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## How to Invest the "Body": Contested "Bodies" in Katherine Dunn's *"Geek Love"*

Mohammed Burhan

English Dept - College of Languages and Human Sciences  
Garmian University

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### Corresponding Author

[mohammed.kakakhan@garmian.edu.krd](mailto:mohammed.kakakhan@garmian.edu.krd)

### Abstract

In *Geek Love* "bodies" face various operations via bio-political/power, which controls, circulates "bodies" within a position of disempowering them. "Bodies" are "allocated" to be created, "made", mutated or even disfigured by different "body" claimers "makers" who have their own unreasonable reasons behind such a cruel conduct. Therefore, in *Geek Love*; "bodies" have turned into, objects, commodities, pieces of vital organs, and pieces of Art work to be sources of attraction. All of these are the outcomes of a greater power than them which have been imposed upon them "Bio-political/power".

the Anglo-American sphere, such because of the developments in science and technology studies, environmental philosophy, and posthumanism. 'Cartography for a world that no longer exists' (Braidotti, 37) or one that remains within the 'traditional humanist orbit' (Ibid). What is evident in the issue of 'power over life' paradigm is that the fact that we have generated new technological freedoms, each has also produced accidental consequences, concluding in the ultimate crisis of existence, even of life, itself. A self-produced crisis resulting from human life exercising its power over life. It is as if the thanatopolitical aspect has directed modern biopower. In other words, efforts to divide life into what is governable and indeed to draw more life into the category of the governable create more resistance. Power over life is constitutive of the contemporary condition produced through the realization that there is no distinction between "bios and zoe", that being in and against itself is constitutive of presentation life. Esposito states that "identifying life with its own overcoming means that it is no longer "in-itself" – it is always projected beyond itself." (88). A politics that does not seek to destroy this resistance but lives with it may therefore provide the most sustainable and least destructive way forward.

The state has essentially to take care of men as a population. It wields its power over living beings as living beings, and its politics, therefore, has to be a biopolitics. Since the population is nothing more than what the state takes care of for its own sake, of course, the state is entitled to slaughter it, if necessary. So the reverse of biopolitics is thanatopolitics. (Foucault 416).

In Foucault's account of bio-power, a special organization or "apparatus" plays very typical role. Through an analysis of police, Foucault stays to stress the impact of two different governmental rationalities, the reason of state and liberalism. The main point for Foucault is to display how in the reason of state police was entitled to take care of the negative task of protecting the state through controlling

## Section One

### 1.1 Introduction:

Even a cursory reading of the notion of biopolitics indicates the fact that politics is concerned with life. The prefix "bio" comes from the Greek vocabulary which has two distinct words for life: Zoe denoting "bare life" or life as such, and "bios" denoting qualified life or life in some particular form (Esposito 15). Thomas Lemke has pointed out that in English the notion of biopolitics is meticulously linked to biology (study of life) thus denoting "a politics that deals with life" (Ibid) without the Greek dichotomy.

According to Lemke (20) the first wave of biopolitics, was fundamentally related the question of race, which later became seen in a rather bad light after the outrages of Nazi Germany. He finds the second wave of biopolitics to the (1960's). On the front of the second wave was a United States based school called "biopoliticians" who draw on interdisciplinary bases. They emphasize naturalistic study of politics and "use biopolitical concepts and research methods in order to examine the causes and forms of political behavior." (Lemke 23).

Thus, Lemke accolades Foucault for handling to grasp the concept of bio- power "When life itself becomes an object of politics, this has consequences for the foundations, tools, and goals of political action. No one saw more clearly this shift in the nature of politics than Michel Foucault." (32).

However, Foucault's usage of the terms biopower and biopolitics is not very consistent. At times he uses these concepts very abstractly and defiantly while in other cases they are meant to refer to defined phenomena and historical events. Consequently, Foucault's inconsistent usage of these concepts is no doubt one of the greatest reasons for the diversity of meanings connected to contemporary exploitation of these notions.

### 1.2 Foucault and Power:

Foucault's description of biopower has been subjected to much criticism in contemporary biopolitical theory, especially in the fields in

superhuman, with enhanced ability for empathy and understanding, or, he is less human as his powers have already broken an inherently human traits.

