

“TO BE FEMALE WO-MAN”: KATHY ACKER’S VIEWS ON GENDER ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a concise critical assessment of the gender views of the American novelist and hippie activist Kathy Acker (1947-1997) as expressed in her novels and essays. Although Acker’s works develop a sophisticated and unusual gendered politics, social norms, feminists rejects her work as pornographic and excessively violent. But a close analysis of Acker’s novels and announced views reveals an intellectual richness and serious commitment in her aesthetic exploration of the issues of gender and its ambiguities and intricacies in the late twentieth-century America. Acker develops her gender inquiries in relation to body, language, and identity. Her negotiation of each of these issues is informed by the depth of Acker’s intellectual background. One particular aspect that underlies her gender explorations is poststructuralism. Acker draws on, and revises, the theories of language, identity, body, and desire of Lacan, Derrida, and other French poststructuralist to mount a gendered critique of the abjection of women in the contemporary culture. Textually, Acker took to appropriating classic male texts to contest the power relations that inscribe women’s liminality.

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 09/11/2021

Accepted: 26/02/2022

Published online: 10/04/2022

KEYWORDS

Gender, feminism, Contemporary American novel, Kathy Acker, literature, language.



Introduction

Although the American novelist and hippie activist Kathy Acker (1947-1997) is not officially recognized as a feminist, her works, and her life equally, offer unusual explorations into the gendered discourses of late twentieth-century America.

Acker’s novels, and life, constitute an integral exploration of the issues of gender in relation to language, body, and identity. Acker’s unusual texts fashion the queer as the core of her gender politics. Any understanding of her gender views should start with a deep look into her life pattern as a woman. Kathy Acker’s work offers more than a feminist perception of postmodernism; it reveals new experimental writing strategies and explores a variety of still urgent themes. The modernized popularity of Acker’s work among young feminists affirms that Acker’s literary analysis and explorations of identity and queerness are not yet outdated.

The problem with Acker’s views on gender is that she neatly expresses a strong feminist stance in her nonfiction writings and interviews. But when it comes to her novels things are highly vague, if not problematic. She tends to depict highly neurotic women characters in a world of total male sadism. To aggravate things her novels are full of open pornography and queer sex where women are posited as willing slaves. This is why Acker is often rejected as anti-feminist by the American feminist intelligentsia.

This dissonance between theory and practice has been previously justified either in terms of the excessive resurfacing of the autobiographical in Acker’s novels or in terms of her radically experimental queer politics. But both stances were not quite satisfying in rationalizing this dissonance. A better approach to this problem might consider Acker’s novels as an extended exploration into the ethics and politics of textual representation of gender identity as cultural performance. Acker’s representation of women under the male gaze reenacts and negotiates the cultural performance of the ‘real’ woman. Acker, as such, tends to read gender less as a stable identity than as a performance in the sense of being a stylized repeated social act. Acker’s contemporary the feminist Judith Butler substantiates this performativity of gender in Acker’s novels when she observes that “the action of gender” as in other ritualized social dramas “requires a performance that is repeated.

” This act of repetition (plagiarism in Acker’s case) is to be read as a textual space for the “reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 1990).

Approach

A good place to start with Acker’s views on gender and what it is to be a woman in late twentieth-century America is her manifesto in *Rip-Off Red Girl Detective and the Burning Bombing of America*. This manifesto which she calls “personal Life, is long but worthy of quoting in full:

Personal Life // to be female wo-man is alone constantly on guard as independent as possible always prepared to be without shelter possibilities of talk a secret language daily language to be various ways to talk various ways are strong weapons live a life which is secret to nonwomen who live otherwise the only way in which to be women is to act in certain ways to think in certain ways sexual gender no longer exists to know you have to be strong at every moment to be able to talk to X each other without having to puzzle what to say without having to plan how to control X you are always your own home your lover the child the mother and the father it is necessary for the survival of the earth perhaps universe life that more all humans become decide women effeminacy fem twine we must be mentally masturbatory in the mountains the caves a foot below the waters of the canyons the cockroach cities you must act out there is no more choice I am going to die whatever I do I We are related to the huge strong-limbed giants in the moon (Acker 2002).

