

BOOK REVIEW

**MCKENZIE, WARK. 2021. PHILOSOPHY FOR SPIDERS:
ON THE LOW THEORY OF KATHY ACKER. DUKE
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Some of the popular images of Kathy Acker in the vignettes of public memory are from her days when she used to don a buzz cut hairstyle, a black leather jacket, a denim skirt, and laced stockings, and was often found mounted on a motorcycle. Kathy Acker, an American writer, and playwright, passed away in late 1997. Acker's works occupy a canonical position in American literature yet are disappointingly designated to the narrow and niche space of what is largely understood as the 'counterculture'. Various scholars have dressed her up in their own imaginings to further multiple discourses on gender, queerness, avant-garde art, punk, and capitalism and have variously reinterpreted her.

Although Acker is a queer icon, her gender identity has always been a matter of obscurity. McKenzie Wark in the book, *Philosophy for Spiders: On Low Theory of Kathy Acker* sees her as a trans individual which is also one of the assumptions about her gender identity. Such positions are not new, but Wark stages her take here by combating the common assumption of Acker's identity as a default cis individual. From a vantage point, this may seem like the crux of the book, but Wark goes on recounting and discussing her interaction and companionship with Acker and drives home the point that the book is neither a biography nor an evaluation of her writings. It is in fact a furthering

and a remembrance of what is lost and maybe forgotten about Kathy Acker, thus introducing the reader to a side hardly visible before.

Biographies tend to imitate human memory. We reimagine and redesign a person in our mind with the help of pre-existing memories and images, and so does the biography. The measure of the dead usually has been for what they have left behind, and most of the retellings impose a sense of ownership over the dead. Wark provides an interesting take on the conventional understanding of biography through this book and claims that this form of literary work is like a conversation about a person by another person to another person (reader) which renders it into an exercise in fiction. She adds that these forms of communication are only a part of image-making and through various stories of subjectivity and opinions of objectivity, one only creates a subject consumed by others as an object. Often in a biography, controversies, gossip, debates, and the public image of a person determine the way one is offered a peek into a person's life but only to be articulated in the manner of another writer. Here, Wark concentratedly withdraws from such a practice. She does not write for people to be initiated into the life and works of Kathy Acker but in fact to problematize all the ways Acker has been imagined and understood so far. It becomes clear in about the first fifty pages of the introductory chapter that Wark has not embarked on writing a biography in a traditional sense. Throughout her life, Acker despised academic circles and the space of philosophical writings, which have been mostly saturated with men. The male sphere of philosophy has been largely preoccupied with metaphysical questions about life. These writings have come to hold a position of 'high' philosophy in the canon. Thus, Wark proclaims her own book as low theory and titles it so, in contrast to the philosophical work produced by men.

Wark presents the book in accordance with her perception of Acker's spirit. She asserts and makes sure that Kathy Acker is not reduced to a categorical individual but is presented in her multiplicity. The first chapter details Wark's relationship with Acker in the first few years of their meeting. It includes stories of their sexual escapade and the struggles of their queer existence in a heteronormative world. At this point, Wark proceeds to write a low philosophy concerning people like them in society. It is interesting to note that the first chapter in the

second section of the book is numbered zero. This section is the part of theorizing their philosophy, which reiterates this style by titling a chapter as Null Philosophy. This play on language and structure resembles the core of the book and the struggle both Kathy and McKenzie have felt about writing. For them, language becomes a limiting tool, something that has been created by men and handed down to them only to reduce their identity. Wark provides a semblance of understanding it through gender as for Acker and Wark language is gender. Wark suggests that gender should be imagined as a transitive verb that exists in the language of behaviors. Besides the structure, the writing of the book shares a striking resemblance with the living philosophy of Kathy Acker. The book confounds the reader as it reads like a combined voice of both Acker and Wark, but Wark interestingly uses her (Acker's) words in coherence of her own and makes her appear no less than a co-author of the book.

Acker was exhausted by the literary industry and the oppression of copyright laws that forbid a text to be imitated and therefore stalls its circulation. Acker writes text that breaches these copyright laws. This resembles the culture of creating remixes in the music industry, which has had a tradition of sampling musical pieces to create another track. Acker does the same in literary terms by titling her novels like *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*. Her remixes are a reappropriation of classics as she takes them away from the hands of men and bourgeois cliques and gives them to a rebellious transgressive public. Wark performs ethnomethodology from references to Kathy's writings and interviews to carve a complete philosophy that issues from her life. The text is laden with quotations, and throughout the text Wark includes notes, writings, and public speeches of Kathy Acker. Wark creates a web of Acker's words in the book and is able to catch multiple ideas and theories that further form a melange of her ideas on varied topics like punkism, post-capitalism, sexual emancipation, and gender revolution.

The book is a simple read devoid of cliched philosophical ramblings. It shows its readers the zest of Kathy's spirit – a kleptoparasite that envisages a body of work through stealing, borrowing, or imitating. In the second section of the book, Wark derives a philosophical piece which is largely derived from her novels, essays, and interviews and her own companionship with Acker. Acker comes alive in the book

only to be reminded in the academic language of in-text citations that it is a quote from the distant past. It would be appropriate to call this book a remix of Acker's work (which most of her own books were). It presents revolution as an endnote on patriarchy and adds yet another footnote to the understanding of sexuality. It is a debate on structural systems which shall provide insights into everyday philosophy that claims to answer the truth about life but often complicates it.

Reviewer Bionote: *Ashutosh Kumar finished his post-graduation in Media and Culture from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. His short film Submission, a group project, has recently been featured at the Madurai International Film festival. His areas of interest include Internet culture, YouTube and Media, Gaming Culture, and Technology. He can be contacted at ashtan721@gmail.com*