## 2.2 The Conception of “Freak” and the Freak Show

Freaks have always been linked with deviations, mythical creatures, and monsters. Particularly, the word monster derives from the Latin MONSTRA, which means to warn, to show forth, hence the verb “demonstrate”, which is the concept at the basis of the freak show. As part of the comical business, freak shows put together two different aspects. On the one side, “the feeling of being on display is something with which almost all disabled people have had to deal” (Gerber 44). On the other, that same desire to stare at freaks was used as the “basis of the marketing power of the freak show” (Ibid), which at least provided the performers the possibility to be paid and make a living out of it. Therefore, by showing that human monsters were real, the freak show offered itself as a concept clearly based on the relationship between the visibility of the different body. Therefore, Dunn employs the sideshow, the carnival, and its crew to show how these “bodies” are produced, “made”, to serve as objects to be gazed at in order that the father, Al, can financially be secured. He “creates” a team of freakish children.

## 2.3 The Worth of Being Different:

In *Geek Love*, the concept of non-normate in relation to the body in general and disability in particular echoes the influence of a power being exercised.

For instance, Olympia’s situation allows us to discuss issues surrounding female reproduction and male replication. To return to Foucault, surveillance ‘watching’ the self and others is something that everyone becomes involved in, and sustaining this is power/knowledge of and over the body. Thus, Dunn allows Arturo the defined notion of rebellion against conventions of natural rules of family life in the novel. Through the family structure of the Binewskis and the choices Arty makes as an individual,

the perils related to population, but also of the positive task of improving the living conditions of the population.

In “Society Must Be Defended”, an important article of Foucault’s power analysis, it is shown that power creates – not just hierarchical relations or domains of the legal and the illegal but also the very conditions in which knowledge is produced and human subjects constituted. In other words, that “human beings are situated in a specific historical power-knowledge network which outlines the rules for practices and discourses by which humans can be constituted as subjects” (Foucault 194). It must be emphasized that power-knowledge is not a metaphysical constant. Yet, it is a historically conditional ontological for the constitution of subjects. It is dependent since it is in a state of constant change. Hence for Foucault there is no fixed or essential human subjectivity. Rather, human subjects are created through ‘discourses’ and practices which are in relation to a multifaceted network of power-knowledge. Thus according to Foucault “we should be trying to discover how multiple bodies, forces, energies, matters, desires, thoughts, and so on are gradually, progressively, actually and materially constituted as subjects, or as the subject.” (Foucault 28).

## Section Two

### 2.1 Dunn's Focal View in *Geek Love*:

Dunn shows through pushing the human body beyond the traditional and modern complications of the animal, the natural, the logical, and the machine. For example, Chick’s birth disrupts into the realm of fantasy, the inconceivable power of the human body to control the construction of other objects and beings without direct touch. Chick with ability to perceive more using methods that are not accessible to humans or technology vandalizes the normal rule of life. And in doing so Dunn shocks the reader with additional questions about the human experience. Either Chick is

ensure their children's success in the carnival and, as Lil says, "What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves" (Dunn 7) Arturo is born with flippers instead of hands and feet; Elly and Iphy are Siamese twins; Chick, who is nearly abandoned because he appeared normal at birth, can move things with his mind; and Olympia, who narrates the story, is a bald albino hunchbacked dwarf. Having created such a cast of characters, Dunn explores the strange dynamics both within the family and between the "freaks" who perform in Binewski's show and the "norms" who come to watch them. Indeed, in one of the novel's spectacular reversals, the audience and the performers cross the boundaries that appear to separate them as Arturo convinces normal people that the way to true happiness is to "liberate" themselves from the straitjacket of their ordinariness by "shedding" their limbs. In this, and in many other instances throughout this multilayered novel, Dunn challenges the notions we use to distinguish self and other, normal and bizarre, perfection and deformity, appearance and reality. With surprises on nearly every page of *Geek Love* explores the American family from an oblique and curiously revealing angle. It uncovers truths a more conventional approach could never even fathom.