This a suburb specimen of Acker’s deconstruction of the culturally constituted codes of the male language which Acker sees as a tool of oppression to women. The deconstruction of the formal properties of language here seeks to restore naturalness to the male appropriated language. This is further mirrored by an intentional slippage of gender through ‘wow-man’ and ‘no-woman.’ The Finnegans Wake language of the primordial

runs like Coleridge’s sacred river into the primitive when humans were in a state of ‘mentally masturbatory in the mountains.’

The hysterical volley of unconnected words continues to impart a chaotic vision of a decentered and extremely gendered human existence:

Women ß à then ß à women, men are humans who are bred trained they can do anything they are almighty they must not be concerned with daily life. their essence is rape. their desire is murder. they are forced to destroy. sexual gender not exist. you do what you want. write about as you live. the dance begins. the cats appears prowl through the gardens the clocks move back. dwarves. giants come out of the caves giant dildos strapped to their thighs. you are the child of the princess your hair is burnt away by a star. (Acker 2002).

This reel is really a kind of a fit of anger. Its lack of punctuation and loose run-on sentences highlights two points. First, it mirrors women’s hysterical nature as the reader can easily detect overtones of fear and reticence. The word ‘wo-man’ is indicative of this hysterical nature that male-centered culture attribute to woman. Second, the cultural conditioning of women as inferior to men can only be countered through the act of writing. Women must write\recreate their femininity as a means of resistance against cultural effacement. Writing, here, means having a voice to usher one’s existence in the web of power relations that constitutes human society.

Kathy Acker’s literary experiments

Acker further elucidates meticulously, but more systematically, these gender issues in her seminal semi-fictional essay “Seeing Gender” (1995) in which she recounts the concept of gender in detail, from her point of view. At the beginning of the article, Acker talks about her childhood. Little Kathy’s ambition was to become a pirate “When I was a child, the only thing I wanted was to be a pirate” (Acker 1995). Although she knows very well that she is unable to achieve her dream and talks about the difficulties she faced as a child in achieving her desires. The only obstacle to achieving her childish desire was her parents. Kathy approaches her parents angrily to the point that she wishes to kill them in

order to achieve her desire. As a child, she knew for sure that her decision was not in her hands, but in her mother's (the decision-maker). Little Cathy was determined to become a pirate, so she aimed to seduce her mother with a handsome man in order to achieve what she wanted. Perhaps Aker's childish project lies in becoming a pirate because she wants to escape from her reality and her bitter childhood with irresponsible parents. She sees the role of a pirate as a key to breaking out of patriarchal restrictions and exploring the unusual. Acker used to see her world as dead and lifeless, and the reason for this was her parents, whom she considered the symbol of the dead world. She considered herself a dead girl in their arms, so she wanted to get out of this dark world and search for the pirate world. Acker continues her narration in adulthood, and her dream is still with her to become a pirate, because as she expressed "I want to live forever in wonder" (Acker 1995). She affirms her strong desire to join the pirate world, a world with wonder that makes her keep in it forever. Kathy has the yearning and desire to know everything through the lens of being a pirate. Because her life is blurred by patriarchal and societal restrictions. So, for Kathy only by being a pirate can remove this blur and see clearly because throughout the pirate world "there is only seeing" (Acker 1995). Kathy's only solution was to turn to her imagination and the world of books, where she finds herself and finds the world of pirates through reading.

The pirate is Acker's metaphor for her search for a mythic society beyond phallocentrism. Piracy, states Acker in an interview, "express the hope and the possibility of a new mythic society whose constituents are highly self-conscious about their own signifying practices" (Friedman 1989). Piracy as a search for a mythic society beyond the phallus runs throughout all of Acker's novels. It becomes the core of her gendered politics. In the early novels piracy takes the form of plagiarism as in *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* where her female characters are so passive and their lives are constructed by reading male texts. Piracy, however, persists in the later novels but take a totally different shape. Piracy in such novels as *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990), *My Mother Demonology* (1993), and *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996) is no longer plagiaristic. Each of these novels, according to Christopher Kocela, "addresses this vision of an outcast pirate mentality" (Kocela 2010). *My Mother's Demonology*, for instance, explains clearly how piracy leads to a mythic society beyond the phallus: "The era of pirates had yielded to the era of artists

and politicians. At the same time women began getting into more than fetishes” (My Mother: Demonology 1993). The cultural politics of piracy reaches its ultimate moment in Acker’s last complete novel *Pussy, King of the Pirates*.

