

BOOK REVIEW

*The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-
Political Bind* Judith Butler, Verso
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Non-Violence and World Crisis: A Philosophical Exploration

Judith Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* critically engages with the challenge of denying violence by offering non-violent resistance for countering disorder, injustice and aggression that has become a part of life and foundations of the modern states. The book appears as an elaboration of the promise made in "The Claims of Non Violence" in Butler's book *Frames of War* that theorised non-violence, "... neither as virtue nor a position and certainly not a set of principles that are to be applied universally. It denotes the mired and conflicted position of a subject who is injured, rageful, disposed to violent retribution and nevertheless struggles against that action (often crafting the rage against itself) ..."(171). Further, the book makes a claim for the absurdity of violence that arises from a refusal to grieve for human beings who fall victim to violence. This refusal denies acknowledgement of existence of certain people, thus Butler appeals for a "...new bodily ontology... that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency..." (Butler 2009, 2). This allows us to understand how our lives are interconnected, they are conditions that make existence possible and hence we have a moral obligation towards all. Butler suggests grieving for lives as a step towards the same (Butler 2020, 38). This project of considering the apparent paradox of subjectivity where the subject must resist violence (though the very

subjectivity is formed on basis of violence) is the subject concern of the book *The Force of Nonviolence*. Interdependence, social equality and an understanding of non-violence that occurs in the midst of political sphere become pre requisites to “...an egalitarian approach to preservation of life (Butler, 2009, 93). Such an approach acknowledges violence as constitutive of psychic constitution of the self and society (Butler “To Preserve the Life of the Other” 2020, 106-159) , it also acknowledges ambivalence as that force that checks the conversion of rage and suffering caused by unequal interdependence (Butler, “Political Philosophy on Freud, War Destruction , Mania and critical Faculty” 2020, 229-276) . Thus, the book *The Force of Nonviolence* presents a profound justification of non-violence as an answer to the world driven by war, inequality and strife. This essay aims to review two central claims of the book, first a claim of radical equality and second, claim of non-violence as a force that subdues aggression.

I

A central concern of the book is to explain the relationship of the ethic of non-violence with the larger political struggle of “...radical equality...” (Butler 2020, 101). Butler explains that the new idea of equality demands an understanding of imagined interdependency that is different from individualist liberal claims of contract based relationships to achieve self-sufficiency and ensure self – preservation. Butler instead argues that this radical equality demands that we assume the embodied subjectivity as a lack of self-sufficiency. It demands that we let go of a notion of body as a single unit, rather we see understand the embodied boundaries as relational and vulnerable (Butler 2020, 76-77). Vulnerability is understood, not as a subjective state but as a shared state or a state of interdependence. Butler explains that one is always vulnerable, since we always rely/are exposed to social structures, other persons or situations (Butler 2020, 77). According to Butler it is most important to acknowledge this state of vulnerability and interdependence, without which cohabitation would be impossible and individualism would lead to constant conflict (Butler 2020, 78). Through the tragedy of Oedipus, the book powerfully explains how the body is that which is always “...given over...to others...in order ...to persist.” (Butler Force

89) The body of an individual (example, a child) is always in other set of hands before it can make use of its own (Butler 2020, 89). Such as understanding of interdependence becomes a pre requisite to radical equality. Radical equality is also understood as an ethic that demands that we regard each life as equally driveable without exception (Butler 2020, 92). Radical equality of the grievable is the demographic pre condition of an ethics of non-violence that governs ways in which living creatures are managed and thus proves to be an integral part of bio politics¹ and ways of thinking about equality among the living (Butler 2020, 93). Grievability is not about those dead but an attribute that is given to living, it marks their value within a system and has a direct bearing on question of who is treated with dignity, equality and in a just way. Thus, the book suggests notions of interdependence, equality, vulnerability and values of grievability as pre requisites to understanding the ethic and politics of non-violence.

This theory appears in stark criticism to theories proposed by neo-liberals like Rawls or communitarians like Walzer, whose propositions of violence for justice shape world politics today. John Rawls' Law of People(s) that strives for world peace prescribes limits of toleration. It prescribes violence in name of self- defence or in defence of the people unjustly attacked and honouring human rights. It prescribes the duty of the democratic societies to come to the assistance of the burdened or other people living under unfavourable conditions that prevent their having a just or decent political and social regime (Rawls 1999, 540).

