

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF JAMAICA KINCAID

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Abstract

Jamaica Kincaid is a great Antiguan- American female writer in modern times. She raised in the colonial surroundings of Antigua in the West Indies, which became autonomous in 1967. Her writings are embodied with nostalgic vision. Her fictional works all deal with some aspect of the female coming of age process. Kincaid's writings project themes such as colonialism, colonial actions, neo-colonialism, gender, race, and sexuality and reflect exile and return to the motherland, family bond, domination, mother-daughter relationship and also showcase her own life. Writing is the only passion in her life. Her works often reveal feminist perception. The novelist brings out a clear picture about women and their characteristics and attitudes are cleverly portrayed in through her writings. Analyses of women are very significant in colonial writings. West Indian male writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Edward Brathwaite, George Lamming and Wilson Harris attained critical notice first. Like Kincaid, they often wrote about their lives and the difficulties of the homeland.

Keywords: Colonialism, Feminist, Perception, Attitudes, Homeland.

INTRODUCTION

The works of Jamaica Kincaid, such as *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), *Annie John* (1985), *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), and the *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) were influenced by the author's background and personal experiences of growing up in colonized Antigua. This present paper is about a critical analysis of women in the select novels of Kincaid. The main characters in the first three novels are Annie, Lucy, and Xuela. Their thoughts and expectations are the same. Swami Vivekandar advocates, "There is no hope of rise for that family of country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved". (p. 214-15)

There are a number of quotations and maxims related to glorifying women by different kinds

of persons. They are emphasizing woman's equality and independence at present. In that respect Jamaica Kincaid, a Caribbean writer, focuses on women's importance and status through her writings. Kincaid novels are loosely autobiographical, though she has warned against interpreting their autobiographical elements too literally. Kincaid's writing is largely influenced by her life circumstances even though she discourages readers from taking her fiction too literally.

Kincaid uses form and stylistic devices to communicate her politics. For example, all her works that will be examined here are allegorical. The novels *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) have female first-person narrators whose focus is on her relationship with her mother, but the reader comes to recognize that the ambivalent bond between mother and daughter is reflected as

between the colonial country and the motherland.

Annie John (1985), Lucy (1990) come under the category of bildungsroman novel, the term coined by a German scholar named Karl Morgenstern in 1819, which means 'a novel dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education' or 'a novel of formation' or 'novel of education'. This kind of novel tracks the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social development and the growth of the main character from childhood to maturity. Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) these are some of the bildungsroman novels in English.

As a writer, Kincaid highlights a variety of characteristics of women in society. Caribbean black women, in particular, are fighters of everyday life. They fight for everything, especially for their daily needs. Through the character of Annie, the protagonist of *Annie John*, we learn how women are the strongest in their lives and how they are important to the modern world. Through the character of Lucy, the protagonist of *Lucy*, we learn about how women to create their own identity in the society. Through the character of Xuela, the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, we learn about how women seek self-empowerment.

As a novelist, Kincaid creates characters who would question and attack society. Like Shakespeare, Kincaid also gives importance to female characters in her novels. *Annie John* is a fully developed psychological study and a pre-oedipal narrative. Lucy, the novel's central character and narrator, seeks independence from the colonial and motherly forces that shaped her youth. But her journey to North America to serve as an au pair for a wealthy family and reveals the state of having mixed feelings behind her apparent drive for freedom. *The Autobiography of My Mother* tells the story of Xuela Claudette Richardson, who lives on the island of Dominica. Half Caribbean and half Scottish African, she loses her mother during childbirth and is alone from an early age. After her journey from childhood, to school, to adulthood, the book follows her struggles, loves,

and surroundings while trying to find her way in a world without a mother.

ANNIE JOHN

Through Kincaid's novels, we can feel the mental strength of women and their intellect. Her first novel *Annie John*, published in 1985, received widespread popularity. In this novel, the protagonist Annie tells some goodness of her mother's character. When some of the women are teasing Annie's mother, Annie sees her mother's patience. This behaviour greatly affects Annie, and she considers her mother as a role model for her life. The novel tells us how patient women are, and we learn that patience is a common trait of women. Kincaid's conflict with her mother is based on gender. Kincaid feels that the mother-daughter relationship with her is sacred because it is a bond between women. Throughout the novel, Kincaid speaks about Annie and her mother. Mother is the centre of every girl's life. In the novel Annie says, "How important I felt to be with my mother" (p. 15). Here we learn how important it is for girls to be with their mothers. In *Annie John*, young Annie is loved and nurtured by her indulgent and caring mother. At the onset of puberty, Annie is suddenly pushed away from the comforting hold of her mother. It is now learn how to become a lady.