In this essay she declares that the reason behind her unfulfilled desire to be a pirate is because she is a “girl” and something related to gender which is defined by society and determines what you should be as a female. She describes gender as interconnected to death. She uses the metaphor of seeing, which she found in piracy, as the fountain head of her existence as human and as a woman: “to see was to be other than dead. To see was to be an eye, not an I” (Acker 79). Acker evokes here the theories of the body and gender of Louis Irigaray, the French feminist theorist, who identified the sexism in Freud who called women as a dark continent. Irigaray also argued the difference in what men see and what women see, as when she highlights that women find pleasure in touching more than looking and describing the women's body as sexy, she said that “her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see” (Irigaray 1985)

Acker, here, also looks forward and puts into practice some of the provocative ideas of the feminist theorist Judith Butler’s theories of materiality and the female body. Butler argues in her famous book *Bodies that Matter* (1996) that the term male-female deliberately excludes women. Where we find that in Phallogocentric, women are excluded as unfit and possessive and that feminine is an exogenous component. Acker also mounted a critique of Plato's theory in *Timaeus*. According to Plato, woman has no substance, as he believes that everything in existence has to share in form. Acker continues her narration by saying that she was well aware of this fact even before she read these philosophers and their theories because, according to her, she was a girl outside the world. Thus, she turned to the language as she found herself through it “I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others” (Acker 1995). Although she writes and uses language, knowing the body and finding it lies through the phallus that can identify the body. Although it is true Acker believes it is not realistic, Acker deconstructs fixed ideologies of gender to reveal that it is man-made and not an indisputable fact. She argues that all women live within linear time, which is the life cycle of an individual (Birth, Marriage and Death) She insists that we must get out of this linear time.

Acker wants to locate the female body separately from the man and from the prevailing patriarchal culture: “I want to find my genre, my body, as separate from man”. Jeannette Winterson rationalizes this aspect of Acker’s gendered politics when she says that Acker’s

Vulnerability as a woman in a man’s world set her to use her body as text. She would be a writer— fuck ‘em— but she would write from the place of denied, despised, and desired by men. She would not deny her own body, indeed she treated it like a fetish item, adoring, tattooing, and piercing it (“Introduction.” (Acker 2002).

Acker further interrogates the gendered politics of her society by citing the story of Alice in Lewis Carroll’s famous novel *Alice through the Looking Glass*. Acker reflects that:

I am Alice who ran into a book in order to find herself. I have found only the reiterations, the mimesis of patriarchy, or my inability to be. Nobody anywhere. Who am I? Has anybody seen gender?” (Acker 1995)

Alice cannot see her reflection in the mirror until she performs her role in the patriarchy as queen. She’s not a woman, she’s no longer a girl, but she’s now a queen, made by the empire. Alice was made by a man with a man’s language. So, under this oppressive cultural regime, Alice fails to find herself. Although feminine power exists, it is refuted. There is no self-desire under the patriarchal control and social norms of gender that Acker wishes to subvert and destabilize.

Acker would consequently turn to the language of the female body by employing such provocative erotica, like orgasm. She does not have to use men’s language anymore and that her body has meaning and no more masculine control. For Acker, language no longer speaks, but the body does, she wonders after post-orgasmic bliss” Could gender lie here?”(Acker 1995). Here Acker separates her body from hierarchical language systems as her body pleasure proves to be real. Acker found her body outside linear time and outside straight time. Hence, we see Acker’s insistence on taking the role of a pirate as an attempt

to dismantle and attack the fixed class and gender roles and to maintain a free imagination without restrictions.

This should explain why Acker took vehemently to appropriate male texts in her novels in order to deconstruct the codes of socially constructed male patriarchy. In a 1988 interview with Ellen Friedman, Acker described her novels of appropriation, like *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*, as “deconstructive.” Acker situates these novels in relation to the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. These novels rely primarily on “appropriating male texts” (Friedman 1988) in order to fashion her gendered politics. These three novels are the central part of Acker’s lifelong search for a myth beyond the phallus as she was speaking to this effect in the same interview: “[Y]ou try to imagine or construct a society that wasn’t constructed according to the myth of the central phallus. It’s just not possible when you live in this world” (Friedman 1988).