Similarly, Walzer in his work *Just and Unjust Wars*, explains that aggression is justified on grounds of either self defense or to enforce law by victim or members of international society. He also prescribes use necessary force against the aggressor if it is meant to aid the victim. Walzer admits of wars to prevent future aggression and admits of punishment against the aggressor state. Once the aggressor state has been militarily repulsed, it can also be punished. This is usually the maxim and justification for fighting a just war, the maxim is to punish crime to prevent violence and punish aggression to prevent further war. (Walzer 2006, 61-62).

According to Butler, such theories are not only limited but also exclusionary as violence in name of self defense is ambiguous and markers of self and non

self become arbitrarily drawn. Butler explains that militaristic modes of foreign policy that justify every attack as self-defence, and contemporary US law that makes provisions for pre-emptive killing are evidence of the same (Butler 2020, 85). Butler would suggest that these theories remain committed to inequality and thus cannot prevent future conflict and violence. Butler notes that theories towards peace and countering violence do not need another formulation of state of nature², rather it involves opening a horizon where destruction and strife is countered without a duplication of the same (Butler 2020, 104). Thus, Butler makes a case for non-violence, she explains it as an active force that aims to subdue destruction. She explains non-violence alone as an affirmation of lives interlinked with each other, "...an affirmation caught up with a potential for destruction and its countervailing force." (Butler 2020, 105)

II

Butler's central claim in the text is that violence cannot be a means to a non-violent end as violence renews itself in directions that exceed intention as well as its instrumental schemes (Butler 2020, 41). As mentioned in the "Introduction", the text aims at challenging some major presuppositions regarding non-violence. Firstly, nonviolence is to be understood not merely as a moral position, rather as a social and political practice of resistance to systemic violence that works towards ideals of freedom and equality. Secondly, the text aims to deflate the claim that non-violence arises out of the passive or calm part of soul, rather non-violence is an expression of rage, suffering and aggressiveness, it is exercising adamant and embodied form of political agency. Gandhi and his notion of soul force is evoked to explain the same. Third, non-violence acts a force that checks/obstructs aggression and lastly, it is a negotiation of fundamental ethical and political ambiguities (Butler 2020, 42-45). The text acknowledges the challenge that there exists no consensus on what constitutes violence and non-violence, "...violence is always interpreted ..." (Butler 2020, 33). At most times, political efforts of dissent are labelled as violence. This explains the state's monopoly over definitions that Butler recommends can be subverted by tracing the ways violence is reproduced at the level of a defensive rationale, filled with paranoia and hatred (Butler 2020,

46). Thus, along with a critique of liberal individualism (presented earlier), Butler engages in psychological dimensions of violence. Butler draws upon thinkers like Fanon, Foucault, Freud, Benjamin to consider how resistance to violence does not include lives that are considered unworthy of being grieved. Taking reference of racial discrimination, the book explains how violence is often attributed to those who have been endangered to its most fatal effects (186). The book makes a case that the struggle for non-violence is found in movements that strive for social transformation. They propose radical equality and grievability of all lives (without exception), such a claim is made on basis of an ethic that claims interdependency of life as basis of social and political equality (Butler 2020, 224-226).

Further, in embracing uncertainty (in meanings violence and non-violence), aggressive form of non-violence accepts hostility as a part of its character and values ambivalence as a way of checking aggression. Butler considers Freud, Einstein's pacifism as well as Gandhi's philosophy, as a paradigm of the same. The book quotes Gandhi's acknowledgment of force of destruction and the law of love being higher than destruction. He calls it the petition to avert destruction and a demand that is natural, organic, political and ethical that compels us in the direction of non-violence just when violence is registered in excess (Butler 2020, 276). Yet, while Butler does quote Gandhi and follows his understanding of non-violence as a struggle (not mere passivity), Butler would differ from Gandhi in his understanding of suggested nature of struggle of non-violence. Butler shares Gandhi's views that non-violence is not merely absence of justice but a demand that is made by people who suffer injustice, thus non-violence for Gandhi is not merely ahimsa, which is absence of violence, but satyagraha, that is truth/soul force. Truth for Gandhi was absolute and equivalent to God (Gandhi "Truth and God" 1968, 81). Gandhi explains Satyagraha as holding on to truth, truth force synonymous with soul force. A satyagrahi is a person who is in relentless pursuit of truth and holds a determination to reach it. The goal of satyagraha is to realize oneness with the universe, inspired by the Advaitin metaphysical principle oneness, establish "...friendship with the world and combine greatest love with greatest opposition to wrong..." (Gandhi 1968, 153). Thus, satyagraha does not permit the use of violence, since absolute truth is not known, Gandhi would believe that one is not competent in punishing or inflicting violence (Gandhi 1968, 154-

155). Ahimsa, non-violence, understood as love for all, thus, forms the core value of the pursuit of truth (Gandhi 1968, 152)³.

