

Tribhuvan University

July 2022

Redefining Gender Identity in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*

Giriraj Dahal

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, T.U.
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

By

Giriraj Dahal

Symbol No.: 280825

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-40-435-2014

Redefining Gender Identity in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

July 2022

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Redefining Gender Identity in Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*” submitted to Central Department of English, TU, Kirtipur by Giriraj Dahal has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

Dr. Mani Bhadra Gautam

Internal Examiner

Mr. Laxman Bhatta

External Examiner

Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research advisor Dr. Mani Bhadra Gautam, Lecturer of the Central Department of English for his intellectual guidance, critical comments, genuine suggestion, and providing essential materials. His supervision and inspiring suggestion helped me to prepare this thesis.

I owe my profound gratitude to Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota, the Head of the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, for allowing me to carry this thesis. Mostly, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my teachers Hem Raj Pandey, Khem Raj Khanal, Dinesh Bhandari, and other lecturers of the Central Department of English for their special guidance during the preparation of this thesis.

I take this opportunity to express my earnest thanks for the invaluable suggestion, and intellectual guidance directly and indirectly to all. I am much indebted to my parents Gom Hari Dahal and Urmila Dahal, and my brother Sagar Dahal and sister Sangita Dahal for their sustained but silent inspiration and unconditioned encouragement.

July 2022

Giriraj Dahal

Redefining Gender Identity in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*

Abstract

This thesis analyzes gender identity in Kathy Acker's Empire of the Senseless in the light of gender performativity. Acker through the central characters in the novel tries to redefine a gender role that has been rooted socially and culturally. Gender identity is the center of the novel and she emphasized her female character voice as a woman to be recognized and wants to deconstruct the social taboos that restrict the woman in a patriarchal society. In Kathy's Empire, she challenged the structural belief of gender ideology and the ways of arranging the power in society according to the social construct. She tries to break the structure of society that is designed to differentiate the gender ideology for male and female. To examine the gender role in this thesis, this thesis has used the theoretical lens of Judith Butler's concepts of gender performativity. Abhor, the novel's protagonist transgresses the constructed gender identity for females through fragmented gender role. Acker tries to show the point of departure from the conventional concept of gender ideology. The significance of the study is to explore the real meaning of gender roles. The traditional way of dealing with gender roles as the biological concept of gender is opposed by creating a constructed 'human-made women.' Hence this thesis tries to dig out how the conventional notion of gender identity and sexual fragmentation altered in the novel.

Keywords: Gender identity, Ideology, Performativity, Patriarchy, Fragmentation

This thesis attempts to explore the gender roles in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*. This thesis unfolds how conventional notions of gender identity, fragmentation in sexual identity, and feminism is altered by Acker through recreating myths, especially challenging the male politics with gender performativity through the characters, language, and structure of the novel. Gender identity is the center of the novel and she emphasizes her female character voice as a woman to be recognized and wants to deconstruct the social taboos that restrict the woman in postmodern society. In Kathy's *Empire*, she challenged the structural belief of gender ideology about ways of arranging the power in society according to the social construct.

This thesis also sheds light on fragmented narrative structure, gender ideology, and male politics with a postmodernist perspective that digs out the identity issues inherent in the novel. Gender simply means the characteristics of male and female that is socially constructed. The norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy, and relationships with each other. Gender role ideology is understood as a person's attitudes to how the roles of male and female should be in society in according to sex. Conventional gender role ideologies claim that female should be restricted to the home to perform house hold activities while males should be outside to earn for breads. To examine gender performativity in the novel, the researcher has used the theory of postmodernism, gender performativity, queer, and feminism with reference to Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, Michel Foucault, and others.

Born just after the Second World War to a wealthy German Jewish family in New York, Kathy Acker's, works reflect the then-contemporary punk culture. Chris Kraus, author of Acker's literary biography, *After Kathy Acker a Literary Biography*,

“The punk aesthetic influenced her literary style” (7). In the field of literature, she is wildly recognized for transgressive writing where she explores themes such as childhood trauma, sexuality, and rebellious acts against established norms. *Empire of the Senseless* tells the story of Abhor and Thivai, two central characters, and their story of fighting against a politically repressive system. They try to break the structure of society that is designed to differentiate the gender ideology for male and female.

The contemporary society Acker belongs to was full of male domination. The female gender was treated as an inferior one. It is depicted in the novel through her character Abhor. The novel is divided into three parts; they are “Elegy for the world of fathers”, “Alone” and “Pirate night”. Both characters tell their own story as they are telling their histories in the individuals’ section, and then within each section, there are chapters each beginning with the title and parenthetical phrase, saying either ‘Abhor speaks’ or ‘Thivai speaks’ except for the first chapter in which Abhor speaks through Thivai.

The novel starts with the narrative of Abhor through Thivai. In the chapter “Elegy for the World of the Father”, the teenager Abhor's trauma is narrated through Thivai's narration. The horrific scene of rape by her father in this first chapter is narrated by the male character Thivai. This shows that Abhor wants to hide from the trauma she had to suffer in her teenage; therefore, it is presented from an alternative narration. With this alternative narrative perspective, Kathy tries to deconstruct social stigma. This narrative style used in the novel depicts the traumatized incident of females who challenged the predominant philosophical framework about gender.

In the first chapter of *Empire of the Senseless*, from Thivai's narration, we get an account of Abhor's teenage and family history. The horrible act performed by the male in a patriarchal society is narrated by males themselves. This kind of alternative

narration tries to depict the vivid picture of dominance over females and Thivai's narration makes it easy to understand Abhor's horrific experiences and makes Acker easy to provide justice to the victim. The social stigma prevalent in male hegemonized society is altered through the narration perspective which deconstructs the conventional notion of male ideology.

