



Deconstructing Cervantes and Dickens in Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*

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Abstract

Plagiarism and originality are two different forces in any discipline, especially in the academic field. They torment most of the writers, researchers, as well as scholars for they try to avoid plagiarism. Studies shed light upon them. But Kathy Acker turns the scales in her writings, especially in her two novels: *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*. The purpose of this paper is what makes an outstanding author as Acker "steal" titles of two famous texts by two famous figures as Cervantes and Dickens, why she "deconstructs" those two novels to "reconstruct" her own.

As long as language is an unstable medium, a literary text has no particular meaning. This means that deconstructionists do not focus on what is said rather than on how it is said. This research concentrates on the way and the purpose behind tackling two novels of male authors by a female novelist who is known on the personal level for her torture of men and her prolonged conflict to achieve her rights (women's rights) in a patriarchal society.

The 1960 is a birth year of deconstructionism, and in 1970 it became an outstanding critical approach to literature. Its major figures are Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Deconstructionism gives the major role for the reader (reader of any field not only literature) to read the text from his own point of view regardless to writers' intended meaning. For Post-structuralist, there is no absolute truth. Accordingly, there is no one reading, there are as multiple readings and

interpretations as there are many readers. This is exactly what happen with Aker's readers. They don't meet Cervantes nor Dickens as the title claim, rather they meet Acker's understanding and employment for the original texts of those male writers.

Key terms: deconstructionist, Kathy Acker, Don Quixote, Great Expectations, Cervantes, Dickens.

الخلاصة

السرقعة العلمية و الاصاله هما قوتان متعاكستان في اي مجال وخاصة المجال الاكاديمي، و لطالما كانتا الشغل الشاغل للكتاب والباحثين و الدارسين. وهناك دراسات عدة سلطت الضوء على هذه المسألة. لكن الكاتبة كاثي اكر قلبت الموازين في كتاباتها وخاصة في روايتها "دون كيشوت" وتوقعات عظيمة"

إن نقطة الانطلاق في هذا البحث هي ما الذي يجعل كاتبة لامعة مثل كاثي اكر "تسرق" عنوانين لأثنين من أشهر النصوص لأشهر كتاب مثل سرفانتس و ديكنز، لماذا فككت تلك الروايات لكي تشكل رواياتها.

وبما ان اللغة تعد وسط غير ثابت فليس للنص الأدبي معنى خاص وهذا يعني ان التفكيكين لا يركزون على ما الذي قبل بل على كيف قيل.

ركز هذا البحث على الطريقة والغرض وراء تناول روايتين لكتاب ذكور على يد روائية معروفة على الصعيد الشخصي بعذابها من الرجال فضلاً عن كونها معروفة بكفاحها المطول كي تتال حقوقها (حقوق المرأة) في مجتمع ذكوري.

1960 هي ولادة الحركة التفكيكية وفي ١٩٧٠ أصبحت مذهب نقدي بارز في الأدب. ومن أهم زعماءها هم جاكوز دريدا وبول دي مان و رولاند بارث و مايكل فوكولت . قد اعطت التفكيكية الدور الرئيس للقارئ (في اي مجال وليس الادب فقط) كي يقرأ النص بغض النظر عن الغاية المقصودة للمؤلف.

بالنسبة لما بعد التركيبية post - structuralist لا يوجد هناك حقيقة قطعية . بناءً على ذلك ليس هناك قراءة واحدة ، بل هناك عدة قراءات وتأويلات كتعدد القراء. وهذا تحديدا الذي حدث مع قراء كاثي اكر . فهم لم يجدوا سرفانتس او دكنز كما يدعي عنوان رواياتها بل وجدوا فهم وتوظيف كاثي اكر للنصوص الاصلية لأولئك الكتاب الذكور.



Kathy Acker autobiography and literary career

Kathy Acker (1947- 1997) is an American Jewish writer, her first step was working as underground filmmaker. Her study was in multiple places in America like University of California, New York City College, and New York University. Between travelling to San Francisco and returning to New York, she entered The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. Then, because of the lack of money, she worked in a sex-show where she got extra money, the knowledge of the street. Those two different phases in her life (her study and her work) had shaped her literary style.¹

From 1970 to 1980 she attended the Manhattan's Lower East Side writers' community and entered to the Black Mountain poets. She was influenced by many figures in those two cycles like Charles Olson and David Antin. Punk and gay cultures are presented in Acker's writing. She depicted a conservative society and socio political environment.²

