

Empowerment in Chains: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Masochism

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The empowered woman so often given to us by the traditional feminist movement is happy, healthy, and capable of doing anything and going anywhere. While she might face challenges in her life, she will overcome them and emerge from them stronger and more powerful. This is not the empowered woman that Kathy Acker creates in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988); indeed, this form of empowerment would be impossible in the chaotic and cruel world that she creates. Empowerment in Acker's fiction, especially in regards to women, takes the form of violence turned inwards. Characters who are incapable of controlling their worlds are left with little option but to learn to control themselves; specifically they must learn to control their response to the pain which they will inevitably experience living in their shattered society. Though the characters in *Empire of the Senseless* do gain a form of control over their lives by appropriating pain, it is unclear whether or not masochism has revolutionary potential because it outwardly reinforces hierarchical power structures at the same time as it subverts them for the individual.

Masochism in *Empire of the Senseless* takes on a very specific form that diverges from most traditional conceptions of masochism as a sexual practice. It appears neither as the consensual and mutually satisfying sexual act that appears in many positive depictions of sadomasochism, nor is it characterized as a glossed-over form of abuse as negative depictions often portray it. In *Empire*, few of the sexual encounters can be called consensual and little mention is made of pleasure in relation to the acts. Yet Acker's account rarely features the moral judgment found in negative depictions of masochism. Though the masochism present in Acker's fiction much more

closely resembles abuse than it does the popular conception of masochism, Acker's writing still seems to suggest that masochism can be a liberating act for her characters. This ambiguity leaves room for speculation about the emancipatory nature of masochism. Is it, in fact, a way to escape oppression or is it simply a willing submission to it?

Defenders of masochism have long touted the fact that 'the masochist is really in control' as proof that the masochist is not simply a victim. Public debate about the sadomasochistic works *Story of O* by Pauline Réage (1965) and, more recently, the dark comedy *Secretary* directed by Steven Shainberg (2002), has been fierce and often centred around masochistic agency. An early defender of the value of some skilfully written erotic literature, Susan Sontag distinguishes *Story of O* from the category of pornography, in part, because,

although passive, O scarcely resembles those ninnies in Sade's tales [...]. And O is represented as active, too: literally active, as in her seduction of Jacqueline, and more important, profoundly active in her own passivity. (Sontag, 1966, p.53)

Eight years later, the debate rages on in 'Woman as Victim: "*Story of O*"' with Andrea Dworkin's description of O as being, 'fucked, sucked, raped, whipped, humiliated, and tortured on a regular and continuing basis' and 'programmed to be an erotic slave' (1974, p.107). Her rejection of *Story of O* seems to centre on her perception of O as lacking agency. As her title, 'Woman as Victim', suggests, much of her critique of the novel focuses on the gender stratification that places woman as slave to dominating and cruel men. She states:

O is totally possessed. That means that she is an object, with no control over her own mobility, capable of no assertion of personality. (Dworkin, 1974, pp.108-109)

The intellectual deliberations of these two theorists about the agency of women in depictions of sadomasochism are indicative of the preoccupation with establishing the difference between the masochist as victim and the masochistic agent that has long dominated conversations about masochism.

Even now, the film *Secretary*, a relatively mainstream and mild treatment of sadomasochism, is met with fierce debate over the meaning of the main character's submission and self-mutilation and the nature of her relationship to her dominant boss/lover. If masochistic agency is the key to establishing the liberatory nature of submission, then Acker's fiction offers no easy solution. Acker herself recognizes the need for control in the sadomasochistic scenario. Speaking of masochistic agency in an interview by Andrea Juno, Acker states 'that to some extent, the masochist controls the situation or else it's rape or some horror story, or it's a crime,' (quoted in Redding, 1994, p.289) yet the situations that the protagonist, Abhor, faces largely leave her with little control. Abhor is raped by her father and again by a male photographer; she suffers abuse at the hands of her boyfriend Thivai and generally faces cruelty as a Black woman in racist Paris. In none of these situations does she overtly consent to abuse, yet throughout the book, she claims power saying, 'by playing with my own blood and shit and death, I'm controlling my own life' (Acker, 1988, p.51). Though she cannot control the cruelty that society inflicts upon her, by disavowing victimhood and by carefully controlling her own reaction to abuse, she is able to retain the agency that she otherwise does not possess.

