

**MOTHER/MOTHERLAND**  
**IN THE WORKS OF**  
**JAMAICA KINCAID**

**Tesis doctoral presentada por**  
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**para la obtención del título de**  
**Doctora en Filología Anglesa i Alemanya**

**Dirigida por la Dra. Kathleen Firth Marsden**

**Programa de doctorado:**  
**Relectures del Canon Literari**  
**(bienio 1996-1998)**

**Universitat de Barcelona**  
**Facultat de Filologia**  
**Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya**  
**Secció d'Anglés**

**Barcelona 2001**

A Matisse,  
con infinito amore

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## **Acknowledgments**

I give endless thanks to my dear friend and supervisor, Professor Kathleen Firth, for having encouraged the writing of this work and carefully revised it, as well as for suggestions that always respected my intentions.

To Isabel Alonso I owe heavy doses of optimism in difficult times. Thanks for having been my best friend in my worst moments.

I am infinitely grateful to Matteo Ciccarelli for the help, love and protection, the spiritual sustenance as well as the economic support during all these years, for preventing me from giving up and for always putting my needs before his.

During the years I have been preparing this thesis, many people have accompanied me on the voyage to discovery of the wonderful mysteries of books. Thanks to Raffaele Pinto, Annalisa Mirizio and the other friends of the seminar on writing and desire for the enlightening discussions over shared drinks and crisps.

## Chronology

### 1949

Born Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John's, on the Caribbean island of Antigua

Mother's family (Richardson) from Dominica

Maternal grandmother, Carib Indian, believer in obeah

Maternal grandfather, Antiguan emigrated to Dominica, son of a Scottish man and an African woman, policeman

Mother, Annie Richardson Drew, born in Dominica, emigrated to Antigua at sixteen years of age to become independent from her family

Father, Roderick Potter

Stepfather, David Drew, carpenter

### 1958-62

Three brothers born: Joseph, Dalma and Devon Drew

### 1965

Leaves Antigua to work as an au pair in New York

### 1966-72

Obtains high school diploma

Studies photography at the New York School for Social Research and attends Franconia College in New Hampshire

### 1973

Publishes "When I Was Seventeen", a series of interviews in *Ingenuae* magazine

Freelance writer

Changes her name to Jamaica Kincaid

### 1974

Meets William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker*

Publishes "Talk of the Town", a series of unsigned pieces for the *New Yorker*

### 1976

Becomes a staff writer on the *New Yorker*

### 1979

Marries composer Allen Shawn, son of William Shawn

**1983**

Wins the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award for *At the Bottom of the River*

**1985**

Moves to Vermont

Publishes *Annie John*, finalist for Ritz Paris Hemingway Award

Gives birth to a daughter, Annie

Returns for a visit to Antigua

**1988**

Publishes *A Small Place*

Gives birth to a son, Harold

**1990**

Publishes *Lucy*

**1992**

Publishes the first of a series of articles on gardening for the *New Yorker*

**1996**

Publishes *The Autobiography of My Mother*

Youngest brother, Devon Drew, dies of AIDS

**1997**

Publishes *My Brother*

## INTRODUCTION

In the last five decades, Caribbean literature and culture have become subjects of growing interest, thanks to the recognition of writers like Derek Walcott, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, V. S. Naipaul, often proposed as a candidate for the Nobel, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, Sam Selvon, and Wilson Harris, among others. Outside the strictly literary context, the popularity of the late reggae star Bob Marley has also helped to bring peculiarities of Caribbean experience to public attention. Nevertheless, with the exception of Dominican Creole writer Jean Rhys, women's contributions have been largely ignored until very recently.

Jean Rhys was the only woman mentioned in 1979's *West Indian Literature*, edited by Bruce King. In 1988 the first international conference on Caribbean women writers was celebrated at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, bringing together more than fifty writers and critics, primarily from the English-speaking Caribbean, to share their concerns and experiences. Their testimonies were recorded in a publication edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe in 1990. The same year, Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido edited *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and*

*Literature*, a secondary-source book on women's writing and feminist criticism. Apart from the contributions of already internationally-recognised writers such as Jean Rhys, these publications served to uncover and establish a literary tradition for Caribbean women, bringing to the foreground the work of mostly unknown and unexplored writers such as Phyllis Shand Allfrey or non-canonical artists such as Jamaican folk poet Louise Bennett and activist poet Una Marson, also from Jamaica. But as well as leading to global interest in their work and fomenting its publication, the major outcome of these events was that already well-established writers such as Beryl Gilroy, Rosa Guy, Sylvia Wynter, Merle Hodge, and Michelle Cliff, among others, got to know each other, and younger writers such as Marlene Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and Erna Brodber were first heard of. The comment made by Jamaica Kincaid, already an acknowledged writer at that time, during an interview previous to the Caribbean Women Writers First International Conference, is significant in this respect: "When you say you're having this conference on West Indian women writers I think, 'God - I didn't know there were more!' That's wonderful" (Cudjoe 1990, 221).

Jamaica Kincaid had begun her writing career in the United States without having any awareness of a Caribbean literary



tradition.<sup>1</sup> Her work, however, is from the very beginning distinctly Caribbean in the sense that it shares thematic preoccupations and stylistic devices with a majority of Caribbean writers. For this reason, she may be said to accommodate to the Caribbean canon established by a number of seminal works from the fifties and sixties, a period that witnessed a boom in Caribbean literature in the Western metropolis mainly through the works of the gifted male artists mentioned earlier. Critical studies in the course of the sixties and seventies acclaimed these writers as central figures and outlined a critical approach tracing the thematic concerns, dominant tropes, narrative modes and aesthetic trends of Caribbean literature, which included: a preoccupation with history, cultural dominance, individual and communal identity; a concern with naming the landscape and validating the local; a prevalence of narratives of alienation, exile and nostalgia; a focus on childhood experience; a preference for the autobiographical mode and the realist tradition.

With the exception of the realist mode, which she rejects as inappropriate to a reality conceived as extending far beyond the realm of physical evidence, Jamaica Kincaid seems to fit easily into this distinctly Caribbean tradition. Her most acclaimed novel, *Annie*

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<sup>1</sup> Kincaid refers to the beginning of her writing career as something that happened to her by chance, since she had no tradition to refer to: "I didn't know that people were still writing. I somehow thought that writing had been this great 'thing' and that it had stopped. I thought that all the great writing had been done before 1900.

*John*, for example, could be read alongside seminal works such as George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) in the light of a tradition of autobiographical novels of self-formation where a child protagonist comes to grip with an oppressive colonial environment.

But while conforming to the Caribbean canonical agenda established by male writers, Jamaica Kincaid's work has more in common with Caribbean women writers, who have suffered and, up to a certain extent, still suffer an "alienation within alienation," as Kenneth Ramchand has remarked (1983, 231), because they are marginalised by sexual prejudice within a literature already marginalised by cultural or racial prejudice. The writers, therefore, delineate agendas alter/native to the androcentric canon, illuminating previously unexplored areas of Caribbean experience and bringing to the foreground the nexus of gender and cultural positioning. Although there are differences, Caribbean women writers share a concern for questions of personal identity and personal relationships, stressing the mother-daughter bond. Often reflecting their direct experience, they celebrate matrilineal links and create strong and self-supporting female characters, who, in the words of Laura Niesen de Abruna, "struggle and survive because of their basic respect for life [and] depend on a strong bonding

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Contemporary writers just didn't exist. [...] I never wanted to be a writer because I didn't know that any such thing existed" (Cudjoe 1990, 218).

between and among women in their communities in the fight for basic survival" 1990, 88). Exploring the particular intersections of race, class, and gender in the Caribbean context, women writers tell a different story, one revealing a distinctly feminine sensibility, and uncover the richness of Caribbean experience. Jamaica Kincaid fully participates in this tradition in that she responds to the androcentric canon with women-centred plots and feminine narrative modes.<sup>2</sup> Her works focusing on the relationship between mother and daughter, for example, could be seen as having been inspired by Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), where the destructive relationship between the protagonist and her mother accounts for her precarious sense of self. Likewise, Kincaid's exploration of the tension between the African-Caribbean and metropolitan cultures finds an antecedent in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), which examines the problems of cultural identification in a colonial context with a particular focus on femaleness.

Caribbean literature sheds light on a history of dispossession, exploitation and oppression which has been ignored, partially told, or (often purposefully) misinterpreted. In fact, most Western literary

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<sup>2</sup> Caribbean women writers in general and Jamaica Kincaid in particular, with her exploration of the most intimate regions of the psyche and the body, with her longing for pre-oedipal and pre-colonial innocence, a paradisiacal space where the self is indistinct from and embraced by the maternal womb and the Caribbean sea, with her fragmented narrative struggling to recreate, through memory and dreams, a semiotic dimension, could be seen as representatives of feminine writing as it has been defined by Western feminism: "L'écriture féminine est une écriture du

productions and historical accounts represent the Caribbean, from Columbus's arrival in 1492 to the neo-imperialist interventions of the West in the present (a process including the slaughter of the native population, the transplantation of enslaved Africans and indentured Asians, the independence of the islands and their re-conversion from "goldmines" feeding metropolitan markets into exotic sites for the Western tourist industry), as a privileged location for Western economy and civilisation. For the Western collective imagination, the Caribbean is a primitive paradise given by God to the white man to satisfy his needs and desires, a source of richness and a space of leisure, and its people, whether natives or forced immigrants, little more than savages blessed with the supposedly civilising mission of Western philanthropism.<sup>3</sup> The twentieth century's Caribbean production defies the hegemony of Western texts and proposes alter/native versions of history, which subvert the subject vs. object hierarchical dichotomy and give voice to the silenced Other.

The literature from the Caribbean is mostly grounded on experience, and its subject is always historically situated. It reveals that the history of the region is not only one of dispossession,

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Dedans: l'intérieur du corps, l'intérieur de la maison. Écriture du retour à ce Dedans, nostalgie de la Mère et de la mer" (Didier 1981, 37).

<sup>3</sup> The colonial and imperialist mentality implicit in Western literary and scientific production has been object of several studies. For the colonies in general, see, for example, Boehmer 1995 and Loomba 1998. For the Americas in particular, see Todorow 1982 and Pratt 1992.

economic exploitation and cultural damage, but also one of resistance, creativity and self-determination, and that it is marked by colonialism, imperialism and racism as well as by revolt, reconstruction and hybridisation. It is not exclusively a revision, but also a writing against and a writing over, a literature which generates its own theory.<sup>4</sup> As Craig Tapping writes: "Practice, the self-representation of formerly silenced, marginalized or negated subjects, is always already a theory of the other" (1989, 52). A discourse of alterity developed in response to historical erasement, Caribbean literature is predicated on self-displacement from the dominant culture and speaks with the language of memory, since remembering delineates alternative narratives and empowers one to claim a history and a tradition. Within the mark of cultural resistance, personal experience becomes paramount because it enables one to re-posit the subaltern as a subject of history. For this reason Caribbean literature privileges personal narratives, which operate as counter-discourse in opposition to the hegemonic narratives of the West.

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<sup>4</sup> This seems to be especially true of Black cultural production, as Afro-American scholar Barbara Christian explains: "People of color have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking [...] My folk have always been a race for theory" (1989, 226).

Jamaica Kincaid is a Caribbean writer in so far as her work is haunted by history and grounded on personal experience as a primal source of understanding and creativity, and in so far as it is based on direct experience rather than on intellectual speculation. The worldview conveyed in her work is also Caribbean in essence, imbued with traditions and beliefs which are the result of creolisation and cultural hybridisation on the Antillean soil. Her perception of reality is undoubtedly shaped by obeah,<sup>5</sup> an African-rooted system of belief similar to voodoo and based on witchcraft, which perspective gives her work a touch of magic realism evoking the South American tradition. Nevertheless, aspects of her work can be inscribed in the Western literary tradition, since she received a colonial education and remained for a long time unfamiliar with Caribbean texts; thus, the works that formed her as a reader and that would eventually shape her writing were the classics of British civilisation.<sup>6</sup> She admits having been deeply influenced by Dickens, Milton, Shakespeare and the Bible.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although it was only as an adult that she

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<sup>5</sup> The obeah philosophy views the world as a fluidity of forms and suggests the existence of a hidden reality behind visible reality.

<sup>6</sup> She acknowledges that while colonial education was aimed at reinforcing the superiority of the English, it actually "didn't work" (Dilger 1992, 21), and that, on the contrary, in her particular case, it empowered her, providing her with the means to respond to oppression: "It's a two-edged thing because I wouldn't have known how to write and how to think if I hadn't read *Paradise Lost*, if I hadn't been given parts of *Paradise Lost* to memorize. It was given to me because I was supposed to be Satan" (Perry 1993, 139).

<sup>7</sup> Echoes of the Bible (especially from the Genesis and the Revelation, which Kincaid used to read extensively as a child and which shaped her understanding of the world as good and evil) are traceable in her writing and use of images. As

became familiar with writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, among others, modernist aspects are traceable in her writing. Like Joyce, she often practices the stream of consciousness technique to depict the interior monologues of her characters. Like Woolf's, her prose is careful and sharp, and, in its power to evoke mood and sensation, it occasionally approaches poetry. In addition, as she affirms in an interview (Cudjoe, 1990), modernism has a special appeal for her because its perspective mirrors her perception of reality as something that cannot be trusted since things are often not what they seem.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, if it is undeniable that her work is distinctly Caribbean in character and can be read in the frame of post-colonialism specific to the Antillean area, it is also true that, drawing from disparate experiences and influences and using what she defines a "slash-and-burn policy of writing" (Dilger 1992, 23), she succeeds in her claim to be "universal" in the sense of being globally understood.<sup>9</sup> Autonomous and individualist, she rejects

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regards the influence of the English canon, striking parallels have been made between Kincaid's fiction and works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Diane Simmons, who devotes a chapter to the comparison of these works with Kincaid's early fiction and evidences the subversive character of her version of the master texts, notices how "Kincaid, in her reinscription of the paradise-lost theme found in Milton, as well as in her rewriting of the story of a young woman's struggle for autonomy in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, seems [...] to take these great works of English literature and to read them in her own terms, turning them to her own use (1994, 58).

<sup>8</sup> Of her perception of reality when she was a child, Kincaid recalls: "For a while, I lived in utter fear when I was little, of just not being sure that anything I saw was itself" (Cudjoe 1990, 226).

<sup>9</sup> In the interview with Selwyn Cudjoe, Kincaid affirms: "In a way, I'd like to think that I could write in the universal, that if I say the oppression by the English was such and such, that I say it in such a way that any human being will say, 'Yes, that

labelling and refuses to be inscribed in single specific traditions such as the feminist or to be characterised as a Black writer. For example, of her relationship to feminism she says:

I think I owe a lot of my success, or whatever, to this idea of feminism, but I don't really want to be placed in that category. I don't mind if people put me in it, but I don't claim to be in it. But that's just me as an individual. I mean, I always see myself as alone. I can't bear to be in a group of any kind, or in the school of anything. (Cudjoe 1990, 221)

She reproaches Black scholars thus:

They've just never really gotten beyond the question of the colour of your skin to see humanity, and it's a great problem because there was a moment when that was being done, I think with Martin Luther King, when we were just going to rescue human beings from this dustbin we're all in, and that failed... (Dilger 1992, 23)

Her work reflects this autonomous perspective. Her characters defy categorisation and affirm themselves in resistance to any form of subjugation. If the protagonists of her fiction are Black and female, it is because her source is mostly autobiographical; but race and

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was wrong.' My father was this sort of person - someone who anyone could understand" (1990, 221).



gender are always taken for granted rather than being worn like badges of honour, as happens in most Black or feminine writing.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes of Kincaid:

She never feels the necessity of claiming the existence of a black world or a feminine sensibility. She assumes them both. I think it's a distinct departure that she's making, and I think that more and more black American writers will assume their world the way she does. So that we can get beyond the large theme of racism and get to the deeper themes of how black people love and cry and live and die. Which, after all, is what art is all about. (quoted in Garis 1990, 70)

Kincaid's work is largely based on personal experience, especially on her childhood memories, dominated by the maternal figure and the small-island environment where she grew up. She was born Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John, Antigua, in 1949, when the island was still a colony of the British Empire.<sup>10</sup> Until her ninth year she was an only child and, with a simple life revolving mainly around home and school and a very intense relationship with her affectionate mother whom she adored, she felt happy and

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<sup>10</sup> Antigua attained partial independence in 1967, shortly after Kincaid's emigration to the United States, and full independence in 1981.

loved.<sup>11</sup> But then, the birth of three brothers put pressure on the already meagre family income, and what had seemed like a paradise turned into hell for the girl who was then growing into a young woman. The relationship with the mother, who had to deal with unwanted pregnancies and an old husband poor in health and purse, became highly conflictive.

Significantly, the loss of harmony at home coincides with a more general sense of alienation as Kincaid recalls how she started at an early age to acquire awareness of the political and cultural subjugation of her homeland to England:

When I was nine, I refused to stand up at the refrain of 'God save our King'. I hated 'Rule, Britannia'; and I used to say that we weren't Britons, we were slaves. I never had any idea why. I just thought that there was no sense to it - 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never ever shall be slaves'. I thought that we weren't Britons and that we were slaves. (Cudjoe 1990, 217)

She developed a strong dislike for colonialism and began having problems at school, where, as a punishment for her recalcitrance, she was forced to learn by heart long passages of canonical

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<sup>11</sup> The prominent role of the mother is a common feature of Caribbean family life, where the onus of responsibility for children is on the mother while the father is left free of obligations. The multifarious roles carried out by women in Caribbean households are documented in Edith Clarke's *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (1957) and Olive Senior's *Working Miracles* (1991).

masterpieces of English literature. Then, due to her family's circumstances, she was forced to leave school because she was needed at home to help with the younger children. Later she went to the United States, where, while working as an au pair, she was supposed to study to become a nurse and support her family.<sup>12</sup> Migration, though, gave her the chance of a fresh start. In 1973 she started to write and changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid. Like the protagonists of her novels, she bravely embarked on a new adventure and "invented" herself.

It is beyond doubt that the quest for an autonomous and authentic self is the founding theme of Kincaid's narrative, and that she is concerned with exploring the problematics of identity formation at different levels. In this study, it is our intention to analyse the mother-daughter relationship, which is the focus of Kincaid's plots and which, it seems to us, functions as a metaphor for the dialectic of power and powerlessness governing nature and history. On one level, we observe that the narrative articulates

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<sup>12</sup> In the Caribbean, migration is an institutionalised aspect of the society and constitutes "an enduring livelihood strategy for Caribbean people" (Momsen 1992, 73). Overseas migration from the Caribbean was male biased until the 1970s, when women began to be much more common as overseas labour migrants as a result of various factors such as changing international labour markets and increased female education levels. Since 1970, there has also been an increase in women migrating independently, and now in many islands the number in women emigrants exceeds the number of men emigrants (Idem, 74). Remittances are of fundamental importance in the Caribbean economy, particularly for female-headed households, therefore mothers often strongly encourage their children to migrate (Idem, 79).

universal paradigms, such as the passage from a paradisiacal pre-oedipal union between mother and child to a painful but necessary breach for the affirmation of the child as a separate individual. On the other hand, placed in the specific context of the Caribbean, the mother-daughter plot not only acquires a particular sociological interest, being explored in a set of interlocking relationships of race, class and gender, but it is one that can also read as an allegory of the conflict between the mother-country and the daughter-colony, as Kincaid herself acknowledges:

I've worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I'm from, which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful. The mother shows her how to be in the world, but at the back of her mind she thinks she never will get it. She's deeply skeptical that this child could ever grow up to be a self-possessed woman and in the end she reveals her skepticism; yet even within the skepticism is, of course, dismissal and scorn. So it's not unlike the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror. (Vorda 1991, 12)

Both maternal power and imperial power are narcissistic since they demand acquiescence and imitation, while, in both cases, conflict

arises at the first signs of emerging maturity. Mothering seems to be seen as a process of othering which produces alienation, and, as the child has to negotiate a separation from the mother to become an autonomous individual, so the colony has to break free from the oppressive power of the mother country. In any event the process is a painful one and the final achievement of the goal is always imbued with the tremendous sense of loss that comes with freedom.

Thus, because Kincaid's understanding of the world passes through personal experience and is articulated in domestic terms,<sup>13</sup> the autobiographical love-hate relationship between mother and daughter becomes the primal paradigm of life, whereby a politics of resistance to all forms of domination is envisaged as the basis of freedom at multiple levels, and alienation is used as a means of liberation.<sup>14</sup>

Kincaid acknowledges that her mother and her homeland are the source of her creativity. While admitting that the relationship with her mother is so intense and painful that she constantly needs to put a distance between herself and her mother, she affirms: "The fertile soil of my creative life is my mother" (Cudjoe 1990, 222). Of her

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<sup>13</sup> Kincaid acknowledges that she personalises everything and reduces "everything to a domestic situation" (Perry 1993, 137).

<sup>14</sup> Referring to the political and cultural alienation of Antiguans in relation to Britain, Kincaid says: "I took notice of it in a personal way, and I didn't place it within the context of political action. I almost made a style out of it" (Perry 1993, 132).

homeland, which is the constant subject of her writing, she says likewise:

I could never write these things in the place I'm writing about, I mean, I need to be away from it and to hold it closely in my mind. The reality of it is overwhelming. I've always found my reality in this place crippling, but it's the only thing I really want to write about. (Dilger 1992, 23)

The association of the mother and the homeland, both of them nurturing and oppressive at the same time, threatening and yet desirable, is clear in Kincaid's first piece of fiction, a story entitled "Antigua Crossing":

The Caribbean Sea is so big, and so blue, and so deep, and so warm, and so unpredictable, and so inviting, and so dangerous, and so beautiful. This is exactly the way I feel about the women in my own family. (48)

We believe that in Kincaid's work the mother/motherland metaphor is played out at two levels. At one level, the nurturing and loving mother of childhood may represent the African-rooted Caribbean world, a world made of beauty and innocence where Kincaid's dramatis persona feels protected and happy. At the other level, in striking resemblance to Mother England, when the daughter starts to show signs of autonomy, the mother abandons praise and

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approval for scorn and begins a violent struggle to keep the daughter under her subjection. It seems, then, that two conflicting worlds, the African and the European, meet in the two-faced figure of the mother. In her quest for freedom, the daughter must fight against the overwhelming and oppressive power of the mother (biological and colonial), but in the end it is the mother (the nurturing mother of childhood / the African-rooted world) that provides her with the means for survival and self-affirmation.

In this study we intend to analyse the mother-daughter theme in order to follow its evolution in the different works by Kincaid and to uncover its symbolic meanings. To this end, we shall examine the works one by one, following their chronological order. Before we start doing this, we nevertheless find it convenient to anticipate the central idea of each work so that the reader may have a notion of Kincaid's work as a whole.

In the collection of stories *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid's first book, a girl approaching maturity comes to terms with her domineering mother. In her process of self-formation, she is caught in a bundle of contradictory feelings: she deeply loves and hates her mother at the same time; she relishes the safety of dependence, but strives for separation; she longs for union with the mother, yet perseveres in resistance. The nostalgia for a pre-oedipal union with the mother seems to evoke the innocence of a pre-colonial world still

uncorrupted by conflict and violence, whereas the maternal rejection of the daughter striving for autonomy may recall the colonial alienating power relegating its subjects to a subaltern position. The mother, whose love is wonderful yet claustrophobic, represents a threat of erasure for the daughter, who must struggle to articulate a separate identity and affirm her own power.

*Annie John*, Kincaid's first novel, explores the same themes in a more articulated socio-historical setting. Within a reality marked by poverty, racism and political and cultural oppression, the mother-daughter theme offers a paradigm of psycho-social female development in the specific context of the Caribbean. As she matures, the girl comes to terms with the emotional conflicts common to adolescence and with the cultural conflicts which characterise her colonial society. The process of identity formation is analysed in relation to the problematics of race, gender and class. The protagonist has to deal with a mother who is subjected to colonial logic and with a whole society which is oppressive and threatening for her own sense of self. The interrelationship between motherhood and colonialism is here explored more thoroughly than in the first book and the theme of cultural oppression is treated more explicitly.

After the success of her first two books, praised by reviewers for the gentleness and the charm of their tone, Kincaid's growing political awareness becomes clear in the controversial essay on



post-colonial Antigua, *A Small Place*, where, drawing from firsthand experience, she engages in a sharp and angry criticism of both British colonialism and American imperialism as well as of the corruption and mismanagement of the native government. In this work, the quest for freedom theme is approached at the collective rather than at the personal level since Kincaid is more interested in the implications of colonialism and imperialism on Antiguan national identity and in exploring the mechanisms of power and the ways in which social conditions shape human consciousness. Resistance is advocated as the prime tool of empowerment and, finally, freedom is envisaged in the abandonment of prescriptive roles and in the rediscovery of the humanity of both conquerors and conquered.

Kincaid's anger and political commitment are then re-inscribed into her second novel, *Lucy*, which continues the personal saga started with the earlier fiction. The book records the emotional struggle of a girl growing up and coming to terms with the changes operating on her perception of herself and of the external world. The North American setting, where the protagonist is caught within new power relationships which replicate old ones, offers a wider perspective on the conflict with the biological mother and the colonial motherland, whose memory still haunts the girl obsessively. While the relationship with her white employer seems to replicate the one with her mother, the imperialism of North American society

echoes the logic of British colonial power. The text articulates the quest for the self of a colonial subject confronting the white West and offers alter/native visions on politics and history. Lucy confronts colonial and imperial power structures and gives voice to her own version of the story, seeing it from the perspective of a subaltern subject who finally will become the agent of her own destiny. Like the protagonists of the earlier works, Lucy is able to carry on with her struggle against oppression thanks to the self-determination inherited from the African world her mother embodies.

The obsession with the mother figure is also at the heart of Kincaid's latest novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which, nevertheless, marks an evolution in her work both because the sources are not as strictly autobiographical as elsewhere and also because recurrent themes are treated from a distinct perspective. Now, Kincaid explores the implications of motherlessness on the definition of the self. The central motif of the protagonist's life, whose Carib Indian mother died giving birth to her, is the absence of a maternal figure who would function as a mirror image necessary to the identification and the affirmation of the self as other. Her writing always responding to a duality of vision, Kincaid also seems to suggest in the protagonist's motherlessness the brutal deprivation of ancestry by colonialism's exterminations of the native people of the Caribbean. In a world marked by death, the protagonist has to invent

herself out of loss. Refusing to become a mother, she sustains herself through self-possession and the pleasure of her own body and poses an end to the perpetuation of historical ruin by not letting her ancestral side (whereas her mother is a Carib Indian, her father is half-Scot half-African) be destroyed in reproduction.

Kincaid's latest book, *My Brother*, is a memoir where, relating of the illness and death of her youngest brother, struck by AIDS in his thirties, the author discloses her personal experience of love and loss with the maternal figure always at the centre. The reflection on the mercilessness of existence and the realisation that nothing is stable and true in life gives vent to a flood of memories revolving around the relationship with the fraudulent maternal figure, beautiful and cruel, nurturing and suffocating, adored and hated. Finally, the life of the narrator's brother will stand symbolically for the destiny she has escaped. The text can therefore be read as yet another personal tale of resistance and survival.



# CHAPTER 1

## *At the Bottom of the River*

### **M/othering and the Quest for the Self**

The ten short stories collected in Jamaica Kincaid's first work of fiction are so enigmatic that they seem at first undecipherable. The language follows the fluidity of dreams, undiluted memory and thought; fantasy and reality intermingle; narrators shift or merge and are not easily identified. The narrative challenges Western notions of logic and seems to follow instead the rhythm of obeah magic, where forms change into others, where there are no discrete units in nature, no definite boundaries between forms, and visible reality is not to be trusted because often things are not what they seem. It could also be said that such narrative defies the symbolic order by occasionally resorting to semiotic babble in an attempt to articulate the world as it is perceived by the baby in the amniotic fluid and in its pre-oedipal union with the mother.<sup>1</sup> The ten stories become more

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<sup>1</sup> In Lacanian theory, the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order is fundamental. The imaginary corresponds to the pre-oedipal stage, when there is no sense of a separate self because the child believes itself to be part of the mother and perceives no separation between itself and the world. With the oedipal crisis, the child enters the symbolic order, a patriarchal order ruled by the Law of the Father. This entry is linked to the acquisition of language, since the symbolic order is sustained by the structure of conventional social meaning based

easily decipherable when read in the light of Kincaid's life and works. From this perspective the pieces acquire the value of a prelude anticipating the themes and patterns of the opera to follow. The harmony of the pre-oedipal/pre-colonial world and its loss, the power of the mother/motherland and the love-hate relationship with the subjected child, the process of m/othering both at a biological and a political level, the impartiality of nature and the great mysteries of life and death are the themes that frame the ten stories and that are more explicitly developed in Kincaid's later work.<sup>2</sup>

Most stories in *At the Bottom of the River* are set on the island of Antigua, where the author was born and spent her childhood, and articulate the experience of a child growing up in the 1950s, when the island was still a colony of the British Empire. Motherhood and

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on strict rational defences. In her theory of the acquisition of language, Julia Kristeva attempts to define the signifying process. She re-elaborates Jacques Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic order as a distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. In the semiotic (linked to the pre-oedipal primary processes), the endless flow of pulsions is gathered up in the *chora* (from the Greek for enclosed space, womb). The semiotic continuum of the *chora* must be split to produce signification. This marks the entry of the subject into the symbolic order and the repression of the semiotic, which can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on symbolic language: contradictions, meaninglessness, silences, disruption, fragmentation.

<sup>2</sup> Of Kincaid's narrative style in *At the Bottom of the River*, Moira Ferguson argues: "Kincaid implies longing and unsureness in diverse ways. Her structure also affirms the indeterminacy implied in the poetics. It underlines her refusal to affix an 'essential' meaning and offer comforting certainties. Repetitions, dreamlike and surreal sequences, trances, free association, fragment even, dominate the brief sections. Seeming nonsequiturs, ambiguities, doubled meanings, allusions, occasional typographic blanks and spaces add to the ethos of indeterminacy. Magic realist yokings coupled with water imagery propel the protagonist toward writing. Delving the depths dredges up the narrator's unconscious, how she should and can create" (1994, 27).

colonialism are explored in their interrelationship - as the mother either symbolises the mother-country or is subjected to colonial logic - and set against the child's contradictory feelings of love and hate, dependence and separation, longing and resistance. The tensions result from a prolonged period of symbiosis between mother and child. Like the colonial motherland, the mother views her daughter as a narcissistic extension of herself. But, as she grows up, the child goes through a process of othering by the mother (both biological and colonial) that makes her a subaltern, a powerless subject. In this condition she must strive for survival, and to escape the threat of erasure she must find a way to articulate identity and affirm validation and agency. *At the Bottom of the River* is the journey through such struggle.

The volume opens with a highly intense one-sentence story of about six hundred words entitled "Girl" which anticipates some of the most recurrent concerns in Kincaid's work. It expresses the author's obsession with maternal power, both protective and controlling, and the difficult process of gender role acquisition in a colonial environment. The voice of the mother instructing the daughter how to act as she grows up presents itself initially as recorded speech, but it develops into a litany haunting the girl's memory. The obsessive refrain of the mother conveys hostility towards the maturing daughter who is no longer an extension of herself. The tone oscillates

between nurturing and betrayal, expressing the contradictory role of Black mothers compelled to fulfil the restrictive roles created for women and caught up in the dilemma of teaching their daughters to adapt to and at the same time to resist a system of oppression.<sup>3</sup> Obeah magic coexists with colonial tropes, once again marking the combination of protection and oppression, the nurturing nature of native culture and the racism of colonial power.

"Girl"'s opening remarks give the impression of a physically present mother giving domestic advice to her young daughter as if instructing her for the future: "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry ..." (3). As she continues, benevolent advice changes into accusation: "is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming ..." (3). These remarks hint at a colonial logic. It is not difficult to perceive the

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<sup>3</sup> In preparing their daughters for life, Black mothers face a troubling dilemma. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, "Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures." To develop these skills in their daughters, mothers demonstrate "varying combinations of behaviors." On the one hand, "to ensure their daughters' physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into systems of oppression." On the other hand, mothers "also know that if their daughters uncritically accept the limited opportunities offered Black women, they become willing participants in their own subordination. Mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival, but at the high cost of their emotional destruction" (1990, 123-124).



internalised racism implied in the mother's disappointment at suspecting the daughter of singing benna (folk songs) in Sunday school, which means disrupting colonial order through a manifestation of native culture. Racist assumptions are also expressed in the second remark, suggesting the common colonial trope of savagery versus civilisation, here referring specifically to table manners, whereas the last remark clearly recalls the Western association of Black people with primitive, animal-like instincts and the subsequent common stereotype of Black women as sexually loose. The mother's assumption of the daughter's sluttishness, which is recurrent in Kincaid's work, becomes obsessive through its repetition in this short text: "this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming ..." (4), "this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming ..." (4).

The maternal discourse, where "the phallus is introduced as a primary signifier of desire, to be rejected at all costs" (Ferguson 1994, 15), expresses the mother's awareness of the historical sexual abuse of women in general and Black women in particular and the fear that her daughter will become one of the victims; although it could also suggest the mother's attempt to prevent the daughter from

acting as she herself did, thus her trying to rewrite her own life through the daughter. Read from this perspective, the mother's obsession with sexual degradation would express her self-contempt and would thus identify the mother, rather than the daughter, as the primary victim of a racist patriarchal structure.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial racist tropes coexist side by side with the world of obeah magic throughout the maternal discourse in this work, both at the level of domestically oriented advice and of assumptions about sexual behaviour. The mother encourages the daughter to be prepared for any eventuality and warns her not to trust visible reality as well as warning her against the magic spells which could be cast on her: "don't pick people's flowers - you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all ..." (5), "this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you ..." (5). Her recipes range from how to cook a good pudding to how to gain the love of a man and to how to "throw away a child before it even becomes a child" (5). On the other hand, it is to be remarked that the kind of advice related to

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<sup>4</sup> In her analysis of motherhood, feminist theorist and poet Adrienne Rich observes how "the mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter." She argues: "Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough; the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted. And it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations. The anxious pressure of one female to another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed 'mothering', even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive" (1986, 243).

