

## The Gendered Politics of Postmodern Parody in Acker's *Great Expectations*

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### Abstract

This paper critically explores the gendered politics of Kathy Acker's use of postmodern parody in her novel *Great Expectations* (1982). By using the textual codes and paradigms of postmodern parody, as theorized by Linda Hutcheon, Acker seeks to initiate a parodic appropriation of the Dickensian text in order to interrogate the culturally privileged gender norms encoded in this male text. Acker's parodic rewriting of Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1862) is really one of textual appropriation as it seeks to rewrite the male text from a totally different, notably gendered, perspective. The aim of such an appropriation is to create a textual space to negotiate issues of gender and female agency. Acker seeks to challenge culturally established canonical narratives of male dominance. She does this by creating feminist counter narratives that bring to the fore issues of gender identity and difference.

**Keywords:** Gender Politics, Postmodern Parody, Textual Appropriation, Intertextuality, Linda Hutcheon.

### 1. Introduction

The novels of Kathy Acker (1947-1997) are often described as "a form of literary piracy in which plagiarism serves as the ironic signature of her fictional style" (Kocela 2010, 123). This is quite clear in her novels which were written during the late 1970s and the 1980s. They are commonly referred to as Acker's 'deconstructive' novels as they seek to deconstruct classic male texts.. These novels are *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), *Great Expectations* (1982), and *Don Quixote* (1986). Acker's novels deliberately plagiarize a wide range of cultural texts from canonical literature to pulp fiction to pop music. Acker's use of canonical literary texts remains central to her politics of textual appropriations.

*Great Expectations* is Acker's first 'deconstructive' novel to completely identify with a classic male text by being its namesake. Acker's novel seeks to deconstruct its Dickensian namesake *Great Expectations* (1861). Acker, however, is not the first novelist to attempt a re-writing of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Several novelists, notably Peter Carey and Lloyd Jones, re-wrote this novel from a variety of ideological vantage points.

Being a postmodern and experimental novel, *Great Expectations* offers no coherent and unified story like its Dickensian namesake. It is rather a kind of a collage of diversified narrative threads that are commonly unified by men trying their best to hurt and abuse women in a variety of ways. Acker's novel starts by transcribing the first page of Dickens' *Great Expectations* word by word but the narrator this

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time calls himself Peter rather than Dickens' Pip. The change of narrator's name is a signal that Acker is appropriating Dickens' narrative.

But Acker soon switches to a female narrator who is reading tarot cards and from there on the novel turns into a deconstruction of heterogeneous masculine-driven narratives of family betrayal with strong autobiographical reminiscences about Acker's actual family life. Sex, gender warfare, and sadistic male domination of women predominate these narratives with a highly unreliable and obtrusive narrative voice. Here a narrative collage starts to evolve around the narrative thread of a character named Sarah trying to solve the mystery of her mother's death. The two gendered narratives of Peter and Sarah finally merge together and the two become characters in a plagiarized version of Pauline Reage's *Story of O*. Acker then plagiarizes sections from *La Princesse de Cleves* from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Mm de Cleves resists an affair with her lover Nemours. Finally, the narrative mosaic moves to Propertius and his relationship with a woman called Cynthia, as told from the female (narrator's) vantage point. The book concludes with a metafictional gesture of the narrator (calling herself Kathy Acker) and the pain her mother's suicide caused her.

Acker, however, was not interested in deconstructing Dickens' text as much as its bildungsroman genre. This genre of novel writing was exclusively privileged as a male genre ever since its introduction into English novel by Carlyle in the middle of the nineteenth century. Acker wanted to explore how the bildungsroman has traditionally affected the textual construction of gender after the dominant cultural stereotypes of gender roles and identity.