Acker received negative criticism for having obscene and pornographic novels. Most of the critics focus on her employment of the body, her playing with language, her innovative stylistics as well as structural techniques. She herself admitted that she classified herself with the most unreadable stuff.³

Acker's usage of language is diacritical; she wants to convey the idea of male dominance. First of all, she is inspired by Foucault, Guattari, and Deleuze especially in their use of language as tool for revolting against social constants. Her aim behind this language is woman's assistance.⁴ She is skillful in wordplay as in her 1986 pastiche novel, *Don Quixote*, in which the wordplay appears: "He whom I love is my eyes and heart and I'm sick when I'm not with him, but he doesn't love me. He's my eyes; he's my I's; I see by my I's; he's my sun. My son lets me see and be [...]. I'll say it again: without I's, the I is nothing"⁵. Like Julia Kristeva, Acker approaches language with a post-structural perspective. So, her language is set to carry woman's issues and expose them to different tensions.⁶ Due to her performance experience, her language is unique in form and content. Most of her novels contain unrecognizable hieroglyphic sidebars, tattoos, maps, and strange illustrations.⁷



One could note that the interest in body has a major part of criticism on her writings:

Oh, the writer could do the same thing. I'm fascinated with the relationship between language and body. That's something not many people have started working with, I'm interested in the material aspect of the tattoo. I admire Pierre Guyotat because he's very much concerned with the body as text. This business of "When I write I masturbate." Erotic texts at their best—I don't mean pornographic, which is something else—are very close to the body; they're following desire. That's not always true of the writer, whereas it's always true that the tattooist has to follow the body. That's the medium of the tattoo. If you're looking for values, it's where the ground would be for real value. Whereas the ground for the values we have now, such as religion, there's no reality to it, especially the evangelical movements, other than politics. It's now something very sick. I have that feeling about the whole spectrum of what's going on in America, from malls to religion, it's very sick. It's not real.⁸

Acker in her Preface Diary, "Against Ordinary Language the Language of the Body" (1993) clearly states her view about language, why she prefers body language rather than verbal language:

The verbal language in the gym is minimal and almost senseless, reduced to numbers and a few nouns. "Sets", "squats", "reps",... The only verbs are "do" or "fail" adjectives and adverbs no longer exist; sentences, if they are at all, are simple. This spoken language is kin to the "language games"⁹

For Acker, the meaning is lost in verbal language, that is why the language of the body is the solution. To avoid the failure of everyday



language, and the chaos that postmodern Man lives in.¹⁰ "A bodybuilder's language is reduced to a minimal, even a closed, set of nouns and to numerical repetition, to one of the simplest of language games. Let us name this language game, the language of the body"¹¹ She treats her body as a foreign land and makes a journey to her body, now she is a stranger. So everyday language does not work here.¹² This language is characterized by simplicity with frequent repetition:

On counting: Each number equals one inhalation and one exhalation. If I stop my counting or in any other way lose focus, I risk dropping or otherwise mishandling a weight and so damaging my body. In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one's way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path.¹³

Concerning the major themes in Acker's novels, love and search for identity are in the center of her fiction. She wants her voice as a woman to be recognized, to deconstruct the social habits that restrict the woman in the postmodern society.¹⁴

Plagiarism is major technique and pastiche is her first style. She builds up her novels out of multiple popular scarps. Her plagiarism creates an aesthetic existence and functions as simulacra. Acker novels pulverizes phallogocentric traditions to overcome patriarchal hangovers. "Acker's novel is an image without resemblance" rather than a simple copy, what we could call "an image endowed with resemblance"¹⁵ By doing so, she takes a chance of becoming. In another words, she makes her writing by adapting male texts in order to make her voice observable. "The one and only function of writing is to deterritorialize through lines of flight to expose "all the minority-becomings of the world".¹⁶



Naom Jacobs in "Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self" (1989), criticizes Acker's technique of plagiarism saying:

Through ... pastiche – appropriations of a 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.¹⁷

Penelope Engelbrecht gives a view about Acker's technique stating:

Acker leaps from classical Latin poetry to Hawthorne's Rev. Dimwit to a new *Story of O* to outlining Dickens' **Great Expectations** pip-pop, and I perceive her *Don Quixote* casts a wavering shadow of sordid, pallid postmodern malaise whether female or male or then or now. *Don Quixote* as first written by Cervantes was, of course, initially sequelized by a 'plagiarist,' a fact that I'm sure appeals to Kathy Acker's