Antiguan culture is clearly in contradiction with the warnings against loose sexual behaviour discussed above. Within the context of native culture, sexual advice seems to be protective rather than threatening: "this is how to love a man, and if it doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up ..." (5).<sup>5</sup> Concern with colonial decorum, as expressed in the prohibition against singing benna in Sunday school or in the obligation to dress and walk like a lady, is also abandoned in favour of bodily freedom: "this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you ..." (5).

The maternal voice shifts from love to threat as it moves through the tropes of colonial and native culture. In this way, the text highlights the role history plays in individual life. The mother must teach her daughter to adapt to a context which tends to erase one's original culture and therefore prevent free personal development. The power of the maternal discourse symbolises the violence of colonial authority, which condemns and does not admit protest. Only twice in the story is the mother's monologue interrupted by timid

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<sup>5</sup> In the mother's discourse in "Girl", as Helen Pyne Timothy notices, sexuality is related to sluttishness, but it becomes acceptable and even desirable if used to gain one's ends: "The girl is being urged to use her womanly wiles to accomplish results from an act she is simultaneously being taught is shameful. Included here is also a recognition that a woman's sexuality must be used to accomplish a rise in social status - possibly an unconscious explanation for the beautiful, strong, young mother's marriage to a much older, weaker, far less beautiful husband, who offered her marriage and a comfortable home" (1990, 240).

observations from the daughter, indicated by italics in the text: "*But I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (4), though the mother does not even acknowledge her voice. It does not matter whether the girl sings benna or whether she behaves like a slut, she stands condemned anyway, and the mother's negative assumptions regarding her daughter evoke colonial prejudices against Black people. However, the text uncovers the mother's intention to make of her daughter a strong and powerful woman, capable of imposing her will and standing above others: "always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*"; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (5). Obviously, the painful contradiction here is that the mother expects the daughter to be strong and obedient at the same time, yet, while trying to be a powerful model, she is making her daughter powerless. In her effort to give her daughter an identity, she perpetuates bonds which prevent the daughter from rightly developing her sense of self. As demonstrated by the two feeble protests the girl manages to raise, the power of the mother prevents the daughter's agency. Hers is a strategy that turns against itself.

The realistic world of childhood and the everyday idiom of "Girl" are replaced in the second short story, "In the Night," by a dreamlike atmosphere of darkness and magic, suggesting the flux and

associations of the unconscious. This dimension is timeless - "there is no just before midnight, midnight, or just after midnight ..." (6) - and takes on multiple shapes in different locations - "the night is round in some places, flat in some places, and in some places like a deep hole, blue at the edge, black inside ..." (6). The story is made up of five parts and constitutes an effective example of Kincaid's stress on the multiplicity of forms and visions, which challenges Western traditional perceptions of physical reality based on notions of centre and periphery, knowing subject and known object, unitary vision and absolute truth. The perspective in Kincaid's text does not have a centre and a periphery, and therefore it does not proceed by othering and marginalising. Instead, the focus shifts fluently from the community to its single members, from them to the narrator's unconscious, then to the landscape, and then again to the narrator's fantasy. In the same way, the narrative does not follow a linear horizontal logic, but proceeds rather in circular movements as in an enchanting dance.

The first part introduces the reader to the island community immersed in the darkness of the night. Here, the first characters we encounter are the night-soil men, who constitute an image of the poverty and degradation that the colonial system has imposed on the island, which is still today unprovided with an adequate sewage system. From this physical and palpable reality, the focus then shifts

to the magic world of obeah practices: "The night-soil men can see a bird walking in trees. It isn't a bird. It is a woman who has removed her skin and is on her way to drink the blood of her secret enemies..." (6). The image of the bird which is not a bird is recurrent in Kincaid's work (see the blackbird in the preceding story) and insists on the unreliability of visible reality. Here, as in Caribbean tradition, the world of magic belongs to women. The bird is in fact a woman who has the power to change into something else and who is thirsty for revenge. Men are usually portrayed as harmless because, even if violence is one of their prerogatives, magic is more powerful and only women have access to magic, as is shown in the evocative piece on the murder of a woman and her revenge:

There is the sound of a man groaning in his sleep; there is the sound of a woman disgusted at the man groaning. There is the sound of the man stabbing the woman, the sound of her blood as it hits the floor, the sound of Mr. Straffee, the undertaker, taking her body away. There is the sound of her spirit back from the dead, looking at the man who used to groan; he is running a fever forever. (7)

The ineffectiveness of men when it comes to magic is again stressed in the following paragraph, where we encounter another community member, Mr. Gishard, who has also come back from the dead, but who is absolutely innocuous as he stands in his white English suit

under a tree, tapping his foot because he misses his accordion. The reference to the suit the man was buried in introduces a colonial trope, suggesting the superiority that colonised people attach to the mother country: "The white suit came from England in a brown package: 'To: Mr. John Gishard', and so on and so on" (7). Neglecting to give the full details of the address on the package suggests the narrator's contempt of the formalities of the colonising culture; the details are replaced by the speedy envoi: "and so on and so on".

In the second part of the story, the first-person narrator is caught in a spiral world of dreams within dreams which express longing for a pre-colonial/pre-oedipal world. She is dreaming of "a baby being born" (8), a baby who is innocent and helpless, and together they are "walking to pasture" (8). The description conveys the image of a landscape unspoilt by colonialism and adulthood. Then she becomes the baby in the enveloping dream, and she is so helpless that she can't even control her bodily functions: "... you have wet your bed again", says her mother, who in her dream is "still young, and still beautiful, and still has pink lips" (8). While the author conveys the girl's yearning for union with the mother, she also suggests the danger of such union. The mother is presented as a caring mother who removes wet sheets. However, read in the light of Kincaid's subsequent work, the image of the removal of the girl from

wetness suggests removal from the womb and therefore the distance that the mother swiftly establishes between herself and her daughter, which is the main occurrence in *Annie John*. Intensely conveying the sense of betrayal and loss, the girl confesses: "My mother can change everything. In my dream I am in the night" (8). Not only has the mother removed her little girl from the innocence of her pre-oedipal dream, now she threatens the helpless daughter with the obscure powers of magic:

'What are the lights in the mountains?'

'The lights in the mountains? Oh, it's a jablesse.'

'A jablesse! But why? What's a jablesse?'

'It's a person who can turn into anything. But you can tell they aren't real because of their eyes. Their eyes shine like lamps, so bright that you can't look. That's how you can tell it's a jablesse. They like to go up in the mountains and gallivant. Take good care when you see a beautiful woman. A jablesse always tries to look like a beautiful woman.' (8-9)

The identification of the mother with the jablesse is through physical appearance (the mother is a beautiful woman) and through the previous reference to maternal powers (the mother can change everything). The innocence of the pre-oedipal fantasy is thus



fractured by the threat of a demoniac mother. Once again, nurture and danger are bound together in the maternal figure.

The third part seems to insist on the contrast between ideal harmony and a threatening darkness which hides beneath the surface of a rational facade. The father-figure is here the focus of attention and functions as a symbol of the deprivation suffered by the child-narrator. A false image of stability and happiness is set against its own impossibility. The girl begins "No one has ever said to me ..." (9), and she starts relating a fantasy about a father who goes to church regularly, likes watching small children playing play-cricket, reads botany books and makes his family happy. Reality, the author seems to be saying, is far beyond the world of daylight and cannot be conveyed by narratives of "simple happiness and stable character" (Simmons 1994, 78). This father, whom everybody loves and who is a model of moral perfection, is a night-soil man. An ideal daylight world is thus contrasted with the reality of dereliction and filthy work to be performed during the night, suggesting that in a community stricken by poverty, where men have to remove faeces because there is no proper sewage system, no child would ever have the possibility of telling a story about a father one can be proud of in a way a typical Western middle-class child would. However, at the same time, the fantasy about the father does not seem to be far removed from the author's biographical reality. The man described

reminds us of Kincaid's beloved stepfather, and the family harmony she conveys could be read as the memory of her happy childhood previous to the birth of her siblings and of the subsequent sense of abandonment she experienced. The "no one has ever said to me" which opens the section would then convey the sense of betrayal and loss of the girl expelled from her childhood paradise.

The narrative focus shifts again in the fourth part from an individual to a wider perspective. Here the Antiguan landscape acquires new dignity by the enumeration of the different flowers that "close up and thicken" (10) during the night. Each species of flower is named in detail, as if intended to heal the historical absence of the Caribbean landscape from colonial narratives. The naming of "native" flowers here replaces the landscape of the mother country which has been haunting the narratives of colonised people, such as the common trope of daffodils that we find in so many post-colonial texts, including Kincaid's. Significantly, the flowers in this passage are "vexed" (11).

The list of flowers is then followed by a list of what each community member is doing at that moment of the night. It conveys the harsh working lives of the community, the loving care shown between family members and the idea that the night in Antigua is not made for sleeping:

Someone is making a basket, someone is making a girl a dress or a boy a shirt, someone is making her husband a soup with cassava so that he can take it to the cane field tomorrow, someone is making his wife a beautiful mahogany chest ... (11)

Into this picture of the community working through the night, obeah is casually introduced to indicate how normal such practices are: "someone is sprinkling a colorless powder outside a closed door so that someone else's child will be stillborn" (11). Just after this reference to Antiguan culture, a colonial trope is introduced: "someone is praying that a bad child who is living prosperously abroad will be good and send a package filled with new clothes ..." (11). The passage recalls the legacy of poverty and reliance on migration brought about by foreign dominion. The story is set at the time when Antigua was still a British colony, but migration is still common there and all over today's Caribbean, where a large number of households (especially those run by women) rely for subsistence on the money sent home by relatives working abroad.

In the final part of the story the girl once again enacts a pre-oedipal fantasy stating that one day she will marry a "red-skin woman with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes, who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them" (11). With this woman she will live near the sea in a mud hut complete with all

the necessary household utensils. Not only will they be mother and daughter, but also like children together in a pre-colonial landscape, as they will "hide in bushes and throw hardened cow dung at people we don't like, climb coconut trees, pick coconuts, eat and drink the food and water from the coconuts we have picked, throw stones in the sea ..." (12). It is an image of innocence and security, a static paradisiacal atmosphere conveyed by the repetition of "every day" and "every night."

This woman the girl will marry is the powerful mother we recurrently encounters in Kincaid's text, she "knows many things" (12), but here she does not use her powers to hurt, she is above all a loving mother to the child:

To me she will only tell about things that would never dream of making me cry; and every night, over and over, she will tell me something that begins, "Before you were born." I will marry a woman like this, and every night, every night, I will be completely happy. (12)

However, there is something half-hidden in the text anticipating the inevitable disruption of this perfect union. Among the objects listed in the description of the hut there is "one picture of two women standing on a jetty, one picture of the same two women embracing, one picture of the same two women waving goodbye" (12). In these pictures we easily recognise the mother and daughter in the last

scene of *Annie John*, where the girl boards the boat that will take her to England, away from her native island and from the suffocating love of her mother. This short story indicates that pre-oedipal love cannot last and that it inevitably leads to separation and sorrow, for here Jamaica Kincaid seems to be saying that innocence lost (both pre-oedipal and pre-colonial) can never be recovered again.

The following story, "At Last", constitutes a mysterious narrative full of indecipherable symbols. It is made up of two parts, "The House" and "The Yard", respectively hinting at the indoor world of emotion and at the outdoor world of metaphysics.

The first part is a strange mother-daughter dialogue in which it is not clear who is speaking, as the two voices alternate and sometimes blend together to insist on a pre-oedipal union that Kincaid's protagonist longs for and at the same time runs away from because she is suffocated by it. The mother tells the daughter about their union at a time the girl's memory cannot fully grasp and the girl constantly asks for confirmation of her mother's love. The text opens with a list describing the house in which mother and daughter had lived. The passage evokes degradation, loss and death, as if the house itself had participated in the painful end of the love affair between mother and daughter, as if it embodied the daughter's inner self consumed by abandonment:

I lived in this house with you: the wood shingles, unpainted, weather-beaten, fraying; the piano, a piece of furniture now, collecting dust; the bed in which all the children were born; a bowl of flowers, alive, then dead; a bowl of fruit, but then all eaten ... (13)

The voice of the mother passes repeatedly from the house to the daughter as if she knew that they are the same thing and, in the same way as she searches for her lost daughter, she searches for some letters:

Where are the letters that brought the bad news? Where are they? These glasses commemorate a coronation. What are you now? A young woman. But what are you really? A young woman. I know how hard that is. If only everything would talk. The floorboards made a nice pattern when the sun came in ... (13)

The mother tells her version of the story, of her own loss and sense of guilt, the feeling that something went wrong: "This beautiful carved shelf: you can touch it now. Why did I not let you eat with your bare hands when you wanted to?" (14). It seems that the mother now regrets her strictness and blames herself for the loss of the union with the daughter. The two voices alternate in a painful succession of questions and answers that express the daughter's helplessness and rage as well as the mother's love and rejection.

At times the voices blend into one so that we hardly know where one ends and the other begins, as in the following passage, where the mother could be seeking to give an explanation to the daughter, or, in a fantasy about red ants eating a newly-born baby, the daughter could be venting her jealousy at having been neglected after the birth of her siblings:<sup>6</sup>

What passed between us then? You asked me if it was always the way it is now. But I don't know. I wasn't always here. I wasn't here in the beginning. We held hands once and were beautiful. But what followed? Sleepless nights, oh, sleepless nights. A baby was born on Thursday and was almost eaten, eyes first, by red ants, on Friday ... (14)

As in the other stories, the mother is a contradictory character, at once nurturing the daughter and sucking her life away. If in one passage she seems to be trying to reassure the daughter on the reliability of her love - "Why were all the doors closed so tight shut? But they weren't closed" (14) -, in another she seems to be confessing the egotistical and narcissistic character of that love - "Was it like a carcass? Did you feed on it? Yes. Or was it like a skeleton? Did you live in it? Yes, that too" (15). This mother is again

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<sup>6</sup> We know from *My Brother* that Kincaid's youngest sibling was actually attacked by red ants shortly after he was born.

a dangerous creature, who has the power to change into other forms and to play cruel tricks, as demonstrated by the obsessive concern of the daughter with a light, recalling the description of the jablesse's eyes in the previous story: "What was that light?" (13), "What was the light again?" (13), "But the light, where does it come from, the light?" (14), "It's the light again, now in flashes" (15), "But the light. What of the light?" (17). The mother herself recalls her powers: "I wore blue, bird blue, and at night I would shine in the dark" (17), "Sometimes I appeared as a man. Sometimes I appeared as a hoofed animal, stroking my own brown, shiny back"(17). And memory is painful because the light, the power, is now extinguished:

I crossed the open sea alone at night on a steamer. What was my name - I mean the name my mother gave to me - and where did I come from? My skin is now coarse. What pity. What sorrow. I have made a list. I have measured everything. I have not lied.  
But the light. What of the light?  
Splintered. Died. (17)

This passage, which closes the first part of the story, is ambiguous and could be read in different ways. Either the mother or the daughter could be speaking. In Kincaid's work both the mother and the daughter undertake a solitary journey by sea - the first from her native island, Dominica, to Antigua, and the second from Antigua to



England - and both of them are obsessed with listing and measuring as a way of fixing reality and holding on to something physical. We have already seen that in the case of the mother the light could be interpreted as a sign of her magic powers lost with the loss of her daughter. If we read the passage as narrated by the daughter, then the light comes to symbolise irrecoverable pre-oedipal love. However, the text also suggests a third reading. The voice could be heard as the mother and the daughter in unison, standing for all the Black women who crossed the sea in the Middle Passage, taken away from Africa to become slaves in the New World. Then the light would symbolise origin, the roots that were lost when the names given by mothers were replaced by those given by slave masters in an attempt to erase African culture.

The conclusion of the first part announcing the extinction of the light anticipates the other part, where an ambiguous portrait of children playing in a school yard is inserted into a larger meditation on nature and death. Human agency (seen as an intrusion in the natural world) is invalidated by the eternal cycle of life and death:

Someone has piled up stones, making a small enclosure for a child's garden, and planted a child's flowers, bluebells. Yes, but a child is too quick, and the bluebells fall to the cool earth, dying and living in perpetuity. (18-19)

Even if the narrator seems to find final relief in the acceptance of impermanence, she expresses anger at the awareness of death's annihilation of experience: "But at last, at last, to whom will this view belong? Will the hen, stripped of its flesh, its feathers scattered perhaps to the four corners of the earth, its bones molten and sterilized, one day speak? And what will it say? I was a hen? I had twelve chicks? One of my chicks, named Beryl, took a fall?" (18). The life of any living creature, the author seems to say, - either a mother and a daughter or a hen and its chicks - comes to nothing in the end, because the "stillness comes and the stillness goes. The sun. The moon" (19).

A similar meditation on nature, its innocence and cruelty, the inevitability of death which makes all things superfluous is at the conclusion of another story, "Wingless". It seems that Kincaid's protagonist resorts to nature when she senses she is not able to understand and cope with her position in the world, specifically her relation with "the woman I love, who is so much bigger than me" (27). Like nature, the girl is at once innocent and cruel, she senses the danger in her own self, because she is "a defenseless and pitiful child" (23). This is the great contradiction of life and human nature, where there are no essential opposite qualities, good or evil, but rather a combination of the two. Life, then, cannot be understood

according to Western binaries, because there is so much more to life than that.

As she grows up, the girl becomes aware of the vulnerability of her own nature, of her own power and powerlessness:

My charm is limited, and I haven't learned to smile yet. I have picked many flowers and then deliberately torn them to shreds, petal by petal. I am so unhappy, my face is so wet, and still I can stand up and walk and tell lies in the face of terrible punishments. (23)

Jamaica Kincaid explores the position of the human subject at two levels, historical and metaphysical, articulating the girl's experience both in relation to nature and in relation to a colonial environment. The mother-daughter theme serves as a backdrop, providing the tension of the mystery of origin and individual development, the great eternal union and breach between the world and the self.

The first scene of the story is set in a classroom, where the children are reading the story of a little chimney-sweep who turns into a water-baby.<sup>7</sup> The importance of the colonial setting is marked by the insistence of the narrator on the amount of British-based learning inflicted upon Antiguan children:

The children have already learned to write their names in beautiful penmanship. They have

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the parallels between "Wingless" and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* see Ferguson 1994, 8-9.

already learned how many farthings make a penny, how many pennies make a shilling, how many shillings make a pound, how many days in April, how many stone in a ton. (21)

Historical location is paramount to the understanding of the protagonist's perception of herself. She is growing up, she is in a stage of becoming and she still doesn't know what she is going to be. She sees herself as a baby in the maternal womb as she swims "in a shaft of light, upside down" (21) and she senses that she could become either an oppressor or a powerless victim:

Perhaps I stand on the brink of a great discovery, and perhaps after I have made my great discovery I will be sent home in chains. Then again, perhaps my life is as predictable as an insect's and I am in my pupa stage. (21)

The alternative, it appears, lies between agency and the lack of it, although at the end there is not much difference between the two, as both end in the stillness of death. It is interesting to note, though, that agency is associated with colonial violence. The protagonist fears that in the course of her discovery, which is articulated as self-discovery, she might become an oppressor and be then punished for her actions, like Christopher Columbus, who was put in chains and sent back to Spain from the Caribbean by the Spanish monarchy emissary Francisco de Bobadilla. Again, the child fluctuates between

the perception of herself as innocent and cruel. She senses her powerlessness as she, a colonial child, is attracted to and wishes to please her teacher. This woman is clearly a reproduction of the powerful maternal figure, careless as she plays on the child's innocence:

'Don't eat the strings on bananas - they will wrap around your heart and kill you.'

'Oh. Is that true?'

'No.'

'Is that something to tell children?'

'No. But it's so funny. You should see how you look trying to remove all the strings from the bananas with your monkey fingernails. Frightened?'

'Frightened. Very frightened.' (24)

This exchange, so similar to the mother-daughter exchanges in other stories, shows the cruelty of colonial schooling, in which children are not only forced to learn things which have little to do with them in order to have them mimic Western children, as pointed out in the first part of the story, but in which their efforts are constantly derided by a racist logic which produces self-loathing.<sup>8</sup> The traditional

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<sup>8</sup> The implications of colonial education are nowhere better explained than in Kincaid's article "On Seeing England for the First Time." Of her experience at school, she recalls: "When my teacher showed us the map, she asked us to study it carefully, because no test we would ever take would be complete without this statement: 'Draw a map of England'. I did not know then that the statement 'Draw a map of England' was something far worse than a declaration of war, for a flat-out declaration of war would have put me on alert. In fact, there was no need for war - I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of

association of Black people with monkeys responds to a Western rationale by which Blacks are condemned to a lower level on the scale of civilisation. In contrast, in Afro-centric narratives the monkey is usually a trickster capable of mocking authority. In this story, however, the trickster is more likely to be the woman, as powerful as the mother who can make a man drop dead by "a red, red smile" (25). The anger, fear and admiration of the girl for the woman, who, in the figure of the teacher and the mother, symbolises both the authority of colonial power, obeah magic and biological ancestry, is articulated as a fantasy of power and revenge:

I shall grow up to be a tall, graceful, and  
altogether beautiful woman, and I shall impose  
on large numbers of people my will and also,  
for my own amusement, great pain. (22)

In this story, Kincaid's protagonist tries to enact a separation from her mother. She envisages herself as a separate being, projecting herself in the external world of school and nature, but in the end she finds herself paralysed in both worlds.

The personal quest for the self by Kincaid's protagonist is articulated in contrast to and set against a superficial middle-class world (presumably white) in the story entitled "Holidays". Here the

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a process that would result in my erasure - not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel awe and small whenever I heard the word 'England': awe at the power of its existence, small because I was not from it" (14).

narrator is physically (and apparently also emotionally) far removed from the maternal world. She is in a holiday house, although it is not clear whether on a Caribbean island or in a North American village;<sup>9</sup> likewise, her sense of her own identity, even of her physical presence, is feeble. If we thereby accept the hypothesis that this story is set far from the Caribbean, specifically in a Western environment, then the self-void perceived by the narrator would be the consequence of geographical and cultural displacement. The woman<sup>10</sup> tries to gain a sense of self by taking note and enumerating in detail each single movement she performs and then she tries to demonstrate to herself the physical presence of her body by checking it. As she cannot see her head, though she can feel it now, she places her hands on top of it, but self-discovery seems to throw her back to the maternal world, as she suddenly remembers that "if you sit with your hands on your head, you will kill your mother" (31). Self-discovery, then, is associated with matricide.<sup>11</sup> It is as if the woman could not exist fully unless she kills her mother, even in

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<sup>9</sup> Moira Ferguson (1994, 12-13) identifies the setting of the story with Dominica, the native island of Kincaid's mother, while Diane Simmons (1994, 84) argues that the narrator is in New York. However, it is most likely that two settings alternate in the various sections of the story, either physically or simply through memory and fantasy.

<sup>10</sup> The text gives the impression that the narrator here is not the young girl of the other stories. It is more likely to be the young woman protagonist of the later novel *Lucy*, who lives in North America but is still haunted by the memory of her native place.

<sup>11</sup> According to feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, the bond between mother and daughter must be broken so that the daughter can become woman. Therefore, in order to achieve her own identity, the daughter wishes to murder her own mother.

memory. Matricide is not enacted, though, as the narrator removes her hands from her head and affirms her resistance to the Western view of certain cultural practices: "I have many superstitions. I believe all of them" (31).

If the affirmation of one's own identity is made impossible by the maternal bond, it is even less likely to be achieved by a narrator who is burdened with colonial history:

Standing in front of the fireplace, I try to write my name in the dead ashes with my big toe. I cannot write my name in the dead ashes with my big toe. My big toe, now dirty, I try to clean by rubbing it vigorously on a clean royal-blue rug. The royal-blue rug now has a dark spot, and my big toe has a strong burning sensation.  
(30)

As a colonised subject, the narrator has been robbed of her name and she cannot affirm her identity on the dead ashes of her people's history, but her body can leave a mark, a sign of the pain for the dispossession suffered, on the royal-blue rug that symbolises the British Empire. The narrator's and her despoiled people's painful quest for the self is then set against the apparently strong sense of the self of a middle-class Westerner:

'I have the most sensible small suitcase in New York.



'I have the most sensible small car in New York.

'I will put my sensible small suitcase in my sensible small car and drive on a sensible and scenic road to the country.

'In the country, I live in a sensible house.

'I am a sensible man ...(32)

Western people ironically portrayed by Kincaid in this story are very much like the white tourists of *A Small Place*, so full of themselves, so affected, and unconnected with the natural world. And as the tourists of *A Small Place* are made to feel ugly by Kincaid's sharp attack, the people in this feel "so pained, so unsettled" (33) by thinking back, perhaps sensing the superficiality of their existence. However, there seems to be no positive alternative, for colonised people are unable to claim an identity and Western people are caught in the meaninglessness of their lives. Not even love offers an alternative to their inner void; on the contrary, love is dangerous, as suggested in the story of the man who went blind when he tried to kill himself after having murdered a woman out of jealousy (35-36).

The following story is a long-sentence monologue like "Girl", where, like in "At Last", the narrator is polyphonic, as the voices of the mother and the daughter meld together. The title, "The Letter from Home", echoes other elements in Kincaid's work. We know from *Lucy* that letters imply painful communication between mother

and daughter; the mother's letters functioning as a threat to the emotional stability of the protagonist because they engender a sense of guilt and announce the evils that could befall the daughter far from home. On the other hand, the daughter's letters are often letters which are not meant to be sent because they betray a weakness that would be dangerous to disclose to the powerful mother.

The story begins with a listing of the domestic activities performed during the day: "I milked the cows, I churned the butter, I stored the cheese, I baked the bread ..." (37). Then, slowly, the realism of simple domestic life gives place to a tense narrative full of surrealistic images which echo obeah magic and the magical powers of the mother: "my heart beat loudly *thud! thud!*, tiny beads of water gathered on my nose, my hair went limp, my waist grew folds, I shed my skin ..." (37).<sup>12</sup> As the account of the actions performed goes on, we do not know whether the mother or the daughter is speaking. The title, of course, suggests that the letter comes from the mother's home in the Caribbean, but it is also possible that, like in the previous story, the narrator is located somewhere else, physically or even only emotionally far from the mother's world, having enacted a

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<sup>12</sup> Wendy Dutton observes that the idea of a skinless woman, a recurring image in Kincaid's stories, "calls to mind someone who is exposed, raw, a painful receptacle for the experiences that touch her. This takes the reader one step closer to reckoning with the curious nature of an adolescent breakdown" (1989, 408-409).

separation in the attempt to find her yet unknown self, a home of her own. Some parts of the text give the impression that the mother is again trying to impose her will by the careful repetition of what she does everyday, which is what the daughter should do as well: "I ate my food, I chewed each mouthful thirty-two times, I swallowed carefully ... " (38). In *Annie John* we learn of the mother's obsessions regarding table manners, so it is possible that she is trying to remind the daughter of the habits learned in childhood, to threaten her through memory with the aim to gain obedience even through distance. It is also possible, although unlikely, that the daughter is trying to show obedience to her mother by a report of her actions. Knowing her, though, we are aware that once separation is achieved, the daughter would not be willing to show any sign of obedience because this would mean revealing weakness. However, it is not the mother's voice but rather the daughter's that we recognise in the passage, expressing first loss and then gain of bodily self-perception, echoing a similar passage in the previous story: "I entered a room, I felt my skin shiver, then dissolve, I lighted a candle, I saw something move, I recognized the shadow to be my own hand, I felt myself to be one thing ... " (38). As in other stories, Kincaid's protagonist appears to be searching for a sense of completeness and communion with the natural world, a stable metaphysical location to avert the threat of the overpowering mother.

The quest for the self is articulated as a symbolic dream-like journey in "What I Have Been Doing Lately". The journey is recursive; it keeps going back to the beginning of a sequence where the narrator is lying in bed and the doorbell rings. She goes to the door, but she finds that no one is there, so she begins wandering through an unknown world. In the course of her journey, she encounters various elements which are recurrent in Kincaid's work: a monkey, a body of water, a woman who resembles her mother. Yet the landscape is unfamiliar, both in the first and the second account of the wanderings. It is as if she cannot find what she is looking for, and is always drawn back to the starting point. However, the two accounts, which at the beginning seem to be two versions of the same experience, differ in many ways, suggesting that if the narrator cannot find what she wants, at least the experiences operate some sort of change in her. The first account is characterised by the passivity of the narrator, who walks around noticing things as if she was a spectator, whereas in the second account she is the agent of what happens to her. For example, the first time she sees the monkey, she looks at it and comments: "Ah, a monkey. Just look at that. A monkey" (41), whereas, in the second account, she throws stones at it and the monkey answers by throwing stones at her.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A similar episode of a monkey throwing back stones also appears in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, where the characterisation of the protagonist does

Significantly, what draws her back at the end of the first account is meeting a woman that she believes to be her mother. This woman does in fact strongly recall the mother portrayed in Kincaid's work: she appears on the horizon as if she was a magic vision, she has a powerful look and she speaks in the same enquiring and suspicious tones: "It's you. Just look at that. It's you. And just what have you been doing lately?" (43). Even more significantly, one of the replies the narrator first considers but then holds back is one that ironically and overtly defies the mother: "I have been listening carefully to my mother's words, so as to make a good imitation of a dutiful daughter" (43). It is a maternal figure, then, that prevents her from following her journey the first time, whereas in the second account she is held back by exhaustion. This suggests that the daughter's achievement of a separate self is hindered by the mother, but is actually prevented by the daughter herself, who is not able to bear the pain of separation from the mother/motherland:

I thought, If only just around the bend I would  
see my house and inside my house I would find  
my bed, freshly made at that, and in the kitchen  
I would find my mother or anyone else that I  
loved making me a custard. (45)

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indeed very much recall the girl in "What I Have Been Doing Lately." This is one of the examples of how Jamaica Kincaid draws inspiration from her childhood world (the monkey episode was one of the stories her mother used to tell her about her life in Dominica) and re-elaborates the sources several times and always differently.

Agency seems to exhaust her, she cannot go on by herself in a new world; the nostalgia is too strong and she finally gives up and goes back to the beginning:

I felt very sad so I sat down. I felt so sad that I rested my head on my own knees and smoothed my own head. I felt so sad I couldn't imagine feeling any other way again. I said, I don't like this. I don't want to do this anymore. And I went back to lying in bed, just before the doorbell rang. (45)

With "Blackness," one of the most difficult pieces of the collection, the quest for the self begins a new movement towards achievement. This is once again a journey, but a journey through illness. The first two parts express devastation at two levels: personal and political. A third articulates maternal acknowledgement of the daughter's identity, so that in the last part the process of healing is finally realised. The story is very contradictory however and does not seem to offer a positive conclusion to the protagonist's journey because, if she finally finds peace in healing, at the same time she is also erased.<sup>14</sup>

Blackness, articulated as psychological malaise in the first part, recalls the state of numbness in the chapter entitled "The Long Rain"

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<sup>14</sup> Giovanna Covi suggests that the text disrupts the Western order based on binary oppositions, joining the opposites in the concept of "blackness." The story, then, would articulate "identity together with annihilation of the self" (1990, 347).

in *Annie John*.<sup>15</sup> Like rain, blackness falls "in silence and yet is deafening" (46). It brings deep grief, "visible and yet invisible" (46), a depression that overcomes not only the girl but also the whole environment, suggesting that individual grief is part of a more general devastation involving the community: "The blackness fills up a small room, a large field, an island, my own being" (46). At a metaphysical level, it is the absurdity of existence, the essence of the life cycle, the all-inclusive universal matter which annihilates the individual:

The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces  
and soon the significant word and event recede  
and eventually vanish: in this way I am  
annihilated and my form becomes formless and  
I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing  
matter. (46-47)

The narrator finds herself erased, she can no longer say her own name; she has lost her voice.

Parallel to the metaphysical meaning, it is possible to read an allusion to a far more concrete political question of racial identity.

The narrator says:

In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I  
have been my individual self, carefully  
banishing randomness from my existence, then

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<sup>15</sup> For a comparative analysis of the two pieces see Simmons 1994, 90-93.

I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am  
one with it... (47)

We know from other novels that Kincaid's protagonist grows up in Antigua and then as a young woman goes to North America. She passes from a mainly black community, where she starts perceiving herself as a subordinate subject in a colonial environment, to a predominantly white world, where Western people identify her as a Black person. The sense of individuality, then, is threatened by the Western assumption of the Black race as an undistinguished body and the subsequent identification of the person with the race. Kincaid's text is an enquiry into the notion of identity as it has been traditionally defined. Her protagonist does not understand clearly where the self begins. Sometimes she cannot even distinguish the boundary between her body and the rest of matter: "How frightened I became once on looking down to see an oddly shaped, ash-colored object that I did not recognize at once to be a small part of my own foot" (47). She perceives herself as separate and rejoices in that sensation, but at the same time she feels frightened. Here the mother-daughter theme emerges again, symbolising the possibility of affirmation of an independent self. The girl is still caught in the terrible dilemma that makes her strive for independence while dying from longing. She is caught up in blackness because passion prevents empowerment:



And again, and again, the heart - buried deeply  
as ever in the human breast, its four chambers  
exposed to love and joy and pain and the small  
shafts that fall with desperation in between.  
(48)

In the second part of the story, blackness is more explicitly identified with the colonial malaise. The devastation brought by colonialism is suggested in the image of "bands of men who walked aimlessly, their guns and cannons slacked at their sides, the chambers emptied of bullets and shells" (48), who "blotted out the daylight and night fell immediately and permanently" (49). In her symbolic dream, the narrator seems to mourn the destruction of the pre-colonial landscape and the annihilation of an old civilisation. The bands of men are then seen slowly disappearing over the horizon after having "destroyed the marble columns that strengthened the foundations of my house" (49). The post-colonial landscape is thus envisaged as a waste land, devastated for no reason and then abandoned by the invaders.