Brutality on a female in a masculine society is depicted as bleak as it can be. This is exposed through the police's abuse of Abhor's grandmother by arresting her and Alexander, her lover, just to "fill his arrest quota in order to keep in creepy job" (5). Similarly, her father's portrayal of masculinity is exposed followed by an elaborate summary of Abhor's rape at the hands of her father, a man who "got married because he wanted to propagate himself once" (9). Thivai narrated the following story of Abhor's childhood incident. The incident is fragmented and the sense of language completely lacks coherence, regarding this issue, Thivai says:

This is what daddy said to me while he was fucking me: 'traditional estilo de p . . . argentino. Q . . . es e. mas j . . . de t . . . los e . . . dentro d. la c . . . es m indicado p . . . entablar g . . . amistades o t . . . tertulias a . . . es m . . . similar a. estilo t . . . :sec . . . lac . . . con l. palma de la m... y s. apoyan l . . . cino d . . . se s . . . y s. baja l. . . . de e . . . manera y . el ... He had become puerto Rican. (17)

This degraded linguistic symbolizes the senselessness in language and the transgression of socially established norms with the recreation of myths with structural change to the conventional notion that a sentence should be incoherent and linear mode. Gender has conventionally been tied to the human body. The human mind has constructed the biological category of gender roles. Thus, the patriarchal notion prevalent in the novel is harsh for females. Therefore, such harsh

representation needed alternative narration, and such depiction can be done by breaking established narrative techniques. Hence, the brutal act of the male character is depicted to the readers to reinterpret the gender-constructed identity from voicing the suppressed female.

To break such a patriarchal notion, the reformation of canon is needed to attack the gender system with alteration of language and to deconstruct power structure. This issue is further supported by Luce Irigaray's work "The Power of Discourse," which according to her "is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal" (78). The traditional way of presenting women does not give justice to women. So Irigaray focuses to change the conventional way of production of truth with suspending the ideology of women.

In other words, conventional ways of presenting the truth with existing myths cannot define and justify female's ideology. The notion of "feminine" has been misrepresented within discursive systems of power. Therefore, Acker by using paradoxical language is designed specifically for this task. It not only to disrupt the system's gears, jam its institutional organs, but, above all, they refuse to install "replacement" parts that might erect a new system from a scrap of the conventional one. Regarding disrupting established ideology, it has been widely supported by Helene Cixous.

According to Cixous, "[. . .] writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 249). The male hegemony over the female body thus is

challenged by Acker through the male narration of the father's brutality over his daughter. Cixous too advocates using language to cut through the logic. The language is embedded in ideology and social discourse that fabricates a "master narrative." In Cixous's "écriture féminine" 'feminine writing' is her manner of stating.' In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous further added, "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes [. . .]" (256). A woman's body is a metaphor for what has been excluded from language by relying on a discourse of logic that drives rhetoric and ways of seeing the other in a negative light.

This altered narrative technique is a breakthrough in the conventional notion of storytelling and following established norms of society and gender rules. It also transgresses traditional way of storytelling where the novel has a beginning, middle, and an end, with steadily rising action and conflict that builds to a climax and then resolves. Similarly, Acker challenges the realist novel writing approaches and attempts to "break through the representational or fictional mirror and be equal in force to the horror experienced in daily life" (*Bodies of Work* 68). In the second chapter of the first part 'Raise Us from The Dead', Thivai narrated his child hood fantasy as, "I hated Nanny the way children hate: absolutely. As fire burns. Most of my conscious moments were fantasies of burning up parts of Nanny's body" (*Empire of the Senseless* 29). Thivai through these lines is expressing his rage against his nanny by imagining burning parts of her body which seems normal to him.

In this chapter, Thivai talks about himself and how he came to dream of becoming a pirate. His narration is filled with a stream of consciousness style and he jumps back and forth, from his dreams to reality, from his narration about killing his mother to getting into prison together with his father. Stream of consciousness is a

narrative mode or method that attempts “to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind of a narrator” (Cuddon 660). The term was coined by Daniel Oliver in 1840 in his book, *First Lines of Physiology: designed for the Use of Students of Medicine*, he asserts:

If we separate from this mingled and moving stream of consciousness, our sensations and volitions, which are constantly giving it a new direction, and suffer it to pursue its spontaneous course, it will appear, upon examination, that this, instead of being wholly fortuitous and uncertain, is determined by certain fixed laws of thought, which are collectively termed the association of ideas. (156)

The identity crisis in the character of Thivai is further validated with his action. He constantly thinks about multitudinous thought and feeling with uncertainty that has no fixed direction. Similarly, for female character, the horrors experienced in daily life and the consequence of upbringing is depicted here that express the identity flux features. Acker displays a desire to challenge the notion of the modern subject. She creates a ‘quest’ for a female identity, which interrogates the notion of a given identity. In Abhor’s voice, the issue of being forced into a male identity is clearly spelled out. Abhor’s narcissistic father makes his daughter into a sort of double of himself: “I looked like him. I smelled like him. I learnt like him. My father had propagated” (9). Acker’s caricature of patriarchy, in which it is the father that “engenders” the next generation supposedly by himself, emphasizes the male character of physically abusive practices and rituals. The female body in this novel is objectified as mere as sex object which do not carry any feelings. Acker here, to show the performance of gender who successfully reestablishes male ideology by pulling out patriarchal or social norms, where it is designed more male product of male

ideology. As women are hegemonies by male thought.