The critic Martina Sciolino explains Acker’s strategy of textual deconstruction in gendered terms as follows:

First of all, Acker works her reader through a deconstruction of the female subject; the phrase "female subject" is here understood through social conventions that still operate to predicate a woman in American culture” (Sciolino 1990)

This textual paradigm is the core of her novels of the late 1970s and 1980s starting from *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), through *Great Expectations* (1982), and reaches its culmination in *Don Quixote* (1986). In these three novels Acker re-works myth of romantic love as structured not by Neo-Platonic conceptions but by monogamous and heterosexual conventions. This fundamentally gendered politics “considers how a woman's desires are already constituted by various myths-narratives of being-that fully inform the speaking subject even as she speaks. Thus, how can one write a revolution to find a space for her own desires when she is already written by patriarchy?” (Sciolino 1990). This is quite evident in, for instance, *Don Quixote* where Acker’s female Quixote “has internalized patriarchal discourse in the very process of learning her craft, an apprenticeship that necessitates reading” (Sciolino 1990) Acker puts this in capitalized form to highlight its graveness: “BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE

WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS” (Capitalization in original) (Acker 1986).

It is from this liminal position that Don Quixote and Acker’s other female characters speak “the discourse of female desire” (Sciolino 439). It is also this very liminal space from which Acker writes this discourse, but with its attending resistance. Thus, the gendered spaces of Acker’s fiction are fashioned by a dialectics of feminine desire and textual resistance that look forward to a deconstructive moment.

However, Acker’s provocative representation of women and gender issues remain a hot spot for both her admirers and detractors. Feminists, for instance, censure her novels as anti-feminist because of her shocking treatment of female body and the overt pornography, sadism, and masochism to which her women characters are subjected. Although many critics identified strong feminist elements in her novels,

For many male writers, as for feminists, Acker's works were an incitement to violence and physical terror. In fact, Acker's works were a cruel reaction to the hegemonic bourgeois narratives of patriarchal capitalism that inscribe women in the liminal space of the object position. Hence, Acker’s extensive use of pornography as the actual space where the female body is commodified as the object of the male gaze. Acker, here, invokes the famous Freudian principle of pain/pleasure and the play it entails of power and desire. It should be remembered that there is a thin line between pornography and serious aesthetic representation of sexuality. Pornography is explicit sexuality with abuse and violence. This is not the case in serious literary works. Sexual acts are invoked for their rich semiotic potential. Such textual representations of open sex are part of the signifying practices that make up the cultural semiotics of the texts. Sex in Kathy’s novels is not pornographic but originates from the cultural semiotics of her texts. Commenting on Acker’s novels Peter Wollen explains that for Kathy Acker:

The presentation of sexuality is always bound up with issues of power, violence and pain, whether explicitly through sadomasochism and rape or implicitly through generalized oppression. Women, in Acker’s books, are both sexually exploited and sexually voracious, an antinomy that generates a cascade of complex discourses, crystallized in the figure of the outlaw heroine, both flaunting her independence,

defying her oppressors and bolting in desperation, abject and humiliated (Wollen 2006).

As a punk writer, Acker uses in her scripts re quoting from various pornographic texts as well as from De Sade, Alexander Trocchi and Leduc to create a montage effect of the male subtexts that interpellate women’s liminality. In her early novel *The Childlike life of the Black Tarantula* Acker tells the story of a sexually disturbed 16-year-old murderer girl who tries to escape her community, her customs, and her language as well. Acker offers another narration from another novel *Kathy Goes to Haiti* in which Haiti, a city stuck in poverty and squalor becomes the liminal space where women are sexually possessed and consumed like commodities. Although the character of Kathy in this novel seeks love in the midst of this filth and turmoil, patriarchal gender systems force her into a sexual commodity that finds in sex a sense of fulfillment, even if only temporarily. Like Kathy, all Haitian women are male-dominated. Acker's use of the character Kathy is an attempt to denote “a world hyper reflective of wider coercive gender rules and behavior” (Lee 2010).

The gendered politics of Acker’s novels might not be feminist in the ordinary sense of the word because she was trying to uncover the epistemological paradigm of a male-dominated culture. It is for this reason that Acker was, sometimes, labelled, to quote A. Robert Lee, as “a meta-feminist” (Lee 2010) because her own feminist concept and ideas are a frustration for feminists. The British feminist novelist Jeannette Winterson clarifies that “Acker positioned herself on the outside on the side of exile less out of Anti-American impulse than because her cultural and literary interests were wider than any single tradition could offer” (Lee 2010). Therefore, Acker texts were considered counter-texts to cultural hegemony and the dominant discourse of patriarchalism.