In the third part, a mother describes her daughter. However, hers is not the voice of the overbearing, powerful mother encountered in other stories. This woman speaks of her daughter in adoration, she is able to see deeply inside her and allow an independent development of the daughter's identity. Besides, and most significantly, she is free from the requirements of colonial

indoctrination. She is a loving and nurturing mother, but one whose love is not suffocating. Instead, her love is empowering for the child, who can now be an active protagonist in the obeah world. Like her mother, in fact, she is now gifted with the power of transformation: "her mouth twists open in a cruel smile, her teeth becoming pointed and sparkling, the roof of her mouth bony and ridged ..." (50).

Such power, though, which distinguishes her from ordinary people, brings with it a sense of loss, the awareness of death that embraces all things:

My child rushes from death to death, so familiar  
a state is it to her. Though I have summoned  
her into a fleeting existence, one that is  
perilous and subject to the violence of chance,  
she embraces time as it passes in numbing  
sameness, bearing in its wake a multitude of  
great sadness. (51)

Here, the maternal voice stops to leave room for the daughter's personal account of recovery. It is a "silent voice" that guides her through her process of healing, suggesting that, rather than by separation, healing is achieved by a return to the maternal womb. The silent voice recalls the semiotic embracing of the narrator as she gets rid of hatred for her mother produced by metaphysical despair and colonial devastation and learns to love her again:

I hear the silent voice; it stands opposite the blackness and yet it does not oppose the blackness, for conflict is not a part of its nature. I shrug off my mantle of hatred. In love I move toward the silent voice. I shrug off my mantle of despair. In love, again, I move ever toward the silent voice. I stand inside the silent voice. The silent voice enfolds me. The silent voice enfolds me so completely that even in memory the blackness is erased. (52)

Read from this perspective, the text seems to suggest that only by learning to love her mother again, by recuperating a love disrupted by the patriarchal colonial order, can a woman claim her own identity. However, the text is also very contradictory in its conclusion, as healing is finally described as self-erasure. The author, it appears, does not find in the return to the womb a satisfactory conclusion to her quest.

The bliss and the horror of maternal love become more explicit in the story entitled "My Mother." Here, the daughter is not the helpless child of previous stories, a passive receptor of her mother's will. Although she has not yet achieved a separate identity, she now senses its possibility. She does not belong to the world of childhood anymore, but she has not yet entered adulthood. She is at a stage of great changes and, as is typical of adolescents, she floats between antagonistic instincts and pre-oedipal longing, alternating defiance

and subjugation, matricidal desires and adoration. She wants to develop a separate self, yet she doesn't want to lose her mother. She would like to control her, but she finds her mother is always more powerful. Besides, at some point, it is her mother who puts distance between the two, and, finding that rejection too painful, the girl finally gives up her striving for a separate self and is drawn back to a fantasy of pre-oedipal bliss.<sup>16</sup> The story beautifully explores the issue of the need both to separate oneself from the mother, and yet to continue to identify with her.<sup>17</sup>

At the story's beginning, immediately after wishing her mother dead, the narrator begs her forgiveness, confessing, through the desperate anger towards her matricidal wish, the deepness of her love. It is because of this revelation of frailty that the powerful mother takes the child into her arm to console her (like Kincaid's mother herself, the mother is a wonderfully loving mother to her defenceless children, but becomes cruel when they show signs of independence), but her act is a strategy of revenge: "Placing her

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<sup>16</sup> According to Patricia Ismond, "My Mother" is "the mythologized burden of *Annie John*. It plots her progress through life in terms of this sense of her mother, to take the form of a journey extending from childhood right into the present struggle for survival." In its ultimate significance, the child-mother relationship is "a paradigm of the struggle between the self and the other, the tug between the yearning for completion and all outside us that seem to resist it, provoking, as Kincaid tells us, the will to master or be mastered. Beneath this struggle lies the final need for union" (1988, 338-339).

<sup>17</sup> Carole Boyce Davies argues that this story "pursues this maternal identification/separation fully. There is a need for bonding as there is for separate space. The ability of each to separate and thus grow ensures harmony" (1990, 59-73).

arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated" (53).<sup>18</sup>

The mother's love is claustrophobic, probably intentionally so, as the woman tries (either consciously or not) to punish the daughter for her matricidal wish. Caught in the clutches of this suffocating love, the narrator spends all her childhood, a period of timeless stasis, until the mother decides it is time for the daughter to stand on her own two feet, or until her obsession with her daughter's life changes to neglect for reasons unacknowledged by the girl (the parental neglect suffered by Kincaid after the birth of her siblings is introduced explicitly into her work only later):

I lay on her bosom, breathless, for a time uncountable, until one day, for a reason she has kept to herself, she shook me out and stood me under a tree and I started to breathe again. (53)

It is then that the physical changes of adolescence begin to appear in the girl, as well as the notion of the possibility of taking care of her own self:

Instantly I grew my own bosoms, small mounds at first, leaving a small, soft place between

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<sup>18</sup> A concern with physical closeness to the mother as a metaphor of approaching death is at the heart of the first chapter of *Annie John*.

them, where, if ever necessary, I could rest my own head. (53-54)

After that, mother and daughter are divided by the resentful memory of the girl's grief - "Between my mother and me now were the tears I had cried ..." (54) - and the intimacy of their pre-oedipal union is replaced by the caution (and hypocrisy) of adult relationships: "My mother and I watched each other carefully, always making sure to shower the other with words and deeds of love and affection" (54).

In the story's second part, an obeah ritual is performed by the mother in a suggested attempt to fill the distance between them. The girl is sitting on her mother's bed trying "to get a good look" at herself (54). She is still dependent on her mother (she sits on her bed), but she is experiencing the adolescent's narcissistic concentration on her own body. The mother darkens the room by shutting the windows and stuffing the crevices with black cloth and lighting candles all over the place, creating a "pink-like, yellow-like glow" (54). It is as if the mother were trying to understand what it was that had passed between them by evoking the shadow of the magic spell dividing them, or as if she were waiting for something to establish a connection between the two again:

Looming over us, much larger than ourselves,  
were our shadows. We sat mesmerized  
because our shadows had made a place

between themselves, as if they were making room for someone else. (54)

However, the mother's attempt is doomed to failure, as "nothing filled up the space between them" (54), and the light of the day soon makes the shadows vanish, signalling the inevitable evolutionary process of growing up. Thus, in the end, the girl is again sitting on the bed "trying to get a good look" at herself (55).

In the following part, the mother passes on her magical powers. As if she had finally accepted the girl's maturation, she transforms herself into a lizard and then instructs the daughter to do the same. The newly acquired power seems to place the daughter in a position that is no longer vulnerable: "now I too traveled along on my white underbelly, my tongue darting and flickering in the hot air" (55). The daughter can now defy the mother, mocking her mother as her mother mocked her when she was a child. In her process of becoming an adult, the girl has learned from her mother how to transform herself into something else, the art of feigning and lying, thereby replacing innocence with hypocrisy, all of which makes her feel powerful:

My mother and I were standing on the seabed side by side, my arms laced loosely around her waist, my head resting securely on her shoulder, as if I needed the support. To make sure she believed in my frailness, I sighed

occasionally - long soft sighs, the kind of sigh she had long ago taught me could evoke sympathy. In fact, how I really felt was invincible. (55-56)

However, her power is illusory. In fact, a wordless agreement has been established between the two: "I sent out my beautiful sighs, she received them; I leaned even more heavily on her for support, she offered her shoulder ..." (56). But when the daughter challenges the mother in overt defiance, she realises that the maternal power would always overcome hers:

My mother reached out to pass a hand over my head, a pacifying gesture, but I laughed and, with great agility, stepped aside. I let out a horrible roar, then a self-pitying whine. I had grown big, but my mother was bigger, and that would always be so. (56)

In the following part, full of enigmatic symbols, a surrealistic scene is described. Mother and daughter enter a cold, dark cave and, for years, the daughter lives there, trying to adapt to the hostile environment. As time goes by, she develops abilities that allow her to survive, however unhappily: "Eventually, I grew a special lens that would allow me to see in the darkest of darkness; eventually, I grew a special coat that kept me warm in the coldest of coldness" (57). The image of the cold cave suggests life as a separate person that



the daughter has to adapt to after separation from the mother has been enacted, it evokes the passage from the warmth of the pre-oedipal union to the isolation of adulthood. However, this piece could also be read from a different perspective as a metaphor for the coldness experienced by the Caribbean migrant in a hostile Western environment. We know from *Lucy* that, as a young woman, Kincaid's protagonist leaves her native island to go to North America where she has to adjust to a world which is predominantly white and hostile, to a new climate, to a new environment in general which differs in many aspects from the one familiar to her. In that novel, the mother reminds the girl through her letters of all the evils that could befall someone who leaves home and, whenever she senses the girl's unhappiness, in this novel as well as in other works, she mocks her weakness cruelly.

In "My Mother", when mother and daughter meet after some time, the mother says: "What a strange expression you have on your face. So cross, so miserable, as if you were living in a climate not suited to your nature" (57). The woman appears to be teasing the daughter either for her maternal dependency or for the difficult time she is having far from home. In both cases, the cave functions as a metaphor for the darkness that the subaltern subject (made subaltern both biologically and politically) has to experience in the process of formation of identity, and the mother is, once more,

affirming her superiority. Responding to the mother's provocation, the daughter builds a beautiful house on a deep hole, a trap which fails because the mother walks "up and down in every direction, even pounding her heel on the air" (58). No matter how far the daughter goes in her maturation and acquisition of power, the mother will always overcome her:

My mother has grown to an enormous height. I have grown to an enormous height also, but my mother's height is three times mine. Sometimes I cannot see from her breasts on up, so lost is she in the atmosphere. (58)

Physical separation later occurs in a scene reminiscent of the one concluding *Annie John*. The mother walks her daughter to the jetty and, after having placed her on a boat in care of the captain, she kisses her goodbye. In another of Kincaid's autobiographical stories, "Antigua Crossing," a similar voyage is described, when the daughter leaves her mother to visit her grandmother in Dominica. On arrival, she immediately recognises her grandmother, although she has never met her before, and, as she does in *Annie John*, the grandmother appears to be re-mothering the girl by protecting her with her magic powers, and thus healing the maternal loss.

During her childhood, Kincaid did leave her mother for the first time to go to her grandmother's house in Dominica with the aim of being relieved from a magic spell which the mother believed had

been cast upon her. In the story we are now examining, after the mother walks away, the girl is upset because they "had never been apart before" (59). Her pain at maternal rejection is deep and she starts making "plans to get off the boat" (59), but, when she realises that the boat is "encased in a large green bottle, as if it were about to decorate a mantelpiece" (59), she calms down and falls asleep. She seems to accept the inevitability of separation as a part of something larger, a pattern she has to fit into. The description of the encounter when she reaches her destination is reminiscent of the one with the grandmother, related in "Antigua Crossing":

I saw a woman with feet exactly like mine, especially around the arch of the instep. Even though the face was completely different from what I was used to, I recognized this woman as my mother. We greeted each other at first with great caution and politeness, but as we walked along, our steps became one, and as we talked, our voices became one voice, and we were in complete union in every other way. (59-60)

Once again, Kincaid's has brought her narrator back to a fantasy of pre-oedipal union: "I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began" (60). Once again, she has accomplished this fantasy by substituting the cruel mother for a loving one, one who is as powerful as the other, but who uses her

powers to help the child develop her own personality. This maternal figure, in fact, does not prevent separation, nor does she urge it. Instead, she lets nature follow its natural course: "As we walk through the rooms, we merge and separate, merge and separate; soon we shall enter the final stage of our evolution" (60). At the end of the story, mother and daughter live in eternal bliss "in a bower made from flowers whose petals are imperishable" (61), although the daughter is developing into a separate independent being with a life of her own, as signalled by the hummingbird that nests on her stomach, "a sign of my fertility" (61). As in other texts, the author seems to suggest that maternal love is essential to the development of an independent personality, to empowerment and agency, whereas, when such love is corrupted, be it by rejecting or suffocating, it denies room for growth and becomes a primal threat for a human being.

In the last story, "At the Bottom of the River," which entitles the collection, the protagonist's quest for the self is finally achieved. The narrator accepts the loss of her childhood world and reaches an understanding of metaphysical dimension. She learns to know and accept death, and she finally finds her place in history and creation. Emerging from a dream-world, she enters the symbolic order that empowers her to articulate her own name.

The narrator has a vision of a perilous terrain dominated by death; she explores the river, a symbol of life that flows mysteriously to collect itself in a pool at the end of the day, and she tries to discover its meaning in a human form, because the stream "awaits the eye, the hand, the foot that shall then give all this a meaning" (63). She examines two men, who could possibly provide an explanation, but she admits that none comes from them. One man evokes the image of the coloniser. He is incomplete because he responds to Western taxonomies and has not developed a sense of the natural world:

He cannot conceive of the union of opposites, or, for that matter, their very existence. He cannot conceive of flocks of birds in migratory flight, or that night will follow day and season follow season in a seemingly endless cycle, and the beauty and the pleasure and the purpose that might come from all this. He cannot conceive of the wind that ravages the coastline, casting asunder men and cargo, temporarily interrupting the smooth flow of commerce ... (63)

The other man, whose description evokes the carpenter father in *Annie John*, can appreciate metaphysical beauty and wonder at its mystery, but, for him also, everything comes to nothing: "But again and again he feels the futility in all that. For stretching out before him

is a silence so dreadful, a vastness, its length and breadth and depth immeasurable. Nothing" (68). Neither the coloniser, who "lives in a world bereft of its very nature" (63), or the colonised subject, who "contemplates the beauty in the common thing" (67), can fill the metaphysical void with meaning.

Cast out of the pre-oedipal paradise, the narrator has been shown the transcendence of life; now she sees death everywhere. Death is not simply the inevitable fate of all living things; it is immanent, it invalidates life itself and annihilates time:

Dead lay everything that had lived and dead also lay everything that would live. All had had or would have its season. And what should it matter that its season lasted five billion years or five minutes? (68)

Once again the source of the girl's grief is her mother, who has revealed to her that "life is the intrusion" into the eternal ubiquity of death and that "false are all appearances" (69). She has told her in a mocking and cruel tone that "death is natural" (71), something the girl protests, because she can see "that a tree is natural, that the sea is natural, that the twitter of a twittering bird is natural to a twittering bird" (71), whereas death bears no relation to those things, it is much more "like the earth spinning on its invisible axis" (72), an abstraction. The narrator expresses her grief at the loss of childhood, she mourns a world that she believed eternal: "glorious

moment upon glorious moment of contentment and joy and love running into each other and forming an extraordinary chain: a hymn sung in rounds" (74). Then, she turns back to the river (the stream of her own life) and looks at the bottom (her maturity), where she sees a house with an A-shaped roof (the symbolic order), that she has no desire to look inside, and a garden, where everything is still and real. She sees a light and a naked woman (herself) who leads her to contemplate a world where vision is clear and trusting, where there are no false appearances: "the light fell on everything, and everything seemed transparent, as if the light went through each thing, so that nothing could be hidden" (77). In this world (pre-colonial/pre-oedipal) opposites coexist in harmonious combination - "the sun and the moon shone at the same time" (77) - and no taxonomic logic has yet intervened; it is a world "not yet divided, not yet examined, not yet numbered, not yet dead" (78). Here the narrator can function, she can see herself clearly and has finally acquired agency:

I was not myself as I had once known myself to be: I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and bones and tissue and cells and vital organs but was made up of my will, and over my will I had complete dominion. (79)

She is no longer a helpless and confused child, no longer a subaltern subject within the logic of power; she has defied

disintegration and embraced multiplicity: "I stood as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that never could be destroyed" (80). She is now ready to enter the symbolic order (the house with an A-shaped roof evoking the alphabet): "I step into a room and I see that the lamp is lit. In the light of the lamp, I see some books, I see a chair, I see a table, I see a pen ..." (82). With a room of her own, the narrator is finally empowered to claim validation and articulate her identity: "I claim these things then - mine - and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth" (82).

In the beginning of her journey, the protagonist of *At the Bottom of the River* was an innocent child helplessly struggling with her longing for a pre-oedipal/pre-colonial world and with her quest for a separate empowered self. In the end, she has achieved her needs by finding a place in a new symbolic order and recovered the lost innocence and bliss of childhood in the wonder of creation.<sup>19</sup> The self has achieved maturity, a name can finally be claimed.

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<sup>19</sup> All of Kincaid's protagonists have a deep feeling for nature. The Caribbean landscape is represented as feminine and omnipotent and acts as a substitute for the biological mother.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Annie John*

#### Growing Up under Mother Empire

In *Annie John* many of the concerns suggested in *At the Bottom of the River* are made more explicit and accessible.<sup>1</sup> The conflict between the self and the mother/motherland is concretised in the experiences of a girl passing from childhood to adolescence in colonial Antigua. The title itself is indicative of the personal and political purport of the novel's concerns and of its highly autobiographical character, since the protagonist bears in her own name the weight of her biological and geographical origins: Annie is the first name of the protagonist's mother as well as of Kincaid's mother, whereas St. John's is the place in Antigua the protagonist and the author come from. If the mother-daughter theme evokes universal patterns of female development, the geographical/cultural location determines the treatment of such a theme, offering a

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<sup>1</sup> Although we do not share Wendy Dutton's opinion that "though it is immensely helpful in translating *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John* looks at the surface of things and lacks rationale, explanation, motivation" (1989, 407), it is undeniable, as she observes, that "*Annie John* is a kind of personification of *At the Bottom of the River*. It fleshes out the fantasy and the philosophy of *At the Bottom of the River*'s poetry, and between the two books there exists a dialogue of questions and answers. They ultimately read as companion pieces or sister texts" (406).

paradigm of psycho-social female development which responds to a reality marked by poverty, political oppression and African survivals. In her coming of age process, the protagonist has to come to terms not only with the emotional conflicts of awakening sexuality and impending maturity common to every adolescent, but also with the cultural conflicts of a land where race, class and gender are primal signifiers in the definition of identity and in the acquisition of agency and power.<sup>2</sup> In *Annie John*, Kincaid offers a portrayal of an environment that nurtures and sustains but becomes oppressive and threatening to its own children. The novel is episodic, marking the different phases of the girl's development, and divided into eight parts entitled as follows: "Figures in the Distance," "The Circling Hand," "Gwen," "The Red Girl," "Columbus in Chains," "Somewhere, Belgium," "The Long Rain," "A Walk to the Jetty."

The opening lines of the first chapter, "Figures in the Distance," introduce the novel's main concern: "For a short while during the year I was ten, I thought only people I did not know died" (3). The protagonist's subterranean fear of losing the bliss of childhood translates into a fixation on death. Unconsciously perceiving the impending changes in her life, the ten-year-old girl becomes

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that race, class and gender components are of minor importance in other societies, but in the Caribbean those issues have a particular and specific significance and weight, the territory being marked by a history of political, cultural and economic oppression of non-white races, as well as by a history of resistance which has maintained cultural survivals offering alternative definitions of self and gender.

obsessed with the idea of people dying around her. Death represents the disintegration of the certainties and the stability of infancy as well as the loss of the mother. In fact, maternal rejection inflects the text.

When the novel starts, the family is living temporarily in a house in a peripheral suburb of St. John's because their house needs "a new roof" (3). As Moira Ferguson notices, a "silent text" is thus hidden in the narrative: the birth of Kincaid's three brothers after she had been an only child for almost a decade (1994, 72). In the novel, however, which Kincaid admits to being autobiographical, no expansion of the one-child family occurs. Even so, the pain of parental neglect the author experienced is expressed throughout the chapters, for example through references to the house, that the father "built with his own hands" (3) needing an extension because, presumably, the family is growing and things are never going to be the same again for the young girl expelled from the centre and pushed to the fringes (St. John's periphery) of the world that once was hers alone. The responsibility for the rejection sensed by the girl is at first attributed to the father (a carpenter who builds the house and presumably enlarges the family), but Annie is soon forced to admit the mother's role in the disintegration of her paradise. Significantly enough, it is the mother who introduces her to death,

more specifically to children's death, evoking the possibility of the rupture of the mother-child bond and the vulnerability of children:

From our yard, I could see the cemetery. I did not know it was the cemetery until one day when I said to my mother that sometimes in the evening, while feeding the pig, I could see various small, sticklike figures, some dressed in black, some dressed in white, bobbing up and down in the distance. I noticed, too, that sometimes the black and white sticklike figures appeared in the morning. My mother said that it was probably a child being buried, since children were always buried in the morning. Until then, I had not known that children died.

(4)

Although Annie has never worried about dying, because in her apparently untouchable childhood world only adults she does not know can die, she is not unfamiliar with the dead. In fact, the mother, who is to Annie a wise god-like figure knowing all the mysteries of the world, has also introduced her to obeah beliefs to warn her against the dangers the dead could represent:

I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. Sometimes they showed up in a dream, but that wasn't so bad, because they usually only brought a warning, and in any case you

wake up from a dream. But sometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home, and even though they might not be able to come into your house, they might wait for you and follow you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them. My mother knew of many people who had died in such a way, including her own brother. (4)

Obeah beliefs and practices coexist side by side with Western beliefs and practices, and the mother's perfect mastery of the two initiates Annie into a non-conflictive acceptance of material and supernatural realities. For the moment though, Annie is more familiar with the supernatural than with the material world. She can easily accept the idea of meeting a dead person in the street, but she cannot yet conceive of the actual death of someone she knows, not to mention her own or her mother's death. Such a possibility, in fact, would threaten the stability of her world. And so it happens. Shortly after the family has moved back to their house, the young daughter of a friend of Annie's mother dies. This death marks the beginning of Annie's estrangement from her mother, Annie senior (mother and daughter bear the same name to indicate both the closeness of their union and the oppressive model the mother imposes on the daughter), when she takes an active part in the rituals. Such

participation is strongly indicative of Caribbean culture, where women are primarily involved in the life of the community. Indeed, it is Annie's mother who is taking the child to the doctor when she dies in her arms; it is her mother who asks her husband to make a coffin; who consoles the mourning mother; who organises the funeral; who bathes and dresses the dead girl and lays her in the coffin. For Annie, the mother's involvement in the course of events is traumatic at two levels. On the one hand, she has to face the fact that her mother, until then her unique object of desire, does not exist exclusively for her; she takes care of other people, she is a caring mother to other children. Furthermore, the mother's closeness to death and her active involvement in the burial of a child is physically disturbing to Annie, as it foreshadows her active/destructive role in Annie's passage from innocence to maturity. Therefore, after everything is over, Annie cannot bear the touch and especially the sight of her mother's hands "lying still in her lap" (6), where she probably sees degradation and death. Annie thus manifests rejection towards her mother in response to a perceived rejection on her part. The sense of loss experienced at home translates into near-adult socialisation outside the home. At school, she and her friends tell each other about deaths they had heard about, as in a secret ceremony to avert or control the feared event.

The association of death and maternal abandonment is a common pattern in the events Annie reports. When the mother of one of Annie's friends dies, Annie stops speaking to her, because she "seemed such a shameful thing, a girl whose mother had died and left her alone in the world" (8). Significantly, Annie notices that the woman who died was pregnant, associating family increase with betrayal and death. Her refusal to speak to the girl again reveals Annie's unspoken pain at maternal neglect and links to the vision of death in the mother's still hands. The mother, it is suggested, is already dead to the girl, because she has betrayed her by pregnancy and involvement in other children's death. Furthermore, Annie's mother is on such intimate terms with death, which suggests to Annie not only participation but, presumably, also (hidden) responsibility. Annie reports: "Not long after the little girl died in my mother's arms on the way to the doctor, Miss Charlotte, our neighbor across the street, collapsed and died while having a conversation with my mother" (8). Annie perceives, but does not want to admit, that mothers are responsible for the death of childhood:

The girl who sat at the desk next to mine suddenly stopped sucking her thumb because her mother had washed it in water in which a dead person had been given a bath. I told her that her mother must have been playing a trick on her, that I was sure the water was plain

water, since it was just the sort of trick my mother would play on me. But she had met my mother and she said she could see that my mother and her mother weren't alike at all. (8-9)

Annie stresses the trust she places in her mother, but this episode foreshadows the cruel tricks Annie's mother will soon be capable of playing on the daughter.

Annie's dread at sensing the relation between death and maternal betrayal translates into an obsessive desire to see a dead person. Therefore she begins to go to funerals, though without her parents' permission, behaviour that indicates her pull towards autonomy and constitutes the first expression of the loss of childhood innocence to be replaced by adult duplicity. Annie does not reveal her desires, she acts secretly and starts telling lies. The awareness of death changes her perception of reality. Since the world is not perceived as stable anymore and mothers are associated with the loss of stability, duplicity becomes a healthy defensive response, although, just like the mother portrayed in *At the Bottom of the River*, Annie's mother is not easily cheated. When, excited by the funeral of a girl her own age, Annie gets home late forgetting some errands, she tries to cover up with a lie, but gets punished instead. At this stage, though, Annie is punished very mildly; her mother is still a loving and nurturing one to her. Clearly,



the mother, whose behaviour towards the daughter will undergo a radical change with the girl's first physical signs of puberty, has no perception of Annie's intellectual maturation at this point.

The funeral of the humpbacked girl<sup>3</sup> marks Annie's first insight into the reality of death. Until then, she had only seen dead people she did not know, therefore she could not compare death with life. Now she can get a real understanding of what it means to be dead and she can describe her perception of death concretely as an image of stillness which is clearly distinguishable from the stillness of sleep:

My parents had just bought me a View-Master. The View-Master came with pictures of the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, Mt. Everest, and scenes of the Amazon river. When the View-Master worked properly, all the scenes looked as if they were alive, as if we could just step into the View-Master and sail down the Amazon River or stand at the foot of the pyramids. When the View-Master didn't work properly, it was as if we were looking at an ordinary, colorful picture. When I looked at this girl, it was as if the View-Master wasn't working properly. (11)

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<sup>3</sup> Diane Simmons notices that, in this chapter, all the girls who die or are associated with death follow a common pattern in their portrayals: they are "badly cared for and somehow deformed or peculiar" (1994, 106).

It is interesting to note that while Annie is showing signs of maturity with her independent behaviour and thinking, she is, at this stage, still unaware of colonial intrusions. She absently reports: "We sang a hymn - "All things Bright and Beautiful" - and her mother said it was the first hymn the humpbacked girl had learned to sing by heart" (11). Annie does not acknowledge the paradoxical connection between the Anglican hymn, which praises the perfection of God's creation, and the girl's deformity and death.<sup>4</sup> But despite the protagonist's blindness, Kincaid's sarcasm is evident.

In the second chapter, "The Circling Hand," Annie shows how the paradise of her childhood was first created and then destroyed by the mother. She describes the wonderful bliss of her life as a child, reporting the daily activities of her family. Elements of Antiguan culture and colonial intrusion modulate the text. Though poverty and political domination do not overtly come into play, their presence and connection are hinted at in the description of everyday life. For example, Annie recalls that every weekday her father would start his long working day "at the stroke of seven by the Anglican church bell" (the sound of the Anglican bell, a reminder of British intrusion, is a recurring element in the text, accompanying various

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<sup>4</sup> The hymn goes: "The cold wind in the winter,/ The pleasant summer sun./ The ripe fruits in the garden,/ He made them every one./ He gave us eyes to see them,/ And lips that we might tell/ How great is God Almighty,/ Who has made all things Well" (Ferguson 1994, 11).

moments of the protagonists' life) and that each morning he would step outside and bathe in cold water in "the little shed he had built for us as a bathroom" (12). In the same way, allusions to gender difference are used to introduce the protective maternity of Annie's happy childhood:

If I had been a boy, I would have gotten the same treatment, but since I was a girl, and on top of that went to school only with other girls, my mother would always add some hot water to my bathwater to take off the chill. (13-14)

Whereas being a female will prove fatal to the girl, causing maternal rejection during puberty, as long as Annie is a child her mother is very loving and caring, their union springing precisely from their common femaleness. Annie reports of bodily closeness and mutual love, with a lot of touching, caressing and kissing. They would bathe together and the mother would protect her with obeah ceremonies to cast away the evil spells of the women with whom the father had had children out of wedlock, a typical reality of Caribbean society<sup>5</sup> (in Kincaid's life, the father later turns out to be a stepfather). Annie would spend the day following her mother in adoration, "observing the way she did everything" (15). The mother is a model of

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<sup>5</sup> In the Caribbean, a considerable number of households are female-headed, and it is typical of men to have children from different women and not to acknowledge them (see Senior 1991).

perfection for the child; she lovingly includes her in everything and explains the world for her: "When we went to the grocer's, she would point out to me the reason she bought each thing. I was shown a loaf of bread or a pound of butter from at least ten different angles" (15). Like the mother in "Girl," she tries to provide a model of strength and self-determination to prevent her daughter from being a powerless victim in a system in which she is already and inevitably a subaltern. In a passage which evokes colonial politics metonymically, the mother protects the family from degradation and rejection:

When we went to market, if that day she wanted to buy some crabs she would inquire from the person selling them if they came from near Parham, and if the person said yes my mother did not buy the crabs. In Parham was the leper colony, and my mother was convinced that the crabs ate nothing but the food from the lepers' own plates. If we were then to eat the crabs, it wouldn't be long before we were lepers ourselves and living unhappily in the leper colony. (15)

Another sign of the mother's determination to provide better living conditions for her daughter is the fact that, although the family is poor (poverty emerges in the descriptions of daily life), the girl never suffers or perceives poverty, and she is always well-dressed and properly fed.

The perception young Annie has of her own self is also provided by the mother. Annie sees herself through her mother's storytelling when the two indulge in incursions into Annie's past, looking at the objects lovingly kept in a trunk. Annie experiences tremendous pleasure each time her mother removes from the trunk clothes, jewellery, school certificates, all the things that had belonged to her "starting from just before I was born" (20), and tells her stories about herself. Through her mother, Annie acquires a sense of self-worth: "No small part of my life was so unimportant that she hadn't made a note of it, and now she would tell it to me over and over again" (22).<sup>6</sup> This private ritual between mother and daughter stresses the centrality of storytelling in Caribbean and Black culture, and underlines the role it plays in the formation of identity and the self-determination it produces.

It is as well significant that mother and daughter share the same trunk. Before containing Annie's childhood things, the trunk had served to ship her mother's possessions to Antigua when she had left her father's house in Dominica to start an independent life. Thus, the story of the trunk, now containing Annie's life, functions as a connection between the mother's and the daughter's life, marking

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<sup>6</sup> Referring to the African-American community, Patricia Hill Collins affirms that Black mothers "try to protect their daughters from the dangers that lie ahead by offering them a sense of their own unique self-worth," and observes that "many contemporary Black women writers report the experience of being singled out, of being given a sense of specialness at an early age which encouraged them to develop their talents" (1990, 127).

the continuity of their experience as women. Annie too will use a trunk when she leaves home to start a new life. Autonomy and self-determination are metonymised in the trunk, a precious container to protect the self from (ship)wreck.

The father is peripheral to Annie's relationship with her mother. He is there to share laughter and moments of harmony and happiness with his wife and daughter, but to Annie's eyes he is a lonely and unhappy figure because he is excluded from the intensely loving relationship between mother and daughter: "How terrible it must be for all the people who had no one to love them so and no one whom they loved so, I thought. My father, for instance" (22-23). Since he was abandoned by his mother and lived with his grandmother, who eventually died, he is seen by Annie as if he was incomplete, because lacking maternal love, "for, no matter how much my own mother loved him, it could never be the same" (24). Annie's love for the two differs, because, whereas she can see the humanity of her father, and love him for what he is, she adores her mother as if she was a mythical figure and she craves for a merging:

Her head looked as if it should be on a sixpence. What a beautiful long neck, and long plaited hair, which she pinned up around the crown of her head because when her hair hung down it made her too hot. Her nose was the shape of a flower on the brink of opening. Her

mouth, moving up and down as she ate and talked at the same time, was such a beautiful mouth I could have looked at it forever if I had to and not mind. Her lips were wide and almost thin, and when she said certain words I could see small parts of big white teeth - so big, and pearly, like some nice buttons on one of my dresses. (19)

In Annie's childhood paradise, the mother is the all-embracing goddess to be adored, while Annie is a mimicking angel, blessed by the powerful maternal love. Such childish passivity may explain the mother's radical change when Annie reaches puberty. To prepare her daughter for life, the mother must push her towards a perception of herself as a separate being. Nonetheless, she does so in a way that is deeply painful to the daughter, revealing contradictions which suggest that the mother is unable to handle the daughter's development into a sexual being. These contradictions eventually link to the mother's own vulnerability as a Black woman in a colonised country.