Acker labels her narrative strategy in *Great Expectations* as plagiarism because she plagiarizes a classic male text to critically explore how genre encodes gender in terms of cultural performativity. So, the unnamed female narrator of her novel assumes several typical roles that culture usually assigns to women in contemporary society. Dickens' Pip becomes Peter and both are orphans but with big difference. Peter's mother has just committed suicide, his grandmother died, his father abandoned the family before the child's birth: "Three months before she was born, her father had abandoned her mother and, according to her mother, had never tried to see her again or her daughter because he's a robot" (*Great Expectations* 82). A psychodrama ensues as the absence of the father proves traumatic to the child. Peter who is made to relive this psychodrama all over his life by the many men who were trying to fill this paternal absence repeatedly. But these men are just copies of his absent father. They are men who abuse, manipulate, and abandon women, notably, the gender-shifting narrator of the novel. These repeated metaphorical acts of father replacement in Peter's grown up life repeatedly kill the mother in an anti-Oedipal way both as a blood-line and on the symbolic order.

Acker takes aim at the phallocentrism of the culture that Dickens' text is fashioning and being fashioned by its gender codes. All the gender roles that the phallocentric culture offers to women are based on the effacement of female subjectivity. Thus, the affirmation of masculinity can only be achieved through the negation of femininity as a signifier. The killing of women on the symbolic order of the psychodrama becomes a repeated stylized ritual for the assertion of maleness in Acker's novel. This, in a sense, is the core of Acker's deconstructive appropriation of Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

Given this strong gendered dimension, such a textual appropriation of a canonical male text cannot escape the parodic because codes of cultural ideology that fashioned Dickens' *Great Expectations* must be installed and subverted in Acker's narrative in order to adumbrate an ideological stance in it. Conventional parody with all its sharp ironic bite is quite inadequate for such a textual project which requires repetition with difference, minus the ironic stance. Acker, therefore, resorts to the dynamics of postmodern parody to critically negotiate the codes of cultural performativity of gender identity.

## 2. Postmodern Parody

Parody had a prominent position in the postmodernist debate on the nature and function of contemporary literature. The cultural and art theorist Linda Hutcheon played a central role in this ongoing debate as she helped conceptualizing parody as the essence of postmodernism. Her stance on parody, or what she prefers to call postmodern parody, is a reaction to Frederick Jameson's dismissal of parody as dead and ineffectual in contemporary art and literature.

In his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Jameson takes all postmodern parody to be blank as it lacks any referentiality in external reality. Parody in the postmodern age, according to Jameson, is replaced by pastiche which is a form of blank parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter (1991, 17).

Jameson argument is based on his belief that parody as an ironic mimicry is no longer functional in the postmodern age because there is no original to mimic. Indeed, in the age of simulacra human existence is reduced to copies without an origin. The intense consumerism of the late capitalist society turned human existence into a practice of simulation. Jameson also argues that postmodernism is characterized by a total lack of distinctive individual styles as in the case of modernism. "Modernist styles," argues Jameson, "become postmodernist codes" (Jameson 1991, 17). This reduces literature and art to "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (Jameson 1991, 17). Classic parody becomes impossible since postmodern cultural productions, notably artistic and literary works, are characterized by "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the 'neo'" (Jameson 1991, 17).

Jameson's views on postmodern parody provoked a range of counter-arguments from other prominent theorists of postmodernism like Linda Hutcheon, Christine Brooke-Rose, and John Docker. However, it is Linda Hutcheon who offered a better unified a sustained counter-argument to Jameson's pastiche. Unlike Jameson, Hutcheon finds postmodern parodic self-reflexivity highly informed by historical awareness and with a profound political edge. In her influential book-length study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon dismisses Jameson's distinction between parody and pastiche on the ground that Jameson "has been misled by the notion of parody as ridiculing imitation; if, on the contrary, it is recognized that parody need not have that ridiculing or critical edge, then Jameson's distinction falls, and with it one of the central contentions of his argument" (Dentith 2002, 156).