Theorist Arthur Redding addresses the masochistic agent in Acker's fiction in his essay 'Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker', yet he broadens his definition of masochism to allow for situations which are coercive and abusive (1994). He states that:

while pain emerges from political/bodily inequity—be it patriarchal colonization of the unconscious or a contract between top and bottom—it does not remain there. (Redding, 1994, p.284)

For him, masochism is liberating specifically because it allows the subject to have control over her interpretation of pain, regardless of its source. The masochistic act has the ability to allow the subject to transcend social oppression because the masochist controls the ultimate outcome of pain. Talking about the masochist, he says:

Like a martyr, I have assumed into my own flesh the pointless pain of the world and taken misfortune into my own hands, so to speak. At the same time, however, I have renounced predictive authority over my suffering, which remains utterly haphazard. The pain inflicted does not merely isolate the subject but opens the subject into a susurrating of potentiality. Make of me what you will, whispers pain. (Redding, 1994, p.283)

The pain that the oppressive hierarchical orders of society inflict upon the subject is predetermined and is, to a large part, an inevitable element of the subject's life that cannot be controlled. Masochism becomes a liberatory act because it grants the subject the ability to control his or her suffering. This factor of control is the liberatory element in masochism. It is what gives meaning to an act that would otherwise seem to be a mere acquiescence to oppressive interactions between dominant societal forces and the subjects of that society.

Masochism in *Empire of the Senseless* most prominently appears in the character of Abhor, though many other characters exhibit this tendency. Acker begins the novel with a description of Abhor's family, moving through the circumstances of her grandmother's and her father's childhood and then describing Abhor's upbringing. Through her repetitive description of three generations of childhood abuse and neglect present in Abhor's family, Acker reminds the audience of the ubiquity of violence in Abhor's life and of the impossibility for her to escape her social conditions. Abhor describes her early relationship with her father saying:

he cared about me. By him. His. He educated me. I was educated the way he had been educated. I looked like him. I smelled like him. I learned like him. My father had propagated. (Acker, 1988, p.9)

Redding asserts that the masochist focuses on herself as a means of ‘claiming the violent forces of abject self-production’ (1994, p.287). Thus, Abhor focuses on the creation of her identity in ‘an effort to gain control over the humiliation that constitutes the only sense of “self” permitted’ (Redding, 1994, p.287). She embraces the identity that her father imposes upon her because that is the only identity which she is allowed. To disavow that identity would leave her in a state of complete abjection—personlessness. Given the condition of her existence, this masochistic identification leaves her with ‘a relationship to the abject self’ which ‘cannot be evaded, but can be claimed’ (Redding, 1994, p.286).

The influence that Abhor’s father exerts over her through his careful cultivation of her identity, in addition to the fact that at times he isolates her from regular society leaves her with a skewed perspective that blinds her to the possibilities of escaping abuse (or even recognizing her own abuse) and makes leaving him seem impossible. A testament to this occurs when Abhor’s father decides to leave her and sail away. Abhor’s mother kills herself because she cannot live without Abhor’s father and Abhor herself is despondent, saying, ‘I wanted to kill myself just as my mother had killed herself’ (Acker, 1988, p.19). The overwhelming physical and emotional control which Abhor’s father exerts over her creates a situation in which she cannot change the conditions of her existence, leaving her to instead turn inward and assert control over her desires, thereby giving her an agency which she would otherwise not possess.

In addition to the intense control that Abhor’s father exerts over her identity, he also shapes her experience through the sexual violence that he inflicts upon her. In the first chapter of *Empire* Abhor describes her father