(recyclable/regurgitative) appropriative vision.¹⁸

Acker does not afraid of this plagiarism since she adapts it as her major distinctive technique. In one of her interviews, she clarifies her vision of this strategy saying:

I came to plagiarism from another point of view, from exploring schizophrenia and identity, and I wanted to see what pure plagiarism would look like, mainly because I didn't understand my fascination with it. I picked *Don Quixote* as a subject really by chance. I think it was a bit incidental, perhaps



consciously incidental, that it was a male text. When I grew up I went to an all-girls' school. By the time I first heard of feminism, I was in college. I never really thought about feminism until I got older and realized that the society was deeply sexist. I don't consciously write as a feminist, although there are a few places in *Don Quixote* where I was dealing with Andrea Dworkin. There is an attack on Andrea Dworkin in *Don Quixote*, not her personally (in fact I saw her on a TV show and quite admired how she stood up for feminism), but on her dualistic argument that men are responsible for all the evil in the world. Her views go beyond sexism. She blames the act of penetration in sexual intercourse. I find that not only mad but dangerous. With all the problems in the world, such a view doesn't do feminism any good. But as a rule I haven't thought, "I am a woman, a feminist, and I'm going to appropriate a male text." What happens is that I frame my work way after I write it.¹⁹

Don Quixote

Miguel de Cervantes' version of *Don Quixote* published as two books. The first book published in 1605 and the second published in 1615. It is a parody of the chivalric romances described an aging knight who is fond of reading romances and chivalry, set out on his old horse Rocinante, with his pragmatic squire, Sancho Panza, to seek adventure.²⁰ He loves a peasant girl from a nearby town. His first fight is a group of merchants and ends with beating him. The other false attack is with giants that are transferred into windmills by magician. Later he fights a group of monks, he thinks they have imprisoned a princess, and the result is the same. Then, he has another adventure with Cardenio who is a wild man. Quixote decides to search about his beloved with the aid of Sancho, but his search is cut by two of his old friends who seduced him to return home. So, most of his journeys end in vain. After that Quixote meets the trickery duke with a lot of prank situations. After series of adventures in different places he fights the Knight of the White



Moon and he is defeated there. At the end he returns home where he gets sick and die.²¹

Acker's *Don Quixote which was a dream* (1986) is divided into three parts; they are "The Beginning of Night", "Other Texts", and "The End of Night". It is a novel about a quest of love and identity, about violence, and about the power of a city (New York), over a woman (Don Quixote). This novel sheds light on postmodern theories of relations of power and language. Additionally, the novel contains the postmodern techniques such as pastiche, fragmentation, quotes and re-creations of pre-existing literary works. Acker, in this novel, stands against patriarchal capitalist society. In search for love and identity, woman is depicted as an alienated figure in a decentered and chaotic world which is dominated by man. The novel starts with a woman who just has an abortion and wants to be a knight to search for love and identity.²² Acker names the protagonist 'Hackneyed catheter; 'Hackneyed' means 'a writer' or 'an attempt to have an identity that always fails.' And "catheter" is the glorification of 'Kathy'. By doing so, she presents her protagonist as a female-male or a night-knight. After abortion incident, Quixote and her friend (Saint Simeon, the Christian bishop-martyr) reach madness, troubled dreams, and deep disillusion in their search for love in a world in which love isn't possible. This section ends in an original nihilism: "It's not necessary to write or be right cause writing's or being right's making more illusion. It's necessary to destroy and be wrong." the second part of the novel is "Being Dead", where Quixote realized that she is born in a male society and has no speech of her own, all what she could is read male texts.²³

In Part two the reader does not meet Cervantes only. It starts with these lines" "Being dead, Don Quixote could no longer speak. Being born into and part of a male world, she had no speech of her own. All she could do was read male texts which weren't hers".²⁴ This part Consists of four texts. The first text is Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, where in page 42 " Petersburg isn't Russian: it's a country by its own". One of the character lives in this city. The second text is di Lampedusa 's *The Leopard*, where Quixote remembers and tells the story of The Leopard. While the third text is Emily Brontë's *Weathering Heights*, where Quixote said " If I can't get Heathcliff into my arms because



we are too poor, I 'll go off adventuring"²⁵. The fourth text is Frank Wedekind's *Lulu* ("Lulu" cycle, a two-play series *Erdegeist*, the Earth Spirit, 1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904) centered on a young dancer/adventuress of mysterious origin. The reader is going to meet Lulu the girl who sells flowers in London streets in Acker's novel too. Acker's aim behind this mixing of male texts is to destroy Bakhtin's notion of 'unitary language'.²⁶