Hutcheon argues that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Politics 1989, 93). Postmodern parody, as such, is a doubly-coded intertextual process of appropriating the discursive cultural paradigms of the parodied text. "As a form of ironic representation," argues Hutcheon, parody is:

Doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies. This kind of authorized transgression is what makes it a ready vehicle for the political contradictions of postmodernism at large. Parody can be used as a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past. Its ironic reprise also offers an internalized sign of a certain self-consciousness about our culture's means of ideological legitimation. How do some representations get legitimized and authorized? And at the expense of which others? Parody can offer a way of investigating the history of that process (Politics 1989, 101).

Hutcheon's brand of postmodern parody is not concerned with mimicking a target text as in classic parody. In her book *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* Hutcheon defines the two basic premises of postmodern parody as, "imitation with critical distance" (2000, 36) and "repetition with a difference" (1991, 32). Such brand of parody seeks critical difference rather than identification with the parodied text or its style. Such a process seeks to negotiate the ethics and politics of representations and the ideological assumptions governing them. Parody, say Hutcheon, "works to foreground the politics of representation" (Politics 1989, 94). Roughly speaking, what happens in this sort of postmodern parody is a translation of past representations into contemporary idiom to mount a political critique in order to politicize representation itself. Hutcheon elucidates this aspect of postmodern parody when she says that "postmodern ironic parody, using the conventions of realism against themselves in order to foreground the complexity of representation and its implied politics" (Politics 1989, 99).

The ironic edge implicit in postmodern parody is not meant to create a comic or humorous effect as in classic parody. It rather seek to interrogate interpretation as ideological and, at the same time, destabilizes representation and ideology in the parodying text. Hutcheon highlights that parody de-doxifies, i.e., to unsettle all doxa, or common beliefs:

And it manages to point at once to the contingency of art and to the primacy of social codes, making the invisible visible, 'de-doxifying' the doxa – be it either modernist/formalist or realist/documentary. In postmodern fiction, too, the documentary impulse of realism meets the problematizing of reference seen earlier in self-reflexive modernism. Postmodern narrative is filtered through the history of both. And this is where the question of representation and its politics enters (Politics 1989, 29).

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In Classical Rhetoric, doxa is usually contrasted with episteme in reference to its ontological sense. So, postmodern parody in Hutcheon's view is politically engaged in the sense that it violates the postmodernist regress into textuality in favor of a resistance to all accepted ideologies and beliefs.

Hutcheon emphasizes the self-conscious reflexivity of postmodern parody in inscribing historical specificity in the contemporary moment. "Postmodern parody," states Hutcheon, "is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history" (Politics 1989, 95). This textual inscription is deconstructive in nature. It is similar in function to the Derridian trace since it seeks to subvert what it inscribes in the parodic act. Hutcheon makes this clear when she remarks that "postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation – in any medium" (Politics 1989, 98).

Hutcheon likens this act of parodic inscription to the convention of the inverted comma.

It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert, or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an ironic – or even 'ironic' – one. [Its] distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity (Politics 1989, 1).

This doubleness of postmodern parody, as Hutcheon points out, is transgressive in nature: "In postmodern parody, the doubleness of the politics of authorized transgression remains intact: there is no dialectic resolution or recuperative evasion of contradiction in narrative fiction, painting, photography, or film (Politics 1989, 107).

Hutcheon's model of postmodern parody depends on the reader to initiate the parodic structure of the literary work because such kind of parody intentionally blur or efface the presence of the original text in the act of parodying. Since postmodern parody seek to create critical distance with the targeted text the effect is less one of mimicry than appropriation. Most often, as in the case of Kathy Acker's parodic novel, the parodied text is nowhere in the parodying text. Such texts usually identify with their targeted texts by using the title of the original as theirs. This is used to a signal for the reader to keep the namesake text in the background of the reading. The parodying text, in this case, does not foreground the parodied one but itself becomes the foreground. This is radically different from what happens in classic parody where the parodied text is firmly present in the foreground of the parodying text. This is because postmodern parody does not parody a given precursor text as much as foregrounding its "politics of representation" and the cultural paradigms underlying such textual politics.

