THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT: AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN BENHABIB AND BUTLER

Post modernism may roughly be described as a movement, which lays bare the aporia of any theory which builds upon the identity of a fixed homogeneous subject of knowledge. The modernist subject represents a universal, foundational position in a speech situation. Theories are grounded in such a subject position determined by normative universality. The subject position presents itself as being beyond the powerful negotiations of politics. Post-modernists strongly oppose such universals, warranting foundations. A metapolitical critique of foundations reveals the latter’s constitution through exclusions or foreclosures, the justification of which is not self-evident. Foundations are impregnated by metaphysical commitments, too.

The validity of these metaphysical assumptions also, is not intuitively obvious. Feminist post-modernist scholars, like Judith Butler\(^1\) repudiate the fixed, unquestionable status of the subject position, instituted by foundations. They question the unquestionability of foundations and scrutinize what the foundations sanction, and what they foreclose. They bring to light the contingent nature of foundations. They lack faith in the
unquestionability of universals too. In the context of the contemporary multiculturalism, there are as many universals as there are cultures. These universals are characterized by ethnocentric biases. The cultural conflict is actually a conflict of universals. Establishment of any universal as proprietary necessitates having recourse to violence. This expresses a contradiction inherent in universals themselves. In the war of the U.S. against Iraq, Butler\textsuperscript{2} exemplifies, the Arab is conceptualized as the ‘other’, that is as being outside the scope of the universals of reason and democracy. Since nothing significant can be tolerated to be external to the imperialist universals, the Arabs have to be incorporated within by the application of “conceptual and material violence.”\textsuperscript{3} To forcibly assimilate them within the universals of Euro-centric reason and democracy, it is necessary to demolish the universals of political sovereignty, freedom of speech, democracy and so on. This contradiction is not likely to be resolved by broadening the scope of the universals by acknowledging multiple subjects following Sandra Harding.\textsuperscript{4} Such extension of the scope of the universals is possible to be achieved through fresh foreclosures.

Installation of universals is a culturally hegemonic move. The philosophical recognition of a normative universal like an uncontested metaphysical subject strengthens the manipulative, hegemonic moves within the social context. Butler, however, would not recommend a total abrogation of the category of
universals. She would prefer to define it as a permanently contested and contingent site, flexible enough to include unanticipatable new claimants. A totalizing account of universals is to be discouraged. Such an account may not do justice to contemporarily undetected entities and to universals, representative of other cultures.

In consideration of the above facts, poststructuralism is totally against positing universalistic or foundationalistic subjects. It not only recommends the termination of the modern subject, but is also opposed to the creation of a post-modern subject. The subjectivating process necessarily presupposes the subjection or displacement of an alterity. It is specifically through denying dependency on a less prestigious “other” that it is constituted. Butler points out, for example, that the subject of any feminist discourse or critique, whether privileged or marginalized, acquires publicity by virtue of power that operates in advance. If it were merely the grammar of the subject that explained which subject speaks and to whom, then any feminine utterance would have had feministic or philosophical significance. There is an authorizing process involved in the selection of the subject position. Its constitution is not effected by its own selection. The subject is constituted through exclusions. The exclusions, differentiations or suppressions that almost determine the constitution of the subject are concealed by a pretense of autonomy, qualifying the subject. The autonomy in
question is achieved by backgrounding the significance of the periphery-associated with femininity, slavery, colonization and similar forms of created alterites.

Butler anticipates that her denial of an “ontologically intact reflexivity,”⁷ that is, of an unconstitutioned, totalized entity may be taken to be inconsistent with agency. Constitutedness is normally understood to be a symptom of determination. Butler, on the contrary, considers cultural construction to be the criterion of agency. Agency is purely political. No power can be stipulated to be political, unless it is characterized by the potential of reconfiguration, working against itself in reconstituting itself. The so-called subject is considered by her to be given to a ceaseless political shaping up. The power that constitutes it is far from ceasing to function the moment the constitution is over. Constitution is an endless process. The subject position is a site of permanent signification and resignification—criticizing and forcing the existing power-situation to turn against itself. A reduction of agency or subjectivity to interminable political conditioning is not to signal the death of the subject. Any other non-Foucauldian treatment of subjectivity is viewed to be “politically insidious”⁸ by Butler. The proclamation of subjectivity in the Court of Law as a victim of sex discrimination or rape, for example presupposes fulfillment of certain conditions. These qualifications de-authorize as pre-subjects many a woman, holds Butler.⁹ Many
other examples confirming such de-authorization can be cited. Women need to be self-critical about positing themselves as epistemological, pre-given subjects.

ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

Feminist standpoint epistemology, discussed in the previous chapter, finds the post-modern dictate of the death of the totalized, modern subject or the poststructural claim that the subject never existed, to be unsavoury. The essence of feminist standpoint epistemology consists in privileging the feminine standpoint and subjectivity. Feminist standpoint epistemologists believe that disrupting the subjectivity of women at a historical phase, where women are beginning to acquire subject positions in speech is theoretically a bad strategy. Sandra Harding proposes\textsuperscript{10} privileging multiple subjects, so as to exclude foreclosure, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Indefinite enlargement of the scope of subjectivity, however, is not potent to rule out the logical possibility of yet other foreclosures. Butler\textsuperscript{11} refers to the attack on the ‘feminine category’ in 1980 by women of colour, who protested that the category invariably refers to white women. Butler also rejects the claim of sex to be the epistemologically pre-given subject. It is gender, which is a sum total of performatives, that sexualizes bodies. If sexuality is determined by gender, which is performative in nature, sexuality cannot be essentialized as the pre-given, autonomous subject of discourse. For Butler identity categories are never descriptive,
but they are necessarily normative. Norms are not norms if they do not discriminate. Instead of exhausting description in maternalistic, racialistic or other ethnocentric essentialities, situating the category of “woman” in an endless perspective of linguistic usages and resignifiability, helps feminists in capturing an “undesignatable field of differences,” maintains Butler. This ensures the eternal possibility of fresh significations, so that no single member of the category “woman” is deprived representation in this identity category.

Nancy Fraser objects to Butler’s esoteric choice of words. Butler understands agency to consist in the subject’s reconstitutive potential, as previously mentioned. Butler chooses expressions like “power’s own possibility”. Fraser considers such descriptions to be “deeply antihumanistic,” and contrary to ordinary language. Fraser prefers expressions like “people’s capacities” to designate agency. The expression is not inconsistent with cultural conditioning. Fraser is of the opinion that unless a justification of resorting to such linguistic metaphors is offered by Butler in terms of theoretical or political advantages, she is liable to be condemned for privileging esotericism for its own sake.

Butler, however, accuses Fraser herself that she is suspicious that ordinary language falls short of describing the normative grounds that Fraser, influenced by Habermas,
pursues. The need for the “quasi-transcendental”\textsuperscript{18} negotiations that Fraser calls for, is “un-ordinary,”\textsuperscript{19} according to Butler. Moreover, she maintains that she has never championed ordinary language. Her analysis of “discourse,” which shapes the subjects and objects forming its content, is not a mere description of the presumed subject in ordinary, spoken words, but an analysis of the production of the subjectivity and other relations within the discursive practices in Foucauldian tradition.\textsuperscript{20}

Fraser also finds fault with Butler’s substitution of “critique” by resignification.\textsuperscript{21} Resignification is presented as a positive value in Butler’s treatment. Butler, however, does not justify why it is to be positively construed. Its goodness is far from being self evident. Critique is good because of its being grounded in warrant, validity or justification. But resignification is not so grounded. The possibility of bad or oppressive resignification also persists. In taking away the potentiality of critique as a tool of feminist theorization, Butler does not appear to be an ally of feminism according to Fraser. Her intentions in valorizing “change for its own sake”\textsuperscript{22} also appears not argued for to Fraser. Butler clarifies that resignification, an agency-restoring practice, is implicated in power-relationships\textsuperscript{23}. Her focus is not on the goodness or badness of resignification, but on determining how discursive practices, within which the concept of resignification makes sense, make resignification possible. Expressed in Fraser’s terms of critique, this means that the normative grounds, in terms of which critique distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable
knowledge claims, are decided upon within the regime of power-relations itself. Critique cannot claim any “pure place”\textsuperscript{24} to ground the warrant it assures. The value of resignification may be understood to consist purely in its power to explain agency, and not in any normative capacity.