When Annie reaches puberty, she is thrown into a state of emotional turmoil as she becomes aware of her physical changes and observes her mother's violent reaction. Unable to talk openly with the daughter about her development, the mother casts her out from under her protective wing without giving any explanation. To

Annie, the mother's rejection is a tragic mystery. Until this moment, her life has been contained in her mother's life (as we saw, the mother's trunk is used to store Annie's memorabilia). Now, suddenly, the mother calls a halt to trunk-ceremonies - "You and I don't have time for that anymore" (27) - and look-alike dresses - "It's time you had your own clothes. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me" (26). Burdened with a history of women's sexual vulnerability in general and the sexual exploitation of Black women in particular, the mother is unable to deal with the sexual development of her daughter. Annie, for her part, still caught in the memory of quasi-pre-oedipal bliss, refuses to take a step forward by herself: "... my mother informed me that I was on the verge of becoming a young lady, so there were quite a few things I would have to do differently. She didn't say exactly just what it was that made me on the verge of becoming a young lady, and I was so glad of that, because I didn't want to know" (26). In an effort to obliterate the daughter's corporeality (and, by extension, her "blackness"), the mother tries to mould her into an ideal of Western womanhood, which clearly contrasts with Annie's emerging personality:

Because of this young-lady business, instead of days spent in perfect harmony with my mother, I trailing in her footsteps, she showering down on me her kisses and affection and attention, I was now sent off to learn one



thing and another. I was sent to someone who knew all about manners and how to meet and greet important people in the world. This woman soon asked me not to come again, since I could not resist making farting-like noises each time I had to practice a curtsy, it made the other girls laugh so. The piano teacher, a shriveled-up old spinster from Lancashire, England, soon asked me not to come back, since I seemed unable to resist eating from the bowl of plums she had placed on the piano purely for decoration. (27-28)

Even if she is still unaware of it, Annie is showing first signs of political resistance. Besides, the fact that she is able to act duplicitously, telling lies to her mother to avoid doing anything she does not want to do, demonstrates that she is already acting autonomously, on her own initiative and without her mother's approval. However, for the moment, she is still unable to acknowledge her personality because all her emotions are focused on maternal rejection:

What a new thing this was for me: my mother's back turned on me in disgust. It was true that I didn't spend all my days at my mother's side before this, that I spent most of my days at school, but before this young-lady business I could sit and think of my mother, see her doing one thing or another, and always her face bore

a smile for me. Now I often saw her with the corners of her mouth turned down in disapproval of me. (28)

In a state of psychic confusion, Annie seesaws between the determination to affirm her own individuality and the yearning for maternal love. She is excited at the thought of going to a new school because she sees it as a chance to obliterate her dependence and invent a new self: "That way, I could put on a new set of airs; I could say I was something that I was not, and no one would ever know the difference" (29). At the same time, she longs for her mother's approval. One day, just before the term starts, she rushes home from Sunday school to show her mother a certificate of merit with the hope of winning her attention back, but she runs into a scene of her parents making love and the sight of her mother's hand caressing her father immobilises her:

It was white and bony, as if it had long been dead and had been left out in the elements ... It went around and around in the same circular motion, and I looked at it as if I would never see anything else in my life again. If I were to forget everything else in the world, I could not forget her hand as it looked then. (30-31)

Like in the previous chapter, in her mother's hand she sees death. Annie's association of parental sexual intercourse with abandonment

and death echoes the silent reference to family extension in the first chapter. Maternal betrayal is perceived to be connected with sex and death. Significantly enough, this event marks Annie's ability to affirm subjectivity through opposition, because it reveals the mother's duplicity and thus destroys Annie's idealised/idolised image of her mother. Annie unconsciously perceives the ambivalence of her mother, who both rejects her daughter's impending sexual maturity and at the same time is involved in the activity the daughter associates with degradation and death. Therefore, when she has to face her mother after what she has just witnessed, she can talk back to her for the first time because she perceives a tone which, although not decoded as embarrassment and guilt on her mother's part, enables her to reply challengingly:

Though I couldn't remember our eyes having met, I was quite sure that she had seen me in the bedroom, and I didn't know what I would say if she mentioned it. Instead, she said in a voice that was sort of cross and sort of something else, 'Are you going to just stand there doing nothing all day?' The something else was new; I had never heard it in her voice before. I couldn't say exactly what it was, but I know that it caused me to reply, 'And what if I do?' and at the same time to stare at her directly in the eyes. It must have been a shock to her, the way I spoke. I had never talked back

to her before. She looked at me, and then, instead of saying some squelching thing that would put me back in my place, she dropped her eyes and walked away. (31)

Annie's first perception of her own power of defiance causes her to see her mother under a different light. She is no more a perfect figure to stare at in adoration; now she looks "small and funny" (31). And as she starts seeing her mother under a negative light, Annie also transfers her contempt onto her father, who is now seen as part of the mother's world she has been expelled from. The sense of loss and emptiness Annie experiences at finding herself cast out of familiar intimacy makes her think of food, of the nourishment she used to receive from her mother:

A long time ago, when I wouldn't eat my beef, complaining that it involved too much chewing, my mother would first chew up pieces of meat in her own mouth and then feed it to me. When I had hated carrots so much that even the sight of them would send me into a fit of tears, my mother would try to find all sorts of ways to make them palatable for me. All that was finished now. I didn't think that I would ever think of any of it again with fondness. (32)

Then, the beginning of a new school-year gives Annie a chance to have a life away from her mother's control and to transfer the overpowering feelings for her mother to a school-mate named Gwen.

The chapter entitled "Gwen" shows Annie engaged in another battle for recognition and love. To compensate for the loss of maternal attention, she craves to belong to the school community. At first, however, a sense of alienation prevails because the other girls ignore her; in compensation, she describes the intimacy and camaraderie among the girls using maternal tropes, thereby revealing the centrality of the mother in her emotions and thoughts: "Hearing the way they greeted each other, I couldn't be sure that they hadn't all come out of the same woman's belly, and at the same time, too" (35). Moreover, thoughts of maternal-filial conflict interweave with observations on colonial authority, as in Annie's description of her headmistress which acknowledges an early contempt for Britishness and an awareness of racist prejudices:

I knew right away that she had come to Antigua from England, for she looked like a prune left out of its jar a long time and she sounded as if she had borrowed her voice from an owl. The way she said, 'Now, girls...' When she was just standing still there, listening to some of the other activities, her gray eyes going all around the room hoping to see something wrong, her

throat would beat up and down as if a fish fresh out of water were caught inside. (36)

Annie also reveals the mother/motherland identification by confessing that her mother likes the British, except for their washing habits.<sup>7</sup>

The girl's painful sense of betrayal and her subsequent scorn of maternal authority translates into a nascent political awareness as she notices the Eurocentric root of her teachers' names (Miss George, Miss Nelson, Miss Edward, Miss Newgate) and acknowledges her vulnerable position in relationship to them: "Since they were teachers, I was sure it wouldn't be long before, because of some misunderstanding, they would be thorns in my side" (37). Stressing her contempt of colonial indoctrination, she remarks on one of her teachers' attentive reading of *The Tempest* (it is no coincidence that Kincaid refers to Shakespeare's most explicit text on colonialism) and expresses her relief at getting rid of her old notebooks sporting on their covers the face of Queen Victoria, "a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armfuls of diamonds and pearls" (40). The demythologisation of the biological mother thus corresponds to a demythologisation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Jamaica Kincaid admits that, at a certain point in her life, her mother went through a phase of identification with the British. She describes her attitude at the time as "anglophile" (Cudjoe 1990, 217).

colonial motherland as Annie develops a sexual/political awareness of her subjectivity.

Nonetheless, Annie is still far from claiming her identity and she is still dependent on maternal/colonial approval. In fact, parallel to her efforts to please her mother is her craving for the teacher's praise and attention. Complaining for having been placed in the third row of desks, she wonders: "... if I was out of my teacher's sight all the time, how could she see my industriousness and quickness at learning things?" (37). Needful of maternal attention, Annie fears that the teacher could also ignore her. Her feelings seesawing between opposition and longing in the domestic sphere are thus transferred to the school community.

It does not take long for Annie to gain the admiration of teachers and schoolmates. The chance to stand out presents itself when one of the teachers tells the girls to spend the morning in contemplation and reflection and then write an autobiographical essay. Annie's response to the requirement is indicative of both her familiarity and ease with the storytelling tradition of Caribbean culture and her internalisation of Western ideals of nobility:

I knew quite well about 'autobiography' and 'essay', but reflection and contemplation! A day at school spent in such a way! Of course, in most books all the good people were always contemplating and reflecting before they did

anything. Perhaps in her mind's eye she could see our futures and, against all prediction, we turned out to be good people. (39)

The combination of the pupils' colonial indoctrination and devotion to their native culture is elaborated in the description of the other girls' essays:

... one girl told of how her oldest sister's best friend's cousin's best friend ... had gone on a Girl Guide jamboree held in Trinidad and met someone who millions of years ago had taken tea with Lady Baden-Powell; one girl told of an excursion she and her father had made to Redonda, and of how they had seen some booby birds tending their chicks. (40-41)

In opposition to the playfulness of the other essays, Annie's is "heartfelt, and, except for the very end, ... all too true" (41). In a memory metaphorically symbolical of pre-oedipal union, she tells of childhood Sunday excursions to Rat Island with her mother, of medicinal baths the two loved to take in the sea, naked, like "sea mammals", Annie on her mother's back, her arms "clasped tightly around her neck" (42). Annie recalls her mother's efforts to make her learn to swim and her own determination not to: "My mother had tried everything to get me swimming, from using a coaxing method to just throwing me without a word into the water" (42). She would then lie on the shore watching her mother adoringly as she swam; but on



one particular occasion the blissful moment was disrupted by "three ships going by" (43) and she lost sight of her mother.

The scene suggests that colonial intrusion is behind maternal abandonment, the ships representing the three ships of Columbus' first voyage to the West Indies irrupting into the harmony of the pre-colonial landscape, for, like in *At the Bottom of the River*, pre-oedipal is equated with pre-colonial, and the disruption of the latter anticipates (and provokes) the disruption of the first. Annie tells of how she cried and was lovingly consoled by her mother when she returned; of how she then started dreaming of that scene, but how in her dreams the mother did not return to her, but stayed on a rock on the opposite side of the shore and was sometimes joined by her husband (a sign of Annie's sense of exclusion from the parental union); of how, when she told her mother about the bad dreams, the mother embraced her and told her she would never leave her. The essay is true, says Annie, except for the conclusion:

I didn't exactly tell a lie about the last part. That is just what would have happened in the old days. But actually the past year saw me launched into young-ladyhood, and when I told my mother of my dream - my nightmare, really - I was greeted with a turned back and a warning against eating certain kinds of fruit in an unripe state just before going to bed. (45)

By giving a happy end to her story, Annie disguises the rift with her mother and conceals her pain from the classmates and the teacher.<sup>8</sup> With her essay, she succeeds in moving the audience and gaining their favour. She becomes the object of admiration of all the girls in her class, and she finally feels her needs satisfied.<sup>9</sup>

Placed at the centre of a new universe, Annie transfers the overpowering feelings for the mother and the yearning for merger on her schoolmates: "my heart filled with just-sprung-up love, and I wished then and there to spend the rest of my life only with them" (45). Her love focuses on one girl in particular, Gwen. They become best friends, and with her Annie recreates the blissful union she had had with her mother. Onto Gwen Annie projects the ideal image of beauty and perfection destroyed by maternal rejection:

The sun, already way up in the sky so early in the morning, shone on her, and the whole street became suddenly empty so that Gwen and everything about her were perfect, as if she were in a picture. (46-47)

A fantasy of eternal union with Gwen re-enacts the matricidal wish expressed and then regretted in *At the Bottom of the River*:

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<sup>8</sup> Here Kincaid seems to make a point about autobiographical writing, suggesting how real life can be enlarged, enriched and transformed into fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Simmons argues that, although the reason the essay so moves the girls is not explicitly given, Annie's essay "may have spoken to a generally felt fear that what has sustained the girls in childhood will be ripped from them as they enter maturity. Though Annie's story ends with a lie, it speaks comfortingly to the girls' own fears, and as a result, the story's author is an instant heroine" (1994, 109).

I told her that when I was younger I had been afraid of my mother's dying, but that since I had met Gwen this didn't matter so much ... I said that I could not wait for us to grow up so that we could live in a house of our own. (51)

Made confident by the approval of teachers and classmates, Annie comes to like her new self. Her brightness makes her stand out and acquire power over the other girls. She is often appointed monitor and enjoys her authority, occasionally using it as an instrument for self-scrutiny: "Sometimes, seeing my old frail self in a girl, I would defend her; sometimes, seeing my old frail self in a girl, I would be heartless and cruel" (49). She also comes to love her previously much-hated developing body and is not ashamed to show it off to her friends. A positive bodily awareness emerges as the relationship with the other girls becomes one of touching, caressing and kissing, just like the relationship with the mother during childhood. In their moments together, the girls create a microcosm of feminine solidarity, out of the reach of patriarchal power - "in the world we occupied and hoped forever to occupy boys were banished" - and in defiance of colonial authority: "What perfection we found in each other, sitting on these tombstones of long-dead people who had been the masters of our ancestors!" (50). It is significant that, on the tombs of white oppressors, these girls, the descendants of slaves, join in solidarity and confident determination

against a future which would place them in a subaltern position as colonised subjects:

We were sure that the much-talked-about future that everybody was preparing us for would never come, for we had such a powerful feeling against it, and why shouldn't our will prevail this time? (50)

But this attempt to avert the colonial/patriarchal subjection implied in maturity is doomed to failure. Annie begins to menstruate and a sense of tragedy and death hovers over the community: "We walked back to class slowly, as if going to a funeral" (53). Annie and Gwen vow eternal love, but the event that marks the inevitability of uncontrollable changes in their lives has already divided them and "the words had a hollow ring, and when we looked at each other we couldn't sustain the gaze" (53).

Another friendship, in contrast to the one with Gwen, is described in the following episode, "The Red Girl." Annie's new passion delineates her construction of a subjectivity in opposition to her mother in a stage of overt adolescent rebellion. She develops duplicity and gloats about her expertise in lying and stealing. In overt disobedience and subversion of her mother's desire, she becomes infatuated with the dirty, careless red-haired girl, who is the embodiment of everything Annie's mother despises. The Red Girl doesn't wash, doesn't change her clothes, doesn't comb her hair,

doesn't go to Sunday school; she behaves like a boy, climbing trees and playing marbles. Her world, diametrically opposed to the order and discipline of Annie's household, is enormously appealing to Annie. Annie, who had formerly described her childhood world as a paradise - "It was in such a paradise that I lived" (25) -, now finds perfection in a world which is just the opposite - "what a heaven she lived in!" (58).

Whereas with Gwen Annie had reproduced the lost ideal of her mother's love and the symmetrical exchange of affection, with the Red Girl she is trapped in the same maternal love/hate, power/subjection relationship. Although the opposite of Annie's mother, the Red Girl paradoxically holds the same distressing power over her. She tortures Annie with painful pinches until she makes her cry and then consoles her with loving kisses. Annie enjoys the cruelty, revealing how strong her desire for her mother still is. Further, the Red Girl also represents the maternal figure to be admired and worshipped, and makes Annie's newly-acquired public power count as worthless. From one who is able to provoke the shock and admiration of her schoolmates by using an unusual word recently learned from her mother that causes their mouths to shape into tiny "o"s, Annie becomes herself the incredulous spectator when the Red Girl climbs on a tree to get her the best guava: "How my eyes did widen and my mouth formed an 'o' at this" (56).

The Red Girl opens up new horizons for Annie, offering an alternative to the "young-lady business" imposed by the mother. By observing her, Annie becomes aware of the possibility of subverting gender roles:

I had never seen a girl do this before. All the boys climbed trees for the fruit they wanted, and all the girls threw stones to knock the fruit off the trees. But look at the way she climbed that tree: better than any boy. (56)

Since Annie unconsciously perceives the threat implied in the apprenticeship towards becoming a nice lady, she finds pleasure in being subversive doing all the things a lady is not supposed to do. She starts playing marbles - a game forbidden by the mother, although she had received her first marbles from her - and becomes very good at the game. Hers is a self-apprenticeship to oppose the good manners and piano lessons her mother forces upon her:

Perhaps it had stuck in my mind that once my mother said to me, 'I am so glad you are not one of those girls who like to play marbles,' and perhaps because I had to do exactly the opposite of whatever she desired of me, I now played and played at marbles in a way that I had never done anything. (61)

By playing marbles, Annie affirms the dignity of her desires and defies the law of the father that shuts girls out of a world of ambitions

and competition.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, through subversion she discovers a talent, "something about myself I had not known" (61), indicative of the repression implied in the learning of appropriate gender roles.

Since maternal attention is what Annie really yearns for, her passion for the Red Girl seems to vanish when the mother, discovering that Annie had been playing marbles, vents her anger for having been defied:

Trying then to swallow a piece of bread that I had first softened in my gravy, I thought, Well, that's the end of that; if tomorrow I saw that girl on the street, I would just act as if we had never met before, as if her very presence at any time was only an annoyance. As my mother went on to my father in her angry vein, I rearranged my life: Thank God I hadn't abandoned Gwen completely, thank God I was so good at rounders that the girls would be glad to have me head a side again, thank God my breasts hadn't grown and I still needed some tips about them. (67)

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<sup>10</sup> For a symbolic meaning of marbles see Moira Ferguson. She argues: "At one level, marbles represent embryos of the breasts she and her friends covet. Beautiful orbs of defiance, they proliferate, have to be concealed, are exchangeable, and always desirable. At another level, they resemble the stolen library books she hides, treasures that identity rebellion against constraining gender roles, a personal power gained by outwitting authority, and an obsession with knowledge that rivals her previous obsession with death" (1994, 54).

To find out where the marbles are, Annie's mother tries to elicit the daughter's sympathy by telling her of an adventure she had at her age when a snake was discovered in a bunch of figs she was carrying on her head. Thinking about the "dangerous, horrible black snake on top of that beautiful head" (69), Annie is so moved that she feels as if her "heart would break" (69) and she is on the verge of giving the marbles to her mother. But the tone of the mother's voice, "warm and soft and treacherous" (70), asking for the marbles betrays the cruel trick. Annie recognises the mesmerising serpent in her mother and recovers her sense of self-defence, answering in her own "warm, soft, and newly acquired treacherous voice" (70) and denying she has ever played marbles.

Soon after this episode, Annie starts to menstruate, stops playing marbles and the Red Girl is sent to Anguilla. Having irreversibly fractured the relationship between Annie and her mother, the Red Girl can disappear from the scene, leaving Annie with her unresolved conflicts. In a dream fantasy about the Red Girl, Annie once again gives vent to her longing for eternal union with the mother. She dreams of rescuing the Red Girl from a shipwreck (a similar story about her mother appears in the second chapter) and, echoing a fantasy in *At the Bottom of the River*, she imagines living with her on an island, sending "confusing signals" causing cruise ships "to crash on some nearby rocks" (71). Since the colonial ships



had disrupted the pre/oedipal harmony with her mother, Annie takes her revenge on the new colonisers, the tourists, causing their "cries of joy" to turn into "cries of sorrow" (71).

In the next chapter, "Columbus in Chains," Kincaid delves into an exploration of power at a more explicitly political level, as Annie grows more and more aware of cultural constructions and of her location in the coloniser/colonised dyad. Annie's growing understanding of power relationships is fostered by her sense of alienation in the public and private sphere. At school she becomes aware of the colonial indoctrination aimed at reducing her individuality to a mirror reflecting imperial power, at making of her a monkey mimicking European models of subjection. At home she begins to understand the mechanisms of her mother's power ploys, insulting her capacity for autonomous thought and ability to grasp the connection between those ploys and foreign domination in the Caribbean.

The chapter opens with a series of references to England and colonialism. Annie mentions the "trade winds" (named after colonial sea routes), the "afternoon tea," which her mother has introduced as a daily habit in their family, and the "Anglican church bell," (72) which compartmentalises time to maintain discipline. She tells of her (supposed) rewards for taking first place in the history class: a book called *Roman Britain*, and being appointed class prefect. She seems

unaware of the irony of giving to a colonial child of the British Empire a book on colonialism in which the British are the colonised, and which the child should ingest as colonial propaganda to identify with imperial ideology. On the other hand, she is aware of the absurdity giving her power over the class. She is certainly not a good example in the sense that her teachers perceive, and because she despises being involved in a power she identifies as being responsible for her people's misfortune. Although it is clearly a strategy to make colonised people blind to their powerlessness, Annie is not yet ready to acknowledge the irony of giving power to a subaltern:

What a mistake the prefect part had been, for I was among the worst-behaved in my class and did not at all believe in setting myself up as a good example, the way a prefect was supposed to do. (73)

However, she seems to have a glimpse of imperial politics when she refers to the dunce cap that "the girl who scored lowest was made to wear" (75). The cap, she notices, has the "shape of a coronet" (74), it is made of "gold paper" and sports the word "dunce" in "shiny red paper on the front," which makes it "all aglitter, almost as if you were being tricked into thinking it a desirable thing to wear" (75). A symbol of stupidity is made to mirror a symbol of power with a clear strategy of subjection, but in Annie's attentive mind stupidity already equates with power.

Annie's pride in her ancestry is expressed in a passage where she describes one of her classmates, Ruth, the white daughter of an English minister who had been a missionary in Africa. Annie does not blame Ruth for not knowing the right answer to a history question: "On the third of November 1493, a Sunday morning, Christopher Columbus discovered Dominica" (75). She understands that Ruth's ignorance about West Indian history stems from the burden of guilt the white girl is made to feel by living among colonised people:

Her ancestors had been the masters, while ours had been the slaves. She had such a lot to be ashamed of, and by being with us every day she was always being reminded. We could look everybody in the eye, for our ancestors had done nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenseless. (76)

At the same time, Annie is aware that the imperial indoctrination that she and her friends have received is so entrenched that it produces complicity with British colonialism. Although they know that they are descendants of people enslaved by the British, they cannot help identifying with the British Empire:

Of course, sometimes, what with our teachers and our books, it was hard for us to tell on which side we really now belonged - with the masters or the slaves - for it was all history, it

was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now; all of us celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, even though she had been dead a long time. (76)

Colonial education was aimed at suppressing any possible expression of native culture, especially reminiscences of an African descent. For this reason, Annie and her classmates are forbidden to play "band," their favourite game, consisting of dancing in rows, "arms around each other's waist or shoulders," (79) and singing popular calypso songs "which usually had lots of unladylike words" (80). Such activity, seen as dangerous by the colonial authority, because it stimulates free bodily expression and fosters insubordination, is for the girls a moment of socialisation and satisfaction of desire:

Up and down the schoolyard, away from our teachers, we would dance and sing. At the end of recess - forty-five minutes - we were missing ribbons and other ornaments from our hair, the pleats of our linen tunics became unset, the collars of our blouses were pulled out, and we were soaking wet all the way down to our bloomers. When the school bell rang, we would make a whooping sound, as if in a great panic, and then we would throw ourselves on top of each other as we laughed and shrieked. (80)

Also, as we have seen, when unsupervised by their teachers, the girls would sit on the tombstones of white slave holders and "sing bad songs, use forbidden words, and, of course, show each other various parts of our bodies" (80). To a repressive colonial education, the girls oppose a defiant expression of language and body freed from constrictions, and choose to locate their revolt in a territory commemorating the oppressors of their ancestors.

The episode that marks Annie's overt rebellion against the imperial indoctrination of colonial Antigua is related to domestic experience and maternal roles. If Annie's mother is trying to force her into a constraining model of womanhood which will allow her to maintain integrity in a colonial context, it is also true that she is transmitting to her daughter her own rebellious spirit. At home, Annie has heard her mother's defiant words about her own tyrannical father, now incapacitated: "So the great man can no longer just get up and go. How would I love to see his face now!" (78). When she sees in her history book a picture of Columbus being sent back to Spain fettered in chains at the bottom of a ship, Annie expresses her rejection of imperial interpretations: "How I loved this picture - to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low, seated at the bottom of a boat just watching things go by" (77-78). Connecting colonial domination with patriarchal tyranny, Annie models her defiance on her mother's and writes in old English lettering under the

photograph: "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go" (78). By applying her domestic experience to an historical event, she deprives historical accounts of authority and affirms the dignity of Antiguan culture. She uncovers historical lies (imperial interpretations of Columbus as a god creating the Caribbean by his discoveries) with the truth of her people. Her act symbolises the need for colonised people to bring about a revision of imperial history by including their version of past events, and to bring it more in line with historical authenticity.

As a punishment for her "blasphemy," as the teacher calls Annie's defacement of her history book, Annie is made to copy out the first two books of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For having defamed "one of the great men in history, Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the island that was my home" (82), Annie is required to honour another great man. Kincaid's choice of Milton is remarkable, since *Paradise Lost* mirrors Annie's subversive act against imperial authority. As Diane Simmons observes, "Milton's work tells the story of Lucifer, who dares to challenge unchallengeable authority and who is, in punishment, cast out of paradise, plunged into a blackness of despair and eternal exile" (1994, 113). Furthermore, the image of lost paradise evokes Annie's mourning for the loss of pre-colonial/pre-oedipal harmony, a loss certainly not brought about by

challenge, but which suggests another possible revision of an authorial text in Annie's favour.

When she gets home, hoping to find comfort in her mother's arms, Annie is presented with another manipulative manoeuvre. The mother brings her a dish, "a new kind of rice imported from Belgium" (83), which, by its smell, she identifies as the much-hated breadfruit, as the mother later admits it to be. Annie has clearly lost her innocence (her paradise) and cannot be manipulated easily. She is able to uncover a hateful truth behind an attractive appearance. The breadfruit, covered with the supposed beauty of European origin, is thus linked to the dunce cap resembling a regal crown and to the imperial version of Columbus's discoveries. Annie's sense of alienation has reached an irreversible stage both in the domestic and the public sphere. She now perceives the world around her as treacherous, threatening her individuality. As the family sit eating their meal, Annie observes her mother with contempt: "My father could hardly get a few words out of his mouth before she was a jellyfish of laughter" (83). The mother is blind to the child's need for solace and Annie feels more and more shut out of the parental union: "I could not believe how she laughed at everything he said, and how bitter it made me feel to see how much she liked him" (83). Annie's uncovering of the mother's duplicity has destroyed the mythicised image she had of her. Now the mother appears as a

secret enemy able to transform herself into a monster, pretty much like the serpent of the previous section and the metamorphoses of *At the Bottom of the River*:

She was standing half inside the door, half outside. Her body was in the shade of our house, but her head was in the sun. When she laughed, her mouth opened to show off big, shiny, sharp white teeth. It was as if my mother had suddenly turned into a crocodile. (84)

In the chapter entitled "Somewhere, Belgium" Annie's sense of alienation has grown unbearable. She is now fully aware that she has lost her paradise - innocence, childhood, and her mother. It is time for her to find herself and her place in the world, a location that will allow her to expand her horizons and to affirm her identity freed from the constrictions of a dominant mother and an oppressive motherland. Probably for this reason, she sees herself in her daydreams in Belgium, a cold place, the opposite of Antigua, a place so far from home that her mother "would find difficult to travel to" (92). Belgium is the country where Charlotte Brontë, the author of Annie's favourite novel, *Jane Eyre*, lived for some time. Fusing the writer with the protagonist, Annie identifies with the young woman fighting for autonomy, and resolves her alienation through the desire to leave her native island. Migration would mean survival for Annie,



the possibility to exist in an unidentifiable space. Her address would be:

Miss Annie Victoria John  
Somewhere,  
Belgium. (92)

Nonetheless, Annie probably perceives that she could never escape completely from her world. To this vague place with no streets and no numbers, with no boundaries except the ones making it unreachable by the Caribbean mother, Annie would have to bring the haunting memory of her old life in her own name, containing, like a magic trunk, a mother, an empress and an island.

Annie's alienation is physical: it has a size, a colour, and a weight. It is as if she had swollen the burden of centuries of oppression:

My unhappiness was something deep inside me, and when I closed my eyes I could even see it. It sat somewhere - maybe in my belly, maybe in my heart; I could not exactly tell - and it took the shape of a small black ball, all wrapped up in cobwebs. I would look at it and look at it until I had burned the cobwebs away, and then I would see that the ball was no bigger than a thimble, even though it weighed worlds. (85)

Her condition is engendered by her perception of the world as treacherous. Treacherous is the public sphere, where Annie is (un)educated to be a child of the Empire, ignorant and submitted. She says she feels "like the oldest person who had ever lived and who had not learned a single thing" (86). Treacherous is also the private sphere, where she has to deal with maternal duplicity by learning to be duplicitous herself: "My mother and I each soon grew two faces: one for my father and the rest of the world, and one for us when we found ourselves alone with each other" (87). Since Annie is bright enough to defend herself against colonial oppression, what hurts her most is maternal betrayal. In this field, she is still defenceless, still dependent, and obsessed with death:

Before, if I hated someone I simply wished the person dead. But I couldn't wish my mother dead. If my mother died, what would become of me? I couldn't imagine my life without her. Worse than that, if my mother died I would have to die, too, and even less than I could imagine my mother dead could I imagine myself dead. (88)

In her dreams, which her mother has taught her to take seriously, as a real part of her life, Annie hears herself repeating "My mother would kill me if she got the chance. I would kill my mother if I had the courage" (89). She understands that her mother's love is suffocating,

it threatens her sense of survival. To maintain the integrity of her newly-acquired and still-frail self, she must seek separation to expel her mother from her life.

The loss of her mother cannot be replaced by other passions anymore. Annie's growing awareness of power mechanisms makes it impossible for her to transfer her love to someone else and thus satisfy her needs. At school she doesn't find anyone with whom to share her feelings. She is in a class with girls older than her (she is now fifteen), who seem to have conformed to the model of womanhood based on vanity and coquetry. They compete to get official favour, and they carry mirrors in their bags, walking "with their hips swinging from side to side" (90). They are so full of themselves that none of them could certainly understand Annie's uneasiness: "They had no different ideas of how to be in the world; they certainly didn't think that the world was a strange place to be caught living in" (90). Even, Gwen, Annie's old friend, has become dull to her eyes. Her orthodoxy is disturbing to Annie: "How small she now looked in my eyes: a bundle of who said what and who did what" (92). They have grown so far apart that Gwen has no idea what Annie's desires are. She is so blind to her friend's real nature (just like Annie's mother) that she expresses the wish that Annie could marry her brother, and mistakes her friend's disgust for joy. Annie is shocked: "Everything was in place. But at the same time

something terrible had happened, and I couldn't tell what it was" (93). What Annie does not dare to name is the end of the intimacy and communion with her friend, the fracture that opened between them when Gwen chose orthodoxy and blindness and Annie committed herself to looking deeper, beyond the world of appearances.

The solidarity that had comforted Annie in the subversive meetings on the white masters' tombstones has vanished with age. The other girls have submitted to the expected role of women in Antiguan society. They no longer play "band," sing calypso or show their bodies. But, if women have betrayed her, Annie cannot find solace in men. The encounter with a boy she used to play with when she was a child shows that men are also treacherous. When she meets this old friend, Annie is in a state of psychic disorder. More and more alienated, she feels extremely odd, to the point that she doesn't recognise herself when she looks at her reflection in the window of a shop. She takes herself to be one of the things "just hanging there" (94) among clothes and household items, as if she was devoid of any sign of vitality. She finds herself "old and miserable" (94) and suddenly remembers the photograph of a painting portraying young Lucifer, "recently cast out of heaven for all his bad deeds" (94), looking "lonely and miserable at the way things had turned out" (95). By identifying herself with the devil Annie

reveals feelings of guilt, as if she believed herself responsible for the loss of paradise.

The feeling that there is something wrong with her heightens with the mocking comments that a group of boys make on noticing her. Annie perceives her helplessness as a woman facing the arrogance of men: "I knew instantly that it was malicious and that I had done nothing to deserve it other than standing there all alone" (95). Then she recognises her childhood friend among the group and remembers the games they used to play together, when the boy, older than her, would always give Annie "the lesser part", making her play the "servant" or "a person who fetched things" (96). Once, while acting a murder they had heard their parents talking about, the boy got caught in a noose and almost strangled himself. While his body was "hanging from the gate" and swinging "back and forth," Annie "just stood there and stared" (98). If his mother hadn't arrived, the boy would have died.

The incident is significant. Perhaps, unconsciously, the girl was taking revenge on someone who had deprived her of agency. She was forced to silence in their games, but in real life she was silently letting him die. Yet, rather than interpreting her memory as a response to abuse and an expression of insubordination, Annie links it to her sense that there is something wrong with her, as one of the bad deeds provoking her expulsion from paradise. Remembering

this, and perhaps hoping to atone for her sins and in order to regain her lost paradise, she approaches the group to greet the boy she knows:

I walked over and said in my best, most polite young-lady voice, 'Hallo, Mineu. I am so glad to see you. Don't you remember me?' It was true that I was glad to see him. For just remembering all the things that he and I used to do reminded me of how happy I had been and how much my mother and everyone else adored me and how, when looking at me, people used to say, 'What a beautiful child!' (99)

But Minou is just as malicious as his friends, and Annie, realising that they are making fun of her, walks away. Her pain turns into anger as she remembers another significant incident in her childhood games with Minou. The last time they had played together, he had made her sit naked on a red ants' nest, so that:

... the angry ants were all over me, stinging me in my private parts, and as I cried and scratched, trying to get the ants off me, he fell down on the ground laughing, his feet kicking the air with happiness. His mother refused to admit that he had done something wrong and my mother never spoke to her again. (100)

This incident, from childhood days, suggests both the sexual danger represented by men and the determination of Annie's mother to protect her daughter from it. Now, as if she had been actually attacked by male sexual power, Annie experiences physical disorientation on her way home. In a scene that vaguely evokes Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Annie has the sensation that her body is changing size, getting "alternately too big and too small" (101), suggesting pregnancy and threat of annihilation male power imposes over women: "First, I grew so big that I took up the whole street; then I grew so small that nobody could see me - not even if I cried out" (101).<sup>11</sup>

After this frightening experience, Annie goes home hoping to find solace in her mother, but, as usual when she is most in need of help, her mother turns her back on her. Annie perceives, from the expression on her mother's face, that something terrible is going to happen:

We looked at each other, and I could see the frightening black thing leave her to meet the frightening black thing that had left me. They met in the middle and embraced. What will it be now, I asked myself. (101)

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<sup>11</sup> Diane Simmons gives a different interpretation of the parallels between this episode in *Annie John* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She argues: "Alice grows too small to reach the key that could provide for her escape and then too large to fit through the unlocked door; Annie, alternating between childhood and womanhood, is both too large and too small to get through any of the available doors" (1994, 114).

