Voices Against Authoritarianism In Kathy Acker's Empire Of The Senseless

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ABSTRACT

Kathy Acker is the most prominent idiosyncratic writer in the Post Punk movement. Her writings plunder the canon of western literature through her interpretations of some classical works in her novels. She defies genre conventions and breaks taboos such as violation, family dynamic, authoritarian rule, and sexual revolution. The aim of the paper is to discuss the rough journey of Abhor, her sufferings, her betrayal, and her quest for identity. Empire of the Senseless focuses on the path of transgression taken by Abhor and the struggles of post-revolutionary Paris. It illustrates the interconnections between racism and sexism, which cause double oppression on the woman's character. She rises out the voices against the issues of sexual abuse and reaffirms the dark journey of Abhor and Thivia. Empire of the Senseless reflects the interweaving of past and present connections, individual and community, personal experiences, and the Algerian revolution, which leads them towards an aesthetic paradigm of wholeness. Acker's female protagonist agonises over the traumas of childhood abuse, terror, rebellion, sexuality, and the anxiety of war. In Acker's fictional world, which is ruled by violations and capitalist patriarchs, new forms of solidarity and resistance are required.

Keywords: Trauma, Injustice, Racism, Sexuality, and Algerian Revolution.

Introduction

Kathy Acker is an Experimental Post Modern American writer. Her novels change their names, genders, and personalities as their narratives fast-forward and slow down; they adhere to

the bare minimum of narrative continuity. However, the sexual taboo is Acker's main topic throughout her works. Her writings, which follow in the footsteps of rebellious authors like the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille, depict rape, incest, child molestation, patriarchal and sadistic violence, hatred against mothers, forced prostitution, and the ongoing betrayals committed by both lovers and the concept of love. All of these processes are depicted inside an eroticized, even pornographic discourse, resulting in a very disconcerting gap between form and content. Her novels find out the morality ethics and political repulsive power.

In Acker's works, language and sexuality are used as weapons in an unstoppable power struggle. It would be unfair, though, to place the whole blame for this at the feet of the phallocentric, as many women also want to appropriate male traits in order to gain power and are therefore not exempt from the same agenda of stealing that men pursue. Because of Acker writings' ferocity, reviewers have called her, as a "punk artist" (171) and a writer carry out "terroristic cultural assaults" (41). Acker's use of violence, according to Hulley, is a result of her attempts to "undo and make visible the intricate buttoning of incest and politics we inherit" (171). The concealed intellectual, representational, and experiential violence of Western society is brought to light and shown as physical in Acker's novels. Robert Siegle frames Acker's long-term endeavor with the following query because of this: "How does one, especially a woman, live in the media-saturated commodity culture of the late twentieth-century?" (71). If Acker appears to imply, rape and incest serve as the foundational ideas of Western patriarchal, capitalistic authority, then the concerns and issues of everyday life take on a far more sinister tone once those presumptions are made apparent or visceral.

Acker's storytelling method is a symbolic representation of patriarchal authority and she seeks to overthrow it. Empire of the Senseless speaks a forbidden language that emerges from the crosses material bodies, branding them with the euphoric impossibility of communicating the realities of experience. The present article analyses the identity of woman in Acker’s Empire of the Senseless in the light of Abhor’s voice. It looks at the quest for their own identity and be rooted in both socially and culturally. It also traces out the voices of Abhor and wants to resistance from all those patriarchal norms and Algerian revolution.

Hence, the present article tries to dig out the central character's voices and breaking of social taboos and quest for their own lives.