This category of truth, does not hold the same meaning for Butler, truth for Butler is based on contingent social relations, on power and on language. She appeals to the realisation of interdependency and vulnerability that demands that the other is not violated. Appealing to Levinas' ethics she explains that an encounter with the other who can be violated, the demand that the "face" of the other makes is that of resisting the temptation to violate. Thus Butler comes close to Levinas' articulation of ethical ambiguity where the desire to violate, brings about an encounter that necessitates that the other is not violated (Butler 2009, 172-173). This may not necessarily purify the soul, as Gandhi would believe but does acknowledge a social bond. Thus, what Butler would believe as non-violence would be more elementary than truth, it would be those associations through which truths come to exist and be known.

Further, Butler departs from Gandhi in his advocacy of self-sacrifice. Butler claims that where the injured subject invites more violence and turns this endurance as a kind of virtue, it is a form of "...moral sadism..." (Butler 2009, 172). Rather, Butler chooses "...responsibility..." that aims to keep the self intact (rather than destroyed), the aim being to not dissolve the ambivalence but rather through the ambivalence creating an ethical practice that seeks to preserve life better than it destroys it (Butler 2009, 177). Yet, Butler's position is in keeping with Gandhi's formulation of embodied soul force that persists under conditions that attack its persistence, example a hunger strike may seem like an action but it is not merely that, it is the withdrawal of labour that is essential to capitalist form of labour (Butler 2020, 301-302).

The book provides a powerful and exhaustive account of non-violence as an alternative to instrumentalist versions of violence and nonviolence. It also stands true to its promise of offering a new possibility for ethical and political critical thought as it proposes an "...egalitarian approach to the preservation of life that imports a perspective of radical democracy into the ethical consideration of how best to practice nonviolence...(Butler 2020,93)". Butler also suggests embracing of ambivalence (counter realism) as way of transformative politics that can arrest all

violence. Such an inquiry would be most urgent, in times of racial, sexual, religious, class and caste based phantasmagoria (as Butler calls it), a socially shared and communicable consciousness born of hatred and paranoia and violence affirming principles. In times where the world braves the crisis of pandemic as well as an epidemic of authoritarianism, inequalities in understanding dependencies and resulting injustice has emerged stronger than before, hence this book is a timely intervention towards hope of a more positive non-violent world.

Notes

¹ In the final chapter of his 1976 lecture course "Society Must Be Defended," Foucault elaborates on the emergence of the biopolitical field in the nineteenth century. He describes the bio political as the operation of power over humans as living beings. Distinct from sovereign power, biopolitics, or biopower, appears to be a distinctively European formation. It operates through various technologies and methods for managing both life and death. Foucault describes the biopolitical as a regulatory power that regulates, among other things, the very livability of life, determining the relative life potentials of populations (Butler 2020, 168-169).

² State of nature is a hypothetical condition of human beings prior to political associations. Liberal thinkers like Hobbes in their *Leviathan*, Locke in his work *Two Treatises of Government*, Rousseau's *Social Contract* and John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* discussed the state of nature to explain the limits of political authority.

³ Closely connected to notion of non-violence and satyagraha was the notion of Swaraj. For Gandhi, *swaraj* also referred to a state of affairs in which individuals were morally in control of themselves. They did what was right, resolved their differences and conflicts and dispensed with external coercion. For Gandhi *swaraj* thus presupposed self-discipline, self-restraint, a sense of mutual responsibility, the disposition neither to dominate nor be dominated by others and a sense of *dharma* (Parekh 2001, 93) Gandhi regarded truth, non-violence, brahmacharya, non-possession, non-stealing, fearlessness, removal of untouchability, commitment to bread labour, faith in equality of religions and practice of *swadeshi* as pillars autonomy/ *swaraj*.

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