She soon finds out that her mother had been observing the scene from inside a shop. Blind to her daughter's distress, instead of seeing a sad girl trying to cope with her alienation, the mother had seen a "slut" making a spectacle of herself in front of four boys. The insult has a deeply destructive impact on Annie. She is near to collapse, but she recovers to strike a blow against her mother:

The word 'slut' (in patois) was repeated over and over, until suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with water it was filled with the word 'slut,' and it was pouring in through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth. As if to save myself, I turned to her and said, 'Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter.' (102)

By turning the insult on her mother, Annie uncovers the mystery of her mother's betrayal. The "slut" she sees in her daughter is a projection of what she sees in herself, and by trying to protect the daughter, she wants to rewrite her own life. Perhaps, when she left Dominica after a quarrel with her father, she was fighting for sexual freedom. In any case, burdened with an entrenched prejudice that identifies Black women with sexual looseness, she experiences her own sexuality with a sense of guilt and therefore seeks to suppress her daughter's sexuality. Unconsciously perceiving what lies at the root of her mother's ambivalence, Annie becomes aware of the need



to separate her life from her mother's. All her childhood memorabilia being contained in her mother's trunk, she decides to ask her father to let her have a trunk of her own. With that trunk she will leave Antigua, just like her mother had left Dominica years before, although she fears that, even then, her mother's "shadow" would stand between her "and the rest of the world" (107).

The chapter entitled "The Long Rain" shows Annie falling into physical and mental collapse. A three-month period of endless rain accompanies her illness. The usually dry Antigua soaks in water while Annie is confined to her bed, caught in black soot. To be born as an adult, Annie must abandon childhood. The water that engulfs her and the island evokes the amniotic liquid and signifies rebirth. In fact, through her illness, Annie temporarily regains parental attention. She wets her bed and her parents look after her as if she was "just born" (113). As she withdraws from the symbolic order, language gets fragmented and meaning does not reach her:

I couldn't hear what it was that they said, but I could see the words leave their mouths. The words traveled through the air toward me, but just as they reached my ears they would fall to the floor, suddenly dead. (109)

Annie floats between a pre-oedipal state and maturity, as her repressed sexuality starts to emerge. Just after having wet her bed, she discovers the sensuality of smell and touch on her father's legs.

She experiences pleasure as she smells her father's perspiration and rubs her legs against his:

A funny feeling went through me that I liked and was frightened of at the same time, and I shuddered. At this, my father, thinking I was cold, hugged me even closer. It dawned on me then that my father ... slept in no clothes at all ... I do not know why that lodged in my mind, but it did. (113)

As Annie lets her desire emerge, she rejects her past life, which she has unconsciously identified as a series of attempts to manipulate her. She remembers with contempt when she was a member of the "First Division troop of Brownies" (114) and swore allegiance to her country, "by which was meant England," her eyes "following the Union Jack as it was raised up" (115). Acknowledging the manipulation operated on her by the colonial system, she now has a vision of herself as a robot, a "small toy Brownie" (114). Another episode marks her determination to free herself from the manipulative forces of her education. Her mother had attempted to repress her sexuality. Now Annie deprives her mother of sexuality by erasing a photograph of her parents "from the waist down" (129), perhaps also to annul her mother's pregnancy with new siblings, a silenced plot in the text. She also erases a photograph of herself on the day of her first Communion, leaving only her fancy shoes visible.

The shoes had brought about an argument with her mother, because they were "not fit for a young lady" (119), and on that occasion Annie had loudly wished her mother dead. By erasing her whole body, except for the shoes, Annie kills her mother in her and affirms the birth of her own will. Furthermore, the act of washing the family photographs suggests a need for purification.

While Annie's father attributes the daughter's collapse to overwork at school, her mother is convinced that she is victim of an obeah spell by one of the women her husband had loved. For this reason, after they have consulted an English doctor, she calls in a local obeah woman. Annie's mother is a clear example of cultural syncretism in Caribbean society for her allegiance to European values does not exclude her acceptance of African-Caribbean beliefs. Although she is not an obeah woman herself, she highly values obeah practices, but at the same time she demonstrates cultural flexibility by moving with ease between the conflicting traditions:

When my father came in to see me, he looked at all my medicines - Dr. Stephens's and Ma Jolie's - lined up side by side and screwed up his face, the way he did when he didn't like what he saw. He must have said something to my mother, for she rearranged the shelf in a new way, with Dr. Stephens's prescriptions in

the front and Ma Jolie's prescriptions in the back. (118)

The most determining factor leading to Annie's recovery is the arrival of her grandmother Ma Chess from Dominica. She mysteriously appears "on a day when the steamer was not due" (123), and her magic powers immediately start to have a positive effect on Annie. She is an obeah woman, far more experienced than Ma Jolie, and to Annie she is a healer and a nurturing mother. Years back, her son had died because she had surrendered to her husband's mistrust of obeah and his belief in Western medicine: "When he died, a large worm bored its way out of his leg and rested on his shinbone ... From that day on, Ma Chess never spoke to Pa Chess again, even though they lived in the same house" (125). Since she couldn't save her son, Ma Chess is now fully committed to obeah, but as soon as she sees Annie, she understands that she is "Not like Johnnie. Not like Johnnie at all" (124). She knows that what Annie needs is a re-mothering, so that she can find a sense of self. Therefore, she assists the girl with her nurturing powers:

I would lie on my side, curled up like a little comma, and Ma Chess would lie next to me, curled up like a bigger comma, into which I fit. In the daytime, while my mother attended my father, keeping him company as he ate, Ma Chess fed me my food, coaxing me to take

mouthful after mouthful. She bathed me and changed my clothes and sheets and did all the other things that my mother used to do. (126)

A nurturing mother, an obeah woman and a Carib Indian, Ma Chess represents Annie's lost paradise. She brings back to life the pre-oedipal and pre-colonial world and assists Annie through rebirth. Then, she vanishes, as mysteriously as she had appeared. Annie recovers. She is not happy, but she has achieved a sense of self, and she knows that she must leave her mother and her native island to live her own life. She has also come to accept her oddity and she does what she can to enhance it, so that "everyone talked about me" (128). No longer bound to the obsessive love for her mother and her motherland, Annie now feels and affirms her presence, and finds extreme pleasure in herself.

The last chapter, "A Walk to the Jetty", opens with the words "My name is Annie John" (130). Naming is the last step in Annie's affirmation of a separate identity and the first in her claim of agency on leaving the mother/motherland. Her name, painted on her trunk, is the last thing she sees before falling asleep and the first she thinks of when she wakes up on her last day in Antigua. And, finally able to name herself, she can say who she is and what she wants. She is leaving her native island, not because she wants to go to England and be trained as a nurse, but because departure is the

only way to cut the umbilical cord and finally be herself. Leaving home empowers both identity and the desire to be affirmed. Annie can now look steadily into her past life to mourn and celebrate the end of it at the same time, aware that what she most loves and what she most despises are the same thing. With a mixture of gratitude and intolerance, she acknowledges the suffocating presence of her parents in her life:

The house we live in my father built with his own hands. The bed I am lying in my father built with his own hands. If I get up and sit on a chair, it is a chair my father built with his own hands ... The sheets on my bed my mother made with her own hands. The curtains hanging at my window my mother made with her own hands. The nightie I am wearing, with scalloped neck and hem and sleeves, my mother made with her own hands. When I look at things in a certain way, I suppose I should say that the two of them made me with their own hands. (132-133)

Nothing belongs solely to her, nothing is created by her or springs from her alone. This is one of the reasons that makes leaving necessary. But, above all, there is the pain for having grown too big to stand between her parents - "And so now they are together and here I am apart" (133) - and the pain of having been betrayed by her mother, who "said that she loved me and could hardly live without

me, while at the same time proposing and arranging separation after separation, including this one, which, unbeknownst to her, / have arranged to be permanent" (133). If her mother's betrayal was a strategy to make of the daughter a strong and independent woman, capable of surviving in a hostile environment, she has succeeded, because, however deep her pain might be, Annie is now resolved "never to be fooled again" (133).

On the morning of her departure, Annie is engaged in her last performance. She is nice to everybody as she gets ready to leave, and she shows the "proper amount of joy" and the "proper amount of sorrow" (136), while harbouring resentment and contempt inside. For the last time, she watches the world she has belonged to, and her heart bursts "open with joy at the thought of never having to see any of it again" (132). She resolves never to be manipulated again, either in the public or the private sphere. Recalling her apprenticeship to a seamstress, where she had been treated like a servant, she comments: "At the time, I don't suppose I minded it ... but now I placed on the dustheap of my life Miss Dulcie and everything I had had to do with her" (138). Looking at her mother running up and down to assist her ageing husband, she plans "not only never to marry an old man but certainly never to marry at all" (132). She is determined to live by herself and for herself.

As she walks to the jetty accompanied by her parents, Annie takes a last look at her childhood world. Without irony, she recalls past events, people and things that she had loved or hated and that had meant a lot to her. Above all, she recalls her mother's love for her, the moments spent together in blissful harmony. When she was five years old, she had taken her first walk alone to go to the chemist's for three pennyworth of senna, eucalyptus, and camphor. Her mother had instructed her on "what side of the road to walk, where to make a turn, where to cross, how to look carefully before I crossed, and if I met anyone that I knew to politely pass greetings and keep on my way" (139). Upon her return, she had greeted the child with an outburst of joy, praising how "wonderful and good" she was: "If I had just conquered Persia, she couldn't have been more proud of me" (140). It is significant that this childhood memory should occur to Annie on the day of her departure, for, now too, she is embarking in a solitary adventure to conquer a new world and to prove, this time to herself, how wonderful and good she is. She has been instructed by her mother on how to behave and she has been prepared by her mother's obeah woman to be protected "from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune" (134), but now she knows that a sense of self-worth cannot come from her mother. She has to be her own witness.



As the moment of departure approaches, Annie is drawn back to her conflicting, consuming emotions of love and hate for her home. She feels torn inside, and her body threatens collapse:

... suddenly a wave of strong feeling came over me, and my heart swelled with a great gladness at the words 'I shall never see this again' spilled out inside me. But then, just as quickly, my heart shriveled up and the words 'I shall never see this again' stabbed at me. I don't know what stopped me from falling in a heap at my parents' feet. (145)<sup>12</sup>

Gripping her parents' hands, she is on the verge of giving up, but she remembers that she is not a child anymore, and that, when she takes a decision, she has to "see it through" (146). Although her newly-born identity is still frail, she is determined to save herself. She cannot help bursting into tears when she sees her mother crying, but suffocated by her mother's embrace, her tears dry up, and she is suddenly on her guard. She finally drags herself away when she hears her mother's last words of farewell, a threat to her

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<sup>12</sup> As Laura Niesen de Abruna observes, the protagonist's fear of death is related to her growing away from both her mother and her homeland: "The narrators in Kincaid's fiction resist separation from the mother as a way of denying their intense fear of death. The fear of separation is further complicated in *Annie John* because the narrator leaves the island for Britain with the clear intention of making a break with her environment. [...] The process of Annie's leaving her mother is mirrored in the process of leaving the island. Displacement from an initial intimacy with her mother's realm is reflected in a growing away from the environment until, at the end of the novel, Annie can only dream of leaving her own home for England" (1991, 274).

independence: "It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home" (147).

After having watched her mother becoming "just a dot in the matchbox-size launch swallowed up in the big blue sea" (148), Annie goes to her cabin, lies down on her berth, and hears the sound of the waves lapping around the ship, "as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed on its side and now was slowly emptying out" (148). The image of the overturned vessel spilling water is an image of death, but it functions more effectively as a metaphor of liberation and rebirth of the self. As Annie releases the amniotic liquid that had bound her to her mother and her land, she lets go of her childhood, her frail, dependent self, to make space for the future, to be born anew in a world where she can be her self-creator.

## CHAPTER 3

### *A Small Place*

#### The Legacy of Colonialism in Post-Colonial Antigua

After about twenty years of voluntary exile, Jamaica Kincaid visited her native island. When she had left, in 1966, Antigua was still under colonial rule. A year later, the island gained associate status as a British protectorate in transition to independence, becoming self-governing only in 1981, under the leadership of Prime Minister Vere Cornwall Bird.

*A Small Place* was written in the late eighties, after Kincaid's return from her trip to Antigua, and was published in 1988. It marks a considerable shift from her earlier works in that whereas *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* commemorate Kincaid's childhood in colonial Antigua with a mixture of nostalgia and regret, *A Small Place* expresses her anger and anguish at witnessing the destructive legacy of Antigua's colonial past.

The personal concerns of Kincaid's earlier works are substituted by an overtly political stand, as the writer becomes more and more aware of the extent to which human consciousness is a

product of social conditions. The alienation of the earlier protagonist as a young female subjected to colonial and patriarchal power is substituted by a different kind of alienation. The speaker now feels estranged from a country which seems unable to take a step forward towards national reconstruction and make use of historical awareness for real political change. Furthermore, Kincaid's growing awareness of the need for an overt political commitment compels her to set aside fictional narrative to engage in direct resistance to hegemony. In *A Small Place*, an eighty-page-long essay on post-colonial Antigua, the writer's voice is unmediated and the autobiographical note explicit. But here she is not so much concerned about herself as she is about the cultural situation of her native land and the response of her people to centuries of oppression. *A Small Place* is a counter-hegemonic work by a decolonised writer denouncing the horrors of historical corruption and its aftermath.

The essay is made up of four untitled chapters. In the first chapter, the author discusses tourism as a form of imperialism. She accuses the white tourist, a contemporary version of the European settler, of reproducing the pattern of racial and cultural domination of the colonial age. Kincaid discusses the mechanisms of tourist hegemony as well as the response of black Antiguan to it. In the second chapter, she equates tourism with colonialism by highlighting

the connection between the contemporary white tourist and the European imperialists who conquered and ruled Antigua for centuries, discussing the exploitation and domination of white Westerners over black Antiguans. The third chapter, accounting for almost half the text, is a bitter indictment of the deplorable situation of post-colonial Antigua, the corruption of its government, the lack of historical awareness among its people, all of which is a legacy of British colonialism. The last part, a very short chapter, celebrates Antigua's beautiful landscape and briefly resumes Antiguan history to end with a wish that both masters and slaves may drop their destructive roles to become "just human beings" (81).

In her direct attack on the imperialist tourists, the merciless colonisers, the corrupt government and the passive natives, Kincaid proceeds by associations of thought, inserting asides and rhetorical questions. But her most effective narrative device is the use of the second person form of address to indict the reader directly. Perhaps for this reason the work was rejected by the *New Yorker* and judged too angry a piece by several reviewers. In fact, the essay is addressed to the privileged white reader, as Kincaid assumes the average reader of the *New Yorker* will be. Her method, however, does not spring from anger, although anger permeates the text. It is more likely that Kincaid is trying to shock the readers into an awareness of the effects that centuries of domination may have on

oppressors and oppressed alike. She reveals to the readers the power relationships in which they are active participants but of which they may not be conscious.

All the concerns of the text are introduced in the first chapter: the awful legacy of colonialism, the incompetence and corruption of the present government, and the people's incapability to improve their condition. But, more specifically, the chapter discusses the role of tourism in perpetuating power relationships between the metropolis and the periphery by repeating the colonial pattern of exploitation and expropriation.

"If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see" (3). The opening words of the work define the reader, that is a possible tourist to Antigua, and the subject of the essay, Antigua itself. The tourist is homogenised, later coded as a white male, and ridiculed throughout the text. Tourism is seen as a narcissistic activity that serves to obliterate the emptiness of ordinary life by conquering new territories while showing little concern for the country's native people to assure one's sense of superiority. Nonetheless, the hypothetical "if" opening the text suggests the possibility of a different kind of traveller, one willing to understand the historical situation, respectful of native people and aware of the meaning of his/her presence. Kincaid does not exclude such possibility: "You may be the sort of tourist who would wonder why a Prime Minister would want an

airport named after him - why not a school, why not a hospital, why not some great public monument?" (3). But the text suggests that the typical tourist is mindless, ignorant or deliberately oblivious of the social reality of the host country, therefore the author has to uncover certain truths, revealing to the presumably blind reader what lies behind the beautiful façade of a tropical island.

Solely concerned with their own enjoyment, tourists upon arrival relish the fact that Antigua is less green than other islands and therefore sunnier, greenness indicating "that they got quite a bit of rainfall, and rain is the very thing that you, just now, do not want" (4). The fact that lack of green signifies shortage of water does not cross the minds of tourists. Even if it did, they would be unconcerned. They ignore the implications of drought for native people, because they are on holiday and the quality of life for Antiguan does not affect them. They go through customs with ease - "Your bags are not searched" (5) - without noticing the different treatment accorded to black Antiguan returning from Europe or North America "with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives" (4). These ironical remarks are followed by an episode which indicates the tourists' disregard for poverty and their willingness to exploit the natives. When they get into a taxi, for example, they ask for a formal sheet listing official prices and destinations. Furthermore, they transform whatever they see into an

object for their own pleasure, including inefficiencies: "Oh, what a marvellous change these bad roads are from the splendid highways I am used to in North America" (5). A sign of poverty is turned into something purposely there for the tourists' enjoyment. Even a reckless taxi driver appears as an entertainer providing the proper amount of fright and excitement a perfect holiday needs.

A ride by taxi is an occasion for Kincaid to give the readers a tour through post-colonial Antigua and to discuss the deplorable conditions of the land and the people. The taxi, as well as all the other cars that the tourists see in Antigua, is a brand-new Japanese-made car, obviously very expensive, but strangely noisy. What the tourists do not know - and the taxi driver probably does not know either - is that these cars were made for non-leaded gasoline, something never heard of in Antigua. Most likely, the taxi driver lives in a house "far beneath the status of the car" (7). In Antigua, Kincaid explains, loans are offered for cars but not for houses, because the two main car dealerships are owned by government ministers. Furthermore, it is possible that the taxi driver has never passed a driving test, since "there was once a scandal about driving licences for sale" (7), but these thoughts would certainly not cross the minds of the tourists, determined to enjoy the view and make good use of their money.



Other scenes of degradation follow, unnoticed by the blind tourists, as they pass Pigott's school, a building resembling latrines in a sea of dust, and Holberton Hospital, a sight that should alarm the tourists, because "no actual Antiguan trusts" the doctors there, and, when in need of medical care, ministers in government fly to New York "to see a real doctor" (8). Then, Kincaid bitterly remarks that it's good "that you brought your own books with you, for you couldn't just go to the library and borrow some" (8). Antigua, she explains, used to have a splendid library, but it was damaged by the earthquake in 1974. More than a decade later, a sign from colonial times still hangs there saying "THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974. REPAIRS ARE PENDING" (9).

In contrast with the stress on governmental neglect, the reader later learns that in 1985 a number of roads were paved for the Queen's visit, "so that the Queen might have been left with the impression that riding a car in Antigua was a pleasant experience" (12), inferring that, although Antigua was no longer a colony in 1985, the British Queen was still an eminence to honour, and that any improvement in Antigua would never be made on behalf of Antiguan. Proceeding by association, the author ironically recalls that, not very long after the earthquake, Antigua gained independence from Britain and that every year Antiguan celebrate the event by going to church and thanking "a British God" (9).

Kincaid's satire strikes one blow after another. The tourists, she warns, should not bother about "the confusion that must lie in all that" (9), because, fortunately, they have their own books with them, books that certainly do not mention the confusion because they never mention the history of oppression in Antigua:

You have brought your own books with you, and among them is one of those new books about economic history, one of those books explaining how the West (meaning Europe and North America after its conquest and settlement by Europeans) got rich: the West got rich not from the free (free - in this case meaning got-for-nothing) and then undervalued labour, for generations, of the people like me you see walking around you in Antigua but from the ingenuity of small shopkeepers in Sheffield and Yorkshire and Lancashire, or wherever ... (9-10)

Kincaid attacks the lies engendered by imperial interpretations of history which deprive her people of the satisfaction of saying "We made you bastards rich" (10) and provide contemporary tourists with a sense of superiority of having turned savage people into civilised monkeys: "If it were not for you, they would not have Government House, and Prime Minister's Office, and Parliament Building and embassy of powerful country" (10-11). In this way, tourists can enjoy their holiday without feeling guilty about the dereliction they witness,

because, in their eyes, only the natives are to blame for the state of their country, for not being smart enough to use properly the disinterested gift of civilisation received from the far superior West.

As Kincaid describes the activities of the typical tourist in detail, she stresses their egotistical behaviour by continuously remarking on their disregard for the social environment and their exclusive interest in their own comfort: "Oh, but now you are tired of all this looking, and you want to reach your destination - your hotel, your room. You long to refresh yourself; ..." (12). She mocks their affected appreciation of the Caribbean sea, which they associate with wildness and therefore with the backwardness of the people:

That water - have you ever seen anything like it? Far out, to the horizon, the colour of the water is navy-blue; nearer, the water is the colour of the North American sky. From there to the shore, the water is pale, silvery, clear, so clear that you can see its pinkish-white sand bottom. Oh, what beauty! Oh, what beauty! (13)

Tourists only see what is convenient for them. Therefore the landscape provides beautiful scenery for their narcissistic satisfaction: turning the Other into an object for their pleasure, wherever they look, they only see themselves and people like them:

You see yourself taking a walk on that beach, you see yourself meeting new people (only they are new in a very limited way, for they are

people just like you). You see yourself eating some delicious, locally grown food. You see yourself, you see yourself ... (13)

But Kincaid is ready to dismantle the splendid (stereotypical) image of perfection of the Caribbean island as an object of consumption by revealing the horrors lying behind the surface. The delicious food anticipated by the tourists turns out to be a sign of Western economic exploitation of Caribbean islands, deprived of the possibility of exploiting their own products for their own benefit. The food was probably grown "dirt-cheap" (14) in the Caribbean; then it went to Miami, where it was resold to Antigua, probably at a much higher price. Then the wonderful sea reveals far more shocking signs of exploitation. Colonial practices have resulted in the Caribbean sea being polluted with human waste. The tourists must not wonder "what exactly happened to the contents of [their] lavatory when [they] flushed it" (13), because in Antigua there is no sewage-system.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Kincaid turns the colonial curse against the tourists: "the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water" (14). But the pollution of the Caribbean sea, the author cynically observes, is nothing compared to contents of the Atlantic ocean, which conserves the memory of the atrocities of the middle passage. Kincaid reminds

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion links to the night-soil men in *At the Bottom of the River*.

the readers of the "number of black slaves this ocean has swallowed up" (14). The association is not coincidental since the author metonymically links the tourists to the colonisers, implying that just as tourists' waste dissolves in the Caribbean sea, so did Africans (treated as human waste) in the Atlantic ocean.

Kincaid's depiction of Antigua differs greatly from the image of the sunny isle sold by the tourist industry to Western consumers. Under the sun live people suffering from drought, people whose work is under-valued, people who could never visit other countries as tourists because they are too poor; in the sea lies the memory of these people's ancestors, the memory of inhuman deeds, the memory of expropriation and exploitation: inhumanity perpetuated in the post-colonial age. The horrific guided-tour over, Kincaid painfully comments that there is "a world of something in this," but that she "can't go into it right now" (14).

Tourists are depicted as subhuman. They are ugly and revolting because they are so intent on gaining pleasure that they cannot see the truth of what surrounds them. The author admits that they might be nice people at home, where they feel at ease among all their possessions and relationships that define them:

A person at home in your own house (and all its nice house things), with its nice back yard (and all its nice back-yard things), at home on your

street, your church, in community activities,  
your job, at home with your family, your  
relatives, your friends - you are a whole person.

(15-16)

But this human quality of wholeness is illusory, because these people lack the capacity for self-scrutiny. Because they feel ordinary and anonymous in a crowd of ordinary and anonymous people, they are "not well equipped" (16) to look inward and set themselves aright. Thus, tourism becomes a solution to the Western malaise, providing both distraction from the banality of ordinary life and escape from emptiness:

You make a leap from being that nice blob just sitting like a boob in your amniotic sac of the modern experience to being a person visiting heaps of death and ruin and feeling alive and inspired at the sight of it. (16)

In the same way as both people and landscape figure as decorative scenery to the tourists' holiday, they also provide them with a sense of superiority with the thought that Antiguan's "ancestors were not clever in the way yours were and not ruthless in the way yours were, for then would it not be you who would be in harmony with nature and backwards in that charming way?" (17). Therefore tourists not only accept the stereotypes of wildness and backwardness offered by the tourist industry, they also turn people

into objects for their own amusement. They are not able to see black Antiguanas as people with lives and feelings of their own. Instead, they look at them as if viewing a quaint art exhibition. The thought that they might be turned into objects themselves and that their presence might not be welcome does not cross their minds. But Kincaid's aim is precisely to make readers realise how painful it is to be reduced to an object and therefore diminished. Thus, she takes her revenge on insensitive tourists by projecting back on them the image of ridicule they represent in the eyes of Antiguanas:

An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness (you do not look the way they look); the physical sight of you does not please them; you have bad manners ... ; they do not like the way you speak ... ; they collapse helpless from laughter, mimicking the way they imagine you must look as you carry out some everyday bodily function. (17)

Tourism is not only represented as a narcissistic activity, but also as masochistic. In fact, to escape the banality of their lives, tourists are forced to live for a time near people they do not like and

who probably despise them. The relationship seems unsatisfactory for both parties, and also painful. While natives are exploited, tourists bargain with them, a people they do not trust and would not want as neighbours. On the other hand, although natives are not passive in their relationship with tourists and although they seem aware of their own exploitation, they seem not always able to relate their deplorable conditions to their dislike of tourists.

Kincaid ends with a shocking truth: everybody everywhere lives a life of "overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression" (18), but whereas some people can find a way out, others (the majority of the world's population) are too poor to go anywhere, too poor even to live decently in their homelands. Therefore they envy the people who can escape banality and boredom and despise them because they are able to turn their banality and boredom into "a source of pleasure" (19) for themselves.

The second part of the essay clarifies the connection between past and present, between contemporary tourists and European colonisers. Tourism is an extension of colonialism in a post-colonial capitalist age in that tourists' behaviour responds to a colonial logic that justifies the exploitation of people's labour. To provide evidence Kincaid goes back to the colonial times of the Antigua she grew up in. She begins by pointing out that the Antigua enjoyed by tourists is



not the Antigua she knew as a child. That Antigua no longer exists because the English have left.

At the beginning, Kincaid does not make explicit the association of tourists and colonisers. She keeps them separate by the employment of the second person, "you," for tourists, and of the third person, "they," for colonisers, although she soon indicts the colonisers for the crime of "leaving home," obviously the same "crime" the tourists commit. Just like the tourists in the first chapter, the colonisers are homogenised and objectified, reduced to a mass of indistinct people, who, over the centuries, oppressed the helpless population of the island. In one of her effective asides, Kincaid makes cynical remarks on the English character and on the psychological reasons for colonialism. The English, she suggests, "hate each other and they hate England" (24). But colonialism apparently provided them with such a sense of self-worth that they tried to reproduce England everywhere they went. Since the end of colonialism, however, they have been reduced to a "pitiful lot" (23) because "they have no place else to go and nobody else to feel better than" (24).

The text makes it evident that the motivation at the root of colonialism is the same as that at the root of tourism: a Western malaise defined by dissatisfaction, emptiness, and self-loathing. The encounter with the Other engenders a positive self-definition and

therefore suspends the sense of displacedness, but this has a high price for the people who are made into Others. Just as the tourists project their own world onto the Other's culture so that they may feel superior, the English tried to reproduce Englishness where it could not be reproduced. This brought a tremendous "destruction of people and land" (24).

Kincaid then proceeds to give several examples of the consequences of British intervention. She points to the glorification of their oppressors internalised by the natives and which distorted historical truth. All the streets in Antigua, she remembers, were named after some "English maritime criminals" (24). She recollects "standing in hot sun for hours so that I could see a putty-faced Princess from England" (25). The natives were so imbued with the imperialist version of colonial history and so subdued by colonial power that no one ever "wrote bad things" (25) on the wall surrounding Government House, a sign, the author comments, of "how cowed we must have been" (25). She describes the street that was the centre of business and bureaucracy (all European inventions), and she conveys the image of an attempted reproduction of the Western world. But to show that this reproduction was often not really effective, she pauses to comment on the absurdity of applying English law to Caribbean society:

There was a law against using abusive language. Can you imagine such a law among people for whom making a spectacle of yourself through speech is everything? (25)

This anecdote suggests that, despite colonial indoctrination, Caribbean people never became English. Not only were survivals of a culture originating in Africa retained, but colonial power was resisted by using and subverting the same tools of oppression, the colonisers' language being one of the most effective ways.

Several descriptions follow that give a general but nonetheless concrete impression of colonial Antigua. After her comments on the question of law, Kincaid discusses economy, health, entertainment and education, showing how all of these functioned as tools of exploitation and marginalization. Finance, for example, was in the hands of Barclays Bank. The Barclays brothers were originally slave-traders who made money by buying and selling black slaves, but who, paradoxically, with the end of the slave trade (the outlawing of which they had no doubt vehemently opposed) became even richer. Over the years, the bank got richer and richer by handling the savings of the descendants of the slaves. Finance remaining in white hands, then, means perpetuating the exploitation of black people's labour under slavery. Nonetheless, the author remarks, Antiguans can "recite the name of and the day the first black person was hired

at this very same Barclays Bank in Antigua" (26). What may seem a legitimate expression of pride for the achievements of a fellow countryman, is presented by Kincaid as a sign of the subjection of Antiguan to colonial power. She scorns black people's participation in an institution founded to exploit them, and even more the fact that a cashier is, after all, still a servant. She expresses her anger, reveals her incapacity to forgive and forget, and the vehemence of her anger leads her to finally unveil the implied association of colonisers and tourists by the use of the second person to indict the responsibility of the crimes of colonialism:

There is the Barclays Bank. The Barclays brothers are dead. The human beings they traded, the human beings who to them were only commodities, are dead. It should not have been that they came to the same end, and heaven is not enough of a reward for one or hell enough of a punishment for the other. People who think about these things believe that every bad deed, even every bad thought, carries with it its own retribution. So do you see the queer thing about people like me? Sometimes we hold *your* retribution. (26-27. Emphasis mine)

The next institution Kincaid discusses is the Mill Reef Club, established by North Americans who went to live in Antigua although they despised black Antiguan. This club was discriminatory,

allowing black people to enter as servants only. The description once again evokes the behaviour of tourists, who would never share anything with black Antiguan, but who cherish their presence as servants and objects of consumption. In the same way as present-day Antiguan, in spite of their dislike of them, seem unable to connect their own poverty to the tourists' presence on the island, the Antiguan of Kincaid's childhood did not connect their deplorable conditions with their servant status at the club and the few scholarships and little money the club handed out to the islanders in suspicious philanthropic moves. They did not see, or did not want to see, the people at the Mill Reef Club as racists. Instead, they would say of them that they "had such bad manners, like pigs; they were behaving in a bad way, like pigs" (27).

Kincaid insists on highlighting the colonial indoctrination ingested by Antiguan, who would not acknowledge racism even when it was evident. No one objected, for example, to a doctor having their bodies examined by his wife before he agreed to visit them so that the wife would make sure that they were clean and that "nothing else about us - apart from the colour of our skin - would offend the doctor" (28). Paradoxically, this doctor was in Antigua to escape racist persecutions, having gone to Antigua as a refugee from Hitler's Europe. Kincaid remembers even her mother's condescending behaviour as she took her daughter to see the

doctor: "in her innocence she thought that she and the doctor shared the same crazy obsession - germs" (29). It was precisely this "innocence" that made Antiguan unaware of the oppression they were suffering. Although they felt superior to white Antiguan, whom they saw as ill-mannered rather than racists, they had the posture "of the weak, of children" (30). They were continuously discriminated against, but they would not acknowledge the discrimination as racism, and they did not object.

As a further example, the headmistress of a school would not accept children born outside a marriage, but Antiguan never thought that this was a way to keep black children away and therefore to deprive the black population of their right to education. When the school finally began to admit black pupils, the headmistress would constantly reprimand them for behaving like "monkeys just out of trees" (29). This bigoted behaviour would not diminish the power and dignity of Englishness in the eyes of Antiguan. Instead, they would think that the English among white residents perhaps "weren't English at all, for the English were supposed to be civilised" (30).

As colonised subjects, Antiguan were not familiar with the real England, for the England they knew was a myth, an invention of greatness and perfection (they were taught the names of the kings of England and on the twenty-fourth of May they celebrated Queen

Victoria's birthday, although she had been dead for years and some of them didn't even know). Therefore England was to them an image of glory and bliss, which had nothing to do with the deplorable manners of "ugly, piggish individuals" (31).

The effects of the horrors and the expropriation of slavery live on, and the most evident sign of the colonial theft is language: "For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?" (31). The millions of people deprived of all that defined them as human beings are left with the legacy of a tongue which obliterates the "injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me" (32). The author expresses her rage at the fact that whatever she may say would be understood by the oppressor from his point of view. Nonetheless, she uses that same tongue as a tool of resistance, and her stress on the relativity of meaning shows that language can be subverted.