Acker's Empire of the Senseless was dedicated to their tattooist. She focuses on dissecting the body and her lack of feminine relationships are furthered by her lack of devotion to her tattoo artist and her lack of loyalty to her family or female friends. Empire of the Senseless opens with a young girl named Abhor, who is "part robot, part black" (3). She struggles with the notion of the humanoid identity and oppression of the family dynamic. Female was suppressed by the male dominated society and rejects the identity of femininity in the contemporary world. In this section Black Heat Abhor says that "You can use to wash the grime off different parts of your body or to fling into the face of another person (a male)" (209). Abhor therefore stands in for Acker's female subjects, placed in a society full of representations of women created as a resource by masculine ideology. Stereotypes about women and consumerism originate from the concept of beauty associated with women in a society where attractiveness and clothes are economic pursuits. About this, Christine Delphy contends in "Materialist Feminism":

> Women are the subordinates within families, As such, women constitute a separate oppressed class, based on their oppression as women, regardless of the socioeconomic class to which they belong. Marriage is a labor contract that ties women to unpaid domestic labor, commonly trivialized as "housework," note considered important enough to be seriously analyzed as a topic, or a problem, in its own right. (98)

However it deeply ingrained the idea of patriarchy in society and culture can be seen in the patriarchal thinking of the male characters in the book, which treat females like a piece of fabric to be cleaned or used to appease them. Against this idea, Acker's main character rejects the standard role that is expected of women and, throughout the novel, detests her normal feminine identity. Abhor explores the borders between being a woman and a person, examining where she get blurred in her body. Here, Acker does not merely explain these limits. She displays the stereotyped portrayal of sexuality and subverts the identities of the authoritarians in fiction.

In “Elegy for the world of the Father” the two central characters Abhor and Thivai narrators. Acker’s Abhor traumatizes the incident of rape by her father. This kind of experience makes Abhor as traumatized victim in her childhood. Thivai narrates his family history. Acker integrates her critique of the oedipal family with her analysis of justice, commerce, and capitalism in late twentieth-century Western society. Thivai begins Abhor's story by introducing her grandmother, who is ordered to become a street prostitute by her parents when they arrive in Paris from pre-Nazi Germany. She narrates the tale of her grandmother and her grandmother's family, a "German-Jewish family which was real wealthy" (3). Her pimp pays for her freedom when she is imprisoned, but the nineteen-year-old lad who was with her and was mistakenly identified as her pimp is condemned to death. The youngster shoots Vice-Squad members with a sawed-off shotgun because he is furious that his pleas were ignored. In Acker's conception, a family consists of the following: the parents send their child out to make money by selling sex; they all avoid legal scrutiny; and the boy who is unable to control the relationships between the sexes, capital, and legal worlds is put to death.

Acker's writing skillfully combines the comments by Abhor on her sexuality as a source of anguish with examples of political torture and masochistic agency. She claims that Voodoo may be used as a weapon against Western hegemony, yet she then goes on to describe how white slave owners torture their captives. She characterizes the masochistic subjectivity produced by torture as follows: "The minds of whoever survived lived in and were pain" (65). In addition to reevaluating the relationship between the mind and body, or her own sexuality—which she had previously characterized as masochistic—Acker goes beyond this instance of real torment.

In "Alone," she investigates voice of authoritarian and breaking the social taboos. It recounts the period of detest and Thivai's isolation from the Algerians revolution after he took over Paris and ostensibly overthrew the oppressive systems. He addresses a variety of sexual taboos, including gay rape, intergenerational sex, interracial sex, brother-sister incest, and child prostitution. However, Thivai is still lugging his father about on his back—the father who ordered Thivai to kill his family's female members—and his post-revolutionary society is still dualistic and sexist. It concludes that “I’m free. We’ve had a revolution” (108).

In “Lets the Algerian Takes over Paris” Abhor speaks about the moment of colonization of Algerians and it’s deriving of marginalisation of oppressions authority governments. The White males who formerly dominated the world through slavery ships have freed the Algerian people. The Algerian revolution aims to abolish white supremacy in Paris as well as whiteness; the demise of "the Parisian" symbolizes this. The Parisian associates himself with "we who rule," although Abhor suggests that he may have had some sovereignty issues when he says, "he thought he controlled everything, even death" (71). Within this framework, the sovereignty of the Parisians encompasses not just their biopolitical authority but also the international businesses that afflict Thivai and Abhor's reality, subordinating official authority to economic policy. After being raped, Abhor comes upon this figure. From the confused depths of her anguish, he emerges, holding her at gunpoint. In the conversation, the Parisian confesses to having overdosed on narcotics and to being "sick to death of the world of humans, of how humans hurt each other, he was about to suicide" (69). The end of the chapter, Abhor says he falls into "total insensibility," puts down his weapon, and is killed by the drugs (72).