In this novel, Acker criticizes the political and cultural reactionaries in America. She deals with Cervantes' text in a feminist approach, by making the protagonist female, and wearing a puke green paper as armor, this alludes Cervantes' protagonist story with innkeeper. In addition, Acker makes Quixote pun on medical instruments, such strategies add a new radical connotation to Cervantes' text. In another word she recontextualizes Cervantes'. Acker exploits the mythology in *Don Quixote*. For her myth is a means in postmodern life that stops the individual chain, ugly reality pushes her towards the world of fantasy and imagination which enables her to create new reality. She employs the myth in this novel in order to free herself from limitations, "The use of mythology enables Acker to find a language for feminine subjectivity and for desire that exceeds and invalidates conventional cultural tropisms of identity."²⁷ Her uses of myth closely connected with her view of language of the body:

Acker's ... decontextualizing of classical mythology by repeating the configurations of mythology within a new subcultural contemporary context provides the conditions for the emergence of the language of the body, as it is through acts of recontextualization that meaning and essence are conflated. This technique of appropriation in Acker's ... foregrounds the production of the silent languages of the body, which in (*her*) later work give voice to pain and death.²⁸

Between Acker and Cervantes, one of the critics saw that Acker reuses Cervantes' text in order to pulverize the status of male writers, this is by rout phallogocentric language and makes room for becoming-woman. She knocks Cervantes' text in order to try out the plagiarism as she claimed but after reading her novel, her aim is a rather different actually she is after woman's



identity.²⁹ Her novel has a feminist attitude: "The original *Don Quixote* is unable to create the same ideas found in Acker's version because she has the ability to write woman-becoming and deterritorialize the products of social production, while de Cervantes does not."³⁰ She destroys the image of the woman in male's text to stablish the becoming woman.³¹

In Cervantes' *Don Quixote* there is a character Benengeli who records Quixote adventures and reads books about the history of woman. In Acker's narrative he becomes a writer of woman's history. For Benengelim, woman's history tops up retrogression, anguish, and misery. Yet, they have right to choose. Here Acker clearly revolts against the past of woman. Her second section of the novel is "History and Woman" where Quixote falls in love with a handsome man and her love is rejected. In this case she has only two options either to be dead or to be normal and avoid any love experience. As a woman, it is impossible for Quixote to be normal, so she decides to die after having pregnancy and abortion she records her journey after her death. She pays special attention to the language she uses in her record. M. W. Smith talks about this: "Deterritorialize desire, identity, and the body by reappropriating and resigning them"³². In this way Acker is part of experimental art since her novel has a line of flight. Acker criticizes the education in United States which is dominated by patriarchal society, she wants a reeducation and describes her male teachers as ghost and zombie since they "living dangerous creatings with dead ideas and teach these ideas as the history and meaning of the world"³³

Jennifer Komorowski reads Acker's employment of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as:

Creates a new aesthetic existence in which woman-becoming is possible. Simulacra deny the primacy of an originary Idea or an original copy and, in doing so, they empower the ideas which come into being through deterritorialization. The subversion of male writing through the act of rewriting texts serves as a stepping-stone that can allow a space to open up for women's voices in literature to be recognized. The simulacrum holds primacy, not the original text,



and by creating something that is a radically new Idea women can change the world.³⁴

The chief focus behind Acker adapting Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is not writing but reading. She does not imitate it word by word rather she reads Cervantes deeply and forms her own story, to face possible future representations. Acker's text is not Cervantes' echo, rather it establishes a mode of reading to all her writings specially the plagiarized novels. So, her employment is extremely political where she is always against gender values. Accordingly, one can understand why she selects a male text to be her raw material. In her novel, woman always is presented as an aggrieved by her society, and a victim of love. And she always searches for her identity (mostly it is the love). What new in Acker's fiction is that the woman herself is responsible for her sufferings as long as she makes herself part of the system that is created by man, she obliges herself to follow his rules. From this, one can understand why she makes her protagonist have dual gender, surely to achieve protection. So, man appears as sadistic figures while woman is masochist and self-destructive.³⁵

Great Expectation

In *Great Expectation* (1982) Acker appears as social critic like Dickens whom she admires. She tackles themes like politics of the art, gender, love, and social violence. She depicts her mother's suicide and her rape accident by her step father, mixing those real stories in a very clever heteroglossic way which appears as social criticism.³⁶