raping her. Though she clearly resists his advances by telephoning her mother to report her father's sexual advances, when recollecting the event she states, 'part of me wanted him and part of me wanted to kill him' (Acker, 1988, p.12). Abhor will recount her rape throughout the novel in a progressively mutated form; changing the perpetrator from father to adopted father and at times confusing her father and boyfriend. Additionally, she gradually claims greater participation in the encounter, saying, 'what I suddenly remembered or knew is that I sexually desired my adopted father' (Acker, 1988, p.67). Abhor's reclamation of her rape illustrates the way in which masochism can be empowering even when the pain issues from non-consensual sources. Because Abhor could not escape her father's abuse as a child and because the brutal and anarchic society of post-revolution Paris does not offer her any formal methods of working through her trauma (i.e. counselling, legal action), she is unable to gain relief through conventional means. Though her changing accounts of the rape might be considered a deceptive equivocation on her part, it is a rationalization that saves her from being stuck in the role of victim. By claiming agency in the rape, she gives herself power, albeit an illusory one. At one point Abhor describes an imaginary encounter between herself and her 'Daddy' which she ends by saying, 'let's not be possessed' (Acker, 1988, p.84). Indeed, it is this possession—the state of being someone's victim—that seems to drive Abhor's desire to continually recreate her rape. It is through this recreation, the reliving of pain, that she can transcend her original powerlessness to stop the rape and claim the power that was denied to her.

Later, Abhor recalls an instance of a sexual act with her father. He is masturbating in front of her and screams out:

I don't even recognize my own body!!! . . . and it doesn't matter!!! . . . I know you're mine!!! . . . I made you!!! . . . I'm making you!!! [...] you're seeing your actual father in his moment of truth!!! . . . God Almighty!!! . . . nothing matters!!! . . . you're my God!!! . . .my daughter: I worship

you!!! [...] I am fucking God and I made God!!!. (Acker, 1998, p.15)

This passage evidences the role power plays in creating a masochistic subject. The masochist, doomed to suffer, learns to embrace the pain which cannot be avoided—a reversal which is not required of those subjects that possess power within society. Unlike the pleasure of Acker’s masochists, who fight against the powerlessness that they feel, Abhor’s father does not have to combat a feeling of helplessness, primarily because he does, in fact, wield a great deal of power. Abhor’s father is quite wealthy, charismatic, and good looking; even outside of the nuclear family he has influence. This power can be seen in the fact that he has no shortage of lovers and in Abhor’s description of his impact on teachers. Within the nuclear family, however, his power transcends the dynamic quality that his charisma and good looks grant him in social settings and becomes the despotic rule of a father in an oppressive patriarchal family. In some ways, he is a god within the family and as such a powerful figure he is at liberty to channel all of his emotions outwardly, in this case onto his daughter, without fear of repercussion.

Though Redding and Acker both claim masochism is an empowering act for those who would otherwise remain powerless, neither claims that it is wholly redemptive. Talking about Acker’s exploration of masochism, Redding states:

Acker, in a ruthless search for a potential freed of the strictures of conscribed identity, has explored masochistic processes with an almost obsessive deliberation. While such processes are not quite emancipatory—the proffered agency is illusory and provisional at best—they do constitute a double effort to evade as well as to claim and reformulate the pain that has hitherto been felt merely to be the insipid destiny of her subject. (Redding, 1994, p.284)

Thus, the masochistic act does not offer a permanent solution to the inequities present in society; rather it offers a temporary outlet through which the masochistic subject can momentarily control her suffering. Since Acker's subjects will inevitably experience pain because of their places in the extant order, the masochistic act is not so much an invitation for more pain but rather a means of converting pain into a form that is more manageable or controllable to the individual.

Though Redding asserts that masochistic agency is empowering even when the circumstances compel the subjugated person to either learn to love pain or suffer, not all theorists accept this idea. Feminist theorist Tania Modleski deeply questions the value of masochistic agency in her book *Feminism without Women* (1991). Contrasting Leo Bersani's treatment of masochism in the gay male to that of women, Modleski says,

Phallocentrism has, of course, sought *continually* to instill in women a sense of the value—for them—of powerlessness and of masochism. The problem here (and this is where the gay male project as Bersani outlines it diverges from the feminist project) lies in the way the category of *gender*—the sum of all the practices through which bodies sexed as female are, to requote Bersani, 'ideologically exploited' so as to restrict their 'potential to control and to manipulate the world beyond the self'—gets elided in Bersani's account, which in the end focuses excessively on sexuality and in the process loses its hold on the concept of ambivalence. (Modleski, 1991, pp.148-149)