Fraser next attacks Butler’s thesis that subjectivation necessarily involves subjection.\textsuperscript{25} Subjects who are authorized to speak, conceptually entail a domain of de-authorized subjects, pre-subjects and individuals silenced and erased from consideration in Butler’s treatment. Fraser is worried about the modality of the link between subjectivation and subjection, outlined by Butler. She is eager to know whether there are counter-examples to the rule, and also whether subjectivation is good in some cases. These questions are connected with the prospect of liberation of women. The enterprise of liberation of women presupposes that it is in principle possible to construct “practices, institutions and forms of life,”\textsuperscript{26} in which legitimation of one does not necessarily threaten the deligitimization of others. It is Fraser’s contention that whether this requirement is possible to be fulfilled is not likely to be settled within post-modernistic limits, unless post-modernistic premises are supplemented by critical-theoretical ones.

Butler replies that the above-mentioned objection is based on the misunderstanding that the distinction between the authorized and the de-authorized is logically independent of the process of
subjectivation, and that, the distinction is fully formed prior to the constitution of signification of the subject.\textsuperscript{27} Butler’s aim, on the contrary, is to provide an account of the process by which the subject is constituted, and to establish the fact that it is this very constitution which is inevitably associated with the exclusion or differentiation in question. It is a mere description of the formation of the subject as a speaking being. It makes no sense to judge the repression in question as good or bad. A certain form of subjectivation, glorifying autonomy and instrumental reason, is involved in the suppression of the feminine. There are other versions of subjectivation also, politicizing other kinds of alterities. Butler points out that she is as keen as Fraser in identifying processes of empowerment that do not disempower others. She is, however, unable to locate such practices within or outside post-modern theoretical, epistemological frameworks.

However, though Butler states that it makes no sense to distinguish between good and bad subjectivation, she herself condemns processes of subjectivation grounded in traditional foundationalism as “politically insidious.”\textsuperscript{28} Fraser, however, interprets the consolidation of cultural imperialism by the foundational strategy of subjectivation to be historically contingent – not as conceptually necessary.

Butler is unconvinced about Fraser’s assertion of the historical contingency of the oppressive potentials of traditional norms.\textsuperscript{29} She construes foundational subjectivation as a trick of power. The
distinctly pre-given, ontologically self-reflexive subject is formed at the expense of inferiorizing those from whom it is distanced and polarized. Butler, like Val Plumwood,\(^{30}\) is derisive about grounding the autonomy of the subject on the disavowal of others. The subject should be constituted in an amicable relation to the sphere of the differentiated, so that its autonomy is not threatened on account of its dependency on or proximity to the other. The difference of the other is to be respected. The differentiated should not be defined in relation to the self or subject. There is, in reality, no fixed foundation in the sense of a presupposed subject, posited from the beginning; but there certainly are foundations, grounds or norms but foundations that are “contingent and indispensable”\(^{31}\) and also a permanent site of contestation – crucial to feminism – an undeniably political venture. Norms or foundations, as such, are not superfluous. Butler could not otherwise specify some versions of subjectivation as better than others. The foundations are to be interpreted as giving way, like what they ground, to the same power relations. Butler prefers contingent foundations, as they resist exclusions, suppressions by which subjects are constituted. She visualizes potentials in the subject, placed in the network of continuous resignification and redeployment in the background of the power-regime.

Seyla Benhabib\(^{32}\) is much more critical than Fraser, in her assessment of Butler’s theory of subjectivation. She is surprised by the strong versions of ‘the death of the subject’ of history and of philosophy, entailed in Butler’s interpretation of subjectivation. The
weak version of ‘the death of the subject’ recommends situating the subject in the network of the social, cultural and discursive practices that constitutes subjectivity. Benhabib sees nothing wrong in such a recommendation. But she believes the strong version of the death of the subject, in unison with Butler’s treatment of gender, to be inconsistent with the emancipatory objectives of feminist philosophy. In the stronger version, the subject is dissolved into the web of significations. It is reduced to a mere linguistic, grammatical position. Reduction into a linguistic component divests the subject of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy, holds Benhabib. In the absence of such capacities, and also in the absence of any distance between the subject and the chains of signification, the subject is unable to review and reconstruct significations. Benhabib concedes that the subject is determined by biographies and identities entrenched in culture. She opposes the point of view that subjects are merely “extensions of histories.”\textsuperscript{33} They are described more suitably as authors and characters of history. In spite of being variously determined and positively gendered, unless the subject is understood as striving towards autonomy, the project of producing emancipatory theories, in science epistemology makes almost no sense.