One crucial consequence of this critical distancing operative in postmodern parody is bringing to the fore the issue of originality. Hutcheon speaks to this effect when she says that postmodern parody:

Contests our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and our capitalist notions of ownership and property. With parody – as with any form of reproduction – the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question. This does not mean that art has lost its

meaning and purpose, but that it will inevitably have a new and different significance (Politics 1989, 93-94).

Classic parody operates on the principle of plagiarism. It, in a sense, plagiarizes a precursor text in order to re-write it with an ironic edge. Postmodern parody, as in the case of Kathy Acker, problematizes plagiarism by critically distancing itself from the texts it professes to plagiarize. Although, for instance, Acker's *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* are given the titles of classic male novels, they are nothing like their namesake precursors. Acker works hard to efface the parodied texts especially through her subversion of the gender codes of these novels. These two novels then defy the parodic expectations of the reader. Plagiarizing the title of famous classics is meant to problematize the very act of reading since the title is a clear signal to the reader to expect a parodic reading experience. But soon such expectation is thwarted when the reader discovers that the promise of the parodic is not there. This would ultimately affect a questioning of the nature of originality and plagiarism in terms of cultural production.

### **3. Reading the Gendered Agenda of Acker's Postmodern Parody in *Great Expectations***

Acker's *Great Expectations* is, in many ways, a postmodern parody of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Acker's is a parodic appropriation of the Dickensian text but without the ironic stance characteristic of classic parody. Such an act of textual appropriation, as practiced by Acker, foregrounds the target Dickensian text but never maintains it as a point of reference in the background of her own text. The result is a repetition with a critical difference. Indeed, Acker may have plagiarized, or in a sense glossed over, Dickens' *Great Expectations* but her text is nothing like its Dickensian namesake. Her parodic appropriation of *Dickens' Great Expectations* emphasizes difference rather than similarity by creating a polyphonic text which archives the parodied text in the background while negotiating and interrogating its coded signs in the foreground. A critical difference ensues between the background and the foreground in terms of a multiplicity of voices.

In a sense, Acker was not appropriating a text as much as plagiarizing a male voice. This is evident in the clear and loud gendered agenda of her practice of postmodern parody in her *Great Expectations*. The critic Naomi Jacobs elucidates this point as follows:

Through... pastiche – appropriations of famous literary texts, and outrageous manipulations of historical and literary figures, Acker attempts simultaneously to deconstruct the tyrannical structures of official culture and to plagiarize an identity, constructing a self from salvage fragments of those very structures she has dismantled (1989, 50).

This act of appropriation works on the same lines that Judith Butler theorizes in her book *Gender Trouble*. Like Butler, Acker's feminist appropriation of sexual difference, seeks to re-conceptualize the feminine, "not as an expression of the metaphysics of substance, but as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion. The feminine as the repudiated/excluded within that system constitutes the possibility of a critique and disruption of that

hegemonic conceptual scheme" (1999, 37). Such a gendered politics can best be realized through the space of postmodern parody.

The first and foremost signal of the parodic process in postmodern parody, particularly the model of Linda Hutcheon, is the title of the novel. Borrowing ('plagiarising' in Acker's terms) the title of one of Dickens' classic novels to use it as the title of her novel signals the parodic nature of her text at least in the mind of the reader. Such an act is calculated to instantly position the reader in terms of his\her expectations within the Dickensian text. Such an act is going to keep re-orienting the process of reading and interpretation of Acker's text in the light of the Dickensian text. The critic Bran Nicol explains the significance of the title signal:

To call one's novel *Great Expectations* is a provocative act and one which instantly positions the reader in terms of their expectations. Imagine writing a novel and calling it *Hamlet* or *Middlemarch*. The practice immediately provides a frame for our reading, setting up interpretive parameters involving themes from the original novel, such as origins, love, or the nature of capital, as well as preparing for a reinterpretation of Dickens's text (Nicol 2009, 160).