The myth of the Algerian revolution promoted by the empire supports a racial liberation agenda that goes against systems of privilege enjoyed by the White people. It is outlined in Baron Samedi's speech. Acker uses the rhetorics of dialectical materialism, anti-imperialist struggle, and "Third World Marxism," Samedi suggests that the impending upheaval portends the simultaneous death of White supremacy and the revolutionary tipping point that establishes the ascendant rule of the racialized Parisian underclass. He addresses that White Parisians are "Algerians so thin they were skeletons" (70). Samedi says that

> Gone are the glorious days of sailing when white men, by marketing slaves, ruled the entire earth. No longer do you mine in our depths cut open: for now we’ve been cut open so long so deeply, we’re stripped. Clean. Dead. We are your death. May this be the slogan on your toilets or for your cities. No longer will you work in our muscles and our nerves creating herpes and AIDS, by doing so controlling all union, one and forever: being indivisible and narcissistic to the point of

> fascism, you have now closed down shop. Sick of democracy which has failed you, you've split. Shits. Forever (70-1).

Marxist theory informs Samedi's lecture on Algeria's struggle against white authority. Samedi, who gets his name from the Haitian voodoo Ghede loa, a psychopomp of the dead who acts as a go-between for God and humanity, uses words to pull Algerians out of their political and social graves. In fact, Abhor's descriptions of the Algerians suggest the undead's primitive brain activity and physical degradation, even as the Parisians refer to them as "zombies": "Thousands of Algerians were walking freely." Ragged. Dirty. Sticks. Dolls. Voodoo. Blood flowed eyeballs out. Hatred distaste from mistreated on every level desecration of human being botched up face" (76; 67). Samedi's statement, "we are your death," however, does not only indicate that Algerians would overthrow Paris's (neo) colonial authority, as Haitians did. Rather, he is implying that Algerians' death is a result of the very racial hierarchy that it will dismantle. Empire has its corpse diggers from White Paris. The "suicide" of the Parisians, who were on the verge of the Algerian revolution, symbolizes the last resort ("all that's left") for the white male capitalists in Paris ("we who rule") (69). They have exploited and humiliated Algerians to such an extent—through ghettoization, technological tracking, official surveillance, and police brutality—that their only option is to rebel and take their power.

Acker skillfully combines instances of political torture from America, England, and France, the three imperial countries. The backdrop of Abhors tale is frequently as enigmatic as the topic of the imperative order, presumably because the "who" of the imperative also involves many state administrations. It is challenging to distinguish between colonial power relations and sadomasochistic aesthetics, which both refer to the eroticization of unequal political and human relationships based on concepts of superiority, dominant behaviors, and the extension of power and control from one state or people to another. As an illustration, Acker explains:

> The Caribbean English slave-owners in the nineteenth had injected a chemical similar to formic acid, taken from two members of the stinging nettle family, into the already broken skins of their recalcitrant slaves….And forced

> their unwilling servants to eat Jamaican 'dumbcane' whose leaves, as if they were tiny slivers of glass, irritating the larynx and causing local swelling, made breathing difficult and speaking impossible. Unwilling to speak means unable to speak (74).

Slaves, who have been rendered mute by violence, discipline others to be mute by the fear of violence. The inability of the Caribbean slave to speak, Abhor's difficulty telling her tale, and the Algerians' use of absurdity as a tactic all highlight the link between masochistic subjectivity and a violent relationship with language while subject to imperial authority. In the last instance of political torture, Algerian boys and girls who refuse to talk are tortured and killed by "a group of white soldiers in the American Embassy."