Benhabib finds Butler’s treatment of gender intriguing too. Gender, in Butler’s opinion, is nothing over and above the expressions of performances associated with the self in speech situations. Butler does not understand gender in the ordinary sense of a cultural construct – but as a discursive means to produce sexed nature or
natural sex. She accuses her opponents of positing the gendered self as an ontologically pre-given, self-reflexive entity – functioning as an apolitical locus of significations and resignifications. The opponents take it to be at the most “mired” by cultural and discursive forces, where miring is understood as short of determining or constituting. Butler is of the opinion that merely enmiring the subject, so as to preserve its agency through gender or otherwise, is unnecessary, as determination does not preclude agency – as previously related.

Benhabib accuses Butler of confinement of performativity to speech-act models, thereby confining sites of gender construction to linguistic practices only. Butler’s rejection of theoretical models or practices explaining gender-constitution, like “family structures, child rearing parents, children’s games, children’s dress habits, schooling, cultural habitus” and so on is unwarranted. The price she pays for her preoccupation with seeking refuge in linguistic metaphors is a deficiency on her part to explain the dynamics of ontogenetic development, that is, of the development of a human infant into a social personality. It is not clear what empirical arguments Butler uses in establishing her theory of gender as performativity.

Benhabib also brings to light logical and political insufficiencies inherent in Butler, in addition to the empirical one reported above. In the first place, it is impossible to distinguish between constitution and determination by cultural negotiations and performativity in the context of gender. In the absence of any
normative component, the capacity of resignification or resistance, so crucial to Butler’s thesis, is not intelligible. Butler is as interested as Benhabib in eschewing hegemonic discourses, so as to empower women to dislodge the hierarchical dualism and heterosexual politics rampant in dominant science and epistemology. But this epistemologically emancipatory interest presupposes attribution of psychic, intellectual, argumentative creativity to a stable self over and above the performances.

Butler’s responses to Benhabib in the article “For a Careful Reading” offer little help in overcoming the communicative impasse between Benhabib and herself. In the said article, Butler accuses Benhabib of misunderstanding performativity advocated by her in a behaviouristic sense. A performative act appears to Benhabib to be characterized by prior intention. A performative act, as such, is a sign of the productive power of discourse. Butler, on the contrary, considers gender performatives to represent acquisition of self-determination through resistance to power-regimes. Language issues in action, not through the intention or will of an individual agent, but through conventions, used and reused, given to repeated revisions. The subject does not produce discourse. It is itself a linguistic category, constituted performatively in a discourse, liable to be resignified, redeployed unendingly. Resistance to power regimes is not established through universal freedom or will. The opposition takes place within the regime of power itself. The requirements of situating feminism and dependence on a non-situated transcendentalized self are
contradictory. The assumption of freedom of will as an invariant, cross-cultural, universal capacity is anthropologically unwarranted too. Besides, the thesis of the pre-given self is incompatible with political life, because the notion of a permanent, grounded self defies alterity, contestation, self-appraisal – crucial to democracy.

Along with the death of the foundationalistic subject, philosophers like Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty and Butler are referred to by Benhabib as heralding the death of metaphysics as a meta-narrative of legitimation. Heidegger and Derrida are quoted by Benhabib as maintaining that philosophy erases its “other”, specifically the feminine, through phallogocentrism. Phallogocentrism is an account of how the structures of language unconsciously rule out the significance of the feminine and the mother, through the acceptance of the phallus as the “transcendental signifier.” The fantasy that the phallus is the sole representation of potency or creation is the most efficacious instrument of consolidating patriarchy – which associates the basic, dominant philosophical tenets with the centrality unknowingly attributed to the phallus. Derrida’s foregrounding of the inefficaciveness of the phallus in abstraction from its other in regeneration in his text “Dissemination,” provides an impetus to the re-reading of female sexuality. The resymbolization of female sexuality has important consequences in redefining autonomy, understood by mainstream philosophy and science.
Benhabib points out that the version of the death of philosophy more in vogue contemporarily are the ones advanced by Rorty and Butler. She mentions Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where Rorty asserts that both the empirical and the rationalist traditions in philosophy have assumed that the basic responsibility of philosophy consists in ascertaining grounds of validity of knowledge claims. They interpret epistemology to constitute the essence of philosophy. With the recent recommendations by naturalized epistemologists, cognitive psychologists, feminists and the like towards particularization, historicization, genderization, detranscendentalization of the subject of knowledge, the context of enquiry and the methods of justification, philosophy is divested of reason. It is liable to be reduced to a genealogy of the rise and decline of power structure and discourses, or to a sociology of knowledge.