From its title, Acker builds up her *Great Expectation* on Charles Dickens's text, beside Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. By documenting her mother's suicide and the rape incident by her step-father, so the major point in this novel is search for identity which seems lost as the reader loses himself in multilayers narratives. The narrative starts with the protagonist Peter, but quickly it moves to young girl who loses her mother and returns to Peter. After a short period, a lot of characters and names appear and take the turn of the narrative that leads to schizophrenic effect on the reader since he could not distinguish the narrator's identity.³⁷



If Dickens's text is mixture of Greek history selections, Harlequin romance, and pornographic novel, Acker's is pastiche and parody of the autobiography, the epistolary novel, drama, poetry, criticism, and history. To make her novel radical and agonistic textual encounter Acker borrows the language, not only the themes of Dickens's novel. Sometimes her copy-paste technique appears as random and contradictorily, to give her most pleasure as she claims in her interview. Another time, her technique is ingrained and purposeful. These writers give her chance to visit places where she dreams to see. Additionally, her plagiaristic technique focuses on:

the derivativeness and immediateness of all fiction; her technique of quotation and cross-quotation undermines the authenticity of the cloying confessional. The intent to damage the form and content of its originals, however, is somewhat diminished by the glib knowingness of the narrative voice. one text must subvert (the meaning of) another text.³⁸

As it mentioned earlier, Acker interweaves her *Great Expectation* on two real incidents in her life that are mother's suicide and the rape incident. It is not enough to say that she depicts those events in this novel but she experiences them. Since they are the past that lead to her present reality and determine her future. In one way or in another they destroy her personal identity which she keeps through all of the novel as well as her life search for.³⁹

Pip suffers at the hand of his people (Estella, Miss Havisham, Mrs. Joe, Magwitch ... etc. Acker's protagonist ends at the beginning of the novel because of her mother suicide and the rape incidents. So, both protagonists tortured at the hand of their people. The difference between them that Pip still has the dream of new good life while in the case of Acker, the two personal experiences burn all the dreams inside the protagonist, even the society, cultural norm and even the language are untrusted.⁴⁰



Conclusion

In Freudian terms, degradation, incomprehension, and misunderstanding are the reasons behind returning to the past and repetition. One repeats to remember and live what he lost. Through male texts which Acker adapts, the reader meets heterosexualization of love. As long as she disagrees with herself as a woman, she realizes her passivity, that is why she changes her gender first. Then, she is able to change her society. She supposed to change her gender but not to Man because even this does not enough for her. She transfers it to something between them. She invites a new character, myth-making, it is a new hero, that she might satisfy with and satisfy her society. To be knight is the only solution to achieve heterosexuality since she couldn't taste love or find it. Her aim is to draw the attention to the kind of love that lies in her universe which is real love not spiritual or ideal. Her view of love is Keatsan one (beauty is the truth, and the truth beauty). That is why her writings fill with precise descriptions of love scenes, highly suggestive language, and body illustrations.

Acker has an insurgent spirit, and she is the defender of woman. But sometimes one might find her revolt is against herself, her society, and even against Woman. She sees love as the weakest point in woman which makes her slave or weak. That is why she chooses famous texts of male writes in order to construct her rejection the fragility of woman's character and the dominance of man. Though sometimes she herself searches for love, and this is a declaration that woman's identity is love itself. So Acker runs in this circle, between rejection of hierarchal society and search of love. To get rid of this dilemma, she heads around male writers and approaches this problem. She wants to replace woman's thinking by man's.

Sometimes she attributes the reasons of her suffering to the system of education that establishes the wrong ideas, which are responsible for shaping her identity she never agrees with. Accordingly, *Don Quixote* is a story of reeducation which might be read as a form of simulacrum. In her novel, she claims it is wrong for women to receive education by men who are dominant education system. She calls replace the old system by new one where women take the chief role. Allegorically speaking, this represents her consulting of



male's texts in order to compose her own. She adapts Cervantes' and Dickens' novels in order to be observed or recognized. First, she puts in her consideration her writing process not the original texts.

Acker finds herself born in a society that is dominated by men and she has no speech of her own. All the sources that she reads in her life are composed by men which reshape her mentality. So, she wants to revolt against this thing, first, she makes her protagonist has dual character. Second, she selects male texts and builds her novels upon them. So, it is a purposeful plagiarism, since her concern is not writing only but also reading. In another word, she deconstructs the male texts to reconstructs her own. Focusing on the process of reading is how to read male's text with postmodern female perspective. despite she receives negative criticism because of her copy- paste technique where her fiction is categorized as "punk" and messegeless.

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