Nicol cites the case of how the reader might interpret the sadistic acts in which Acker's narrator is forced to indulge in. The reader's interpretation here is framed by his\her knowledge of Pip's willing masochism to immensely enjoy the sadism of Stella. Thus, Dickens' *Great Expectations* keeps lurking in the background of Acker's narrative in a double-coding way. The above case also serves to comment, if not interrogates, Pip's masochism too. This helps to establish a dialogue between the two texts in a parodic style.

This play on reader's expectations and interpretive double-coding is furthered through the plagiarism of the first page of Dickens' novel right after the title:

"My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name being Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister – Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith" (*Great Expectations* 4).

Acker, however, changes the original Pip into Peter. The critic Martina Sciolino reads this plagiarism from the standpoint of orphanhood. The fact that both Pip and Peter are orphans suggests, according to Sciolino, a "fantastic autonomy." Pip invents his own name through a misprision of his dead father's name from the tombstone. This process of self-invention does not matter in Peter's case because the narrator soon becomes a young girl. This is quite significant because Acker here "indicates the tenuous relations between name, gender, and identity while simultaneously exposing the sequence that a reader engages to orient herself in narrative" (Sciolino 1990, 439). Acker seems to play on the notion that gender identity is biologically pre-fixed. His gender identity is subverted by the culturally inscribed tactics of gender performativity through the highly ambivalent sudden shift in the gender of the narrator after page one of the novel. This could be counted a correlative to self-reinvention in the case of Dickens' Pip. Dickens and Acker, however, take the same road by pointing out that this sense of autonomy in their

narrators is 'fantastic' as their respective characters are denied escape from other characters' control, "thereby demonstrating exactly how the desire for individual autonomy is fantastic, wishful, a dream that constitutes and deconstitutes character" (Sciolino 1990, 439).

This gender fluidity is Acker's postmodernist and feminist critique of the hegemonic rhetoric of 'autonomy'. The individual in Acker's novel is no longer a "coherent, unified subject with a stable identity who endures over time and who can "own" its choices" (Friedman 2003, 82). She constructs her characters after the "postmodern notions of the subject as an unstable, fragmented, incoherent assortment of positions in discourse (Friedman 2003, 82). Accordingly, gender is a matter of performativity as a discursive practice rather than a fixed binary opposition. The breakdown of this gender binarism works for parodic effects.

One of the fundamental aspects of Acker's postmodern parody is her shattering of Dickens' Victorian moralism. Her deliberate intimate erotic and pornographic references throughout her *Great Expectations* is parodic of the excessive moralism of the Dickensian text. Although the ironic stance is inescapable here, the parodic is meant to question the nature of reality being textualized in the Dickensian text. Acker, in other words, is interested in the resurfacing of the absent and the repressed, like sex, in the Victorian novel. This very act of giving voice to the absent and repressed in the Dickensian text is the true dynamics of postmodern parody.

The critic H. Zaltash explains this issue through the Baudrillardian concept of simulacra. According to Baudrillard's theory, excessive abundance in reality leads to the disappearance of reality itself, and therefore abundance in sex leads to its inevitable simulation. Sex, like reality, is replaced by the "hyperreal", as it is simulated by pornography in the narrative. Zaltash believes that the addition of pornographic material with a philosophical dimension to the texts gives the text a profounder sense of absent real. Thus pornography is turned into a simulacrum, as a truth that hides the truth's non-existence (Zaltash 2021, 3).