Benhabib opposes the proposal of marginalization of philosophy. Without philosophy, characterized by its transcendental meta-narratives of legitimation, significant criticism is rendered impossible. Without philosophy, warranting criticism, phenomena like sexism cannot be analysed in all their possible dimensions. Social criticism is indispensable to feminism, construed as epistemological and analytic, as ensuring emancipatory empowerment. Social criticism is dependent on philosophy. Philosophy, thus, is not superfluous or irrelevant to feminism.
Judith Butler draws upon Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* to produce a counter-argument to Benhabib. Gilroy interprets the narratives of modernity to be exclusionary, as they help in instituting phenomena like slavery. But contradictorily, these narratives carry potentials to uproot slavery also. Butler detects in these narratives ample scope of recontextualization, resignification and redeployment, facilitating emancipatory effects. The recontextualization makes obvious that the establishment of slavery is not the political aim of such practices. As such, the narratives of modernity, or foundations, though historically contingent, are not devoid of value. Care should be taken in not positing them uncritically, prior to the adjudication of political goals or aspirations. To establish epistemological and philosophical norms before dealing with the world politically to transform it is to dehistoricize politics, and to abandon the political fold in course of time.

Benhabib anticipates that in order to safeguard social criticism crucial to reconstruction of society, in the face of the death of metaphysics, the postmoderns would appeal to local narratives of everyday practices, characterized by local criteria of legitimation. The feminists’ responsibility would consist in choosing from among the various local narratives available the one that is the most congenial to the goal of social and political upliftments in conjunction with social criticism. Social criticism, however, would not be a view from nowhere, but the view of a critic situated in a specific culture or tradition. Benhabib’s objection to the replacement of the narratives of
modernity by local narratives is that though reflexive and self-critical, local narratives are fraught with conflicts and controversies. The settlement of these conflicts is possible only through evaluative negotiations, peculiar to philosophy. The criteria set up by local narratives are rarely uncontested. Transcendental, idealistic reconstructions are, consequently, inescapable.

The other problem of situated criticism consists in the fact that the social critic is forever exposed to a risk of turning to a “social exile.” Benhabib illustrates copiously through examples from ancient, medieval and modern history that frequently one’s own culture, tradition and society become so dominant and oppressive that the critic is obliged to abandon the culture integral to her. Exile is also necessitated by the requirement on criticism’s part of a distantiatement from daily certitudes – so as to reinforce them only after a more critical defence. In Benhabib’s opinion, the social critic who leaves home does not land nowhere, but in different cultural surroundings. Her immanent urge to establish the acceptability of domestic culture is possible through confrontation and arguments. When conventions of societies clash, social critics, political activists and feminists need to fall back on normative justification, typical of philosophy.

Benhabib is also apprehensive that the death of the subject and of metaphysics pronounce a retreat from utopia, understood not in a modernist, rationalist sense, but in the sense of a “practical moral imperative”. Benhabib considers radical transformation to be
impossible without a strong moral conditioning. Utopia, to Benhabib, is the same as moral conditioning. A phobia concerning utopia is manifest in a radical non-acceptance of essentialism, which is not approved by Benhabib. Anti-essentialism stigmatizes anything feminine – namely, feminine politics, ethics, a feminine concept of autonomy and so on. It condemns the points of view of Gilligan, Chodrow and Sarah Ruddick, for example, as reflections of the voices of white, middle-class, affluent, first-world, heterosexual women. But Benhabib points out that these critics of essentialism are yet to offer any better interpretation of ethics, politics and a theory of self, in place of an ethics involving both universal justice and empathy, a concept of self as an autonomous individual, not impaired by a recognition of otherness. Politically, too, Benhabib points out, there can be nothing better than the feminist articulation of a democratic policy, respecting ecology, non-militarism, integrity among inhabitants of a polity. Post-modernism can be appreciated for locating theoretical weaknesses in defining utopia and foundations – but feminism gains nothing from post-modernism in its wholesale rejection of utopia, which strengthens feminist theory and politics by generating moral feeling universally and democratically.