Throughout the novel Annie adores her mother, basking in her mother's attention and eagerly learning about the details of her mother's daily life. It describes the strength of womanhood. Through her mother, the heroine Annie strengthens her character and learnt how to face the society. This novel deals with more issues of femininity. Annie reaches puberty, her mother becomes distant, and teaches Annie learn how to become a woman. Also the novel deals with Annie's changing body, Annie's friendship with her friend Gwen, and romances, Annie's relationship to her teachers (who are all women). At every turn, this novel asks questions about what it is to be a woman, what women should do, who women should love, and how women should act. By the end of the novel, Annie has grown both physically and emotionally and is more determined than ever to escape from the island.

LUCY

Lucy (1990) is a short novel or novella by Jamaica Kincaid. The eponymous Lucy has

come from the West Indies to the United States to be an au pair for a wealthy white family. The plot of the novel closely mirrors Kincaid's own experiences. In this novel a major grudge that Lucy holds against her mother is her pride for the accomplishment of her sons, while ignoring the endless possibilities that could be available to Lucy because of her intelligence. "She should not have thrown away her intelligence. She should not have paid so little attention to mine" (p.123). The difficulty of mother-daughter relationships is shown in the novel. Despite the physical absence from Lucy's life, Lucy's mother is constantly preoccupied with Lucy's thoughts, provoking anger, disgust, longing, and remorse. Lucy recounts an enormous amount of her experiences with a reminder or observation about her mother, demonstrating the power of the mother-daughter bond. "I wondered if ever in my whole life a day would go by when these people I had left behind, my own family, would not appear before me in one way or another". (p. 8)

The central character remembers an unpleasant childhood acquaintance, and this reflects Lucy's ambivalence towards the community she left behind. In *Lucy*, the protagonist tells her story through flashbacks, dreams, and dialogues. Throughout the novel, the story revolves around her. Upon arriving in the United States, she finds a job as an au pair in a wealthy American family where Lucy craves identity and support. At the same time, Annie also craves support and love from her mother. Both Annie and Lucy's characters are the same reflection of Kincaid's mind and life. Kincaid gave these characters her mouthpiece. Like all Kincaid writings, Lucy focuses on the effects of history on societies and individuals, but this is her first work of fiction set outside the Caribbean.

Lucy enjoys her mother's love during her childhood days but when she was nine years old, her mother bears male children and Lucy finds her mother does not love her anymore. Her feeling of alienation from her family is obvious in her self-reflection thus: "I was not only child, but it was almost as if I were ashamed of this, because I had never told anyone." (p. 130). Running away from home, Lucy is also taught to behave well by her parents but she hates that kind of life when her mother cares more for her brothers than for her. She moves away from them and works as a maid in Lewis and Mariah

family taking care of their four children. Lucy still longs for her mother's love. Kincaid is inscribing the mother-daughter relationship in the larger context of colonialism. Fear of the new world is common to all, especially to women. The novelist beautifully expresses such fear through the characters.

Lucy spends a lot of time in this novel with other women, thinking about women in the past and thinking about the injustices she has experienced as a woman. This novel got all the necessary elements: a self-respecting mother, a hardworking father, and charming children who always speak boldly. Each time Lucy finds herself re-learning, she learns something about herself that helps her prepare for the next stage of life.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, published in 1996, readers are first introduced to the retrospective story of the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson, who tells the story of her life more than seventy years ago. Xuela's memories are recollected and narrated with such clarity and vividness that one might even think it is being lived in the present. Investigating themes of fear, loss, and the forging of character, *The Autobiography of My Mother* was alienating for its unconventional narrative and lack of a traditional plot, but it was glorified for its detailed character work and profuse descriptions.