In *Great Expectations*, Acker uses excessive pornography and narrates explicit sex scenes in very accurate details throughout the novel. She provides detailed descriptions of the cases of sexual intercourse and naked bodies. This aspect of Acker's narrative is part of her gendered politics since the excessive and pleasure are meant to invoke the Lacanian *jouissance* which signifies "pleasures associated with sensuous and sexual gratification, or orgasm" (Wolfreys 2004, 126). The ensuing fulfillment is only temporary and it should be constantly sought anew. More importantly, it "figures an excess beyond any economy of exchange, as is implied by mere pleasure (Wolfreys 2004, 126). Acker's *jouissance* is more gendered in being closer to what Luce Irigaray dubs as non-phallic *jouissance*. Irigaray contends that there are two modes of *jouissance* for women:

One is programmed in a male libidinal economy in accordance with a certain phallic order. Another is much more in harmony with what they are, with their sexual identity... if we are to discover our female identity, I do think it is important to know



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that, for us, there is a relationship with jouissance other than that which functions in accordance with the phallic model (1991, 45)

Within this second category of jouissance, Acker correlates the excessive with obsession with sexual pleasure: "I am only an obsession. Don't talk to me otherwise. Don't know me. Do you think I exist?" (*Great Expectations* 45) This obsession/excess becomes for Acker's female characters a medium to achieve a sense of sexual identity.

The most subversive play of Acker's postmodern parody takes place in the projection on the textual paradigm of the male bildungsroman in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Her postmodern parody installs and then disrupts the textual paradigm of the male bildungsroman. The critic Ankhi Mukherjee speaks to this affect when she considers Acker's *Great Expectations* as updating Dickens' novel:

[Dickens'] autobiographical novel of endless reversals ends with the hope that Pip's belated authorship of his life will mark a re-beginning, not a return. In contrast, the hysterical protagonist of Acker's novel is dissatisfied, disgusted, and sick with desire: he or she ambivalently negotiates a cultural wasteland, where even language has been defeated by that which it could not speak for or of (2005, 115).

Mukherjee reads Acker's postmodern parody of Dickens' text as "a transformative and transgressive reimagining," one in which the "hysterical" writing of women reveals that there is "nowhere to return to, and nothing to remember, for what it 'repeats' compulsively is that which was never experienced" (Mukherjee 2005, 131).

This compulsive drive figures in the way Pip and his gender-shifter Peter fail to re-experience their traumatic childhood. Both children were subject to the sadism of elders. In Pip's case he was subject to the sadism of the maternal figure through the characters of Mrs. Joe, Mrs. Havisham, and Estella. Acker reverses this textual paradigm by making the paternal figure, in the fashion of Freudian psychology, as the source of the traumatic childhood experiences. Peter's sadistic father caused his wife to die and tormented his life. Peter's subsequent life became a ceaseless cycle of reliving the sadism of the absent father with each man he/she lives with. His/her life becomes a cycle of pleasure-pain where gender identity loses any sense. Acker, at this point, translates the feminine sadism of the Dickensian bildungsroman into masochism as Peter finds pleasure in the pain of his/her ceaseless re-living the sadism of the lost father. But this masochism is gendered because the decentered male subjectivity of Peter breaks down the binarism of gender as his narrative persona suddenly changes into a girl. Kaja Silverman recognizes this power of masochism to subverts gender normalcy: "It strips sexuality of all functionality, whether biological or social; in an even more extreme fashion than "normal" sexuality, it puts the body and the world of objects to uses that have nothing whatever to do with any kind of "immanent" design or purpose" (1992,187). Acker followed Freud's insights on masochism. Of the three categories of masochism that Freud described (erotogenic, feminine, and moral) Acker chose the feminine masochism as it pertains to the gendered agenda of her postmodern parody. Pip and Peter promote symptoms of feminine masochism, which Freud "associates with fantasies of being bound and beaten, and with the desire to be "treated like... a naughty child" (Qtd. In Silverman 1992, 188). By relying on Freud Acker is trying to psychologize Pip. Kaja Silverman sums up what happens:

The prototypical male subject oscillates endlessly between the mutually exclusive commands of the (male) ego-ideal and the super-ego, wanting both to love the father and to be the father, but prevented from doing either. The morally masochistic male subject has given up on the desire to be the father, and may in fact have turned away from the paternal ego-ideal to the maternal one, and from identification with the father to identification with the mother. However, he burns with an exalted ardor for the rigors of the super-ego. The feminine masochist...literalizes the beating fantasy, and brings this cruel drama back to the body (1992, 195).