Gender performance is a notion used to clarify gender as a social phenomenon. It is inscribed through daily practices and involves imitated behavior based on cultural norms related to femininity and masculinity. Regarding the ideology issue, Acker in this novel through Abhor has raised a voice that has been suppressed by the patriarchal mindset which she wants to deconstruct. Here the novel adds further by deconstructing the patriarchal order by creating a futuristic society. Acker travels into the world of radical, romantic imagination. Her setting in the novel is futuristic. She reveals her new world in the sources of literature, and allusions she makes explicitly in her text. As in the chapter called “On Becoming Algerian” when Thivai has been thrown in jail, after the Algerian revolution in Paris. It is not clear whether Thivai is telling stories, or possibly hearing the stories of other prisoners. However, we were introduced with certain Sinbad from Sinbad the Sailor who tells his listeners about Shah Zamam, who explained how patriarchy was initiated. Sinbad the Sailor explains:

Shah Zamam, the king of Samarcand, and king Shahryar were brothers. When they realized that all women are sex maniacs, they decided they had to control women. This was the beginning of patriarchy. In order to control women, Zamam murdered his wife and lover who was black, and his cook. Sexuality and negritude are allied. King Shahryar murdered his wife and all her friends, then fucked and murdered one woman every day for three years. (152)

Patriarchal notions from the story of Sinbad the Sailor tries to dig the reality of the masculine mindset about how they treat women. Here it is mentioned that they need to control women and for that King Shahryar as the representation of masculinity murder his wife, to control women. Thus, futuristic notion of gender construction

through science and technology through human being is shown possible by Acker. It was impracticable idea for that late twentieth century. Acker challenges patriarchal mindset regarding gender issues fragmented the gender identity with the advancement of technology in *Empire* which is set as a futuristic novel shows the future advanced technology of gender transmission. Gender transmission is a sci-fi subject of Acker's time; however, it has been a simple thing these days. Acker's burning issues of gender and gender's role are the reality and common process which can be done easily.

The experimentation of character with altered identity further validates with the creation of a woman "who is part robot and part black" (3). Abhor must struggle with the notion of "human" because the differences in gender role in the contemporary society was at the peak. Female at the period were suppressed in a way that male dominated thinking reject the identity of femininity as a part of human. As in Chapter Black Heat, the character Abhor tells that Men believe that women are wet wash cloths. "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). In this way, Abhor represents Acker's female subjects, cast into a world filled with images of women which are produced by male ideology as a material. The idea of materialism as a female stereotype stem from the construct of beauty connected to women in a cultural sphere where clothing and beauty are marketable and profitable endeavors. Regarding this, Christine Delphy argues in her text "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," not considered important enough to be seriously analyzed as a

topic, or a problem, in its own right. (98)

The patriarchal mindset of treating Abhor as a piece of cloth to just wash or please male characters in novel gives the glimpse of the socially and culturally rooted notion of patriarchy. To oppose such a notion throughout the novel Acker's central protagonist, Abhor opposed her conventional role of typical female; she refuses the traditional role set for females. she very quickly learns the impossibility of easy identification with the myths/models by which she is surrounded. As part human and part construction in the novel, Acker's central character Abhor tests the boundaries to see where they blur on her body, somewhere between being human-made and woman-born. Acker here simply leaves these borders unclarified. This further adds a signal of her discomfort in dealing with a conventional concept of the female body. As Carolene Bynum suggests in her article, 'Why All the fuss About the Body?,' "there is no clear set of structures, behaviors, events, objects, experiences, words, and moments to which the body currently refers" (5). Acker through creating such character in her novel shows she is painfully aware of the 'crisis' of the body. Similarly, the delusion over the gender in the character's terms of the hyper-advancement of the postmodern world. The idea of postmodernism designates a different way of living, perceiving, and understanding the world, or a different way of doing so. Thus Through the character, Acker shows the stereotypical representation of femininity and gender identities and subverts the gender roles in the fiction.

Abhor in the novel transgresses the gender role constructed for females only the please patriarchy. In *Empire of the senseless*, the construction of the cybernetic body of Abhor tries to validate that Acker makes it clear that Abhor as part robot state is not an extension of rational, technological, or hegemonic control. In her novel she does not reveal clearly who constructs her. Abhor desperately runs from being used as

a machine, or from having her body incorporated into any man-made institutions. Abhor's position is still a challenge to the post-modern, capitalistic fix of male hegemony culture. Acker wants to establish the modern notion of gender roles performed/enacted by the individuals' continuous performance. Performativity as a word gives the notion of repetitiveness.

Performativity in the feminist movement can be divided into three broad categories or waves which are defiance of patriarchy, the celebration of the female self, and recognition of equal rights. During the women's movement the rebellion was not a unified force with a single ideology or goal. Some activists were seeking for equal job opportunities and equal payment; others focused on changing relations between men and women. They raised their voices against conventional gender roles and tried to alter society's constructed narrative that a woman's identity was based on her physical attractiveness. The issue for many women was quest of their freedom. They want to have control over their bodies. Regarding this issue Acker tries to depict the gender ideology through performance of gender. She tries to reestablish male ideology by pulling out patriarchal or social norms, which was designed for male ideology.