If Abhor's masochism is only subversive in her own mind and if her appropriation of pain is actually promoted by patriarchal society, then the potential for masochism to be liberatory is dubious at best. To what extent can masochism both offer empowerment and reinforce the social hierarchies that enslave the masochist? Modleski argues that to view masochism as empowering is 'individualistic—and indeed may in the end *ratify* the self as well as the social order being denounced' (1991, p.150). It may be possible to claim that Abhor, as an individual, benefits from accepting her father's

humiliating treatment of her and that her rationalization that she desired her father (thus negating the rape) are both empowering actions, but neither action does anything to empower women as a larger group in society. In fact, her reaction to oppression may hinder attempts at reducing inequalities because patriarchal culture can point to the pleasure that women (masochists) receive from this treatment as proof that it *is* in the best interests of women to be mistreated. Other such examples of individual empowerment through masochism include a person who self-mutilates in response to depression and feelings of inadequacy or an anorexic woman who finds herself powerless to control her surrounding but finds power through closely controlling her caloric intake or through fulfilling a strict exercise regime. Both of these examples offer subjects some sort of control or agency over themselves and thus might be labelled empowering. Neither of these forms of empowerment, however, holds liberatory potential for either the individual or for a larger subjugated group because neither directly addresses the outside forces which make the masochistic control necessary. The self-mutilator will rarely solve her problems through inflicting pain upon herself, thus her control is illusory and ultimately represents a distraction from the larger social conditions which renders her self-mutilation necessary.

It is important to consider the conditions in which the masochist operates in relation to the liberatory potential that this holds for the subject. Masochism has been lauded as subversive because it breaks down the dichotomy between pain and pleasure that the dominant social order has long used as a deterrent to rebellion and a reward for compliance. In this sense it does have potential for subversion. For instance, if a subjugated woman can transcend her fear of her spouse's abuses then that spouse is stripped of the power that the threat of violence holds and thus has less leverage with which to manipulate her. In this situation, however, one has to ask if masochism isn't a lesser form of subversion than direct action. In

Abhor's situation she has little opportunity to escape her subjugation until she is older, thus her masochism serves as a coping or survival mechanism. In many situations such as the three described above there is potential to escape oppression. Even the recognition that there are outside forces actively oppressing the individual might empower her to resist that oppression and transgress the social norms (as in the case of the anorexic or the self-mutilator). An investigation of the power structures that encourage the subject to cope with oppression masochistically is imperative in determining masochism's subversive potential.

Even though Acker presents masochism as an empowering force for her female characters, she is very cognizant of the role social conditioning plays in forming the masochist. Redding quotes from an interview of Acker by Andrea Juno in which she speaks of masochism as a reflection of a subordinated social position, saying:

Well, we [women] were taught to channel anger, rage, feelings of insecurity—to channel what would-be 'negative' energy masochistically. We were taught not to do it *directly*—not to go out and hit someone, for example—but to do it so we'd hurt *ourselves*. And that's a typical feminine ploy to deal with power...in a way it's because you *don't* have power, but you're looking for power. (quoted in Redding, 1994, p.288)

If masochism is, in fact, a socially conditioned coping mechanism that encourages women to react passively to oppression, then its empowering element must be deeply called into question. If it is simply one choice of action that is allowed by the dominant social orders and is thus integrated into the system, it is unlikely that this option can ever be used to pose a real challenge to the extant order. Redding is also suspicious of masochism's potential for 'freeing' the subject, saying:

If, like me, you're suspicious of the insipid rhetoric of choice, a rhetoric that skates breezily over a shambles of broken-

down problematics (not the least of which is how choices are motivated or conscribed) even as it sets the only terms in which ‘solutions’ to social, political, and personal problems might be discussed. (1994, pp.298-99)

Determining masochism’s emancipatory potential is difficult because of the complex intertwining of social conditioning and the relief that it brings to the individual. Even if masochism is a ‘false choice’ presented by the extant order to allay real rebellion, it does give the subject relief in the control or illusion of control that she gains. In this respect, masochism does dissolve the feeling of powerlessness that the dominant social forces instill in its subjects.