### 3.2 Freaky Bodies & Biopolitics

Elly and Iphy are described as "Siamese twins with perfect upper bodies joined at the waist and sharing one set of hips and legs. They usually sat and walked and slept with their long arms around each other...They were always beautiful, slim, and huge-eyed" (Dunn 8). By Dunn's portrayal of their interactions it is clear that the twins have a connection unlike any of the other siblings—if "you pulled Elly's hair, Iphy yelped too. If you kissed Iphy's cheek, Elly smiled. If Elly burnt her hand on the popcorn machine, Iphy cried also and couldn't sleep that night from the pain..." (51). This seemingly "magical" physical connection is in line with other depictions of conjoined twins as well in *Freaks*, "separate hearts but meshing bloodstream" (51) makes their communication

the reader detects this obsession with his own freakishness, for he "could live only in the show" (Dunn 87). Because his only helpful and hope for furthering his vocation exists within the circus, he must create a way to assert himself. Through exercising power over the others, who seem comfortable existing on the borders of the society. Despite the beliefs of his relatives who think they can coexist with the norms, Arty holds the thought that "[they] are the things that come to the norms in nightmares" (Ibid). Arty's passionate desire to be accepted, shows itself in the evolution of the cult. He begins with seemingly decent intentions; however, those motives change when he discovers he can create a society that looks to him for guidance and over which he can have power. Dunn uses this development to uncover Arty's own 'hamartia' his own anxious need for acceptance drives him to create this cult when he only wants to "know that [he's] alright" (Dunn 178). Eventually, he believes that "the more deformed [he is], the higher [his] supposed sanctity" (Ibid). In his cult and in his personal life, he practices his complete and utter hatred of anything and everything normal, so much so that he cannot or, rather, refuses to have ordinary relationships, believing that these attachments are just another way for others to discard him; therefore, he creates a sub-culture where he panels the norms and has the ability to reject people, just as he is rejected by conventional society.

## Section Three

### 3.1 "Bodies" in *Geek Love*

Like many of the best American novels of the past fifty years, *Geek Love* tells the story of a family. But this image of family is distorted and bizarre, a reflection cast back at us from the distorting surface of a circus mirror. In a reversal of the conventional wish to produce perfect children, Crystal Lil and Al Binewski set out to give birth to a family of freaks, taking everything from prescription and illegal drugs to insecticides and radioisotopes to engineer their children's deformities. They want to

they are on the inside "amputation". Arty even exploits his own family members "bodies". Oly's life is devoted to Arty. Chick who is also deceived by Arty when he realizes that Arty solely thinks of himself and does not care about any member in the family. Chick has a very sensitive nature. After the death of the twins and their baby in miserable way, Chick realizes that this misery is due to Arty. He consequently becomes irritated he bellows the Fabulon, saving only Oly and his mother Crystal Lil. Therefore, is a totalitarian Furthermore, Arty in one of his show address a woman, Alma, who is obese, and tries to impose his political, ideological, discursive power upon by saying "No. You can't. You cannot be happy. Because, you poor darling baby, you believe them ..." (178) so, here Arty studies the situation and exploits the nature or naivety of the woman for his own sake, and ends with her confession that she wants to be like him "I want to be like you are!" (178) He achieves his goal by his contradicting the condition which he is in. He uses his weakness as the source of his principles. "I'm a freak, but not much of a freak. I'm like you, fucked up without being special. There's nothing unique about me except my brains and the crowd can't see that" (103). So he uses his ideology to exercise his power. Arty practices a new power by which he manipulates the "bodies", turning the "norms" to "freaks" through "amputation". He knows how to invest the "bodies" as Roberto Esposito's explains "power's hold over life" and such acquisition of power over man is because "Man is a living being, that the biological came under State control" (Biopolitics 364). Arty gains the source of his power from his weakness points. He turns his bad situation "being a real freak" into his favor. "I get glimpses of the horror of normalcy. Each of these innocents on the street is engulfed by a terror of their own ordinariness. They would do anything to be unique" (223). He is sanctimonious because he builds his cult only for his sake. He just "barks", and never believes in what he says. He was motionless in capturing by the reaction of his first prey, Alma, when she

untraceably subtle. Elly and Iphy's brother Arty went as far as to jest that Elly and Iphy's "two brains functioned as right and left lobes of a single brain" (51).

Thus, Bodies are "made", reformed, deformed, and disfigured in *Geek Love*. "Bodies" play an important role in fulfillment of others' goals. An institution is set to work as a "factory" ARTURISM, "A quasi-religious cult" (277). While in Arty's cult bodies are disfigured to reach "Peace, Isolation, Purity" (Dunn 227). In other words, these "body" claimers or "apparatuses and institutions" exercise power rather than possess it.