Male ideology refers to the practices of tradition observed from generation to generation. It indicates the way of making to hegemonize the female body. It is often stated as acts, movements, gestures, postures, dressing, and ways of behaving. The thought is belonging to social and cultural performance to flow with the motions and current of gazing. Therefore, it believes to be synonymous with the male gaze, male ideology, male politics, and gender performance. It helps to explore the body politics ancientness, pastness, and a pristine existence of the male strategies. In the chapter "Raise Us From the Dead" Acker's telling of Thivai and Abhor's story of the

consciousness of the body and languages of the body and its inseparability from the soul marks the difference in their story:

The sky faded to blood, to the color of blood. After I left the doctor and returned home, which was better than I ever had, Abhor had gotten there before me and was waiting for me, so to speak. Asleep. Naked. I saw her. A transparent cast ran from her knee to a few millimeters below her crotch, the skin mottled by blue-purple, and green patches, which looked like bruises but weren't. Black spots on the nails, fingers, and toe, were shaded into gold. Eight derms, each a different colour size and form, ran in a neat line down her right wrist and down the vein of the right upper thigh. A transdermal unit, separated from her body, connected to the input trodes under the cast by means of thin red leads. A construct. In my imagination we were always fucking: the black whip crawls across her back. A red cock rises. (33-34)

The description of Abhor's body isn't a human being. It is partly cybernetic apparent here and its deep connection is to sexuality and gender ideology. Thivai's desire for her is because of her body. His desire is different from a simple objectification of the body and the desire is linked to the body. Her body is inseparable from feelings. Another way of differentiating their relationship from many literary love stories is noting that longing and desire are not usually signified by bodies. Bodies are not usually read as the key to empathy and feeling in these earlier depictions of love.

Such explicit use of the body in the arousal of the senses is usually reserved for pornography or erotica, prevalent in high-art films. Here the description of Thivai further promoted erotica in *Empire of the Senseless*:

While my ice saliva mingled with her saliva perfumed by sugar and incense and rose water in the bowl of my mouth. I felt her rags slap and the glued

against the skin of my thighs. I felt like vomiting. I tore these rags of dried vomit off my skin. I separated the bare thighs; I put them between my knees; I opened my mouth as widely as I could so the gypsy could inject all her vomitaceous poison into me. Without that I felt that I would die. I need her in order to live. (102)

It is a theoretically informed arousal, which does not sound very erotic at first, but its theoretical implications could be heightening the sexuality between Abhor and Thivai. Thivai's awareness of her body is completely connected to his feelings for her as he further explains in the chapter IV Romanticism why he needed Abhor. "Because I had Abhor on a string and the string was tied around my little finger. Whenever I twirled her around, my finger moved, so I was never bored. I need to pull strings. But it didn't have shit to do with shit and shit didn't have to do with it, 'I explain fully.'" (61) The explanation of Thivai about why he needed Abhor proves that the Male at that period enjoys the female body as mere as a toy which is used whenever the male needed it. The body of the female is portrayed as a biological need to male character, Thivai. It might seem more evident in the following excerpt in which his empathy and sympathy for her and his awareness are just like a physical channel. This is partly formed out of his sense of her body, and how it reacts and moves to pain:

I must have passed out because I had a nightmare: that the world is full of people who no longer feel. They are carrying on their business as usual, in fact better than usual, because they no longer feel. In the dream I felt my whole being struck still, as if I had died. The cunt was hurt. I realized that when I awoke. The terrorists said. Six thousand micrograms of endorphin analogue, however, were coming, down on the pain like a hammer, shattering it. Her back, like a cat's, was arching in convulsions. Pink warm waves were lapping

her thighs. (38)

This also has implications concerning seeing gender and the oppressive patriarchal mindsets. Which tends not only to objectify, freeze and put females down but also reduces all levels of empathy and feeling across genders and humanity. Hence there is a relationship between Thivai's awareness of a world full of people who no longer feel. The awakening of his empathy for Abhor through a body that does not conform to any arbitrary system of aesthetic rules developed by patriarchy.

This novel presents the female body as objectified by gender performance and male domination upon them. Acker here, to show the performance of gender who successfully reestablishes male ideology by pulling out patriarchal, or social norms, which is designed for the more male product of male ideology. As women are hegemonized by male thought. The reply of Thivai's robotic father further validates this point where he is advocating his young son about how to treat the women.

“Daddy (Robot): That's right, son. You're too fucked to fuck. That's what being inhuman means. Now: do you think you're able to walk? A man has to walk in order to fuck. Do you know why, son? Do you know why? Because THAT'S WHO A MAN IS. A man is someone who goes after everyone and everything he wants. Men do not need permission” (155). Here concept of male ideology of gender performance depicted through the schooling of his son by Thivai's father shows the tradition of male-centric society where they claim themselves superior among females. Feminist movements made it clear understanding that sexual politics preceded governments and governing politics. Male could not have been free to dominate in the public sphere if they did not also control women in the private sphere of the home. The dominance of women by men, in the private sphere of the home as well as the public sphere, suggests the need to rethink “political ideologies” also.

Male ideology refers to the practices of tradition observed from generation to generation. It indicates the way of making to hegemonize the female body. It is often stated as acts, movements, gestures, postures, dressing, and ways of behaving. The thought is belonging to social and cultural performance to flow with the motions and current of gazing. Therefore, it believes to be synonymous with the male gaze, male ideology, male politics, and gender performance. It helps to explore the body politics ancientness, past-ness, and a pristine existence of the male strategies.

To validate a particular action or institution as a female body, one refers to the actions and assumed values or people much like oneself. In traditional society, the concept of cultural and social performance is a way of legitimating practice through body politics and gender performance. It establishes a norm that is already on the conventional track. That is to say, gender performance has followed over many years as established norms and politicized in society. It is the way of behaving while performance is an act, the concept of gender performance is opposed to social performance and cultural performance.

Gender performance simply refers to a marked break from the traditional norm of society. This radical disjuncture between gender performance and male ideological view the former with suspicion, disdain, and even hostility as if the two essential issues and mutually exclusive without anything they can support from each other. Gender performance is associated with cultural and social performance and the psychology of others in the background of the performance. But this idea of gender performance which is body politics is problematized and even compromised by male thought that there is no one single male politics but multi-level politics.

