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The Formation of Gender Identity Based on the Performativity Theory in Postmodernism Perspective

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to assess the formation of gender identities of women and men based on the performativity theory in postmodernism. The study included articles and books that were written about language and gender and also identity of gender in postmodern theories. These studies were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The result of these analyzing shows, the identity of people changes in different situations and they do not have a fixed social identity. They form their identity based on what they say and do. First of all, the image that a person makes of oneself reflects the attitude of the society and culture, and then, it depends on their knowledge. This person “unlike representing the social identity” has also a stable identity to face with all time.

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INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism is not a movement or a school, but the development of modern society concerns which enables us to know more about diverse ideas in the world. In postmodernism, words and concepts that give the meaning to human life, such as wisdom, truth, tradition, morality, identity and gender completely lose their meanings. The meaning of identity, hence, will change and it will not belong to a person anymore. In fact, in postmodernism, identity is not personalized. Actually, the meaning of identity is formed by the interactions of a person in a particular time and a special place. Today, gender identity is influenced by the Judith Butler's theory called “performativity”. She believes that gender is what one does, not one has inherently. By this new idea, gender is something that one produces and reproduces it all the time. It means that a person does not have a flexible gender because gender is a kind of the process that she or he does it frequently. Therefore, the performing of gender identity will be different in different situations.

In post modernism view, the biological factors of sex and gender are meaningless. Gender gets the meaning when it is carried out and performed. Totally, in postmodernism view sex and gender depend on the culture and social structures. Therefore, differences between sex and gender in modern theories are not acceptable in postmodernism.

Considering aforementioned issues, therefore, the following questions can be asked; what are the differences between men and women? How can one distinguish men from women? The answers of these questions from postmodernism perspective are that which men or women you mean? Typically, in postmodernism there are no men and women. Femininity and masculinity are always influenced and made by the factors such as; ethnicity, social classes, ages, positions, jobs, etc. Today, the problem of identity is in a situation. People measure their identity by paying attention to the culture and the development of their culture and also their desires and feelings. Therefore, they can't find any adaptation and become confused. Thus, they ask themselves who I am or what I am?

This study seeks to answer such questions; how men and women are trying to form their identity? How postmodernism views are effective in these formations?

Sex and Gender

The meaning of terms sex and gender in sociolinguistics are completely separated. Holmes (2008:157): I have used the term gender rather than sex because sex has come to refer to categories distinguished by biological characteristics, while gender is more appropriate for distinguishing people on the basis of their socio-cultural behavior, including speech. Butler (2009) claims that Of course gender and sexuality are different issues, but I do not think they can be fully dissociated. Certain forms of sexuality are linked with phantasies about gender, and certain ways of living gender require certain kinds of sexual practices. There are significant and widespread discontinuities between gender norms and normative sexuality, as we know. But in relation to both gender and sexuality, none of us has the choice of creating ourselves *ex nihilo*. We are transformed and acted upon prior to any action we might take. And though we can radically rework our genders or even try to rework our sexualities (though often failing), we are in the grip of norms even as we struggle against them.

Gender and Identity

In recent decades, studies on gender and language have affected by the postmodernism philosophers theories, particularly, gender performativity theory of Judith Butler. In Butler's view (1990) the differences between men and women are in using and performing language. Language performativity is strongly influenced by the community speech. If society makes gender, it seems that gender is same as biologically formation (sex).

On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir (1949:1) in the second sex says that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one". Butler (1990:8) states "for Beauvoir, gender is constructed. But implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cagito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle take one some other gender".

Gender, Society and Culture

Whenever a baby is born, the first question is whether the baby is a boy or girl? The necessity of this question shows that the differences between men and women are very important in all communities. It should be also considered that there is an imagination of being man and woman before and after birth. Every society expects a certain behavior of men and women which is appropriate for that sex.

Femininity and masculinity were achieved through socialization. The identity of masculinity and femininity is a product of society it is learned by each generation and each society and never relays on nature or biological features for producing specific roles. Since the form of culture in all societies is dominated by men, therefore, there would be great gender inequalities between men and women (Shaibi, 2013: 37- 38).