By overt indictment, Kincaid urges Western people to acknowledge the crimes of their ancestors as well as their own responsibility in the perpetuation of oppression. Furthermore, the use of the second person form of address concretises the oppressor, preventing readers from thinking of oppressors as an invisible entity. Anticipating the concern of the next section of the work, Kincaid stresses the fact that the incapability of Antiguans to rule their

country properly and for their own benefit is a consequence of colonial hegemony:

Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that this is mostly your fault. (34-35)

The association of tourists and colonisers is now explicit. Tourism and imperialism spring from the same impulse, a need to feel renewed and superior, and to gain pleasure and benefits by the exploitation of a people considered backward. Western greed cannot be justified or forgiven, because its consequences are too hard to eradicate. Kincaid's condemnation is radical:

You murdered people. You imprisoned people. You robbed people. You opened your own banks and you put our money in them. The accounts were in your name. The banks were in your name. There must have been some good people among you, but they stayed home. (35)



She expresses her scorn of everything that came through colonisation, cancelling out the value of the supposed civilisation brought to her people by the West, asserting her preference for pre-colonial African civilisations, even if they were really "primitive" as the West defined them. Evoking and subverting the headmistress' reprimand, she asserts: "Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you" (37).

The third and longest part of the extended essay draws a detailed picture of post-colonial Antigua. Kincaid vehemently denounces the corruption of the present government and tries to explain the reasons for the apparently irreversible degradation of the country and its people. As she attempts to analyse the personality of Antiguan, whom centuries of oppression seem to have made hyper-passive, the narrative presents a shift in tone, the aggressiveness of the first two chapters changing into a bitter observation of reality, for the writer is now willing to share her anguish with readers. After all, the readers who have got through the first two parts are probably willing to drop their Western sense of superiority and to acknowledge their responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The "you" is no longer indicted; instead, the pronoun expresses familiarity since the writer needs an

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<sup>2</sup> Most reviewers refer only to the first half of the essay.

addressee with whom to share her bewilderment and pain at witnessing the deplorable situation of her native island in the post-colonial age:

And so you can imagine how I felt when, one day, in Antigua, standing on Market Street, looking up one way and down the other, I asked myself: Is the Antigua I see before me, self-ruled, a worse place than what it was when it was dominated by the bad-minded English and all the bad-minded things they brought with them? How did Antigua get to such a state that I would have to ask myself this? (41)

The old library, damaged in the earthquake of 1974 and never restored, becomes a metaphor for the bad government of colonial and post-colonial times in that most of Kincaid's discussion about colonial oppression and post-colonial corruption revolves around the library. Left unrepaired, the library symbolises the will of the people in power to leave Antiguan in a state of ignorance so that they remain subdued; for it is knowledge that provides the tools for resistance. But, most significantly, the library had meant a lot to the writer when she was a child, as we saw in *Annie John*. By using the library as a point of departure to discuss different aspects of Antiguan society, Kincaid stresses the importance of the autobiographical factor and shows how personal experience is the source not only of fiction, but also of theory.

The library that Kincaid visited as a child represents the false dream of the greatness and beauty of England. It was a site of colonial indoctrination, where Antiguan learned to love the culture of their oppressors before realising that it erased their own culture.

As Diane Simmons observes:

When the story is shown to be false, subjects of colonialism are left with an immense sense of loss, so overwhelming that they try to cling to the old beliefs, though on some level they now know how destructive it is to do so. (1994, 139)

This paradox explains the seductive effect that the library had on the writer and her anguish at seeing it destroyed. Thus Kincaid recalls with nostalgia and sadness the moments spent in the library, fully conscious now that it was there that she ingested a doctrine that defines her and her people as inferior and establishes the power of the West over the rest of the world:

But if you saw the old library, situated as it was, in a big, old wooden building painted a shade of yellow that is beautiful to people like me, with its wide veranda, its big, always open windows, its rows and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading, if you could hear the sound of its quietness (for the quiet in this library was a sound in itself), the smell of the sea (which was a stone's throw away), the heat of the sun (no

building could protect us from that), the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, taking in, again and again, the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do the things you did, how beautiful you were, are, and always will be; if you could see all of that in just one glimpse, you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua. (42-43)

Associating the state of the library with the legacy of corruption left by colonialism, Kincaid is determined to understand why the building has not been repaired and why the books are now held in boxes above a dry-goods store. But on noticing that most young people in Antigua seem almost illiterate, speaking English as if it were a "sixth language" (43), she associates the two evils: while the "greatness" of colonial Europe is accumulating dust in the market place, young people are devouring "the rubbish of North America" (44). The cultural imperialism of the post-colonial age appears to be even more destructive than the former; after all, colonial indoctrination had proved to be a weapon that could be turned against the oppressor. The lowering of standards in the post-colonial age, on the contrary, only produces ignorance and passivity and condemns black Antiguan to remain at the lowest level of the social scale.

The library is reduced to boxes of old books collecting dust; the false dream of England's greatness contained in the books is collecting dust; the head-librarian, a pathetic reminder of the old colonial lackey, has turned into a maudlin woman who spends her time apologising to "Antiguans returning to Antigua after a long absence," like the author herself, for the state of the library "sitting on top of a dry-goods store," (44) and wondering if influential people in Antigua, like the ones at the Mill Reef Club, will finally contribute to the building of a new one. When the author was a child, the head-librarian was proud of her work, "she seemed imperious and stuck-up" (44). She represented colonial authority, always vigilant and suspicious and Kincaid happily recalls how she managed to steal books, although the librarian seemed to anticipate all possible tricks and "kept a close watch" (45) on her.

The author goes on to make further connections. Explaining how her beloved old library is now used as headquarters for a carnival troupe called "Angels from the Realm," she evokes the lost paradise in *Annie John*, whereby a personal experience, the loss of childhood bliss, was translated into a political one, the loss of the colonial dream. Commenting on the name of the carnival troupe, she says:

It seemed to me that there was something in that, though not a deliberate something, just a

something, like an "Angels from the Realm of Innocence" something. (And I supposed it made sense for something from the realm of culture to occupy a building that used to house something from the realm of education, for in Antigua, the Minister of Education is also the Minister of Culture). (46)

Thus, associating the degradation of colonial education with the loss of innocence and suggesting a commitment to political awareness, she remarks that the costumes "representing After the Fall were the best" (47).

Kincaid's determination to understand the reasons for the neglect of both the government and the citizens towards the condition of the library, symbolising the overall neglect in the community, brings her to visit an influential woman in Antigua, one "whose family had helped to establish the Mill Reef Club" (47), and therefore representing the perpetuation of imperial paternalism and racism. This woman is well known for "liking Antiguan only if they are servants" (47), and she boasts about encouraging "her girls" (meaning grown-up black women "not unlike me" (47), Kincaid comments) to use the library. The visit makes the author understand why the Mill Reef Club, instead of contributing to the building of a new library, hold to a "repair-of-the-old-library-or-nothing position" (44). Sticking to an imperialist logic, white people in Antigua take

pleasure in pointing out "the gutter into which a self-governing - black - Antigua had placed itself" (47). The conversation with the woman reminds Kincaid of a foreigner, a convicted criminal, who was financing the development of Antigua.

Antigua's motto of independence, "A People to Mold, A Nation to Build," is paradoxical. Building is carried on by foreign criminals who travel on passports issued by the government of Antigua, while Antiguan are effectively being "moulded" into inertia and submission to an authority which mimics colonial power. Notwithstanding, the motto's unintentional irony is not merely received by Kincaid but reversed through her commitment towards the shaping of a political – that is to say decolonised - identity for Antiguan. Through her work she in fact resists hegemony by refuting the apparent irreversibility of colonial legacies. Her commitment parallels that of her mother, who, Kincaid recalls, was engaged in opposing the corrupt government. Indeed, all her work demonstrates that, in spite of the breach between them, Kincaid follows her mother's example, showing the importance of the role of women in Caribbean society and the significance of matrilinear continuity.

In a small place like Antigua, Kincaid observes, "people cultivate small events" (52). They devote their energy to trivial matters because they cannot see themselves in relation to the

context, "a larger picture" (52). They cannot see themselves as part of history, therefore they ignore the existence of time and its effects: "To the people in a small place, the division of Time into the Past, the Present, and the Future does not exist" (54). This blindness is a form of self-defence, for to give an exact and complete account of things implies "a careful weighing, careful consideration, careful judging, careful questioning" (53). Like the child in *Annie John*, Antiguans cling to innocence and refuse to see what is too painful for them and what would require of them "a reconsideration, an adjustment" (53-54). This attitude, though, prevents them from becoming active subjects, it prevents empowerment. Just like when mourning the destruction of the library the author is trapped by the seduction of the false colonial dream, Antiguans cling to a story which makes them see themselves as noble in their misfortune. Holding on to a tale of victimisation, they are condemned to be victims forever. Antiguans, the author observes, are obsessed with slavery:

In Antigua, people speak of slavery as if it had been a pageant full of large ships sailing on blue water, the large ships filled up with human cargo - their ancestors; they got off, they were forced to work under conditions that were cruel and inhuman, they were beaten, they were murdered, they were sold, their children were



taken from them and these separations lasted forever, there were many other bad things, and then suddenly the whole thing came to an end in something called emancipation. Then they speak of emancipation itself as if it happened just the other day, not over one hundred and fifty years ago. The word "emancipation" is used so frequently, it is as if it, emancipation, were a contemporary occurrence, something everybody is familiar with. (54-55)

Like the tourists in the first section, Antiguan are dissociated from context, and this makes them passive recipients of imperial dictatum. Antiguan do not see a connection between their obsession with slavery and their present condition. They do not see the connection between their obsession with slavery and their pride in the Hotel Training School, Antigua's chief educational institution, "a school that teaches Antiguan how to be good servants, how to be a good nobody" (55); nor the connection between their obsession with slavery and the fact that "they are governed by corrupt men, or that these corrupt men have given their country away to corrupt foreigners" (55). The tale of slavery (they have made it into a tale) controls their identity and prevents real change. The acquisition of political awareness would lead them to a more demanding relationship with the world, and this, as we have commented earlier, is what Kincaid is trying to foster through her work. In the meantime,

however, she wonders whether her people are "children, eternal innocents, or artists who have not yet found eminence in a world too stupid to understand, or lunatics who have made their own lunatic asylum, or an exquisite combination of all three" (57).

After having explored the degradation and humiliation of her people, Kincaid launches into an attack against the present government under the leadership of Prime Minister Vere Cornwall Bird. She denounces the greed and corruption of a government which perpetuates colonialism, and laments again the passivity of Antiguan, who have voted for the same government for twenty five years, with only one exception when a representative of the opposition was elected but soon charged by the former Prime Minister of using his office for personal profit and sent to jail. Kincaid associates the present Prime Minister, who, paradoxically, led Antigua to independence from Britain, to Africans who sold their people as slaves, and indicts Antiguan of active complicity:

The men who rule Antigua came to power in open, free elections. In accounts of the capture and enslavement of black people almost no slave ever mentions who captured and delivered him or her to the European master. In accounts of their corrupt government, Antiguan neglect to say that in twenty years of one form of self-government or another, they

have, with one five-year exception, placed in power the present government. (55-56)

A long list of dishonest and illegal activities carried on by the government follows. Ministers are involved in drug trafficking; they benefit from the offshore banks; they own shares in a Japanese-car dealership which holds the monopoly on government vehicles; they allow gambling and reap benefits from the casinos; people close to the Prime Minister run a house of prostitution; the Prime Minister runs his office as if it were family business, placing his sons in the most important posts in the cabinet. Furthermore, most of the media in Antigua are owned by ministers or their relatives (this practice prevents freedom of expression and clearly mimics colonial control). The Antiguan government allowed ammunition to be tested there that was to be sent to South Africa, and on another occasion, they allowed food contaminated by radiation to be distributed in the island. Yet governmental malpractice is protected by the West, Kincaid suggests, for most ministers possess green cards and might fly away whenever necessary. And the indictment seems endless as the writer takes up some fifteen pages of her essay to denounce the Prime Minister and other people in government who are violating the rights of the people. Not surprisingly, after the publication of *A Small Place*, Kincaid was declared *persona non grata* by the government and denounced by governmental newspapers (Ferguson. 1994, 99).

In the last short chapter, the stunning beauty of the Antiguan landscape is countered with a vision of deterioration. Antigua is "too beautiful" (77) to seem real. But contrasted to the magnificent sunsets, seawater, and the sky are miserable cows, a parched earth and destitute people. And the beauty of everything is so exaggerated that it nauseates and constitutes a prison for the people who live there. Antiguan history is shut out of time and history. They have no big events to separate the past from the present and give them an idea of who they were and are:

No Industrial Revolution, no revolution of any kind, no Age of Anything, no world wars, no decades of turbulence balanced by decades of calm. Nothing then, natural or unnatural, to leave a mark on their character. It is just a little island. The unreal way in which it is beautiful now is the unreal way in which it was always beautiful. The unreal way in which it is beautiful now that they are a free people is the unreal way in which it was beautiful when they were slaves. (80)

Kincaid stresses the fact that Antiguan history is not agents of their destinies. She resumes Antiguan history in a few words, making it appear that everything happened casually, with no Antiguan playing a part. After Columbus' discovery in 1493, Kincaid's retelling goes, the island was settled by "human rubbish from Europe, who used

enslaved but noble and exalted human beings from Africa" (80). Eventually, the masters departed and the slaves were freed, and all this happened "in a kind of way" (80); though in fact what Kincaid implies is that the masters are still there, and Antiguan are not free at all. Old power relationships are perpetuated since both oppressors and oppressed follow the dictates of imperial narratives. Kincaid's prescription is thus clear and resolute. The masters should rise from the rubbish while the slaves should descend from their podium of nobility. Only by abandoning their prescriptive roles can they become human beings.

*A Small Place* is a text which militates for human rights since it calls for change and thorough decolonisation. Kincaid urges her people to claim agency and demonstrates that the perpetuation of power relationships is not natural. She argues that the reality of Antigua, founded on hegemony and subordination, is reversible and that the subordination of Antiguan in the present is the result of their passivity; therefore, they should place themselves in a more demanding relationship with the world and they should constitute themselves as free agents. Antiguan should oppose the corruption of the government which works against the people. In the same way, they should stop behaving as objects of consumption for the tourist industry since tourism perpetuates colonial exploitation. Only by losing their pride in being servants (see, for example, the comments

on the Hotel Training School) and by substituting the tale of slave nobility with real historical awareness, will they be able to end slavery. Their freedom lies in their hands.

In this political essay, Kincaid continues the quest for the self, now at a national level since here the identity to claim is not the identity of a single character but of a whole nation, and Kincaid herself, after her visit to Antigua, becomes more aware of the weight of the political factor in her life. *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, are works that give voice to a sense of alienation not yet clearly placed in context, while in *A Small Place* the narrator, Kincaid herself, has become aware of how social conditions can shape human consciousness. She has understood the mechanisms of power and this understanding has given her the key for resistance. Not only does she affirm her identity; she also constitutes herself as an advocate for her people's freedom. She uncovers for Antiguan, and for the rest of the world (after all, the narrator addresses white readers), what lies behind the imperial version of their past and present history, and she reveals to them who they were, who they are, and who they can become.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Lucy*

#### **Between Worlds**

*Lucy* is another chapter in the personal saga which links all Kincaid's main works. The plot continues the one in *Annie John*, already suggested in the dreamlike atmosphere of *At the Bottom of the River*. Although the name is different, the protagonist seems to be the same, changed only by Kincaid's more political perspective on her past experience. *Annie John*, a bildungsroman, records the feelings of a girl growing up and struggling with the changes that her maturation brings to her perception of herself and of the outside world, and to her relationships with others, primarily with her mother, who also symbolises the colonial motherland. This novel ends with Annie sailing off for England, her personality still frail and unstable, but determined to abandon her childhood world (literally and metaphorically) forever and to invent herself anew far from home.

Kincaid's second novel opens with Lucy arriving at the airport of a North American city to work as an au pair in a white family and to study nursing. The girl will strive not to be caught up in new power

relationships which replicate old ones, and while she seeks to strengthen her sense of self, she is haunted by the memory of her Caribbean home.

Between the publication of *Annie John* and *Lucy* there is a time span of seven years interrupted by the publication of *A Small Place*, following Kincaid's visit to Antigua after two decades of absence. As noted in the previous chapter, *A Small Place* marks Kincaid's growing awareness of the determinant role of social factors on human consciousness. Deeper understanding of the interrelations of power structures and personal development is reflected in *Lucy*, where the conflict with the biological mother and the colonial motherland acquires a new consistence. Furthermore, with this second novel, Kincaid discloses a significant part of her life which she had silenced in the first novel: the birth of her brothers and the privileged treatment the parents accorded to them as males, depicted in this novel as the prime factor determining the breach between mother and daughter. In this way, *Lucy* sheds new light on the biographical aspect of Kincaid's opus, and facilitates the understanding of her previous works. But, above all, *Lucy* articulates the quest for the self of a colonial subject confronting the white West.

*Lucy* is a resisting post-colonial subject, opposing both colonial logic and imperial assumptions, meaning that this novel provides a



rich set of alter/native visions. Questioning the attitude of the West towards the Other, the refusal to acknowledge difference and the imposition of homogenisation, the narrator voices the need for subaltern subjects to tell their own stories, to give their versions of history and their view of the world. Here, the colonised person, constituted as an object within imperial logic, speaks in her own voice and becomes both a subject and an agent of her destiny. *Lucy* is the direct fictional continuation of *A Small Place*, Kincaid's indictment of colonial exploitation and of the perpetuation of such exploitation through the ignorance of imperial tourists. It is clear how theory, fiction and autobiography creatively interact in Kincaid's work to construct a post-colonial saga which defines itself in the resistance to oppression.

*Lucy* is set in an unnamed North American city resembling New York. The protagonist, a nineteen year old black Caribbean girl, must come to terms with a white middle-class world which identifies her as a colonial subject (object). Integrity of the self is at stake, as Lucy struggles against the imperatives of a colonial logic. She has abandoned her native island to escape from a setting which prevented her from developing as a free agent. Her integrity has been threatened by the maternal and colonial power(s), both entities determined to turn her into a reflection of themselves. In the First World, she finds herself caught up in a similar set of power

relationships, again at the personal and political level. The relationship with her white employer, Mariah, replicates in many aspects the one with her mother. On the other hand, the imperial attitude of white North American society echoes British colonial power.

As in *Annie John*, the protagonist strives for ontological independence. To achieve her goal, she must pass through various stages and engage in various relationships. In *Annie John* the protagonist tries to recreate the maternal union in her friendship with Gwen, and then seeks to establish a subjectivity in opposition to her mother's through friendship with the Red Girl. Finally, after her collapse and the re-mothering process offered by the grandmother, she finds a separate self and relief in stressing her difference, or "oddity," as she calls it. Similarly, in *Lucy* the protagonist finds an echo of lost maternal love in her relationship with Mariah. Then, perceiving the dangers of this love, she engages in relationships with other people, in particular with the maverick red-haired Peggy, recalling the friendship with the Red Girl. Furthermore, in this novel sexuality becomes a paramount issue as Lucy gets involved in purely sexual relationships to affirm her rebellion against maternal power by putting into practice the "sluttishness" that is her mother's obsession here as well as in Kincaid's previous fiction. In *Lucy* also there is a phase of collapse, but here the protagonist manages to

resist, and the disintegration that threatens her is externalised as she witnesses that of familial harmony in the white household where she is employed.

Though still haunted by the memory of the mother/motherland, Lucy's sense of the self is strong enough to resist manipulation, rejecting the identities shaped for her by her mother, Antiguan society, and the western world, and, like Annie, she finally understands that to find her authentic self she must go on alone. As Diane Simmons points out, the greatest threat to Lucy's autonomy does not come from overt forms of racism or violence, but rather from love and beauty:

The threat to Lucy and to the self she is trying to create will not arise out of violence or hatred but from those who possess many admirable and even lovable qualities and who reach out in friendship. In the world of Kincaid's protagonists, the great danger is not in overt hostility and brutality but in being presented with something that you will love too much and, through that love, be lost to yourself. (1994, 126)

The danger represented by the loving mother in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* and by the colonial dream embodied in the old library in *A Small Place* is here presented in the form of the kind employer, Mariah, who embodies both the maternal figure whose

love Lucy longs for and the dominant culture embedded in the superiority of the West over the rest of the world.

From the very beginning, Lucy is determined to gain control of her life, and, although her position as a black working-class expatriate in a white middle-class world makes her vulnerable, she never appears to be a passive receiver of the dominant culture. In the first chapter of the novel, "Poor Visitor", the protagonist is defined as an outsider, experiencing the pain of exile. Although she has been very unhappy at home, she recalls that unhappiness with nostalgia upon her arrival in the new setting, which is cold, unfamiliar, and deceiving. She had expected to find an immediate relief to a "bad feeling I didn't have a name for" (3), but she is overcome with sorrow when faced with the greyness and emptiness of the North American city.

Seeing and doing things new to her for the first time, what Lucy experiences is not excitement, although she imagines she "would grow used to it and like it very much" (4), but rather a feeling of exhaustion: "I slept soundly that night, but it wasn't because I was happy and comfortable - quite the opposite; it was because I didn't want to take in anything else" (4). She finds reality disappointing: she had daydreamed of famous places and has seen how "ordinary, dirty, worn out" (4) they are. Appearances are also treacherous in this place where the sun may shine while the air stays cold. As

things she had taken for granted reveal themselves to be untrue in the new setting, Lucy is overcome with homesickness and with a feeling of having entered a permanent state of exile:

I was no longer in a tropical zone, and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past - so familiar and predictable that even my unhappiness then made me happy now just to think of it - the other my future, a gray blank, an overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight. I was no longer in a tropical zone and I felt cold inside and out, the first time such a sensation had come over me.

(5-6)

Lucy is given the maid's room, a high-ceilinged room resembling "a box in which cargo traveling a long way should be shipped" (7). In her position as a servant, she fears being objectified and treated like cargo, an image evoking the conditions of slaves during the middle passage. But she is determined to affirm her subjectivity, and, despite her overwhelming unhappiness, she refuses to see herself as a subaltern and takes every opportunity to claim agency. The white family encourages her to feel at home. They do not acknowledge Lucy's difference and want her to assimilate to their world. Their maid, on the other hand, unrestrained by middle-

class hypocrisy, openly manifests her dislike of Lucy, mocking her for speaking and walking "like a nun" (11). She provokes her by stressing her inability to dance, but Lucy responds to a superficial Western song with an energetic affirmation of her own culture and experience, bursting into a calypso about a girl who ran away from home and had a good time.

Threatened with objectification, Lucy turns the tables and, by continuously giving her own version of things, she turns others into objects. In fact she homogenises the members of the family, describing them as a bunch of yellow-haired heads resembling a bouquet of flowers, the image anticipating the depiction of the dreaded colonial daffodils later in the story. Like *A Small Place* tourists admiring the natives "backwardness" with a sense of superiority, Lucy wonders at their "strangeness," finding funny and absurd their perception of the world as "unbearably wonderful" (12). Nonetheless, she likes them and soon starts to assimilate them to her world (she does not allow them to assimilate her; it is she who takes them in), and her new experience is coded and evaluated in relation to her past life in Antigua. For example, she relishes the fact that they believe in "a God that did not have to be thanked every time you turned around" (13), and that, in contrast to her parents, Lewis and Mariah are quite indulgent with their four girls.

Perhaps it is only at an unconscious level that Lucy senses that the apparently innocent beauty and kindness of the family constitute a threat to her integrity. Like the daffodils of the poem she was forced to memorise at school in colonial Antigua, they represent the white world that the colonised subject is made to adore and imitate at the expense of a sense of self-worth. To defend herself against assimilation, therefore, she is content to remain an outsider and keeps herself a little apart from them, while they, perceiving her need of separateness, start mocking her benevolently and calling her "the Visitor." Since Lucy does not fit into their order of things, they are obviously blind to her way of relating to other people, refusing to acknowledge their imperial role and their complicity with a system in which Lucy is inscribed as a subaltern. Lewis, a middle-aged lawyer, is apparently unaware that his benevolence towards Lucy is grounded in the authority of the employer to objectify and ridicule his employee based on the legitimacy of ownership, while his wife does not acknowledge her own complicity.

In a scene reminiscent of a family meal scene in *Annie John*, where the mother, oblivious of the daughter's discomfort, enjoys her husband's jokes, the girl finds herself excluded from family harmony, an episode anticipating the identification of Mariah and Lucy's mother developed in the next chapter:

... look at the way I stared them as they ate, Lewis said. Had I never seen anyone put a forkful of French-cut beans in his mouth before? This made Mariah laugh, but almost everything Lewis said made Mariah happy and so she would laugh. I didn't laugh, though, and Lewis looked at me, concern on his face. He said, "Poor Visitor, poor Visitor," over and over, a sympathetic tone to his voice ... (13-14)

Lewis's discourse is charged with racist allusions. After his observation on table manners, he tries to make his point by telling a tale of monkeys, apparently oblivious of the old association of blacks with apes. By telling the story of an uncle who went to Canada to raise monkeys and finally got so used to them that he preferred them to human beings, he probably tries to convince Lucy that, although she finds them strange, she will finally come to like and adapt to them. Lucy, wanting to show that she "had taken them in" (15), responds with a story of a dream which, although she may not be conscious of the fact, is an allegory of colonial violence:

Lewis was chasing me around the house. I wasn't wearing any clothes. The ground on which I was running was yellow, as if it had been paved with cornmeal. Lewis was chasing me around and around the house, and though he came close he could never catch up with me. Mariah stood at the open windows saying,



Catch her, Lewis, catch her. Eventually I fell down a hole, at the bottom of which were some silver and blue snakes. (14)

In her dream, where she is lost and defenceless (naked) and there's nowhere she can turn for salvation because she is trapped in the Western world (the house), Lucy expresses her fear of being assimilated by the white world, yellowness being a signifier evoking the daffodils as well as the hair of the family members, and therefore she unconsciously identifies the invitation to imitate her employers with the violence she had experienced during childhood. As we know from *Annie John*, both her mother and colonial authority had expected from her adoration and imitation, trying to turn her into a narcissistic reflection of themselves. Thus, while Lewis's tale underscores the coloniser's domination, Lucy's dream represents the resistance of the colonised.

Nevertheless, Lucy's employers are blind to the political implications of the dream and unable to see things from a non-Western perspective, so that, assuming the superiority and all-inclusiveness of Western theory, they look at each other, not at Lucy, to find an explanation, and finally come up with a sexual interpretation:

Their two yellow heads swam toward each other and, in unison, bobbed up and down. Lewis made a clucking noise, then said, Poor,

poor Visitor. And Mariah said, Dr. Freud for Visitor, and I wondered why she said that, for I did not know who Dr. Freud was. (15)

The episode is very significant in revealing how Lucy's cultural difference (and with it the validity of her culture) is neglected by her Western employers and how therefore she is erased as a subject and reduced to an image of childlike innocence (implying lack of civilisation) previous to the acquisition of Western values. Without acknowledging the perpetuation of violence they are exercising on the colonised subject, Lucy's employers encourage her to mimic the Western ideal, so that, as an immigrant, Lucy finds herself caught in a clash of cultures only she is aware of.

The chapter entitled "Mariah" articulates both Lucy's definition of herself in confrontation with her white employer and her conflict with her mother. Lucy's relationship with Mariah echoes the love/hate relationship with her mother, not only at a personal level, but also at a level charged with political significance: as the mother represents colonial power, Mariah represents white imperialism. As in her previous works, Kincaid makes a connection between the mother figure and the dominant cultural group, both representing a threat to the free development of the protagonist's personality.

Struggling to picture an authentic identity for herself, Lucy moves within two worlds, the Western and the Caribbean, both

presenting dangers for a young female. After having received a letter from her mother warning her against the evils that could befall black girls away from home, she is paralysed by fear since an immigrant girl, the letter tells her, was assaulted on an underground train and had her throat cut. In a further attempt to suppress her daughter's sexuality by reminding her of the dangers for a female outside the domestic sphere, Lucy's mother succeeds in frightening her even when they are far from each other.

Lucy is so scared that she admits she is "afraid to even put my face outside the door" (20), but then she recalls that, where she comes from, danger exists also within the home. She remembers a schoolmate whose father had "dealings with the Devil" (21), a girl who became "possessed" and was continuously beaten by what possessed her (her father?) and who eventually had to cross the sea for salvation because it is believed that "the Devil cannot walk over water" (21). Presumably, though, as Lucy understands it, crossing the sea, as she has done, would imply running the risk of being assaulted by visible criminals on an underground train. Refusing to see her freedom crippled by domestic and alien violence, Lucy will not choose between paralysis at home and paralysis abroad:

I thought, On the one hand there was a girl being beaten by a man she could not see; on the other there was a girl getting her throat cut

by a man she could see. In this great big world,  
why should my life be reduced to these two  
possibilities? (21)

At a more general level, Lucy's statement can also be read as a rejection of dichotomies since she refuses to choose between a Caribbean and a Western identity in opposition to each other. In both worlds, as a black young working-class female, she is constituted as a vulnerable subject, but by taking a stance against paralysis Lucy is claiming agency, and therefore she has to reject the available identities offered to a black woman by Antiguan and Western society.

Lucy's present life is coded in relation to her mother and the memory of home; her childhood is a source of knowledge and a key to self-understanding. When the snow falls, she is at pain to admit how nourishing the world appears to her, because she remembers that love is followed by betrayal. She is beginning to love Mariah and her world as she had loved her mother and her home, and, as she had done at home, she tries to defend herself from the dangers of love with all the means at her disposal. She remembers her harsh replies when her mother had wanted to share with her a memory of her and her husband falling in love while watching a romantic movie showing a world immersed in white snow. Now that Lucy sees the snow for the first time, she is overcome with its beauty, "a beauty

you could appreciate if you had an excess of beauty to begin with" (22-23). The memory of the excessive and altogether treacherous beauty of her home, the dangers of which Kincaid has explored in *A Small Place*, and the memory of the mother, whom she adored, prevent Lucy from enjoying the new feeling of well-being:

That the world I was in could be soft, lovely, and nourishing was more than I could bear, and so I stood there and wept, for I didn't want to love one more thing in my life, didn't want one more thing that could make my heart break into a million little pieces at my feet. (23)

As she experiences the passing of the seasons, something unknown to her before, her sorrow becomes a permanently "heavy and hard" feeling settled inside her, like an inner scar, and, summoning a childhood memory, she concludes that "this must be living" (24). She identifies with a friend of her mother who had a scar on her cheek, a human-teeth bite consequent to a quarrel with another woman over a man: "it was as if the mark on her face bound her to something much deeper than its reality, something that she could not put into words" (25). As a child, Lucy had understood the "heavy and hard" tone of the woman's voice to be "real living" and she had been sure that she "would end up with a mark somewhere" (25). The loss of innocence, which in *Annie John* was associated with death, and in *A Small Place* with political awareness and the

possibility of agency, is here identified with real life, and therefore with permanent pain. Kincaid stresses the necessity of being marked by life to acquire awareness both at a political and personal level. In contrast to Annie, Lucy can see clearly into herself and into the outer world, she can understand the structures of power as deeply as she can understand the role designed for her within those structures, and she can use the means at her disposal to subvert power and to position herself in a new site.

Lucy constructs herself in difference as she understands who she is and who she wants to be by studying other people. She defines herself in opposition to her white employer: Mariah is a nice, kind woman, possibly the best example of the white Western world, but the fact that she is so nice and kind makes her insignificant because it makes her incapable of leaving a trace on the world:

The smell of Mariah was pleasant. Just that - pleasant. And I thought, But that's the trouble with Mariah - she smells pleasant. By then I already knew that I wanted to have a powerful odor and I would not care if it gave offence.  
(27)

Lucy and Mariah are different because life hasn't left any mark on Mariah, she has no scar and the world seems to fall at her feet. She inhabits the paradise of innocence that Annie John had lost, but, like Annie's, her world too is doomed to destruction.

Through studying Mariah, Lucy comes to an understanding of herself. She wonders how priorities are set, how it is that some people are able to live at a trivial level, influenced by insignificant things like the weather:

I thought, Things must have always gone her way, and not just for her, but for everybody she has ever known from eternity; she has never had to doubt, and so she has never had to grow confident; the right thing always happens to her; the thing she wants to happen happens. Again I thought, How does a person get to be that way? (26)

Mariah's simplicity in looking at the world invalidates the complexity of Lucy's experience. For Lucy's life to be validated, she has to destroy Mariah's simple assumptions, therefore, whenever Mariah tries to impose her version of experience, Lucy responds with alter/native visions embodying the Other culture originated in the history of violence on Caribbean people.

The episode of the daffodils is the one that best illustrates the danger of Mariah's innocence (political ignorance) of people like Lucy. Mariah is as loving as Annie's mother was in the first years of her childhood. Like her, she wants to include Lucy in everything, to make her experience the best things in life, but in doing so Mariah is not aware that by imposing her own visions she is exercising

violence, because the innocent beauty she sees in the world obliterates the oppression perpetuated on Third World people. Mariah ignores cultural difference and when faced with it she seeks to erase it. As spring approaches, she communicates to Lucy her desire to take her to see blooming daffodils, one of the most beautiful things in nature for her. Lucy, startled by Mariah's excessive excitement about what to her are simply "some flowers bending in the breeze" (17), summons a memory of childhood that violently opposes the simplicity of Mariah's vision and tells her about the Wordsworth poem she was forced to memorise and recite in public while she was internally resisting the colonial imposition of Western superiority on the Caribbean landscape and "making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem" (18). Mariah's response is naive and betrays a "bit of envy" (19) for not being part of that history of oppression that makes things full of significance.