Butler would obviously react by asserting that the philosophical vision of an idealized life, redeemed of all immoralities, spells the termination of political activity. To claim a fully formed philosophy is to have given up the political sphere, which is completely ungrounded, asundered by criticism, and which consists in a possibility of
recontextualization from a non-foundational standpoint. To be grounded is to be buried, to be conservative to the point of trivializing alterity and giving up self-transformation.

It is a misfortune that Butler and Benhabib, both of whom enrich feminist thought and politics vehemently, refuse to come to terms with each other on vital issues like normativity, objectivity. Benhabib defends the feminist need of normative critique, emancipation and action-theoretical interpretation of women’s ideals and activities. She propagates a quasi-Habermassian feminism, to which intersubjective communication is crucial. The validity claims inherent in such intersubjective communication are instrumental in centralizing ethical questions in feminism. Moreover, the importance attached to speech-act theoretical situations, characterized both by normative and procedural dimensions, explains clearly the political mechanism involved in the growth of hegemonic discourse and marginalization, domination of female subjects. Domination is sanctioned by validity claims that escape scrutiny. Benhabib subjects discursive procedures like taking turns, allocation of chances to raise proposals, posing objections and the like to normative, though non-essentializing ways of critical examination – thereby singling out validity-claims characterized by procedural inequality. Again, the Habermassian approach, adopted by Benhabib, presents normative guidelines, enabling a critical evaluation of institutions. The approach consequently, secures a relevance to the public sphere – proliferating
in a fresh impetus of feminist contributions to democratic theory, historiography and cultural critique.

Though the kind of objectivity, upheld by Benhabib, allows that the researcher is fully informed of the political, epistemological, ideological values and presuppositions, so as to take care of emancipatory requirements, it is designed to resist the equal defensibility of all points of view. Habermas’ distaste for relativism is common knowledge. He is eager to fix an anchor, the groundedness in which would justify a point of view. The experiences of the oppressed forms an anchor for him, as he is interested in emancipation, implied by the rupture of the existing status quo. Benhabib accepts this notion of objectivity without significant alteration. As previously mentioned, this notion of objectivity is characterized by considerable emancipatory potential. It, however, has its difficulties. The acknowledgement of foundations is unfriendly to critiques elaborating how local, specific, communicative principles are actually differentially established, to critiques precipitating alternative emancipatory frameworks and so on. The methodological aspect of research is not clearly defined by critical realism, which makes it easy for its own criteria to politicize the content of research. The standpoint of oppression, too, is apt to dictate to the oppressed the needs that should be pursued, assuming such needs to be homogeneous. The researcher’s values are likely to dominate those of the oppressed section. Again, the neat classification of the entire range of experience into oppression, critical reflection and emancipation, is primarily
intellectual. Reason’s emancipatory capacities are determined by one’s experience. The post-modernists and post-structuralists raise the additional question as to whether truths presumed in critical theories, aiming towards emancipation, can in fact set agents free or whether such truths are implicated in relations of power. If knowledge in general is interest-based, the truths proclaimed by critical realism’s interests may function as further sources of tyranny. It is also dubitable whether the autonomous subject can achieve adequate reflexivity to address the subtle influence of power vitiating knowledge-claims. If complete reflexivity fails to be achieved, the possibility that the critical realist might succumb to privileging his own validity claims – contrary to the emancipatory goals visualized by critical theory itself – cannot be ruled out.