Identity and History

Ahmadi (1996) says, nowadays, the meaning of identity has been changed like other historical words and concepts. In pre- modern world, everybody inherits the identity from their ancestors and it was considered as an inherited identity. It means that people's thoughts were in certain and clear framework and the way of their lives were pre- determined. Totally people had a personal and unique identity in the past. But in the modern world, by enlightenment era, small communities spread all around the world, so they need more social relations to meet their needs. A person in a modern society accepts different roles such as: father, mother, son, citizenship, manager, employee etc. Therefore, each person finds his/her identity based on this type of roles, but he/she is always faced with some questions such as: who am I? Who can be I? The one under all roles has one real identity to face with her/his private life. By and large, in a nutshell in postmodernism, identity is something relative.

Personal Identity

Based on psychology, identity should be considered from people's feelings and their desires. It means that, identity is a kind of personal continuity feeling in other words, a personal independency feeling. Thus, the problem of understanding identity is a character and it depends on expression of human feeling towards of his/ her mental life. We should consider that, having an identity was formed by language and society and usually it forms by people's attitudes and their feelings. But we should never forget it forms in social life, too. The social identity, apart from the social world makes no sense and it will be completely meaningless. Although, identity of a person is unique and erratic but his/ her character will form throughout the socialization and social action (Tajik, 2009, 37-38).

Some Post-modern Views about Identity and Gender

To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines.

When I speak about the subject in such contexts, it is not a “subject” who is the sovereign precondition of action and thought. But it is a socially produced “agent” and “deliberator” whose agency and thought is made possible by a language that precedes that “I”. In this sense, the “I” is produced through power, though not the deterministic effect of power. Power relies on a mechanism of reproduction that can and does go away, undo the strategies of animating power, and produce new and even subversive effects. The paradox or quandary that emerges from this situation is one that we find in politics all the time: if the terms of power lay out “who” can be a subject, who qualifies as a subject of recognition, in politics, or before the law, then the subject is not a precondition of politics, but a differential effect or power. It means as well that we can and must ask the question, “who” comes after the subject, not expecting another form of the subject to emerge in historical time, but because some name must be reserved for those who do not count as subjects, who do not sufficiently conform to the norms that confer recognizability on subjects. What do we call those who do not and cannot appear as “subjects” within hegemonic discourse? It seems to me that there are sexual and gender norms that in some ways condition what and who will be “legible” and what and who will not. And we have to be able to take into account this differential allocation of recognizability.

The theory of gender performativity presupposes that norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us. In other words, norms act on us, work upon us, and this kind of ‘being worked on’ makes its way into our own action. By mistake, we sometimes announce that we are the sovereign ground of our action, but this is only because we fail to account for the ways in which we are in the process of being made. We do not know, for instance, what precisely the norms of gender want of us, and yet we find ourselves moved and oriented within its terms (Butler, 2009, 2- 15).

Foucault claims that we should have defeated the basis of common language. This type of attitude believes some factors such as: historical context, power in society, structures, process of socio- cultural and universality make the language. What has been impacted of Foucault’s ideas are: the first one is feminism theories about gender which are a post modernism and also Poststructuralism theories. They believe in the field of language and thought, subjectivity and gender in literature and philosophy not only are neutral, but also there are quiet masculine and aggressive. The second one is theories about transformation of social identity. Foucault proves that, the body of a person not only is natural but also it is formed throughout the knowledge and power of the society. Therefore identity to be imposed from authority and also it is formed throughout a person’s actions and behaviors (Mcnaey, 1992).

Lacan in first step spreads the meaning of masculinity and femininity. He believes they are not limited to biology of men and women. They are not just defined biologically. Thus there are some subjects that both men and women have an access to them. Therefore what is called sexual difference and determine the structure of men and women are not separated by differences between both sexes because it is “Jouissance” that one obtains. It means we always feel there is something more and better, something we have lost, something more and better we could have. This feeling that we get more than our pleasure and satisfies us is jouissance (Homer, 2009).