Although she does not acknowledge her complicity, Mariah's attitude reveals a certain degree of culpability for belonging to the class of oppressors. Nevertheless, she is unaware of the tragic proportions of Lucy's experience and, just like colonial power, she uses trickery to impose her vision. One day she takes Lucy to a garden and, after having covered her eyes with a handkerchief, walks her to a spot full of daffodils and forces her to gaze at the



flowers. Lucy's reaction articulates the danger implicit in Mariah's action and the necessity for Lucy to destroy Mariah's simplicity to validate her own experience:

They looked beautiful; they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them (29)

Mariah's trick evokes the insidious colonial strategies of presenting as beautiful something which in fact invalidates the Other's culture. When the name of the flowers is revealed, Lucy experiences a sense of weakness and speechlessness symbolical of the erasure of experience and the loss of voice of the colonised. She stammers and bites her tongue, temporarily unable to articulate her feeling about the daffodils. But when Mariah, mistaking her suffering for joy, reaches out to hug her, Lucy recuperates her voice and, stepping back, reminds her harshly of the violence that daffodils represent in her life. Lucy's response has to be aggressive: although she feels sorry about hurting Mariah, she has to respond with her own version of the natural display casting "her beloved daffodils in a scene ... of conquered and conquest" (30). Thus Kincaid reminds readers that history cannot be erased or mystified. The horrors of colonialism, violence and oppression shape people's consciousness and divide the world in two, the worlds of the oppressors and the oppressed,

each of them with their own visions: "It wasn't her fault. It wasn't my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness" (30).

Lucy's relationship with Mariah is a love/hate relationship replicating the one with her mother. On the one hand, she loves Mariah precisely because she reminds her of her mother. Like Annie, she enjoys looking at the maternal figure cooking or nurturing plants with her beautiful hands, but, at the same time, she senses the danger in Mariah's desire to make her see things her way, just like her mother's attempt to turn her into a reflection of herself, and has to defend herself from a love which is controlling and overbearing. On the other hand, her need to escape from the power her mother still exercises over her drives her closer to Mariah. When she has to leave with Mariah and the children to spend the summer holidays in Mariah's childhood house on the Great Lakes, she feels reluctant to go, sensing, perhaps, that in her childhood home Mariah's sense of entitlement will grow even stronger, as in fact happens. But then she receives a letter from her mother with idle details of life in Antigua, and she feels the need to put as much distance as she can between herself and her home:

I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter came, and if I could put enough events between me

and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face? (31)

She wants to escape from memory, from the burden of history in her personal life, and, paradoxically, she has to do this in a world which replicates the old one, a world bent on affirming white hegemony and on denying her the possibility of an authentic independent self. Lucy leaves with the family for the Great Lakes and soon finds that the "hundreds of years" obsessing her cannot be erased from her consciousness, no matter how much distance and how many events she puts between herself and her home. However painful memory can be, it is memory that enables her to defend herself from the cultural violence of the white world and to maintain an integral sense of the self.

On the train taking the family to the Great Lakes, the contrast between Mariah's and Lucy's points of view articulates the contrast between oppressors and oppressed, an irreducible dichotomy. During dinner, Lucy notices that the people being served look like Mariah while the people waiting on them look like her. Mariah, on the contrary seems oblivious to all this. Resembling the tourists in *A Small Place*, she is ignorant of Lucy's history and memory, her ethnocentrism enabling her to find joy in sights that mark the

exploitation of labour for Lucy. She wants Lucy to relish the beauty of freshly plowed fields, once again forcing her gaze on a mark of atrocity, while the significance of the fields, like that of the daffodils, is lost on her. Looking at the plowed fields, Lucy maintains her identification with the oppressed and harshly observes: "Well, thank God I didn't have to do that" (33). The two women see things differently, one from the point of view of a person who feels entitled to enjoy the world, the other from the point of view of one who knows that for some people to enjoy the world a larger number of people live lives of toil and suffering. Mariah does not relate her well-being to the subaltern position of people in her service. Like the white tourists described by Kincaid, she behaves as if she owned the world, as if landscape and people existed for her own enjoyment. Lucy notices that she speaks about Gus, a man who has served her family since she was a child, as if he belonged to her, unable to see the real person behind the faithful servant.

Although her love for Mariah grows deeper day after day, Lucy is reluctant to be captured by her charm. Aware that Mariah's love for her is the same kind as her mother's, she sees that, like herself when a child, Mariah's daughters are willing to see things their mother's way. On the other hand, Lucy uses her past experience to defend herself against a threatening love:

I had come to feel that my mother's love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her; and I didn't know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone. (36)

Resisting Mariah's love, she re-enacts not only her opposition to her mother, but also her rejection of colonial indoctrination. Mariah wants her to appreciate the beauty of a world that Lucy was taught to adore without ever having seen. Now that she is face to face with that world, she finds it deceiving, its beauty illusory. For her the myth of Western superiority does not hold, so the daffodils, the pride of the Western landscape, look "like something to eat and something to wear at the same time" (29) and the lake, the greatness of which Lucy had studied in geography books, looks "ordinary, gray, dirty, unfriendly, not a body of water to make up a song about" (35). Compared with the explosive beauty of the Caribbean, the Western landscape appears squalid and faded: its greatness revealed as false to the decolonised eye.

Lucy takes every opportunity to oppose the cultural and maternal power Mariah unconsciously insists on exercising on her. Mariah is unaware of the dialectic of conquest implied in her perspective, and Lucy is determined to unveil it to her. When Mariah, proud of having caught several trout, sings joyfully "I will make you fishers of men" and dances around Lucy exclaiming "Let's

go feed the minions" (37), the latter associates her discourse with the oppression of her people and responds with a story of her own, remembering how she had reacted to her mother's reading of Jesus feeding the multitudes, asking "But how did Jesus serve the fish? boiled or fried?" (37-38). Lucy resists the authority that ignores the wants of people and makes them invisible objects of history. Commenting on her memory, she says:

Not only would the multitudes be pleased to have something to eat, not only would they marvel at the miracle of turning so little into so much, but they might go on to pass a judgment on the way the food tasted. I know it would have mattered to me. (38)

She is determined to turn the tables and make herself a visible subject and an agent of her own destiny. Therefore, she opposes Mariah's discourse of conquest with a story of defiance and resistance, a story taken from her own personal experience.

Lucy's continuous attacks occasionally succeed in shaking Mariah's confidence. Nonetheless, instead of responding to her sense of culpability by acknowledging her responsibility, Mariah claims absolution. Seeking identification with Lucy to narrow the gap between them, she naively claims kinship with the oppressed, without realising that her effort makes her even more outrageous: "the reason I'm so good at catching fish and hunting birds and

roasting corn and doing all sorts of things is that I have Indian blood" (39-40). Once again, her ethnocentric perspective makes Mariah unable to see the real people behind the labels of oppression. Lucy herself has Indian blood, since her grandmother was a Carib Indian, but, although "Carib Indians were good sailors," she doesn't like to be on the sea and, to her, her grandmother is her grandmother, "not an Indian" (40). Lucy considers the implications of Mariah's affirmation and does not hide her disgust:

Underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also? (40-41)

When Lucy responds harshly, Mariah's look is one of anguish, and Lucy's heart almost breaks. She has finally shaken Mariah's innocence, but her triumph is "hollow" (41), because she knows how painful any loss of innocence is, and because her distaste for Mariah's behaviour does not diminish her deep love for her. Like Annie's, Lucy's opposition to the maternal figure she loves and detests at the same time is necessary to her development of an independent self, but it is extremely painful and it leaves her emotionally drained. Her triumph does not make her happy, she only holds on to it for the sake of her own survival.

In the third chapter, "The Tongue", Lucy's reflections on the world and herself revolve around sexuality. Her vision of herself as a subject with sexual desires comes to the surface as her sense of self grows stronger. Both the relationships with Mariah and with her mother play a determining role in Lucy's analysis of herself as a sexual being. On the one hand, the fact that she has been able to survive on her own for six months and forced a distance between herself and her home by refusing to open the numerous letters from her mother gives her a sense of her own power. On the other hand, she also overcomes the fear of being robbed of her own emerging self by the pressure of the white world, when she comes to see its perfection as illusory. She stops provoking and defying Mariah as her love for her becomes deeper and as she witnesses the collapse of Mariah's paradise.

In the previous chapter, through her relationship with Mariah, Lucy had re-enacted the conflict with her mother. But then she realises that Mariah is not omnipotent and godlike as her mother is, and that, unlike her mother, she can easily be shaken. This awareness increases Lucy's self-confidence, allowing her to become protective towards Mariah as she understands that her apparently perfect world rests on unstable foundations. In fact, although Mariah is unaware of it herself, Lucy has learnt that her husband is unfaithful to her. For this reason, Mariah no longer appears to Lucy



as a representative of imperial power, but rather as a woman marked by love, like her mother's friend Sylvie, and as a helpless creature cast out from paradise. Lucy, who had previously defined herself in opposition to Mariah, can now identify with her through common experience: just like Mariah, she has lost the love of her life. This new understanding of loss as a universal pattern of the human condition makes Lucy less paralysed by her grief and enables her to look deeper into herself and to explore a part of herself which was at the heart of her breach with the mother, her sexuality. In her analysis of herself and of her sexual experiences, it is significant that Lucy never sees herself as an object of desire, but rather as a desiring subject. Therefore, after having claimed political agency, she defines herself as a sexual agent, advancing in her quest for the self.

The chapter opens with Lucy remembering her first kiss. At fourteen, she says, she had "discovered that a tongue had no real taste" (43). She had been kissing a boy named Tanner and had realised that flavour did not really matter: "how it makes you feel - that is the thing" (44). She mulls over this memory while she feeds the youngest child of the family, Miriam, whom she loves best and treats like her own mother used to treat her, with loving care. As her mother did with her, she convinces the child to eat food she doesn't like, telling her it is something very special sought after by fairies. In this way she re-inscribes her childhood experience in her present life

and connects the understanding of sexual pleasure with what she had learned from her mother: how something makes you feel is more important than what it really is. For the same reason, she is amused by Mariah's objection to the telling of fairy tales to the children, which she thinks would give them wrong ideas about what to expect from life. With her different background, containing other sorts of deception, Lucy sees Mariah's views as inconsistent: "I had in my head a long list of things that contributed to wrong expectations in the world, and somehow fairy tales did not make an appearance on it" (45). Paradoxically, by rejecting external appearances and seeking only the pleasure of the senses, Lucy is better prepared to face life's deceptions than Mariah is. She observes how "hollow" and "old" Mariah appears, so concerned with the passing of time and her advancing age, and she perceives Mariah and her husband's show of deep love and perfect harmony to be untruthful. It is "a show for each other" (47), she says, ascertaining the couple's incapability to face the end of their love.

Lucy's relationship with Lewis is also inscribed in maternal teachings. She likes him, she confesses, but her sympathy goes to Mariah, because her mother had taught her never to take "a man's side over a woman's; by that she meant I should never have feelings of possession for another woman's husband" (48). Her position also re-enacts her old attachment to her mother at the expense of her

father. Lucy has grown to love Mariah deeply and she blames the husband's hypocrisy for the deception that is invading Mariah's world, making her miserable.

While she observes the couple making a show of their faded love, Mariah responding with a sigh and a shudder to her husband's kisses on her neck, Lucy's thoughts return to Tanner's tongue and the exciting feeling it gave her having him licking and sucking her breasts. She remembers how, after having experienced such pleasure, sexual fantasies invaded her imagination in everyday life and how she became eager to experience more pleasure with other boys. Shortly after Tanner, she recollects, there was a young boy she used to meet at the library and kiss violently, enjoying the feeling of power it gave her to see the boy walking away trying "to hide the mess in front of his trousers" (51).

In her relationships with boys, Lucy's role was certainly not that of passive victim of masculine sexual greed. On the contrary, she responded to aggressiveness with violence, asserting her own desires and putting an end to the relationship as soon as she started to tire of it. When she first experienced sexual intercourse, for example, noticing how triumphant the boy was on seeing the white towel stained with blood, she had the presence of mind to tell him that it was just her "period coming on" (82). In her urge to get rid of her virginity, Lucy asserts her desire, defying the maternal power

which is complicitous with patriarchy in suppressing women's sexual desire, and, in her response to the boy, she opposes male power over women's sexuality:

I did not care about being a virgin and had long been looking forward to the day when I could rid myself of that status, but when I saw how much it mattered to him to be the first boy I had been with, I could not give him such a hold over me. (82-83)

From the beginning, Lucy constructs herself as an active sexual subject with the right to desire, enjoy, and reject according to her own personal wishes.

Far from home, Lucy finally begins to feel happy because she has been able to spend six months on her own, putting a distance between herself and the "harsh judgments made against me by people whose only power to do so was that they had known me from the moment I was born" (51). Having also overcome the fear of being erased or reduced to an object by the white family's pressure on her to emulate them, because she has affirmed her power to defend herself, she is now able to appreciate the beauty of her new home. She relishes the passing of the seasons and the pleasant warmth of the North American sun compared to the unbearable heat of the Caribbean.

Nonetheless, her experiences in the new world are still coded in terms of life at home. She is afraid, for example, to walk through the wood dividing the summer house from the lake, because she imagines that someone or something could emerge from the dark. She is still in the world of obeah, where "there was no such thing as a 'real' thing, because often what seemed to be one thing turned out to be altogether different" (54). She remembers a large scar her mother had on her face for having been hit by a monkey in the rain forest and how her life was saved by the grandmother's skills in obeah medicine. Lucy, though, is no longer paralysed by her fear. She walks through the wood and eventually becomes able to appreciate its beauty, adding on more thing to her "expanding world" (55).

Lucy's love for Mariah, whom she no longer perceives as a threat, contributes towards making her feel at ease in the nurturing atmosphere of family life. She finds reflected in Mariah the parts of her mother she loves best. Both women seem to be gifted with magic beauty. With Mariah, though, Lucy can have the companionship that was not allowed with her mother. Besides, in contrast to Lucy's mother, Mariah demonstrates the ability to understand the separate needs of others. Although she dislikes Lucy's new friend Peggy, she admits that it is altogether good for Lucy to have a friend:

This was a way in which Mariah was superior to my mother, for my mother would never come to see that perhaps my needs were more important than her wishes. (63-64)

For this reason, since Lucy is starting to feel really at home in the best sense and she is no longer vulnerable to power relationships, she is distressed when the apparent harmony in the family starts to show signs of collapse. Not only does she feel sorry for Mariah, she also senses that she is losing something herself.

The relationship with Peggy echoes Annie's friendship with the Red Girl. Peggy represents all that Mariah and Lucy's mother disapprove of. She smokes, uses slang, dresses awkwardly, and doesn't comb her red hair. The two girls spend their time together smoking marijuana and talking about men and sex. The friendship drives Mariah crazy, just like the one with the Red Girl had distressed Annie's mother, and, like Annie, Lucy enjoys acting rebelliously. But the two friendships are altogether different, and Lucy appears to be a more mature character when compared to Annie. She does not try to emulate the friend for, unlike Annie, Lucy has a strong sense of self and no need to imitate other people. Although they are not alike, she enjoys being with Peggy because "what we didn't have in common were things we approved of anyway" (61). What Lucy likes especially about Peggy is her

emotional detachment from her family; her parents, whom she describes as "extremely stupid" (61), have no hold over her. In taking up with Peggy, Lucy repeats Annie John's strategy to construct an identity in opposition to her mother. Though, apparently defying Mariah, Lucy is actually re-enacting the conflict with her mother continuing to subvert maternal power, and, although Lucy's mother is not physically present, it is clear that her pull is still very strong and that Lucy's choosing to behave the way she does articulates her need to establish a separate identity.

Lucy's understanding of her position in the white world is displayed through her observation of different people she encounters, and is drawn from the memory of her past life. Looking at the people she meets at a party Mariah has organised for her to make new friends, Lucy is reminded of the pictures in a catalogue that her father used to order clothing items from abroad. The association is immediate and clear: "Their clothes, their features, the manner in which they carried themselves were the example all the world should copy" (64). All these people seem to have been tourists in the Caribbean, the same sort of tourists depicted in *A Small Place*. For them, Lucy is someone from "the islands," a homogenised and unnamed place whose landscape and people they assume to exist for their own enjoyment. Lucy has a glimpse of the implications of

such a perspective. She perceives that the validity of her own and her people's life is erased by imperial discourse:

They had somehow all been to the islands - by that, they meant the place where I was from - and had fun there. I decided not to like them just on that basis; I wished once again that I came from a place where no one wanted to go, a place that was filled with slag and unexpectedly erupting volcanoes, or where a visitor was turned into a pebble on setting foot there; somehow it made me ashamed to come from a place where the only thing to be said about it was "I had fun when I was there." (64-65)

Dinah, Mariah's best friend, represents for Lucy the worst example of the white world. She embodies Western entitlement; she is the sort of person, Lucy comments, who "thought her presence made other people beside themselves with happiness" (56). Lucy is perfectly aware of being an object in Dinah's eyes, "the girl who takes care of the children" (58), and she can guess that the woman would never imagine that Lucy, in her turn, objectifies her, seeing her as a cliché of Western stupidity and greed. What Lucy most despises is Dinah's attachment to physical appearance and her envy of Mariah's life. In contrast to Mariah, whose innocence makes her see Dinah as "a friend full of goodness and love" (57), Lucy can see behind the



facade, since her experience of disillusionment has provided her with a deep understanding of people and behaviour. Passing through the maternal abandonment in *Annie John* and the collapse of the colonial dream in *A Small Place*, Kincaid's protagonist has become able to see the mechanisms of power in their various disguises, Dinah's hypocrisy and Mariah's innocence providing two examples of how power functions.

Set in contrast with Dinah and the other people at the party is Hugh, a smart, worldly young man, who is the only one who seems to view Lucy as a subject in her own right. Lucy immediately comes to like him when he enquires about her origin in a way that shows knowledge and respect for the culture of the Other: "Where in the West Indies are you from?" (65). Hugh is also the only character in the novel who does not pretend to obtain from Lucy a narcissistic reflection of himself. On the contrary, he seems to respect and understand her, and the two have in common a sense of pleasure and freedom in being away from the place they belong to:

Isn't it the most blissful thing in the world to be away from everything you have ever known - to be so far away that you don't even know yourself anymore and you're not sure you ever want to come back to all the things you're a part of? (66)

A common need to find an authentic self unites them temporarily in a relationship. Nevertheless, Lucy does not fall in love with Hugh. The memory of the bond with her mother makes her aware of the need to be emotionally independent to be able to invent herself without constrictions: "I could tell that being in love would complicate my life just now. I was only half a year free of some almost unbreakable bonds, and it was not in my hearts to make new ones" (71).

But Hugh's presence indirectly draws Lucy back to the memory of home and the obsession with her mother. After they have made love for the first time, Lucy realises that she has forgotten to "protect" herself, and the memory of the past re-emerges to fill her with "confusion and dread" (67). She remembers the shock of her passage from childhood to adolescence, when patches of black hair had appeared under her arms, and the day when she had seen blood in her panties. She recalls how, reassuring her, her mother had told her that "finding blood in my underpants might be something one day I would get down on my knees and pray for" (69). The theme of the mother's inability to discuss the daughter's sexuality, as developed in *Annie John*, is here re-inscribed in Lucy's painful memory of one of the fundamental moments in the process towards her rupture with her mother. Nevertheless, the mother remembered here is also the one of "Girl," eager to provide the child with the knowledge of practices that would help her when in trouble. The

ambivalence of the mother in Kincaid's previous works, unable to face the implications of her daughter's sexuality and yet willing to give her the means to protect herself from unwanted pregnancy, reappears here in all its complexity, marking the beginning of hypocrisy in the relationship between mother and daughter:

Without telling me exactly how I might miss a menstrual cycle, my mother had shown me which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring on a reluctant period. She had presented the whole idea to me as a way to strengthen the womb, but underneath we both knew that a weak womb was not the cause of a missed period. She knew that I knew, but we presented to each other a face of innocence and politeness and even went so far as to curtsy each other at the end. (69-70)

Lucy dreads the possibility of pregnancy, since it would put her in a vulnerable situation in her mother's eyes. And of course, far from home, she would not be able to find the herbs her mother had instructed her to use and would have to ask her for help. At this point, if Lucy has a clear idea of who she is and who she wants to be, she is also still haunted by her mother and cannot help but experiencing the world through the memory or the re-enactment of the relationship with her.

Lucy's realisation of the fragility of Mariah's apparently indestructible world parallels her awareness of the inconsistencies of Mariah's and her friends' behaviours. Ecology-minded Mariah is worried about vanishing marshlands (at an unconscious level her preoccupation may be literal, given the turn that her marriage is taking) to the point that with her friends she organises parties in honour of the countryside. But because Mariah and the people of her class are not able to connect the degradation of the environment with the comforts they enjoy, Kincaid inserts a question asked by the oldest daughter, Louisa, to stress the contradiction between Mariah's well-being and her preoccupation for the destruction of the surrounding countryside: "Well, what used to be here before this house we are living in was built?" (72). This is a question that Lucy herself would have liked to ask, but her love for Mariah prevents from hurting her further. She can see, better than Mariah, that the perfect world the woman had invented for herself is collapsing through its own contradictions. Therefore, she limits herself to mulling over the implications of imperialism for the lives of the oppressors, and taking hollow satisfaction in seeing them getting "a small sip of their own bad medicine" (72).

The collapse of Mariah's world enables Lucy to view loss as a universal pattern of the human condition rather than her own personal drama or one limited to oppressed people uniquely. This

awareness makes her feel that her pain has not to be crippling and she realises that the unhappiness and the hypocrisy she had experienced in her own family is part of a universal history that will never be recorded in books. Watching the family burying a rabbit that Lewis had killed with his car, provoking a family crisis, Lucy comments:

The ceremony was another one of those untruths that I had only just begun to see as universal to life with mother, father, and some children. I had thought the untruths in family life belonged exclusively to me and my family, with my mother's unopened letters representing evidence of the most important kind. (77)

The understanding Lucy has of life finds its first definition in a revelation she had had when she was growing up, a revelation which evokes Annie's sudden awareness of the irreducible breach which had opened between herself and her friend Gwen: "Everything remains the same and yet nothing is the same" (78). Lucy, now less centred on herself, witnesses something in Mariah's life that she had experienced in her own life. She becomes aware that Lewis is having an affair with Dinah and watches as an atmosphere of hypocrisy invades the family while they continue to act as if nothing had changed. In distress, she participates in Mariah's unhappiness and ponders on her innocence, for Mariah is not aware of Lewis's

unfaithfulness, and Lucy notices how she complains about all sorts of things as though sensing the demise of her world but not able to imagine that her man no longer loves her. What had constituted Mariah's happiness and is now destroying her life is, for Lucy, with her different background, a common occurrence of everyday life: "Where I came from, it was well known that some women and all men in general could not be trusted in certain areas" (80). In the face of Mariah's defencelessness in such circumstances, Lucy recalls the obeah practices her mother performed to defend herself against the women who had loved her husband. Kincaid suggests that Caribbean women have a more realistic approach to life that enables them to endure the unpleasant circumstances of human relations. Thus, while women like Mariah have wrong expectations and finally fall into the mistakes they had tried so hard to avert, Lucy is well provided with the baggage of Caribbean knowledge and with her mother's example to defend herself against the tricks of love. She has grown so used to life's deceptions that she is now able to exercise open detachment in the face of deception: how, for instance, the beautiful lake she had once enjoyed now "stank anyway, and the fish that lived in it were dying from living in it" (81). She will not miss the lake, nor will she miss Hugh, from whom she unregretfully takes her leave with a long kiss during which she remembers all the people she has kissed in her life: Tanner, the boy

in the library, a schoolmate, and her friend Peggy. Through her tongue, Lucy caresses her past and prepares herself to taste her future.

In the chapter entitled "Cold Heart," Lucy's battle for survival takes a turn as she confronts other characters and realises that she has to stand on her own two feet. Although she no longer feels threatened by the white world, her past still haunts her, and, to come to terms with it, Lucy has to see through the great conflict of her life. She must confront her mother once and for all. Only then she can really start to build her own life. Questions of gender, colonialism and ethnocentrism intermingle as Lucy analyses the position she occupies as a young black third-world female and tries to cut out for herself a free space in the new world for her to be the agent of her own destiny.

The first and the third worlds are continually set against each other. Witness to the disintegration of the white family, Lucy realises that, in spite of their privileges, not even the people in the first world can be "safe and secure and never suffer so much as a broken fingernail" (85). Still, the two worlds are different in their very foundations, so much so that even the weather seems to be on the part of the rich. As a child, Lucy had noticed that "all the prosperous (and so, certainly, happy) people in the world inhabited the parts of the earth where the year ... was divided into four distinct seasons"

(86). Now, like the narrator of *A Small Place*, she considers the implications of growing up in a place that seems not to be "influenced by the tilt of the earth at all" (86), a place where the heat of the sun is the same all year round and the rain hardly makes an appearance. The sun, a blessing in other parts of the world, is a curse in Antigua, where a destitute population suffers from water shortage. Such a climate must affect the character of the people, as when Lucy remarks: "I did not have a sunny disposition, and, as for actual happiness, I had been experiencing a long drought" (86). Now she can see that the privileged experience unhappiness too, but, used to destitution, she laughs at unhappiness resulting from having "too much" (87).

Lucy makes connections between her political and personal estrangement, connecting her thoughts about the unhappiness of the destitute and of the well-to-do with a dream about herself and her mother:

There was a present for me wrapped up in one of my mother's beautiful madras headkerchiefs. I did not know what the present itself was, but it was something that would make me exceedingly happy; the only trouble was that it lay at the bottom of a deep, murky pool, and no matter how much water I bailed out I always woke up before I got to the bottom. (87)



Lucy still longs for her mother's love. She is still the child painfully separated from her mother by something that seems to have nothing to do with either of them.

Once again, Kincaid is inscribing the mother-daughter relationship in the larger context of colonialism. Happiness is as far from Lucy's reach as it is from the reach of all people in the third world doomed to cope with "too little" (87). The unhappiness of first world people is a joke for people like Lucy, for it is the unhappiness of the victors who fall into the contradictions of the world they have created. Consequently, Lucy describes the disintegration of her employers' perfect life as the "fall of this Rome" (88), seeing the ruins of an empire in which she knows herself to be positioned as a slave - slavery being the empire's very foundation -, and concludes that she will be once again involved in a system of power functioning to her detriment unless she escapes.

Lucy becomes aware that running away from home has not given her freedom and that her present is in effect taking the shape of her past:

I had come to see the sameness in things that appeared to be different. I had experienced moments of great happiness and a desire to imagine my own future, and at the same time I had had a great disillusionment. (91)

Her past is, of course, her mother, and she comes to see the similarity between herself and her mother. She tries to defend herself by keeping her mother's letters unopened, but, as anticipated at the end of *Annie John*, the mother's shadow always stands between her and the rest of the world. Lucy now realises she *is* her mother. She starts having headaches, just like the ones that used to afflict her mother when she said things that hurt her. Maybe, Lucy is coping with her own sense of guilt for going against the mother's expectations, but she is determined to construct a subjectivity in opposition. Her friendship with the rebellious Peggy and her involvement in purely sexual relationships are part of her battle against the mother and the constrictions of colonial femaleness. Defining herself in negativity, since she is not what her mother and everyone else expect her to be - she does not want to be a nurse, and she does not want to marry and be a man's servant -, Lucy sees her mother's betrayal as part of her complicity with patriarchy and colonialism which deny to women the possibility of rising in the social scale other than through marriage:

I was not good at taking orders from anyone, not good at waiting on other people. Why did someone not think that I would make a good doctor or a good magistrate or a good someone who runs things? (92)

Lucy's drama, as she perceives it, is grounded on the undeniable fact of being a female and of wearing, wrapped around her shoulders, "the mantle of a servant" (91). All her behaviour articulates her efforts to distance herself from her condition, to get rid of that ideal of femininity which is coupled with inferiority and powerlessness. Her battle for freedom is first of all a battle against her mother, a model she does not want to reproduce.

Lucy's subversion of maternal power is carried out primarily through sexuality. As we know from Kincaid's previous works, the mother, obsessed with the idea of "sluttishness", had tried to suppress the daughter's sexuality. Now sex becomes Lucy's weapon against her mother. As the Red Girl had introduced Annie to the unladylike game of marbles, Peggy introduces Lucy to sex for the sake of it. Through Peggy, Lucy meets Paul, whose eyes remind her of "a marble I used to have, my lucky marble, the one that, when I played a game with it, always won" (99). Sex with Paul enables Lucy to defy the mother by willingly becoming the "slut" she had accused her of being. Sex for the fun of it is the greatest attack Lucy can inflict upon her mother. At another level, Lucy's battle is a battle against her own self, against the mother in her. The first time she meets Paul, she listens to her own voice greeting him, "the voice of the girl my mother had hoped I would be: clean, virginal, beyond reproach" (97). Then she remembers a significant episode of her

childhood when Mr. Thomas, the fisherman, had died and a girl named Myrna had confided to her that she had been having secret encounters with this man whom she would meet every night in the dark and let him touch her in exchange for a few shillings. Both girls saw these meetings as extremely exciting: they made the ordinary Myrna feel special, and Lucy was "overcome with jealousy" (105). With her, however, Mr. Thomas was the model of propriety, because he knew Lucy to be a "girl so beyond reproach in every way that if you asked her a question she would reply in her mother's forty-year-old voice - hardly a prospect for a secret rendezvous" (107). Now, Lucy's engagement in a sexual relationship with Paul functions as an attack on the mother-ridden girl who had lost her chance with the fisherman.

Another symbol of Lucy's need to take control of her own life is the camera. When another letter from her mother arrives, marked 'urgent,' she rushes out to buy a camera and gets involved in a new sexual encounter with a man who reminds her of her father. Significantly, the letter Lucy does not open would inform her of her father's death and of her mother's financial troubles. The camera, then, functions as a metaphor for Lucy's need to fix and control reality with her own gaze, and the sexual encounter with a paternal figure is a further assault on the mother's rule. At another level, Lucy's act is also an assault on ethnocentrism, on the sexual

exploitation of black women, and on a history which only records the lives of men. From Mariah, she had learned about a famous painter (Gauguin), who "had gone halfway across the world and had painted pictures of the people he found living there" (95). Lucy had initially identified with this man who had escaped from a place perceived as an "unbearable prison" and had wanted to find "something completely different from what you are familiar with" (95), but then she had realised that she was "a woman from the fringes of the world" (95) and that her life would never be found in a book. Furthermore, Gauguin's art represents an ethnocentric gaze on black women portrayed as sexually desirable. In this way, with the camera, Lucy reverses the painter's gaze by placing herself, a black woman, as the gazer, and through her sexual encounter with a Martiniquan man rejects being positioned as an object of desire and affirms instead the position of a desiring subject.

But if Lucy has wanted to strike a further blow against her mother, her mother is not that easily defied. On the contrary, she is ready to invade Lucy's world. In a scene reminiscent of obeah ceremonies described in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, Lucy darkens the room by covering the lamp with a drape, and lies on her bed:

...in a state of no state, almost as if under  
ether, thinking nothing, feeling nothing. It is a

bad way to be - your spirit feels the void and will summon something to come in, usually something bad. (121)

And it is her mother whom Lucy summons, her mother who arrives in the apartment in the shape of her goddaughter, Maude Quick, a model of propriety and femininity. Filling the apartment with the scents of a recent obeah bath, Maude comes to bring to Lucy the news of her father's death and of her mother's sudden poverty. Maude, who had sometimes cared for Lucy when she was a child and who had tortured her with her obsession for cleanness and proper behaviour, represents the maternal rule Lucy is trying to escape from. At another level, Maude represents the mother confronting Lucy with guilt for having deserted her family at a time of need. Hearing about her mother's distress, Lucy is overcome by despair and on the verge of collapse, but she is pulled back by Maude's smug laugh as she remarks: "You remind me of Miss Annie, you really remind me of your mother" (123).

Being like her mother is the one thing in the world Lucy does not want to be, at all costs. With Maude's crude observation Lucy remembers herself and her battle for survival. She accuses her mother of having betrayed them both by accepting the role designed for black women in Caribbean society, and goes on to affirm her difference:

She should not have married my father. She should not have had children. She should not have thrown away her intelligence. She should not have paid so little attention to mine ... I am not like her at all. (123)

Only at this point does the text completely uncover the reason at the root of the breach between mother and daughter. The mother had succumbed to the patriarchal law. To rise in the social scale, she had married a much older man who had finally left her a pauper. Furthermore, she had been complicitous with patriarchy in forcing the daughter into a model of femininity to her detriment and by concentrating all her energies on her sons, of whom were expected great things in life. Lucy recalls with pain the birth of her brothers and the attention her parents had devoted to them while leaving her neglected. The great drama of Kincaid's life, silenced in the first texts, emerges here in all its sad majesty. With the birth of her siblings, the girl had been locked out of the paradise of love and had lost her innocence to the awareness of being a female, destined to be invisible in a world made for men. Lucy discloses to Mariah the circumstances of her loss:

I was an only child until I was nine years old, and then in the space of five years my mother had three male children; each time a new child was born, my mother and father announced to each other with great seriousness that the new

child would go to university in England and study to become a doctor or lawyer or someone who would occupy an important and influential position in society. I did not mind my father saying these things about his sons, his own kind, and leaving me out ... But my mother knew me well, as well as she knew herself: I, at the time, even thought of us as identical; and whenever I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how proud she would be at some deed her sons had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her own identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation. (130)

It was then that Lucy began to call her mother "Mrs. Judas." The painful separation between mother and daughter, which is the main theme of Kincaid's fiction, has to be understood as a consequence of the neglect suffered by the daughter after the birth of the siblings and the realisation of what it means to be a female in a patriarchal/colonial system.

Lucy, however, refuses to see herself as part of a larger context of a history in which women are oppressed, claiming that her pain is personal and that her life cannot be explained by the Western texts on the condition of women that Mariah gives her in the hope of alleviating her despair. No book can reflect Lucy's drama,



the fact that for half of her life she had been "mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know" (132). Lucy understands that in her quest she is alone in the world and that Mariah is incapable of understanding her anger. Furthermore, Mariah's maternal love makes Lucy feel like "a dog on a leash" (110). It is at this point that Lucy begins to think of leaving and will decide to find an apartment with Peggy. She then writes a letter to her mother telling her how much she is enjoying her new life as a "slut" and proclaiming that she will never come home. Her battle for freedom is close to a turning point.