In *Empire of the Senseless*, the authoritarian power like American CIA and ideology like capitalism wants to control society. They try imposing freedom from

occurring. Abhor and Thivai, the major protagonists in the novel, are seeking for love in a world that is trying with every possible way to control. They are seeking some method to stop the love and fucking from occurring. The notion of controlling gender through ideology and institution in the novel depicts the picture of how the society was completely under control in hands of authority.

Similarly in Acker's *Empire*, these institutions like American CIA and ideology like capitalism are on the side of control. The central characters want to engage in fucking but are too afraid to admit it. Sexual intercourse is shown as a sense of freedom in Acker's *Empire*, the empire provides more than criticism and deconstruction of the issues that Acker may have lived with, or that others may have lived with. In the review of the book *After Kathy Acker a Literary Biography*, Rachel Cooke presents her view about the personal life of Acker in her book review "After Kathy Acker: A Biography by Chris Kraus review – baffling life study":

Who was Kathy Acker? Born in 1944, she grew up on New York's Upper East Side, where she was raised by her stepfather, Albert Alexander, and her mother, Claire Weill Alexander she never knew, and seemingly never wanted to know, her father, who abandoned her mother when she was pregnant, though the absent father would become a theme both in her writing and perhaps in her busy sex life, too. (The Guardian)

Acker's personal life was full of tragedy, which can be traced through her parents' marriage affairs. The abandoned by her biological father when her mother was pregnant shows the suffering single mother has to face in the society who treats female as a product. The patriarchal domination she had to suffer in her life is depicted through the character Abhor in the novel who transgresses the existing concept about gender and its ideology. *Empire* does more than offer a critique or

deconstruction of problems that Acker may have lived with, or others of us may live with. As she writes, in one of her essays, 'A Few Notes on Two of My Books', and says in interviews, *Empire*, unlike some of her earlier works which were more deconstructive of political issues in literature, and in many of which she appropriates several classical texts, *Empire of the Senseless* is a more constructive text or novel.

Constructive doesn't necessarily mean positive; rather it seems to indicate that Acker's focus had shifted and her thinking about how to write a novel that is as politically subversive as *Empire* is had changed. In the essay cited above she also writes, "*Empire of the Senseless* is my first attempt to find a myth, a place, not the myth, not the place" (11). Acker's desire to find a myth a place, perhaps possible after shaking down the repressive forces of the myths manufactured by patriarchal cultures. French feminist theory is more rooted in gender performance than cultural performance and social performance. In this matter an American academician Elizabeth Bell in her article "Performing Gender and Interpersonal Communication Research" argued:

Performativity as a theory of identity constitution, and performativity as a strategy of critique. The third project is that performativity is a political practice . . . much theory in performativity argues that everyday practices of identities are political. These practices are evidence of agency- the ability to act to transform structures large and small. (192)

In Elizabeth's perspective, there is a political practice and design the strategy for creating identity. Performativity is multi-dimensional in acts to transform as a way of behaving. Hence, performativity is always happening phenomenon, which makes us constitute identity and political practice as per the demand of time. The principal concepts and ideas of performance progress, evolution, revolution, freedom,

democracy, science, and technology were born out of that criticism. However, it is marked by experimentation imagination, and inventiveness, the complete understanding of assertion of independence, and wonderment of psychic seeds. It is built on a sense of acts and way of behaving. It embodied a series of contradictions and paradoxes. It could embrace a multiplicity of features of performativity, which might have appeared in a logical sense, mutually exclusive.

Performativity is a perspective, which analyses the environment and experiences which can be altered through cultural, social, body politics, and related psychology. In this sense, performativity can be said to unite all performances. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity. Judith Butler, one of the critics of performance that the project of performativity is oriented towards the establishment of gender performance making a shift from cultural performance, social performance, body politics, and so on. Butler as influenced by Austin regarding gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble* she argued:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (272)

Gender is the performance of continual repetition of action which is acted in daily lives. Such an act is scripted in a way to oppress female gender. The identity constructed for females in the hegemony of patriarchy is inferior gender. Female constantly needed the shelter of male. The scripted act is constructed in a society to suppress females. Regarding this Butler further opines:

Categories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted

the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics. These constructs of identity serve as the point of epistemic departure from which theory emerges and politics itself is shaped to express the interests, the perspective of “women”. But is there a political shape to “women” as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view? . . . a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface or site of cultural inscription? . . . a cultural source figured as “external” to that body. Any theory of the culturally constructed body. (163-64)

Butler claims that gender performance tends to resist cultural performance and social performance. The consciousness of body politics refuses the principle of cultural performance and social performance in its insistence on origin, newness, and evolution. But cultural inscription produces change as well as continuity; the new cultural and institutional formation of performance is themselves the product of cultural performance and social performance. Therefore, performativity is the acceptance of newness.

Elizabeth and Daniel in “Performing Gender and Interpersonal Communication Research” consider performativity as an ultimate product of male politics:

Gender is a complex matrix of normative boundaries- constituted in discourse, materially embodied and performed, and mobilized through culture to secure political and social ends always articulated in/on/ through desire, race, ethnicity, class, age, and abilities. These bounded matrices, navigated by individuals, are open to scrutiny by interpersonal researchers. (18)

Here they claim performativity is articulated stereotypically: desire, race, ethnicity,

class, and age, abilities, and so on as adoption of psychological behavior. That's why gender performance is a complex matrix of normative boundaries as a reflection of desire, race, age, class, abilities; and so on causation makes a valuable lens for the researcher as performativity. They reflect the boundaries of gender performance as body, history, and power consider themselves interrelated and manipulated than cultural performance to constitute new phenomena. They interpret every activity from the perspective of male ideology there may be the performance of giving space by the gender performativity but the female body tends to interpret as an interchange the subjectivities. If reacting style constitutes performance. Male thought overlooks the female body objectification of gender performance.