Julia Kristeva believes, there is no difference between male and female. Not only there are no biological and psychological differences but also there are no differences in formation of gender in society. She claims there is no femininity or female gender because these concepts are metaphysical concepts. In her opinion women and femininity will be only possible politically. She claims to be a woman is almost as irrational as to believe that a person is a man (McAfee, 2005).

Discussion and results

As we know that, identity is relative, so it will be changed in different situations. We should also be considered, today a person does not have a permanent identity to be able to define oneself. Thus, the person has been influenced by internal and external factors such as: one’s mind and society. Due to these factors, one forms, destroys and renews oneself everyday.

According to some philosophers of postmodernism it can be understood that language is a masculine. When a person wants to express his/ her gender by language, he/ she has to use the preset language, since this person can't find any relations between his/ her identity and what the language shows. He/ she start to perform some behaviors that can show his/ her in society. Sometimes these behaviors are against the norms and roles of society. Therefore they will be rejected. Like behaviors and actions of homosexuals and transes and etc. Hence, in this case a person will be confused about what or who is she/ he? This person has to dissemble his/ her personal identity and make himself/ herself closer to the roles and norms of the society. Although this kind of behavior will be accepted by society, but it will never follows the natural and real behavior and actions. A consequences of these kinds of gender identities that is formed by the fear of society and people's judgments will be shown like mental and sexual disease and will be came out like raping and other terrible sexual violations.

Today's, the meaning of masculinity and femininity are not same as the biological meaning of men and women. Because, femininity and masculinity are intertwined in social structures and there are no differences in their formation. It means that, masculine language is using by both men and women. Therefore, women identify and describe themselves by the words of masculine language was already selected. A person shows her/ his identity not only by using language and linguistic varieties but also by performing actions and behaviors. Sometimes without paying attention to the gender of a person, their identity will be masculine or feminine. It means that, a person's identity is built, destroyed and rebuilt by performing these languages. It should be considered that, not only this is not an act of male or female but also this action are given by society and people.

When we are talking about performativity, we reach to the Butler's theory about gender and identity. Butler asks some questions such as: is there a gender which person are said to have or, is it an essential attribute that a person is said to be, as implied in the question what gender are you? From Butler's view gender and gender identity that a person chooses is a kind of social roles that is chosen by others. One may decides what kind of gender or sexual relation wants to have, but in fact he/she decides that put whom to his/ her act. Thus, he/she decides something that has already been decided. Thought and views of this kind of person is not personal anymore but one who is made by community and society. I mean, whenever he/ she called himself "I", before understanding who is I, a social power defines I to him. This is a special situation that one can not define themselves throughout their language and started acting and performing some behavior that shows their real identity. The one does some actions against of what he/ she says. It means that his/ her identity is not what he/ she says, rather what he/ she does. Sometimes this behavior was accepted by society and sometimes abandoned. So, a person under all social roles has a real identity that is faced it when she/ he is alone. Sometimes these identities are accepted by society and grow. And, sometimes are abandoned by community and shows its result as a social and cultural problem.

Conclusion

As we know, modernism looking for single and universal theory, but postmodernism does not looking for this kind of unity. In postmodernism everything is possible. It means that, we should not start a question by phrases such as: "Is it possible" because in postmodernism everything is possible and is allowed. Unlike traditional view that believes each society has an independent culture and unity without knowing about other cultures and community, the majority of communities live in a diverse world. So people of each society are formed by different races and various cultures and also they live altogether. Modern human trys to get out from their traditional security walls and a person is going to enter to the global civilization. Therefore, each person based on a situation takes a different identity. It means that, people's identity is formed based on their connections and relations. It is clear that, identity is not inherited rather it is acquired by using language in community. Although identity is relative and it is including changes and instability in a person's identity, but this person under all identities always faced with individual and real identity. Now, the problem is not about person's identity rather it is about reality. There is a dilemma which identity person defines based on his/ her feelings and which identity person faces it in reality. We must distinguish identity and reality. For instance, when a person names himself/ herself a man, we should accept this masculine identity, though in reality "he" is a female. It should also be noted that, not only the image was made by a person also his/her feeling reflects people attitude and society, but also one thing is crystal clear that his/ her identity depends on his/ her knowledge about himself/ herself and world.

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