One of the leading lights of the Algerian revolution led by the Empire, Mackandal, converts Samedi's political language of "living death" into a revolutionary plan. Acker Empire's Mackandal, which took inspiration from James' The Black Jacobins, is based on Francois Mackandal, a maroon who led an early and ultimately unsuccessful slave uprising against French colonists in the 18th century. Mackandal is portrayed by James as a quintessential revolutionary, and he reveals that his "great plan for the destruction of white civilization in San Domingo" would involve assaulting the white colonists who are dying and poisoning the province's water supply centers (21). He is an Algerian, "dreamed of paradise, a land without whites. He determined to get rid of every white" in a similar way expresses in Empire of the Senseless (76-77). Abhor suggests that Mackandal poisons the white ruling elite in Paris by using the puffer fish's "tetrodotoxin," which, in tiny quantities, gives the impression of "insects crawling just beneath the skin" (77). Like Samedi, who declared, "We are your own death," Mackandal used hegemonic tactics to subjugate Black people against White Parisians. According to Naimous, "reverses the positions of Parisian and colonial slave by using the weapon of zombification against an unwilling national body" (142):

> In time, like ink on a blotter, poison seeped into the lives of the whites. Poison entered the apartments of the bourgeoisie. There is a way to stop guns and bombs. There's no way to stop poison which runs like water. The whites had industrialized polluted the city for

> purposes of their economic profit to such an extent that even clean water was scarce. They had to have servants just to get them water and these servants, taught by Mackandal, put poison in the water. (77)

The fact that Algerian Mackandal poisoned Paris's water supply to "get rid of every White" and that the Parisian died from a chemical overdose suggests that the myth of the Algerian revolution in Empire envisions the eradication of Whiteness itself. In fact, Abhor continues, that "The old man didn't need to suicide," about Mackandal's anti-neocolonial struggle against the white Parisians (77). Her casual comment highlights not just how the revolution and the Parisian's death coincided, but also how the Parisian's suicide represents the demise of the idea of whiteness in general.

Acker's paraphrase of Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers (1966) implies that Mackandal's disastrous execution and escape, as well as the suicide of Parisians and Algerian sabotage, are the driving forces behind the creation of a "black city" and the abolition of Whiteness. In Empire of the Senseless, Mackandal is burned alive by White American soldiers after they had taken him as a prisoner. Abhor remembers the scene when he was being held at gunpoint by the Parisian:

> A small section of a coroner of that room had been decimated by a bomb. With a single almost invisible spasm the black leader in flames succeeded in wrenching himself out of his handcuffs. Before the dumbed Americans could react, still burning he was half- way across the room and through the hole. It was not known what happened to Mackandal. Poisonings of white continued: finally the Algerians won Paris. Except that a third of the city was now ash (80).

Acker's narrative pace, which suggests a similarity between Mackandal and Ali la Pointe, is reminiscent of the long scene in The Battle of Algiers where the French army tries to talk La Pointe out of hiding behind a wall. He recounts the revival of protests in 1960, over three years after la Pointe's passing, and abruptly ends with Algeria's declaration of independence in 1962. In a similar vein, Abhor's account of the Algerian revolution in Paris comes to a hasty but victorious end, even if

Mackandal appears to survive his execution. Abhor's glib statement that "finally the Algerians won Paris," which is preceded by the graphic, in-depth description of Mackandal's body in flames, mimics the imbalance in Pontecorvo's film, which seems to elevate the martyrdom of the Algerian masses over the efforts of the masses themselves, even though in both cases the masses achieve their revolutionary goals only after the leadership dies.

Acker's Abhor acknowledges that the revolution against the Fathers' sexual, racial, and economic structures are not only unfinished but could also be out of date in the postmodern era. For Algerians, the revolution may be inevitable, even vital, but it is insufficient as a means of resistance against the hegemonic forces of today since it fails to acknowledge the contemporary forms of power. It targets White people, particularly rich White people, as the root of oppression due to their monolithic racial identity. However, Abhor understands that the global centre of oppression has shifted from (racialized) "fatherhood" to a more dispersed system, namely multinational capitalism. She states:

> My father's no longer important causes interpersonal power in this world means corporate power. The multinationals along with their computers have changed and are changing reality viewed as organisms, they've attained immortality via bio-chips. Etc… who needs slaves anymore? So killing someone, anyone, like Regan or the top IBM executive board members, whoever they are, can't accomplish anything. (83)

In post-revolutionary Paris, the multinational corporations and the CIA, its worldwide defence organization, are free to function and regain power since they are not dependent on any national government, unlike the one that the Algerians toppled. In this Foucauldian universe, power is omnipresent. It can only be defeated inside, since it battles from within.