Male doctrine to make hegemonized females through culture, religion, language, and knowledge. Patriarchal assumptions internalized by women. However, the female body traps herself in the vicious cycle of the argument when she proclaims "but the nature of politics itself is re-defined as public/private distinction is declared invalid and power is said to exist in the most intimate private relationships" (Bryson 230). Here Bryson calls for freedom and restriction side by side.

In terms of Biology, it is a destiny concept of sex. After in emergence of the punk aesthetic in 1970s, we can trace that the notion of gender has been challenged by psychological, sociological, and critical theories and practices. After the birth of post structuralism theoretical discourse on sexuality have brought about a radical change in the discourses of sex and gender. Those challenges are continuously aided by new theories and findings of sociology, the feminist movement, and literary criticism. When it is established that gender is socially defined or constructed then it can also be 'undefined' or 'deconstructed.' Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* argues:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.

(100-01)

Power politics or discourse of power is not an epoch but an ethos or an attitude. It is because power politics is an attitude related to the micro-politics of bodies. The way of thinking and feeling, a way of acting and behaving, a way of breaking with tradition, a mode of relating contemporary reality manipulate in daily life as the relationship. Therefore, Foucault defines power production in the light of the theoretical concept of discourse design through knowledge, economic process, and relationship of another mechanism. For him, power is produced that is changing, and changeable as social body and practice as those mechanisms linked together as well as micro-politics.

Performativity glimpses through the materialization of the body in performance as well as history, culture, or other conventional performances. When the term performativity is introduced, gender performance becomes radically revalued. To say that something is right because it is performance has very different implications than cultural performance, social performance, and theatre performance would have cultural performance, social performance legitimate things in terms of a society where as 'performativity' legitimates by references to other societies or especially gender performance. Bryson discusses the differences and relationships between sexes. She argues that in all known societies the relationship between the

sexes has been based on power and that they are therefore political:

This power takes the form of male domination over women in all areas of life. Sexual domination is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears 'natural' and hence becomes invisible so that it is 'perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. (Bryson 185)

She claims for the social mechanism to design the patriarchal power politics. Male domination over the female body makes hegemonized through many mechanisms as socially, culturally, politically, and so on. Bryson supports the ideology of patriarchal norms and values received from females. She presents the document as Sexual Politics to confer radical feminist view through the patriarchal politics and power. However, the politics of gender performance with its universal features and characteristics is the same in all societies. The departure of the gender of gender politics and performativity is clear although they have a mutual relationship for the sake of novelty and creativity. Both of them objectify the patriarchal ideology to hegemonize and male center culture.

In *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker categorically represents how gender politics with dominative power exercise social and cultural entities. This justifies the female role in the postmodern world with gender performativity the female liberation that follows from end to repression. She wants to form the new society on the very ground of transgression. Acker's point can be further depicted through the conversation with Friedman:

The first part is an elegy for the world of patriarchy. I wanted to take the patriarchy and kill the father on every level. And I did that part by finding out what was taboo and rendering it in words. The second part of the book

concerns what society would look like if it weren't defined by oedipal considerations and the taboos were no longer taboo. I want to through every taboo or tried to, to see what society would be like, without these taboos... The last section. "Pirate Night," is about wanting to get into a society that is taboo, but realizing it's impossible. (17)

The brief discussion claims that these two concepts- gender politics and performativity are mutually inclusive. There is no gender politics without performativity. However, the most defining trait of performative works of art, that is: "the basis of women's oppression lies not in the social organization or physical domination, but in a male control of culture, religion, language, and knowledge that limits the ways in which we can think and causes patriarchal assumptions to be internalized by women as well as by men" (Bryson 222). Therefore, it is appropriate to say that male politics inferring citation and objectifying the female body as performativity are neither inclusive nor exclusive. It is system of constructed practice which suppressed female through culture, language and so on. Gender performance is to establish the autonomy of the female body, which is overshadowed by male politics. As in *Empire of the Senseless*, Abhor through rejecting to follow the instruction of "Highway code" constructed by gender ideology to please patriarchy. Similarly, as through Part human and part construction. Abhor tests the boundaries to see where they blur on her body, somewhere between being human-made and woman-born.

Abhor's state is still a challenge to the post-modern, capitalistic fix of male hegemony culture. The basic view of all human civilizations is pervasively patriarchal which is formed in such a way that ultimately subordinates women to men in all cultural domains. Women are also brought up and trained in the same culture that

tends to internalize the patriarchal ideology with conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority. As such they derogate their sex and cooperate their subordination. But feminist criticism widely holds that one's sex is determined by anatomy. Drawing a clear distinction between sex and gender they condemn the cultural constructs that are used for male domination. They assert that the sexual difference is the difference that males and females get by birth. So, they accept the biological difference, but they strongly go against the concept of 'gender'. This gender has nothing to do with a biological difference but is just a cultural construct. One is not born a woman but it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine.

By this very cultural process, the male in that period has been known to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative while feminine, by systematic opposition is identified with what masculine is not, i.e., passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. The same socio-cultural consciousness or ideology also pervades art and literature considered canonical.

