

IDENTITY IN FLUX: A POSTMODERN ANALYSIS OF CYBERPUNK IN SELECT WORKS OF KATHY ACKER

JINCY JOSEPH

Abstract: In the context of the new social theories issued from the emergence of cybercultures, the question of identity is vigorously debated. Kathy Acker, the most disputed avant-garde writer and important figure of the punk movement and also considered as the most important proponent of radical feminism. Her fictions mainly based on postmodern themes. They are the amalgam of extreme violence, graphic sex, autobiography, fragmental narrative and plagiarised texts. She rejects the traditional modes of literary expressions and conventional moralities. I would like to analyse Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *Don Quixote: which was a dream* (1986) as the writings against the conventionalities in picturing identities and how postmodern elements are depicted within the works. This works feature female protagonists who involve in rape, incest, suicide and abortion. They struggle to discover meaning and identity in the deconstructed patriarchal language and sexual masochism. Acker's treatment of the subject of love and violence are meant to present woman as the inhabitant of a decentred and chaotic world in which she feels alienated. Her feminism can be considered as the feminism of cruelty and excess. Kathy Acker's works fit within the perimeters of postmodern depthlessness, play and pastiche by Fredric Jameson. Baudrillard observes contemporary world as a simulacrum, where reality is replaced by false images. One cannot distinguish between what is real and unreal. The fragmentation and decentredness are the only way of existence. Kathy Acker's protagonists are fragmented and decentred. Acker's plagiarised version of writing gives a challenge to all authoritative versions.

Keywords: Identity, Postmodernism, Cyberpunk, Fragmentation.

Introduction: Cyberpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that mixes up the technophilia of cyber culture with the anti-establishment attitude of punk, resulting in a number of recognizable characteristics in its texts, including hybrid identities, dystopian futures and a focus on technology. In the context of the new social theories issued from the emergence of cybercultures, the question of identity is vigorously debated. In essence the argument is that the old notions of identities which stabilized the world for long are in the decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified self. Kathy Acker, the most disputed avant-garde writer and important figure of the punk movement and also considered as the most important proponent of radical feminism. Her fictions mainly based on postmodern themes. They are the amalgam of extreme violence, graphic sex, autobiography, fragmental narrative and plagiarised texts. She rejects the traditional modes of literary expressions and conventional moralities. I would like to analyse Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *Don Quixote: which was a dream* (1986) as the writings against the conventionalities in picturing identities and how postmodern elements are depicted within the works. This works feature female protagonists who involve in rape, incest, suicide and abortion. They struggle to discover meaning and identity in the deconstructed patriarchal language and sexual masochism. Kathy Acker's fictions offer a serious threat to established literary forms. Her writings helped her to earn the label 'literary terrorist' as she uses unequal and impure techniques of cut-up, mash-

up, transposition and transfusion. Her characters easily move to time and space and most often change the personalities and gender. The works are on oppressive middle class and phallogocentric culture. Acker's treatment of the subject of love and violence are meant to present woman as the inhabitant of a decentred and chaotic world in which she feels alienated. Her feminism can be considered as the feminism of cruelty and excess. She uses stream of consciousness method in her fictions. Her vision interrogates the authority of parents, sexuality and policing of the desires. Her novels share the postmodern interest in experimenting with narrative techniques such as collage of genres, fragmentation, quotes and recreations of pre-existing literary works. Postmodernism rejects the boundaries between high and low forms of writings. The major characteristics of postmodernism are pastiche, intertextuality, metafiction and temporal distortion.

Kathy Acker is actively involved in the construction of new myths. In western world oedipal narrative is a foundational story of identity formation. Acker attacks on the oedipal narrative as the reconfiguration of narrative itself. She represents the female subject as an anti-oedipal body without organs, as a machine for attacking desire, having no desire of its own. In her deconstruction of female identity, Acker fire up her female characters with the desire of the other. The concept of identity has become freer but also more fragmented. To a great extent dependent on borrowed texts, her novel *Blood and Guts in the High School* draws on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letters*, describes the plight

of Janey Smith, who has an incestuous sexual relationship with her father, whom she treats as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father. Acker's version demonstrates that the moral and social condemnation of explicitly sexual women has not completely abated. Hawthorne's purpose was to reveal the lingering Puritanism in New England Society; Acker's is to disclose the dirty secret that it lingers still. *Don Quixote* is a reinterpretation of Cervantes' 17th century novel, follows the wanderings of a female Don Quixote in contemporary New York and London. After an abortion, Acker's romantic protagonist searches for her companion Saint Simeon, a talking dog who represents Sancho Panza, in an absurd world dominated by male texts and female subjugation. Moreover, the novel shares the postmodern interest in experimenting with narrative techniques such as collage of genres, fragmentation, quotes and re-creations of pre-existing literary works. Don Quixote, in her chimeric quest wants to believe that the truth of the human nature is love. Her trip into the night of the city will show her that the truth is uglier than that. Don Quixote's sex is ambiguous and a sign of the equality of the sexes. Acker does not choose Don Quixote accidentally to represent a woman in a city. Don Quixote traditionally considered as a pathetic figure, displaced, living in a world that is not his. In the same way, for Acker, women are displaced in a world ruled by males and the city is the place where isolation is made more concrete.

Kathy Acker's works fit within the perimeters of postmodern depthlessness, play and pastiche by Fredric Jameson. In postmodernity all are equipped with information; technology has become a centre focus in lives. Jameson argues that postmodernity converts all art forms in to commodities. It denotes a culture of surface appearances rather than depth. The absence of depth leads to a culture where the surface meaning and appearance is all that matters. The subject lacks uniqueness and is fragmented. This fragmentation and depthlessness is called by Jameson as the culture of pastiche, where repetition of older styles becomes a style in itself, and where there no originals, only copies. Pastiche, the cut up method employed by Kathy Acker in her works. For Jameson pastiche or the black parody is significant with

References:

1. Acker, Kathy. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: grove, 1984. Print.
2. ----- *Don Quixote, which was a dream*. London: paladin, 1986. Print.
3. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. By Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.
4. Castells, M. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1997. Print.
5. Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1991. Print
6. "Kathy Acker Critical Essays." *Enotes.com*. Enotes.com, n.d. Web. 14 July 2017.
7. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue1/mad/quixote.html>

Jincy Joseph, Full-Time Research Scholar, St. Thomas College, Pala, (M.G University Kottayam), Kerala