This is exactly what happens with Peter, but the actual point that Acker scores here is to show that sexual identity is not bound by gender binarism. The heteronormative structure of the Victorian society prohibits the textual surfacing of the queer sexuality of masochism. So, The masculine subjectivity of the grown up Pip is asserted through the mysterious father figure Magwich who is re-initiated into the social power relations in the name of gender identity as a male. Acker undermines the status quo of social power relations by giving full access to the queer sexuality of Peter's masochistic personality.

This is linked to one important aspect of postmodern parody in Acker's novel: the destabilization of socio-cultural hegemony of Dickens' text. Pip's highly rationalized world gives way to a highly fragmented and unstable contemporary social context. This strategy which lies to the heart of postmodern parody seeks to question the epistemological foundation of Western culture as filtered in classic realist novel.

In this respect, Acker's *Great Expectations* has been accused of being linked to madness, at least, on the account of what her novel explicitly states: "They call me CRAZY [...I I just don't believe there's any possibility of me communicating to someone in this world]" (*Great Expectations* 74).

Literal madness is a crucial aspect of the gendered politics of Acker's postmodern parody in *Great Expectations*. This novel is linked to madness on two accounts. First, it is a narrative chaos without any organizational logic. It is a 'writerly' text that defies 'interpretation' to echo Shoshana Felman reading of Foucault's reading of madness in his book *Madness and Civilization*. This defiance of rationalization which characterizes Acker's novel is as deliberate as fundamental to the textual paradigm of postmodern parody. She borrows the blurring and rupturing tactics of postmodern parody to negotiate the cultural fashioning and dissemination of gender norms in classic male texts like that of Dickens. This would make her *Great Expectations* a writerly text, to quote Roland Barthes. It is a text which defies the horizons of reading expectations. It is a text that challenges the passive habits of reading as it decodes the ways culture encodes its norms in imaginative texts like novels.

The highly discordant and heterogeneous nature of Acker's narrative in *Great expectations* lends it a color of textual madness. The text itself declares its madness in a moment of confession. The narrator and the author both "Stylistically: simultaneous contrasts, extravagances, incoherences, halfformed misshapen thoughts, lousy spelling, what signifies what? What is the secret of this chaos? [...] Expectations that aren't satiated" (*Great Expectations* 107). Acker herself highlighted this aspect of her text when she exclaims in an interview: "I couldn't understand why anyone would read me. I honestly thought I was

writing the most unreadable stuff around (McCaffery 1991, 90). Second, her narrator is literally mad by official standards.

Madness in its two levels in Acker's text is part of the gendered agenda of her postmodern parody. The textual madness parodies with critical distancing the hegemonic rationality of the Dickensian text as an edited version of a hitherto chaotic reality. Acker tries to undermine the very cultural ideologies that textually fashions the Victorian novel. Dickens' *Great Expectations* presents a hierarchical\patriarchal world fashioned by power relations structured by a male-dominated set of binary oppositions. Such a world offers a rationale that easily and comfortably submits itself to interpretation. The textual madness of Acker's text is geared to resist interpretation by undermining the cultural rationales of the ideologically promoted mode of formal realism which is responsible for fashioning a highly biased gendered worldview.

This gendered critique is furthered by the literal madness of Acker's narrator. She uses madness as a critique of power and gender identity in Western capitalist society. The dominant power structures undergird a patriarchal society whereas madness is a space where the norms that fashion these power structures and the dominant gender ideology are undermined and symbolically subverted.