With its emphasis on canon reformation and revisionist approach, feminist cultural criticism intersects with postmodernism in considering the construction of the subject:

If seen from one angle feminism is committed to the material change with which post-modernism has nothing to do as it is preoccupied with language and the free play of signifiers. But if seen from another angle, both meet for "postmodernism asserts the ascendance of the subject over what has seemed the safety of "the self", and feminist critics often revise this assertion to understand how "woman" is constructed by "cultural practices". (Allen 279)

Feminism takes the marginal stance and tries to denaturalize the sexual categories to

illustrate how what appears to be “naturally” female, like caring for the needs of others, is the function of the gender of culturally learned expectation rather than of inborn tendencies feminist critic Kaja Silverman also suggests that the subject is constituted by “the relationship between ethnology, psychoanalysis and semiotics always with very precise historical and economic determinants” (130). French psychoanalyst and semiotician Julia Kristeva also asserts that some ideas of gender as a cultural construct that “a woman cannot ‘be’.... In ‘woman’ I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said something above and beyond no men cultures and ideologies” (137). Thus, the central focus of feminist criticism is basically the cultural constructs that have tended to subordinate and marginalize females.

Acker thus represents female subjectivity in *Empire of the Senseless*, as a point of alienation and confusion for women whose identity is constructed within a male culture by naming, clothing, and cultural narrative. The name of Abhor sounds just like whore (Ab-whore) which is itself a rebellious act to portray a female subject as to oppose the traditional notion of naming as purity. The patriarchal norm further claims that men have a biological weapon of male dominative culture that gives access to control women’s bodies, and they have also explicitly articulated how men have constructed female sexuality to serve not women’s but men’s needs, wants, and interests.

Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone argues reproduction as the cause of women’s oppression. She presents her view regarding reproduction as it is by biological inequality as a tool to control over them. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone claimed that patriarchy – the systematic subordination of women – is rooted in the biological inequality of the sexes. This assertion led her to a feminist revision of

the materialist theory of history offered by Marx and Engels. Their struggles of “economic classes” as the driving forces of history became “sex classes” in her analysis. For her, the original class distinction is between men and women. “Because Firestone believed that the roots of women’s oppression are biological, she concluded that women’s liberation requires a biological revolution” (73). Thus, Acker is constantly altering stable concepts of gender identity, or any stabilizing concept of identity, as can be seen in several scenes in which Abhor dresses in male clothes, or Thivai wears women’s clothes; these are examples of the kinds of shifts of stereotypical roles which take place.

This inequality over gender is depicted by Acker through the suffocation of Thivai being a girl by wearing girl’s cloth, being a girl Thivai in the chapter, ‘I realize something’ claims that girls are passive and he would rather be dead than a girl:

Now I didn’t want to be a girl no more cause girls, being passive, don’t eat enough. Cause girls don’t get enough to eat. Now, if girls were meaner, they’ld get whatever they wanted. To eat. Cause the meanest of us all get the most. Cause that’s meaning of meanest. Who is the meanest of us all? It’s dead people. Cause dead people have no emotional or other human considerations to stop them from being mean. All of human history proves this. I would rather be dead than girl.” (*Empire of the Senseless* 180-81)

The male hegemonic social norms make it difficult for women to survive. Thus, here the central character putting on girls’ clothes and behaving like girls depicts the real picture of gender biases over females. The suffocation Thivai feel is depicted through Mr. Williams’s looks. “Mr. Williams just looked at me like I didn’t fit in” (181). At this moment the male has experienced the woman’s feelings inside the woman’s cloth.

The male gaze over the female body shows how it will be uncomfortable for women to live in such a socially and culturally dominated society where they are treated as a product. As Williams's blue eyes were constantly looking at the tits of Thivai. "His blue eyes moved upward from my dead fuffles to my tits. Only there moved upward from my dead ruffles to my tits. Only there weren't any" (181). Gender has conventionally been tied to the human body. The human mind has constructed the biological category of gender roles. The patriarchal notion prevalent in Acker's empire is harsh which sees women as a product that can be bought through capitalism. When Thivai reject the proposal of Mr. Williams to be protected by him. She said "I got a lot of money. Mr. William said for no reason at all.

Acker in the novel has subverted the established gender ideology through problematizing its notion, creating the whole world upside down. She wants to run away from the society where the males refused to recognize females' identity. Her central character Abhor of this novel transgresses her gender roles as defined by a male-dominated society. She stands against the conventional notion of gender roles as sexual behavior has been defined by society. Abhor has raised the quest for identity and freedom within gender roles. She was compelled to accept traditional gender roles. The quest for identity and freedom by picturing the concept of a new woman. The leading female character has challenged the patriarchal norms of following men and staying under them, advocating on behalf of every other female. Abhor portrays the female character as a very strongest female in this novel. In this fiction, the protagonist, Abhor has been represented as an action-oriented and bold female character. She is not represented as submissive and obedient in her later life. She transforms from powerless to powerful in her journey of life struggle. In the last chapter of *Pirate Night*, she realized that men think "women aren't human and men

are” (*Empire of the Senseless* 209). Here through the journey of her life’s tragedy and extreme exploitation by males, she realized that Thivai as well as Mark treats her like shit. She further says “Thivai thinks this way because he thinks that I’m shit because I’m a woman” (209).

Through the novel *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker has depicted the picture of the female, whose quest for freedom and equality is suppressed. The series of exploitations by male constructed system to her central character, Abhor whose voice has not been heard in the patriarchal society. Abhor chooses to transgress established societal norms as a way to revolt against the male-dominated society. She wants to redefine the gender role. As to redefine gender role Abhor reject the boundary set by males and sets her own rule in the patriarchal *Empire of the Senseless* at the end part of the novel to achieve women’s right. Thus, she decided to become part of motorcycle gang. She didn’t know how to ride the motorbike nor did she have enough money to buy it. When Thivai asked, why she want to have it? Abhor replied that in prison she wasn’t allowed to read any things. “And so that I can move swiftly, even when I am not dreaming, that I fly everywhere anytime and I escape all cops forever” (211). She wants to ride motorcycle to sense the freedom in her life.