Masochism’s potential to be liberatory is limited, in part, because the subversive element—the appropriation of pain and humiliation—is internalized. The individual masochist understands the control that she has over her situation, but to the observer she appears to be either a victim or a martyr suffering at the hands of her oppressor. When oppressed groups begin to publicly proclaim their marginalized status and join together in solidarity, however, they pose a threat to the dominant order. In *Empire* there are a few unified groups that resist social oppression. Sailors and other social outcasts who operate on the fringes of society symbolically unite themselves by getting tattoos. Redding speaks of the tattoo as a unifying symbol for oppressed groups saying:

here the tattoo signals the subordination of the masochist subject via a ritual scarification. She assumes membership in the pariah tribe of the perverse, and the tattoo etches a dreamworld in miniature onto the flesh. (1994, p.290)

By outwardly proclaiming allegiance to a socially oppressed group, subjected persons recognize their oppression. The very act of proclaiming allegiance to a subculture is an act of resistance to the dominant orders that

seek to oppress the subject. Abhor describes the social perception of the tattoo as:

associated with the criminal—literally the outlaw—and the power of the tattoo became intertwined with the power of those who chose to live beyond the norms of society. (Acker, 1988, p.140)

Thus the brandishing of the masochistic symbol signals the creation of an alternative, though not necessarily unified, society that operates outside of the rules and oppression of the dominant culture.

Acker, like many other social critics, worries about establishing unified sub-cultures because of the potential for any group to become hegemonic and begin to limit the prerogatives of its members. Masochistic rebellion is particularly tenuous because the masochist will not accept a simple redefining of social norms. Redding says that the masochistic utopia, ‘will not take the form of an image of a happy and sensible world’ (1994, p.296). Instead, this world will be ‘the cruel Eden of the tattooed’ (Redding, 1994, p.295). This world will seem to be as equally cruel as the hegemonic social orders that came before it because it will be ‘governed by all manner of filth, by all that has been scarred, renounced, and rejected’ (Redding, 1994, p.296). Though this world will not be the utopia that revolutions often aim for, it will, in actuality, be more liberating because it will be a world of ‘unlicensed potentiality’ (Redding, 1994, p.297). The prescribed social norms will have been torn down and the world that remained would be one that was up to the individual to create for him or herself.

Striking a balance between group emancipation and individual empowerment is especially difficult when dealing with acts or behaviours that are not easily categorized as oppressive or beneficial. In fact, the individual almost wholly determines those categories and any attempt at creating a collective idea about where those categories fall would undoubtedly marginalize some individuals. Redding comments upon

Acker's ambivalence about group projects, saying, 'Acker's work dramatizes and founders on an irresolvable dilemma between individual and group emancipation' (1994, p.293). Her concern is well founded; almost every political or social movement has had to define strictly its mission and identify its constituents, thereby alienating people and creating a new set of hegemonic social laws. Acker finds the feminist movement especially offensive for 'failing to consider all the contingencies upon which "equality" might depend' (Redding, 1994, p.293). The problem lies in trying to find a balance between being tolerant of the varied means through which people find power and combating the detrimental effects that some of those acts or representations have on society at large. Modleski thoughtfully addresses this paradox in postmodern feminism, seeking to complicate the issue by looking at the effects of masochistic sexuality on both individuals and on society. Speaking of the work of many lesbian feminists who claim that all sexual expressions are emancipatory and that traditional feminists oftentimes take on the role of 'gender police', Modleski says:

It does not surprise me, then, that lesbians have sometimes reacted by insisting on the emancipatory potential of all varieties of sexuality and all representations of sexuality, including pornography. Many heterosexual feminists have joined forces with them on this issue, relieved by the new libertarian view from having to examine the contradictions inherent in their own rather more insidious relation to the sex/gender system. And it is certainly true that for women to insist on sexuality and on their rights to enjoy pornography may be a liberating release from a socialization process that denies these rights. (1991, p.159)

When sexual expressions such as masochism are appropriated by overtly misogynistic forces, it is difficult to unequivocally label that act as emancipatory. As with most debates about the acceptability of sexual expression, the issue becomes convoluted when the representations of sexuality are controlled by mainstream forces and seemingly promote the

oppression of certain groups of people, though those expressions might be liberatory for some people. The issue evades easy definition and determining whether or not an act benefits women may limit the options of some women to deal with their oppression, thereby stripping away the little bit of agency that they could claim for themselves.

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