Acker’s novels, according to the critic Lesley C. Graydon, are “narratives of continual slippages of gender, identity, and perversity” (Graydon 2021). Indeed, gender slippage in particular plays a central role in her life and that of her fictional female characters. Identity and perversity are consequential on this gender slippage. Graydon explains this at length as follows:

Her characters can occupy multiple genders at the same time, have the anatomy of a woman and that of many animals simultaneously, and exist in a drug like, experimental world of poetic

self- discovery, reflection, incest, fantasy, sex, BDSM, exhibitionism, and voyeurism, bestiality, personal authorship, and creation. Non-normative sexualities, genders, bodies, desires, and expressions are the waters Acker swims in.

She is slippery and loves slippage— it is both the access to her sanity and her insanity— and while some may avoid it for fear of falling into an unknown pain, Acker explores to a dark, scary depth. (Graydon 2021)

Although Acker fashions the disfigured the female body through sado-masochism practices, her novels show no anti-male tendencies as much as anti-dominance and control. Through her works, Acker raises important questions about female identity and what it means. Her novels represent an unbridled attack on gender discrimination and the imprisonment of the female self within the defining norms of gender. Acker's narcissistic characters resort to pleasure in destruction and physical torture as in the case of the character of Janey in *Blood and Guts in High School* who revolts against all systems of command and control, all agencies of patriarchy and social gender as well against logocentrism and against language itself. Furthermore, in her texts, Acker raises implicit questions about how to liberate life and art from commodification, and how women can live a life free from the confinement of mind and body. So Acker's texts pose a great challenge because they contain a lot of deliberate violence and mistreatment.

Through her journey in exploring the language of the female body, Acker seeks to highlight the feminine identity. Acker, in this respect, sought to emulate the theories of the French feminist Helene Cixous, notably her *écriture féminine* or women writing. What Acker proposes in the language of the female body is essentially a Cixousian in appeal. Like *écriture féminine*, it is:

A practice of writing that dismantles the essentialised dualisms and destabilises the meanings of their terms. Through a poetic language that makes the meanings of words undecidable, *écriture féminine* performs *différance*, making the reader feel the bi-sexual, erotic drives of the feminine body and the relation to the repressed

mother through the rhythms and ambiguities of the text (Rabine 2000s).

By advocating this feminine practice of textuality Acker initiates an inquiry on whether gender is attached to language and also questions about the possibility of a female gender that is not constituted by patriarchal elements. The prevailing notions of femininity and girlhood are shaped by institutional practices according to specific discourses. According to Judith Butler “gender is a reiteration of norms, everyday practices and discourses” (Butler 1993).

Therefore, the performance of gender, or what Butler calls gender performativity, is determined and pre-established by social norms. Butler argues that the body can subvert these discourses, but the cultural performativity distances the body as an emotional source.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Acker’s works, and life, advertise a feminine force destructive to the oppressive system, a system that aims to distance women from their own desires. In her texts, Acker aims, in addition to destroying and subverting this oppressive regime and subverting the symbolic language. She also aims to create and liberate new and different female models by fashioning a gendered politics in her novels in particular.

As a writer, Acker’s gender politics seeks to fashion textual modes of representing female desire into male texts as a means to counter the phallogentrism of the western culture. This would require an act of textual appropriation as a threshold to initiate a process of deconstruction that culminates in the creation of the *écriture féminine*. The aim of such an appropriation is to create a textual space to negotiate issues of gender and female agency. In her novels Acker seeks to challenge culturally established canonical narratives of male dominance. She does this by creating feminist counter narratives that bring to the fore issues of gender identity and difference.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<p>CITE THIS ARTICLE AS: JADWE U. Majeed, FAISAL Salman Ali Sarraa. “To be female Wo-man”: Kathy Acker’s views on Gender Issues. <i>International Journal of Humanities and Social Development Research</i>. Volume 6 (1), 2022,pp. 22-35.doi: 10.30546/2523-4331.2022.6.1.22</p>
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