The domination of the feminine gender in the male-privileged society, here Abhor wants to be someone by herself in the world of patriarchy. Her sense of freedom resembles that Abhor did not want herself to be fit in the terms set by males anymore. This further supports as “The highway code” which was supposed to make driving easier was not helping her cause it was constructed with gender biasness to privilege masculinity. When Thivai inform her about rules she replied, “I had never heard of any rule so I didn’t know that there were any” (213). Here she starts to revolts and against patriarchal constructed rules. When she got the Highway Code,

she starts to tear out the pages which she finds unnecessary to her. Finally, after reading the instruction of Highway Code She said to herself that “from now on The Highway code no longer mattered. I was making up the rules” (222).

After constructing her own rules and having experienced that it was not working according to her. She told mark that he was right and said that she do not want to be in motorcycle gang anymore. She didn't know what to do with herself. She even says that “I now fully knew what I didn't want and what and whom I hated” (227). Abhor quest of identity and freedom's journey in her life made her realize that she has to listen to herself. In term of following the rules she further added:

The problem with following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself. Therefore, rules prevent, dement, and even kill the people who you follow them. To ride a dangerous machine, or an animal or human, by following rules, is suicidal. Therefore, disobeying rules is the same as following rules cause it's necessary to listen to your own heart. (219)

Hence, in the ending paragraph of the novel, she shows an optimistic tone toward humanity and said, “And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't disgust” (227). With these ending notes, one can sense that Kathy through Abhor's character wants to present a picture of humanity which was a bias toward the gender. She have had experienced masculine gender domination, as being an openly bisexual woman, in her futuristic novel *Empire of the Senseless* gender constructive phenomena. The male and female gender role ideology is just constructed through social norms created in society.

In conclusion, *Empire of the Senseless* transgresses the set of rules and regulations of the patriarchal traditional mindset that was constituted to define gender

ideology. The central character Abhor and Thivai show their point of departure from conventional myths regarding gender identity by constructing new myths in the novel. They try to reject such socially constructed norms, especially as being female, Abhor had senses the extreme exploitation in the novel where the rules were constructed by masculinity for their benefit. This can be observed from the first chapter “Rape by her father” to the last one “Black Heat”, being female Acker through Abhor tries to depict the brutality she had experienced in her own life. From being physically torn and raped by her father to being abused by police and authority, the female gender role has been presented in the novel as inferior. Acker’s central character Abhor wants to alter her gender identity. Alteration of gender identity is presented in the novel as the construction of Gender identity with the constructed body of Abhor.

After the realization of Abhor, as she was constantly being used by males, she starts to hate all men, she realizes that “the whole world is men’s bloody fantasies” (210). She hates the notion of male ideology. The male control of religion, culture, language, and knowledge limits the in which the gender role has been politicized. Therefore, the performativity of gender identity in Acker’s Empire is constructed in a patriarchal notion to oppress females. Thus, in the novel through the construction of alternative gender as part women and part construction, Abhor departs from the conventional notion of the human body constructed as male and female. Acker leaves the boundaries between human-made and woman born.

Thus, *Empire of the Senseless* highlights issues of identity as constructed in society from the perspectives of gender roles. Acker through Abhor's fragmented gender identity in the novel tries to redefine the gender ideology role of females which according to Acker could not justify through a conventional mindset. The sense of freedom has been suppressed for female in the senseless empire full of patriarchal

notions. The accepted phenomenon that a sexual difference between male and female is according to birth is rejected here with the human-made construction. The gender ideology with this alternation further validates the concept of gender as a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon. This alternation of gender in the novel proves that gender is constructed through the action of one's performance rather than the power in the society according to the social and cultural construct.

Works Cited

- Acker, Kathy. *Bodies of Work*. Serpent's Tail, London 1997. Print. pp 58-105.
- - -. *Empire of the Senseless*. Grove Press, 1988.
- Allen, Carolyn J. "Feminist Criticism and Postmodernism." *Tracing Literary Theory*. Ed. Joseph Natoli. University of Illinois Press, 1987. pp 278-305.
- Barrett, Michèle, and Mary McIntosh. "Christine Delphy: Towards a Materialist Feminism?" *Feminist Review*, no. 1, 1979, pp. 95–106. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394753>. Accessed 23 Jun. 2022.
- Bell, E., & Blaeuer, D. Performing gender and interpersonal communication research. In B. J. Dow, & J. T. Wood *The SAGE handbook of gender and communication*. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412976053.n1>
- Bryson, Valerie. *Feminist Politics Theory: An Introduction*. Paragon House, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990
- - -. *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge Publication, 1993.
- - -. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge Publication, 1999.
- Bynum, Caroline. "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 1, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 1–33.
- Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1980. 245-64

Cooke, Rachel. "After Kathy Acker: A Biography by Chris Kraus Review – Baffling Life Study." *The Guardian*, 4 Sept. 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/04/after-kathy-acker-a-biography-chris-kraus-review>. Accessed 28 June 2022.

Firestone, Shulamith. *THE DIALECTIC OF SEX: THE CASE FOR FEMINIST REVOLUTION*. William Morrow and Company, 1970.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. Penguin. 1998

Friedman, Ellen G. "A Conversation with Kathy Acker." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1989. pp 12-22

Irigaray, Luce. "The Power of Discourse." *This Sex Which is Not One*. Cornell University, vol.5 no.6, pp 12-22, 1985.

J. A. Cuddon. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Penguin Books, 1984.

Kraus, Chris. *After Kathy Acker a Literary Biography*. PENGUIN UK, 1st edition April 5, 2018.

Kristeva, Julia, et al. "An Interview with Julia Kristeva: Cultural Strangeness and the Subject in Crisis." *Discourse*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1990, pp. 149–80. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389174>. Accessed 24 Jun. 2022.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford University Press, 1983.