The Autobiography of My Mother is different from her other novels in the style. Unlike her other works that are full of poetic and flowery language, it is written in a more direct prose style. The novel is meaningful and thoughtful about the protagonist's own life, rather than their relationships. Kincaid novels spoke about the female struggle for everyday life and also the effects of the colonial era. The story set in Dominica in the early twentieth century. Here Xuela's mother, the first-person narrator and the main character, died in childbirth. The lines open with this message, "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity: at my back was a bleak, black wind". (p. 3)

The novel portrays Xuela as forever wandering in her life, with emotions of losing her mother at birth. She can never become a full-fledged

woman due to the lack of a mother-child bond. She never has the opportunity to feel a mother's love. Her entire life has an empty space in it from the lack of motherly love. In Kincaid's novel we find that power is a recurring theme. This is generally shown in two ways, through Xuela trying to empower herself and through other characters like her father Alfred seeking power over others. In this regard, Xuela assumes that changing the world is beyond her. She can change herself and take control of her own life, and throughout the novel she seeks the strength to do so. From the beginning of the novel the *Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid clearly tells the story of a woman's life on the island of Dominica. The protagonist of the novel Xuela tells a story of love, fear, loss, and the forging of character also deals with the tragedy of a young girl, Xuela, who is constantly mourning the loss of her mother. Xuela appears to have an inner strength that guides her through her life. This novel revolves around her youth and adolescence until adulthood while trying to find her place in a world that doesn't seem to love her.

CONCLUSION

Mostly autobiographical, Kincaid's work is centred on the experiences of female protagonists. Femininity is thus inscribed within the cultural-political framework underlying the narrative, which articulates problematical interrelations between gender, race and class. The quest of women independence the central theme of Kincaid's narrative is played out at different levels.

Each of the Kincaid characters, Annie John, Lucy, and the *Autobiography of My Mother*, have unique obstacles that they must overcome. All these three protagonists Annie, Lucy, and Xuela reflect the same identity and they love their mother; that is never an issue. They are like shining stones of everyday life. At one point, all three characters of Kincaid decide to leave their motherland because of the struggles they experience in their life. The decision to leave the oppressive island of Antigua is not a difficult decision for Kincaid's characters. Their distance from their mother is similar to their distance from British oppression. Through these characters, Kincaid exposes the strength of women and their ability to fight against society. This is further explained by Aujo Philip J.M. and

Dr. C. Govindaraj's article following statements;

Women, on the other hand, always value love and tend to offer unsolicited advice to those they love. Women always try to help the surroundings they love by advising and giving suggestions to improvise them but men in many times misconstrue the guidance they receive from a woman as they thought of the woman as trying to control and change them. (p. 188)

Women of all societies interact and develop in various ways. The philosophies of marriage, parenting, interactions with men, and the sense of community vary from one culture to another. When analyzing the feminine rituals of coming of age, there is the common thread that all women go through some rite of initiation. Kincaid's characterization is based on her life struggle in the Caribbean Islands, especially in Antigua. Her thought about society reveals her novels through her heroines of the novels. Kincaid's fictional works deal with some aspects of the female process of coming of age. All of her main characters are women of the West Indies. The mother-daughter relationship is a key element in Kincaid's writing.

The three protagonists Annie, Lucy, and Xuela, and their views about society are the same. Annie's relationship with her mother, Lucy's expectations of society, and Xuela's identity from her land are a kind of struggle always facing black women in common. All the three protagonists are black and their problems always reflect their identity. When compared to the problems of women of European or some other continent, they are not the same to the black women's problems. People always consider that black is the specific color which always shows negative, but in reality, black is the power for everything. Through these three protagonists, Kincaid reflects her strong thought and emphasis on women's power, rights, culture, relationship, and experiences.

Kincaid's writing is known for its long sentences and the stream-of-consciousness style. Kincaid states that she only writes for herself, but her unceasing search for truth extends to her readers, who are then forced to question. Like other defects of humans, it shows a variety of symptoms and reflects some bad actions through own activities. The mother-daughter relationship can be quite tumultuous and

suffocating. The absence of women's relationships can be equally devastating. Thus this paper brings to light the strength and weaknesses of the women community that projected in the writings of Jamaica Kincaid.

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