we could do is just to focus on her major contributions to contemporary gender studies as well as humanities in general toward the reconstruction of global humanities..



Thanks for your  
attention!