The consensus theory of truth advocated by Habermas also has its problems. The theory is rooted in the concept of ideal speech, which is not practically achievable in a society saturated with domination. Ideal speech situation involves a conceptual circularity. The concept of an ideal speech situation is defined in terms of freedom from ideology. The concept is intelligible only if one is able to free herself/himself of the effects of ideology, which is impossible as far as Habermas is concerned. If ideal speech-situations are not possible, the epistemolgical status of Habermas’ own theory faces a dilemma. It is either to be construed as an instance of distorted communication, or as an exempted, priviledged account. An exemption can be proclaimed only by involving epistemic authority and power notions, not
particularly consistent with Habermas’ premises. The strongest objection to Habermas possibly consists in the fact that Habermas is obliged to appeal to theory – neutral observation-language to defend his theory that consensus arises out of discourse. In keeping with Habermas’ premises, nothing is absolutely pre-given to the researcher in the form of experience or its meanings, or what is to be counted as evidence, or the relation of evidence to hypotheses or theories. In such circumstances, unanimous answers cannot be arrived at by different rational enquirers. The possibility of any neutral adjudication of competing knowledge-claims can be entertained only on the strength of the presupposition of a theory-neutral observation-language within the frameworks of critical theory. While he officially severs all connections with the epistemic privileges associated with empiricism – his consensus theory persuades him to rehabilitate the epistemic privilege founding empiricism. Moreover, rational consensus may be achieved by suppressing alternative, competing interests. Critical realistic feminism shares these difficulties in common with feminist standpoint epistemology. The persistence of these difficulties is indicative of some defect in the concept of objectivity itself. It needs reformulation. Benhabib, whose critique of relativism is based on Habermas’ premises, is liable to be charged with the same set of objections as those raised against Habermas. Again, Butler, who nurtures no official reservation against relativism, is certainly in a better position than Benhabib, so far as the above-mentioned objections are concerned. Butler, however, lacks the sharp normative
focus, characterizing Benhabib’s normative approach to epistemology. In her overzealous preoccupation with performativity, Butler loses sight of the effects of commondification, recuperation inherent in herself, unless safeguarded by the ideal of social justice. The merits due to Butler can be sustained only on the basis of a normativity – implied in her approach. Belief in normativity manifests itself in Butler’s moral objection to exclusion, her plea for anti-racism, her frequent references to radical democracy and so on.\textsuperscript{47} In her essays “Contingent Foundations” and “For a Careful Reading”,\textsuperscript{48} Butler herself lets the reader understand that though she is averse to Benhabib’s kind of normativity, she would not totally give up normativity.

Butler’s emphasis on the local, the specific and her taboo against totalization, even of a temporary nature, makes her work suitable to microlevel, intra-subjective theorization, while Benhabib’s theory is more suitable to macro-level, intersubjective theory-formation. To utilize the full benefits of Benhabib and Butler, it may be useful to stipulate a version of objectivity that has nothing to do with relativism and yet utilizes the merits of de-reification, de-transcendenatalization, historicization and the like as fully as possible and is characterized by optimum normativity and the richest emancipating potentials. The next chapter is devoted to working out an account of objectivity, addressing such needs.
It is required to be pointed out in this context that Butler has not deviated in her latest works from her position on norms and foundations discussed in this chapter. The Raymond Williams Lecture delivered in Cambridge University in 2000 “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”\textsuperscript{49} represents how Butler challenges epistemological and ontological foundations in the Foucauldian tradition. In \textit{Contingency, Hegemony, Universality},\textsuperscript{50} Butler is involved in a lively exchange with Ernests Laclau and Salvoj Zizek in affirming that an invasion on oppressive terms exposes their limits and subverts hegemony. In an interview, “Changing the Subject”, Butler writes “For me, there is more hope in the world when we can question what is taken for granted . . . What qualifies as a human subject . . . ? How do we circumscribe human speech or desire? At what cost? And at what cost to whom? . . . We feel that we know the answers. . .”\textsuperscript{51}

Butler herself provides no answers to the difficult questions posed by her. Fraser is not recorded to have made any comments on politicizing norms in any subsequent research. Butler’s deconstruction of the subject category along with her emphasis on the local makes the ‘woman and science’ question problematic. I would prefer to pay allegiance to the Nelsonian manner of subjectivation, elaborated in chapter three. Longino might also reinforce Nelson’s stand on choosing the community as the subject of responsible theorization.
Notes and References


7. Ibid. p. 46.

8. Ibid. p. 47.


10. Sandra Harding “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is Strong Objectivity”.


15. Nancy Fraser, Ibid. p. 67.


22. Ibid, p. 68.


26. Ibid. p. 68.


35. Seyla, Benhabib, Ibid, p. 100.


38. Ibid. p. 151.


41. Ibid. p. 27.
42. Ibid. pp. 29-30.

43. Ibid. p. 30.

44. Ibid. p. 30.

45. Ibid. p. 30.