More importantly, the narrator's madness bears direct parodic relations to the Victorian conception of what Shoshanna Felman calls "female malady." Victorians, and later psychiatry, entrenched the assumption that madness is inherent in female nature because women are hysterical by nature. Such an assumption is ideologically geared to keep women under control. Madness as deviation from rationality is normative of the reality that the male-dominated power relations is fashioning. At one point in the novel the narrator confesses that "madness is a reality" (*Great Expectations* 119). But later she is retrospectively reticent: "I don't think I'm crazy. There's just no reality in my head" (*Great Expectations* 65). Reality in this context denotes the mode or modes of social existence being fashioned by the interplay of the male-oriented power structures. It stands for the normality such power structures sanctify. The madness of Acker's narrator, in this respect, looks backward to the Victorian 'madwoman in the attic' of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. She is referred to as 'it' and kept hidden. She is 'Othered' as alien and dangerous. Jane, afraid of such 'Othering', declares her unconditional comply to male-conditioned normalcy:

I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation.... They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs (Chapter 27).

Jane justifies this in the name of moral integrity which is itself a normative tool in a hierarchical society. Acker's narrator prefers the stance of Bertha because the very process of Othering is an assertion of gender identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Acker uses the character Pip to reset identity of Dickens' gendered historical narrative. She employs the postmodern strategy of gender transgression to challenge and subvert the gender tradition. The author, as such, "challenge[s] our conventional distinctions between male and female, normal and deviant, real and fake. It insists that all gender is engineered rather than given, prosthetic rather than natural" (Galbraith 2021, 73). We find in Acker's text this rebellion against the traditional gender through an analysis of the body of transgender people and an attempt to liberate herself from the masculine logic that the writer herself suffered from. Therefore, the relationship between history and gender serves to address the issue of sexual transformation and takes it into account. In addition, Acker adopted the strategy of multiple narrators by replacing pip with several characters due to the amelioration of history in Acker's text, so the individual experience of each character is the solution.

Furthermore, Acker's choice to appropriate Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* stems from her desire to interrogate the culturally coded gender norms in this male narrative. Being the ultimate tool to disseminate and foster these culturally fashioned gender norms, the family would necessarily be the central focus of Acker's postmodern parody in her *Great Expectations*. The textual dynamics of postmodern parody makes it possible for the author to carry out a double interrogation of the cultural production of phallogentric norms and the subsequent reproduction of these norms textually in literary narratives. The space of the family is paramount for such a double investigation.

To sum up, Acker's *Great Expectations* may sound a disorienting text which is barely relevant to its Dickensian namesake but a deep scrutiny would reveal a systematic unfolding of a parodic paradigm of postmodern textuality. Unlike classic parody, Acker's brand of parody is not directed to reproduce another text with an ironic stance. Her *Great Expectations* neither reproduce Dickens' nor maintaining an edge of irony against it. She rather seek to negotiate and interrogate how culture encodes its gender norms in such a male text. The writer, as such, does not reproduce the background text but reproduce and negotiate its cultural codes in order to initiate a larger inquiry into the phallogentrism of late twentieth-century American society.

السياسة الجندرية للمحاكاة ما بعد الحداثوية في رواية (آمال عظيمة) للكاتبة كاثيري آكر

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الملخص

يقدم البحث استجلاءً نقدياً للسياسات الجندرية في استخدام الروائية كاثيري آكر للمحاكاة ما بعد الحداثوية في روايتها الموسومة (آمال عظيمة) (1982). تسعى آكر إلى خلق تملك نصي يحاكي النص الديكنزي ليس الغرض منه إعادة إنتاج النص الديكنزي بصورة ساخرة وإنما الهدف الحقيقي هو مساءلة المعايير الجندرية التي يعيد المجتمع إنتاجها في أعماله الأدبية، إن هكذا استملاك نصي يهدف بمجمله إلى بناء سرد مضاد من وجهة نظر جندرية معاصرة تعمل على تفكيك السطوة الذكورية على المنتج الثقافي، إذ أتاح لـ (آكر) حيزاً ممتازاً لنقل رؤاها ما بعد الحداثوية حول القضايا الجندرية في المجتمع الأمريكي على أعتاب الألفية الثانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياسات الجندرية، المحاكاة ما بعد الحداثوية، الاستملاك النصي، التناس، ليندا هاجيون.

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