Anarchy results from the immediate abolition of Whiteness, which includes the suicide of the Parisian and the replacement of Mackandal by all Parisians. This means that Abhor and Thivai are free to act outside of racial, gender, and economic hierarchies and can do so through outsider anarchist practices without intervention from the state. As Thivai and Abhor demonstrate, they are the leaders of the Algerian

revolution following its victory. He looks over the "black city" and questions himself: “What are we going to do now we don’t have a boss? [. . .] What are we going to do now we don’t have no more bosses?” (82). Within the framework of Empire's racial themes, these inquiries not only show that the Algerian revolution destroyed hierarchy by overthrowing capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and the state via protests and guerilla warfare, but they also imply that race and racial identity are now Thivai and Abhor's problems to solve rather than ones that should be solved for them. This is because the master signifier, Whiteness, has been removed and the links in the signifying chain that makes up race have been disconnected.

In “Pirate Night” Acker rewrites Twain’s novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn novel in the third and last section. This novel describes about the American freedom sexuality and racism. Acker refers to Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as "one of the main texts about freedom in American culture, [….] Twain was obsessed with racism; me, with sexism" and the book begins with the most overt use of Twain's work (13). This portion commences with the fish tattoo already stated; Thivai speaks at the beginning of the chapter. He and Abhor are reunited aboard a boat on the Seine, much like Huck and Jim are. In a clear nod to Twain's work, Thivai gets them some food while dressing like a girl (like Sarah Williams). Similar to Huck, s/he encounters Mr. and Mrs. Williams and then flees to float down the river with Abhor. Abhor is opposed to become a pirate, despite Thivai's wishes for the two of them to do so. Similar to Huck in Mark Twain's book, Thivai informs the CIA that Abhor is the "runaway nigger" they have been searching for since the Revolution, even thought Abhor doesn't want him (182). After imprisoning Abhor, Thivai and his new friend Mark—gay motorcycle riders—rescues her and teach her how to write. They cut into her fingers to teach her calligraphy, which is similar to getting a tattoo. She starts riding a motorcycle, and in true Ackerian viral manner, passages from "The Highway Code" appear often throughout the chapter. In a moment of horrific regeneration and revolution via death/life, Abhor's motorbike transforms into an Arabian Steed, and she proclaims, “Let the anger of the Arbian steeds be changed through that beauty which is blood into beauty” (221).

In the novel epilogue, Abhor realizes that, despite her confusion about her desires, she understands what she dislikes

and doesn't want to be a part of a motorcycle gang. "And then I realized that maybe there would be a human society in a beautiful world one day, a society that wasn't just disgusting" (227). The final instant of regeneration and the potential for rebirth via decay is the end. According to Acker, "Empire ended with the hints of a possibility or beginning: the body, the actual flesh, almost wordless, romance, the beginning of a movement from yes to no, from nihilism to myth." (13).

In Empire of the Senseless, Acker constructs a government in principle but destroys it when it is put to the test. This compromise provides a reasonable evaluation of the novel. Finally, Abhor is left searching for the next administration to assist in the construction. Acker's work of remythologizing—that is, seeking for feminine contributions to societal myths—is aptly embodied by the lone female figure seeking involvement. Acker looks ready to engage in the discussion even if doing this duty puts her at risk for essentialism criticism. According to her work, women have been defined by their concealed, stigmatized, and excluded bodies for far too long. Before what may be considered culturally "essential" about that body can be known, it must be brought out and revealed in a new "light."

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