Furthermore, In *Geek Love* Katherine Dunn employs the sideshow, the carnival, and its crew to show how these "bodies" are produced, "made", to serve as objects to be gazed at in order that the father, Al, can financially be secured. He "creates" a team of freakish children which late on results in having its dangerous side effects represented by Arty his elder son who undertakes the responsibility of the carnival and establishes his cult "ARTURISM". Hence, Arty is the "body" claimer. He wants the "body" of others, the "normal people", to have them amputated, in order for them to feel all right "you just want to feel all right" (178). He invests the "body" for his own sake. He seeks adoration from others. With his act all the "bodies" fall in his trap due to his way of thinking, "ideology". He is aware of his situation that he is not like other "norms", yet he looks to institute his "production" because he does not look like other norms; he is only a torso born with flippers instead of limbs. He wants to accumulate "bodies" like him as much as possible. The novel is built on various connections between "bodies" and their "producer". Power is exercised within the family particularly in relation to the greedy, manipulative Arty. Arty through the course of the novel, seeks admiration not love. He looks to be admired by the "norm" that he dislikes, even ends up with his own cult of "ARTURISM". This cult changes "normal people" into "freaks". These "body" choose to remove body parts to become externally what



with him the notion of "utilizing" the "bodies" "What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?" (7), therefore, when Lil discovers that Chick is a healthy "normal" child, her reaction is very strange. She tells Al, "I did everything, Al... I did what you said, Al... What happened, Al? How could this happen?" (Dunn 64). This type of reaction is unusual because it reveals that abnormality is "desirable", and the "normal" baby "body" is "unwanted", imperfect, and not promising by their standard and as a result unwanted. It cannot be invested. Al does not need "normal" any more. He is in favor of "freaks" only. The most prominent feature that Al supplied his children "bodies" is their "abnormality".

### Conclusion

Throughout the above mentioned, and what have been related to bio-power, the Arturan cult has provided a path for Dunn to argue, quite convincingly, for social change. Her irrefutable efforts do not go unnoticed, and her complete influence allows the reader to consider and question whether Arty would, or if he does already, allow others power over him. At the same time, Dunn questions whether humans actually have a choice over their own lives or if they are just an extension of their culture. Also, the freaks in *Geek Love*, shed lights on the case 'human body' in an age of science and technology and the combinations reproduction, sex and body are profoundly destructive. In addition, Ary seeks to remove the bodies from their sociopolitical contexts and fashion new identities for them. So, *Geek Love* seems to intent on focusing principle that we there are docile bodies controlled, governed by rules being imposed on them. Freaks have contributed to shape the American culture. Their use was to produce "bodies" to be deciphered in order to understand societal fears and anxieties.

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accepted to be a "freak" "one of his desired bodies."

Moreover, in *Geek Love*, there is another person whose interest is with female "bodies". Miss Lick transforms the female "bodies" in the aim of having more opportunities or skills. She made a surgery to a woman and she became professional able to speak more than one language and she is on the safe side from the men who may exploit her because she lost her beauty. This surgery is similar to Morningdale whose purpose is to produce children with better intelligence quality. Miss Lick approach is a strategy by itself. Her prime aim is to deform the "body". This operation is a kind of "immunization". She inflicts the bodies so that they can be protected "The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy" (Biopolitics 364). Her strategy as she believes is to liberate women. She makes use of the surgical operation she has done by recording video for them because as Oly, says: "Miss Lick's purpose is to liberate women who are liable to be exploited by male hungers....If all these pretty women could shed the traits that made men want them (their prettiness) then they would no longer depend on their own exploitability but would use their talents and intelligence to become powerful (162).

Therefore, this liberation is a pretext to achieve her goals. Roberto Esposito takes the word "Immunity" as a way of coming to terms with biopolitics. For Esposito "Immunization" emerges as deeply constitutive of a liberal, political lexicon "Immunization is seen as the means by which biopolitics both protects and in some case negates a commonly held life" (Biopolitics 30). Similarly the first initiator, the father, Al, gives the mother a kind of drugs to "create" freakish children "objects to be gazed at, children become immunized just through their being "freaks" this "immunization" means " is to produce norms in living bodies in such a way that non-normative norms appear" (Biopolitics 30). Al is negating their being "normal" by his invention because they are not brought from the "outside" they are "created" from "within" they "bodies" are his own "subjected" objects. Also, the mother shares

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