In the last chapter, "Lucy", the protagonist makes "a new beginning again" (133). She takes her leave from the people who had tried to restrain her definition of herself and prepares for self-invention. She takes a last look at the person she was supposed to become, and defines herself in negativity:

I had been a girl of whom certain things were expected, none of them too bad: a career as a nurse, for example; a sense of duty to my parents; obedience to the law and worship of convention. But in one year of being away from home, that girl had gone out of existence. (133)

She feels she hardly knows the new person she has become. She can see that her appearance has not changed; she looks familiar to herself on the outside. But inside everything is different.

Lucy perceives that she is inventing herself "more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist" (134), using her instincts and the only things she has at her disposal: memory, anger and despair. She summons up her origins, her ancestral history, and her loss of innocence: she was born on a very small island discovered by Christopher Columbus and named after a church in Spain and had soon realised that her presence on the island was "the result of a foul deed" (135). Once, at school, she had refused to sing "Rule Britannia" proclaiming that she "was not a Briton and that until not too long ago I would have been a slave" (135), and this event had marked an important change in her life. In a similar way, she recalls that on the day she had realised she was no longer a child she had entered a "personal hell" (136). Now, Lucy views all this as her past, of the person she no longer is. For this reason, she writes a last letter to her mother, giving her a wrong address, so that she can never reach her again, and she takes her leave from the other mother figure in her life, Mariah, who appears, in her reaction, as a colonial mother "insisting that I be the servant and she the master" (143). She also distances herself from Peggy, whose model of rebellion she has outgrown, and from Paul, who sees her as an exotic object to possess. Lucy rejects all kind of enclosure by others and chooses her own margins: "I longed then to leave in a place like

this: bars on the windows to keep out people who might wish to do me harm, an unfriendly climate, uncertainty at every turn" (147).

Lucy is not happy in her new apartment, but she has got what she wanted, for her life now belongs only to her. Following maternal teaching, she has made sure that the roof above her is hers and now views economic independence as the foundation of her freedom:

I could do what suited me now, as long as I could pay for it. 'As long as I could pay for it.' That phrase soon became the tail that wagged my dog. If I had died then, it should have been my epitaph. (146)

The memory of home still haunts her as well as the sorrow it brings, but she is no longer paralysed by it. In fact, absolute solitude enables her to find her authentic self and she can finally name herself and embrace her name, a short version of Lucifer, in all its significance. A fallen angel, she has dared to defy her godlike mother, and, cast out of paradise, she has founded her own reign, and now, mistress of her home, she arranges her things and prepares to write her own story in a blank book. It is in blue ink, the colour of the Caribbean sea, that she finally articulates her desire: "I wish that I would love someone so much that I would die from it" (162). Covered by tears, the words become "a big blur" (162). Once again, as in Kincaid's previous fiction, the text closes with self-naming and the sense of loss that comes with freedom.



## CHAPTER 5

### *The Autobiography of My Mother*

#### The Decolonisation of the Body

Jamaica Kincaid's third novel marks a turning point in her work. For the first time in her fiction, the author does not ground the plot on her personal experience as a mother-obsessed girl growing up in colonial Antigua and migrating to North America to gain an independent life at the same time as her homeland is in transition to independence from the British empire. While the narrators of the previous works could be loosely identified with Kincaid herself, the narrator protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela Claudette Richardson, a half-Carib Dominican in her seventies, does not share their common experience. Here, too, the protagonist is obsessed with the maternal figure, but, rather than an overbearing presence, the central motif is the mother's absence. After having explored the theme of the role of a suffocating maternal love on a character's formation, Kincaid undertakes the analysis of its opposite, the implications of the physical absence of the mother on the definition of the self. From the beginning to the end the story of

Xuela's life revolves around this central fact, and the definition of herself and of her position in the world draws its peculiarity from the absence of a mother or a suitable mother substitute to function as a mirror image for identification and affirmation of the self as other.

Another relevant aspect of this novel is the treatment of the political environment. As in the previous works, colonialism provides more than mere background to the story. The colonial theme permeates every aspect of the protagonist's life and the lives of other characters, and it interweaves with the maternal theme at both the concrete and the allegorical levels. Once again, Kincaid shows how each life is politically marked by race, gender, class and history, how apparently ordinary, personal events have a political significance, and how human relationships are complicated by these factors. Here, though, her insight into the consequences of colonialism on human nature is further developed and problematised. In Kincaid's work, political identity is never presented as only a matter of black and white, male and female, conqueror and conquered. There is much more to the issue than that. The subtle mechanisms of power and the role it plays in individual lives are not reducible to fixed categories in opposition. Annie and her mother interact in a dialectic of power and powerlessness. The same happens to Lucy and her mother. And does not Mariah play the conqueror and the conquered at the same time and at different

levels? Are not Annie and Lucy's mothers oppressors in relation to their daughters and at the same time victims in the patriarchal-colonial order?

In Kincaid's opus, the examples of shift in position from oppressor to oppressed and vice versa are numerous. But, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the issue is further complicated. The characters differ in race, class, and sex. In the Dominican setting, all the characters represent miscegenation of cultures to a lesser or higher degree. Some of them are racially mixed, and none can be isolated and defined as oppressor or oppressed a priori, for it is their interaction that marks their position at different levels. Furthermore, the presence of Carib characters, whose only appearance in Kincaid's previous works is in the figure of the maternal grandmother, operates a shift in the angle of her perspective on race. If blacks are the oppressed race in relation to whites, they certainly appear differently in relation to Carib people, who are the defeated ones in the first place. Xuela's mother, a Carib woman, dies in giving birth to a child of a half-Scottish, half-African father. But if the racial features of Caribs are still visible in Xuela, their culture will not be passed on. In this world, "death is the only reality" (228), inevitable for everybody, as the narrator observes at the end of her tale, but for Caribs, death comes without the consolation of being remembered.

A further novelty in Kincaid's third novel is the development of male characters. In her previous works, the author has privileged female characterisation, while men have functioned as projections of the constraining systems within which women move and against which they define their space. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, however, men are round dramatis personae even though their development is not so much aimed at the analysis of masculine identity as presented as essential to the exploration of cultural and racial issues. In a place like Dominica, both men and women live under "the spell of history" (218), a burden that determines the nature of their relationships. By giving the same prominence to male and female characters and making them interact in this novel, Kincaid demonstrates a more sophisticated understanding of human kind.

Despite its differences from the former works, similarities abound and make Kincaid's voice recognisable not only at the level of the subject matter of this novel, but also and especially at the level of its narrative mode. *The Autobiography of My Mother* has the lyrical language of *At the Bottom of the River*, the clarity of vision of *Annie John*, the political sarcasm of *A Small Place*, and the self-determination of the character's voice in *Lucy*. At the level of content, Kincaid still draws her inspiration from her knowledge of the Caribbean, but, abandoning the strictly autobiographical note, she



will expand horizons to gain a deeper insight into history and human nature. If *Annie John* is a brilliant novel on female development in a colonial environment, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a masterpiece conveying the complexity of the Caribbean world, where, more evidently than anywhere else, human relationships have to take into account history and politics, and identity is not so much a matter of who you are as of where you come from and where you stand.

As regards genre, we have already observed how easily Kincaid subverts pre-defined literary prescriptions. If her previous fiction smoothly slips into autobiography and her political essay on her homeland is mainly grounded in personal experience, and if both her fictional and non-fictional works make room for theorising, this novel is even more puzzling and subversive in its combination of autobiography, fiction, and theory. In the story, anecdotes already encountered in the previous works are retold from a different angle (the girl hit on her forehead by a monkey, and the worm crawling out of a dead young man's leg are only two out of many examples of remanipulation of material), leaving the reader with the impression that, rather than existing for themselves, events only exist in the act of telling, and, since they can be told in different ways, no absolute truth about them can ever be established. Furthermore, the novel presents many elements of Kincaid's family biography, especially

regarding her mother: she was from Dominica, her mother was a Carib Indian, her brother died of an illness only obeah medicine could have cured, her sister made a bad marriage, and much more. However, the novel is not a biography of her mother at all. The main character, who is undoubtedly inspired by the powerful, godlike figure that appears as the mother in the previous works and that can be identified as Kincaid's mother, is nevertheless fictional.

But even having established that, despite the numerous elements drawn from Kincaid's family history, the novel cannot be defined as autobiographical or simply biographical, there is still the problem of autobiography internal to the novel itself. The title is in fact misleading. It is not only a paradox in itself (an autobiography written by someone other than the subject of experience), but it also implies that the reader will expect the story of a mother. Since the narrator protagonist is not a mother, we are clearly not dealing with her life told by an imaginary child using the first person 'I' to tell his or her mother's story. On the other hand, since the narrator protagonist knows very little about her Carib mother, having never even seen her, she is unable to tell her story. She can only tell the story of an absence. And maybe this is the point of the novel. If, at an allegorical level, Kincaid attempts to trace the ancestry of Caribbean people, she can only do so by evoking the extermination of indigenous people and by giving voice to a character, Xuela, who

reunites in herself the three races that met on the Caribbean soil as conqueror, exploited, and defeated. Significantly enough, this character refuses to become a mother, shutting her womb and, with it, the possibility for the three races to coexist harmoniously as one person or, by extension, one country. Xuela's refusal to be a mother can be read as an act of racial claim. Mating and giving birth to a racially mixed creature would mean killing the Caribs once again. It is precisely in the allegorical construction that Kincaid's fiction more evidently leads itself to theorising, although we do not necessarily need to interpret her works as allegories.

Further, and leaving aside the allegorical reading for the moment, another interpretation of how the title relates to the story is possible. In telling the story of her dead mother, the narrator relates her own loss and, therefore, her own life. It is her story, then, that we are being told. Seen from this perspective, the title is not contradictory at all. The protagonist, whose mother died when she was born, and who refuses to become a mother herself, is in fact her own mother. Lacking a mirror image and a nurturing figure, she dwells in self-observation and self-nurturing. The autobiography of her mother is thus her own autobiography in a feminist act of self-mothering which also becomes self-possession as the protagonist refuses to belong to a man and dwells in enjoying her own body. In

the figure of Xuela, Kincaid constructs the image of a decolonised womanhood outside the patriarchal dichotomy of virgin/whore.

Whatever reading we choose to follow (the two do not contradict each other), the novel is the story of a loss that eventually becomes a gain. The loss of the pre-oedipal paradise, the maternal love, this time never experienced by the protagonist, only evoked in her imagination, couples once again with the loss of innocence at a political level as the protagonist becomes aware of the political prescriptions that place her as a subaltern in the social context. At both levels, the protagonist challenges unchallengeable authority (colonialism and patriarchy), refusing to belong and to reproduce, and eventually finding in loneliness the only possible form of autonomy. A rebel angel, like Annie, Lucy, and Kincaid herself, Xuela refuses to serve in paradise and finally triumphs in hell.

*The Autobiography of My Mother* is set in Dominica and covers the time span of the narrator's life, approximately seventy years. Time inconsistencies in the text are too evident to be accidental and suggest deliberate strategy. The narrator tells of her paternal grandparents' marriage in the late nineteenth century, and, since she is in her seventies, assuming that she is speaking from the present, we guess she was born in the twenties. But then she states that she was seventeen years older than her sister, and, at another point, that she was in her early twenties when she started her relationship with

her father's friend shortly after having assisted her sister through an abortion. These contradictions suggest that precision of time is not what really matters; they serve, rather, to guide the reader's attention towards the spatial setting, and hint at a situation already explored in *A Small Place*: an island geographically isolated from the rest of the world with a long history of economic exploitation and ascribing a subaltern position to its inhabitants to heighten its isolation to the point of metaphysical alienation. People inhabiting small places, as Kincaid suggests in her essay, acquire a distorted perception of time. An event of the distant past can be recalled vividly as if it belonged to the present, while an everyday occurrence can be made into a myth. Seen from this perspective, time inconsistencies in *The Autobiography of My Mother* are understood as a result of the narrator sharing a common distortion of time perception. But, also, and most important of all, they suggest that in a place like Dominica nothing really ever changes. Although there are allusions to time setting (the face of a king on the coins provides an example), no specific reference is made, for instance, to significant events in the history of Dominica, such as a change in government or the gaining of independence. This, rather than suggesting that historical changes have no impact on the protagonist's life, hints at the pathological political stasis of a country where modern advances towards democracy do not succeed in

corroding the system established by colonialism. A post- to the history of the island's exploitation does not seem possible, not even in name. Like Antigua, Dominica seems doomed to remain on the fringes of the world and to be forever dependent on other countries, unless its people awaken from the (nightmare-like) colonial dream.

The novel is made up of seven untitled chapters, each divided by a part of a drawing to portray a woman who matches Xuela's description of herself. Only her hat is visible in the first drawing, and the picture is only completed with the final chapter. The graphical presentation follows the fragments of the narrator's life until the final picture emerges of the woman, who, at seventy years or more, finds herself longing "to meet the thing greater than I am" (228). It is significant, also, that the picture of Xuela is revealed from her head to her feet, while only her mother's heels, which she sees repeatedly in dreams, are visible. Xuela can never see her mother. She can only observe herself, and, through self-observation, acknowledge her existence and make it visible to the rest of the world. In fact, Xuela's life is a struggle against invisibility for the affirmation of the self in a world physically and metaphysically marked by death.

Relating her childhood, the narrator looks back and reads her life from the loss which has enabled her to understand who she is:

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 always a bleak, black wind. I could not have known at the beginning of my life that this would be so; I only came to know this in the middle of my life, just at the time when I was no longer young and realized that I had less of some of the things I used to have in abundance and more of some of the things I had scarcely had at all. And this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world. I came to feel that for my whole life I had been standing on a precipice, that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself. (3-4)

Although Xuela refers to her vulnerability and helplessness, and to her shame at recognising such qualities, in the following account of her life, signs of vulnerability and helplessness are hard to find, and her shame is never palpable. The character that the reader comes to know is a child that soon learns to take her life in her hands, who never submits to the subaltern position designed for her, and who responds to the lack of appreciation from the outside world with healthy self-love. On the other hand, the reader also sees her becoming hard-hearted as her only defence against a world without

love, and the sadness and self-pity which inevitably follow the awareness of her condition.

Comparing Xuela with the protagonists of Kincaid's previous works, both striking differences and similarities are to be found. While Annie is suffocated by her mother's interfering in her life and Lucy struggles with her mother's shadow, between her and the rest of the world in spite of physical distance, Xuela finds herself "living at the brink of eternity" (213), with both her past and her future inhabited by an absence. Like the other two, though, she realises that her loss, however painful, is also a gain. For all three characters, the issue is one of identity and agency, a matter of who they are and how they can intervene in their own lives; it is a quest for the self. And for each of them the quest is hindered but at the same time made possible by the maternal figure powerfully present in each one's consciousness. In the case of Annie and Lucy, it has been observed that both the mother's overwhelming love and her complicity with the patriarchal-colonial system serve to suffocate the daughter's sense of autonomy. At the same time, though, with teachings that confirm the role of women typical of Caribbean culture, the mother provides a model of strength and independence for the daughter to follow. In Xuela's case, the absence of the maternal figure makes the formation of the self problematical, because the child has no mirror image to identify with and to



differentiate from, but, eventually, this same absence will determine a self-possessed subjectivity. Xuela never suffers from the physical and psychical disintegration that threatens Annie and Lucy and is undoubtedly the most outstanding of the three in her capacity to stand on her own.

Soon after the death of his wife, Xuela's father places his child in the hands of the woman who washes his clothes. The association with soiled clothes marks Xuela's subordinate place from the very beginning of her life. Looking back, Xuela acknowledges her vulnerability (for being a child in need of care) as a burden in her father's life. Her clarity of vision makes her see things as they are, so that no doubts or need for justifications taint her moral judgements. She never falls into the trap of blaming herself, nor does she blame single individuals. Corruption does not surprise her; it is the inevitable result of the yoke of history on groups of dispossessed people. Her father is poor, but "it was not because he was good; he had not done enough bad things yet to get rich" (4). In the same matter-of-fact way, she talks about the woman who takes care of her, Eunice Paul:

Ma Eunice was not unkind: she treated me just the way she treated her own children - but this is not to say she was kind to her own children. In a place like this, brutality is the only real

inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given. (5)

Already as a child, Xuela refuses to fit into this system, trying to carve out a space for herself, rejecting dependency and cherishing autonomy instead. She does not accept Eunices' milk, which tastes sour in her mouth, and when she grows teeth, she bites Eunice's hand as she feeds her as an "act of ingratitude" (6) that places the woman on her guard. The absence of a mother is at this point in her life not yet acknowledged as real, and contributes to the child's alienation: "I missed the face I had never seen; I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was coming, as if I were expecting someone to come" (5).

In this state of expectancy, Xuela lives the first years of her life, perceiving the world "as a series of soft lines joined together, a sketch in charcoal" (7). When her father comes to pick up his clothes, he asks her formally how she is, but never touches her or looks into her eyes -"What was there to see in my eyes?" (6), she asks, not yet perceiving the connection between her father's rejection and the death her presence is a reminder of-. He then disappears behind the path that leads to the main road, the boundary of four-year-old Xuela's world. In this enclosed, mysterious world, with no love bestowed on her, no attention of any kind, no invitation to participate in anything, Xuela does not find any need for

communication. Although she can speak, she does not want to. Language, which will later reveal itself as an instrument of empowerment, is, in the first place, an evidence of pain. The first words she utters, to enquire about her father when she notices a longer absence, are in English, a language she has never heard anyone speak. The fact that she does not employ the French patois, "the language of the captive, the illegitimate" (74), that everybody uses with her, marks her refusal to be placed in a subordinate position. All the same, English marks the inescapable bonds of a history Xuela will always be trapped by:

That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me; everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain. (7)

Although she is only a small child living in an enclosed world, Xuela seems to have an unconscious perception of the power structures regulating human relationships, and whatever she does, willingly or not, is a sign of a challenging nature, determined never to be subsumed. A significant episode witnesses her breaking a plate decorated with a picture of a landscape supposed to represent heaven, but which is in fact "a picture of the English countryside idealized" (9). Xuela, who does not even know that "such a thing as the English countryside" (9) exists, is fascinated by the sadness Ma

Eunice expresses over this loss, not yet understanding the cultural subjugation which lies behind Eunice's pain. Of course, Eunice has never seen an English countryside, either, but she believes the plate represents a picture of heaven, "offering ... a secret promise of a life without worry or care or want" (9). An unknown place whose landscape belongs to the masters is presented as a promise of relief to a people forced to toil and suffering throughout their lives. The significance of all this is not lost on Xuela as she recalls the childhood incident.

When she breaks the plate, Eunice pronounces harsh words against the child but Xuela is not hurt. The absence of love generates defence against attack. Since she does not love Eunice, her words have no meaning to her, because language is powerful only when bound to love. Unwilling to show regret for destroying Eunice's (colonial) dream, Xuela refuses to say she is sorry, for which she is punished. With Xuela made to kneel down under the sun, a large stone in each hand held above her head, the punishment is representative of "the relationship between captor and captive, master and slave, with its motif of the big and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak" (10), and has a lasting impression on the child.

With the punishment she begins to understand the mechanisms of power, that which makes beings powerless or

powerful depending on their position in "the hierarchy of everything" (131) and immediately afterwards Xuela experiences a desire for power, bound as it is with love and death at the same time. She falls in love with three land turtles, whom she yearns to possess. Love, which wears the same face as evil, is presented as dangerous, the first step towards the dispossession and deprivation of the object of desire. With the helpless animals, Xuela can play the conqueror: "I took all three turtles and placed them in an enclosed area where they could not come and go as they pleased and so were completely dependent on me for their existence" (11). As a punishment for withdrawing into their shells against her will, Xuela covers the turtles with mud, but then she forgets about them, the mud dries and they eventually die. An ordinary episode in the life of a child, the incident is also a metaphor of Xuela's situation. Like the turtles, she cannot do as she pleases and cannot defend herself against the people who have placed her in an enclosed area. With her act, though, Xuela teaches herself a lesson that will be extremely useful for her in the near future. Having learned from direct experience that powerlessness can bring death, she will be able to defend herself against her own powerlessness when threatened with death.

Schooling, an unexpected ambition for her on the part of her father, since "girls did not attend school" (12), marks for Xuela the expansion of her world's horizons as well as an understanding of her

position in the social order. Looking back, she mulls over the implications of education for a person who is doomed to be a subordinate:

In the end what could an education do for someone like me? I can only say what I did not have; I can only measure it against what I did have and find misery in the difference. And yet, and yet... it was for this reason that I came to see for the first time what lay beyond the path that led away from my house. (12)

On her way to school, she experiences the world revealing itself to her through powerful sensations of "seeing, smelling, and hearing" (13), something that strongly characterises her and that suggests her ability to make her body a subject cherishing its own enjoyment. Her body, in fact, will become her first and last resort in her confrontation with the world. Ignored or despised, she will find enjoyment in self-eroticism, cherishing it over sexual pleasure even with men who love her.

As a child, her first acquaintance with her body comes in the form of acknowledgement of difference. She takes her first look at herself through the eyes of her teacher and her schoolmates. Her thick eyebrows, coarse wavy hair, almond-shaped eyes, and narrow wide lips, evoke the features of Carib people. When her teacher and schoolmates, all of African descent, look at her, they see a people

"defeated and exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden" (16). The teacher, herself humiliated by the colour of her own skin and convinced of the inferiority of non-white people, regards Xuela's unusual ability to retain information as a sign of the child being "evil" and "possessed" (16), pointing to the fact that her mother was a Carib.

The world that Xuela finds at school is no different from the one she experiences at home, a world devoid of love, where human relationships are subjected to the destructive consequences of colonialism. The self-loathing that imprisons non-whites prevents any expression of affection for each other. The children at school are made to despise one another as they are made to despise themselves. Caught in a spiral of alienation within alienation (she is poor, she is female, she is not white, she is part Carib), Xuela stands apart, by force first and then by choice, and creates an intimate space for herself to dwell in. With no faces where she can recognise something of herself - "Because who was I? My mother was dead; I had not seen my father for a long time" (16) - she consoles her loneliness by speaking to herself, finding a sweetness in her own voice that makes her feel less alienated. Her vulnerability, as she perceives it, is a result of her mother's death. It is then that her yearnings articulate in dreams of her mother coming towards her down a ladder with only her heels and the hem of her gown visible.

Xuela's awareness of an irreparable loss in her life is followed by an automatic transference of love to a physical reality, her father. When at school she is taught to write letters by copying out "letters of someone whose complaints or perceptions of joy were of no interest to me" (19), she turns writing, an instrument apparently useless to "a person in the position that I was expected to occupy" (18), into a weapon for her own benefit. She starts writing letters to her father (in fact with her mother in mind), in which she tells him how unhappy she is and how she longs for him to save her. She dwells on this exercise only to console herself in the recognition of her own misery, without any intention of sending the letters, since she wouldn't know how. But, eventually, this event marks a turning point in her life. Her teacher finds out about the letters and sends them to the father, who eventually comes to take his daughter to his new home. For the first time, Xuela realises that she has the power to change her situation for herself. That this power comes through writing only stresses the fact that the master's tools may be turned into an instrument of liberation by the oppressed.

The presence of the father in her life does not help Xuela to understand who she is, and her altered situation does not bring any happiness. Leaving her past behind, the enclosed world of Eunice's house and the hostile environment of her first school, she enters a larger but still loveless world. Her father, a policeman, has married



another woman for convenience and is getting rich by taking advantage of other people: "he was a part of a whole way of life on the island which perpetuated pain" (39). His hypocrisy is not lost on Xuela, who sees that, behind the mask of respectability he wears and behind his exaggerated professions of love, "lay another story altogether, the real story" (24). His wife, like everyone else Xuela knows, is full of hatred towards her. Her frustration for not being able to bear a child to her husband translates into a violent hostility against Xuela that she does not try to conceal. Her face is the embodiment of evil for the child, who suffers all kinds of ill-treatment and is made to feel illegitimate (the woman speaks to Xuela in French patois, a language denoting low social status). But, since Xuela has never experienced love and has had to resort to her own self for consolation, she is well equipped with the means of self-defence and adapts to her new environment without traumas, determined to live the best she is able to: "In an atmosphere of no love I could live well; in this atmosphere of no love I could make a life for myself" (29). The confrontation with her father's wife marks Xuela's first encounter with danger and spurs her on to being constantly on guard. She is well aware that the woman wishes her dead. After having tasted some bitter tea and a portion of mouldy food prepared especially for her, she determines to cook her own food, and, when the woman resorts to obeah and makes her a gift of

a necklace, she hides it among the dog's neck hairs and by this means saves herself from sudden death.

Obeah, which eventually becomes an instrument to use for her own benefit, is for the moment a sign of the treachery hidden in the world Xuela lives in. One day, for example, on the way to school with her schoolmates, they see an extraordinarily beautiful woman at the mouth of the river they are crossing, beckoning them to come to her. Though someone suggests that it is "not a woman at all" (36) and that they should run away, one boy starts swimming in her direction and vanishes into the water. On another occasion, Xuela throws stones at a monkey on a tree and the monkey hits her back on her forehead. The two incidents, which eventually motivate her father's decision to send her to a new school, indicate both the entrenchment of obeah beliefs in Caribbean culture and the utter contempt in which these beliefs are held by the people who want to rise in the social scale. Xuela's father, determined to suppress his African side and to stress his Scottish ancestry, is an example of the interiorization of the idea of the inferiority of black culture. Not only does he warn the child not to trust her schoolmates, "people who looked very much like each other, who shared a common history of suffering and humiliation and enslavement" (48), as Xuela acknowledges, but he also urges her not to believe what in fact she witnesses with her own eyes, the admittance of which would mean

"to say that we lived in a darkness from which we could not be redeemed" (49). Referring to the apparition of the beautiful woman on the river, Xuela relates that the children would not speak about it out loud. They would accept it as something that existed "only in our minds, an act of faith, like the Virgin birth for some people, or other such miracles; and it had the same power of belief and disbelief, only unlike the Virgin birth we had seen this ourselves" (36-37). Positioning herself as a subject of knowledge, and acknowledging the fact that, if her beliefs are held in contempt it is because of the historical dispossession her people suffered, Xuela places them on a higher level in relation to Western beliefs on the basis of her personal experience:

Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human, all that is without love, all that is without mercy. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it. Our God was not the correct one, our understanding of heaven and hell was not a respectable one. Belief in that apparition of a naked woman with outstretched arms beckoning a small boy to his death was the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low. I believed in that apparition then and I believe in it now. (38)

The world, as Xuela perceives it as a child, is "full of danger and treachery" (41) at various levels. Things are not what they seem, both physically and metaphysically, and peril is everywhere. Her father is not the generous person he pretends to be; a beautiful woman and a monkey are in fact dangerous supernatural creatures; her stepmother tries to kill her with rancid food and obeah magic. Xuela responds to the perilous environment by wearing a mask, and cloaks herself in "an atmosphere of apology" as a weapon to deflect attention from her and be regarded as a "pitiabile, an ignorant child" (41). Both at home and at school, she feigns modesty, pretending not to be interested in her own body or anyone else's body, "only one of many demands made on me simply because I was female" (42), while, in fact, her body is the centre of her attention and development into a sexual being. Xuela's double face in the private and public sphere evokes Annie John's duplicity:

From the moment I stepped out of my bed in the early morning to the time I covered myself up again in the dark of night, I negotiated many treacherous acts of deception, but it was clear to me who I really was. (42)

Relating her development into a woman, the narrator comes to terms with the implications of being a female in a colonial environment through the confrontation with other characters. First, she confronts her miserable situation with her stepsister's

unhappiness. Her father's wife has in the meantime managed to bear two children, a boy and a girl. This, Xuela relates, results in two "predictable outcomes" (52): the stepmother draws her attention away from Xuela and values her son more than her daughter. The theme of daughters' neglect by their mothers evokes a similar concern in *Lucy*, where the breach between mother and daughter originates with the birth of three sons whom the parents favour over the daughter, but here it is further inscribed within the context of colonialism. Boys and girls alike are here seen to suffer from the sense of inferiority internalised by non-white people of the island. For both, the education received at school, embedded with the supposed superiority of Western culture over the rest of the world, makes them feel "humiliated, humbled, small" (59). But at home they are treated differently. Whereas no expectations are placed on girls, who are supposed to become good wives and servants, boys are in some cases spurred on to improve the social status of the family. In the case of Xuela's household, both her stepsister and her step brother are to suffer respectively from the absolute lack of expectations and the excess of the same. Her brother is expected to follow the standard set by his father, who wears the mask of honesty and bravery while he is in fact a thief and a cowardly liar. The boy spends the few years of his painful life making efforts to acquire a personality which is unreal, and eventually dies from a mysterious

illness when a worm crawls out of his leg, maybe the sign of the final expulsion of the model of falseness he had tried to imitate. His sister, ignored by her parents, looks for refuge in romantic love, but, as romance is not part of such world, she ends up disfigured as the result of an accident, and consumes herself in the frustrations of an unhappy marriage.

In the course of her self-scrutiny, Xuela confronts her stepsister's situation with her own. Both are caught in the invisibility of femaleness; both suffer from the lack of maternal love. But the tragedy of her stepsister's life, Xuela observes, is greater than hers. Every day, in fact, her mother's neglect reminds her that she is not loved and makes her feel worthless. The presence of the mother makes her weak and incapable of finding relief in her own self, as Xuela does. While her sister lives the drama of a denied love, bestowed instead on her brother, Xuela, who is used to a loveless atmosphere and who has taught herself not to expect anything from others, turns the absence of maternal love into a source of strength:

No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else. (56-57)

She comes to love her body deeply and to cherish whatever she is told to hate: "the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the

smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet" (32). In an effort to make her presence real and powerful, and to oppose the sexual repression imposed on females, she cultivates the most visible signs of biological life in her body: "Whatever about me caused offence, whatever was native to me and was not a moral failing - those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted" (32-33). In her development into a sexual being she finds extreme pleasure. She enjoys the thickness of her first menstrual blood flowing from between her legs and relishes the changes in her body as she observes herself in a mirror and wonders how she will look as a woman, without ever doubting that she will love the reflected image. In her private moments, she indulges in self-eroticism, her hands never leaving the intimate parts of her body, and in public she keeps her hands close to her nose to enjoy the smell of her sex.

The pleasure Xuela finds in herself through the enjoyment of her own body is a subversive act of self-possession within the colonial-patriarchal context that reduces women to objects for the pleasure of men. The eventual decision to throw away the children she bears follows as a natural outcome to the affirmation of the ownership of her body, which becomes a measure of self-definition and a means of empowerment. As long as she owns her body, she owns herself. In fact, it is through her body that she knows and

affirms who she is, because her body is the only thing she can claim as her own. Her name, on the other hand, which should indicate her identity, is a sign of dispossession, like her mother's, who was named after the French nun who found her outside the gates of a convent. Xuela carries her mother's first and second name, Xuela Claudette, the Carib one had miraculously survived and the second had been given to her mother by a woman who "was on her way to wreak more havoc in the lives of the remnants of a vanishing people" (80). Her surname, Richardson, comes from her paternal grandfather, a Scot, who left his black wife and his red-haired children for a visit to his homeland and was mysteriously lost at sea, "a convenient event, for I would not be surprised to learn that he had after all returned to Scotland, where he had more children, all of them boys with red hair of a different texture" (183).

At fifteen, Xuela is sent by her father to Roseau to work as a servant for Monsieur and Madame LaBatte in exchange for a home and the possibility to attend school. Jack LaBatte is not different from Xuela's father, all his efforts are concentrated on making money and becoming more powerful, but, Xuela notices, he is more successful because he has "not wasted his time marrying a poor Carib woman for love" (67). Lise LaBatte turns out to be an important presence in Xuela's life. She becomes the friend that Xuela needs, a comforting, nurturing sister (if not a mother) with whom to share the



burden of living. The two women soon develop a very special kind of friendship based on mutual understanding and a typically feminine wordless communication. On the other hand, Xuela is ambivalent in her feelings about Lise. She feels sympathy because Lise "had gotten something she so very much wanted" (64), and admires the determination of this woman who had succeeded, by the use of obeah magic, to marry the man she was in love with. At the same time, though, she feels revulsion for the image of defeat that Lise offers now, a woman worn out by a husband to whom she was not able to give children. While she identifies herself with the young woman who was determined to get what she wanted, Xuela also defines herself in opposition to her: "I thought, This must never happen to me, and I meant that I would not allow the passage of time or the full weight of desire to make a pawn of me" (65).

The three together, Lise, Xuela, and Jack, form an unusual trinity. Xuela enters the life of the unhappy couple as the embodiment of their hope. Both of them intend to use her for the consolation of their frustrations and the fulfilment of their desires. Jack sees in her a fresh blossom for the satisfaction of the sexual greed his wife is no longer able to bear. Lise prepares the young girl as a gift to her husband, hoping that she will give him the child he could not have with her. Even if they are not conscious of their intentions, both of them turn Xuela into an object for their own use.

But the subordinate place that Xuela occupies in the household does not make her helpless. Although she is well aware of what is expected from her, she never sees herself as a subaltern and never fears manipulation. On the contrary, she makes herself a subject of her own destiny and takes from the situation what is good for her, Lise's attention and care during the day and Jack's caresses and kisses at night.

The scene of Xuela's sexual initiation evokes the episode of the illness in *Annie John*, where the girl's psychical and physical collapse is accompanied by a long period of rain until the grandmother comes to assist the child in her passage to adulthood. Here, the rain falls during the night of Xuela's first sexual experience, a long night of pain and pleasure, and keeps falling during the following days when Lise looks after Xuela's aching body and soul. Here, too, when the rain ends, the protagonist senses the great change in herself; she acquires an awareness of who she is, and rejoices for not being ordinary: "I would not remain the same, even I could see that; the respectable, the predictable - such was not to be my own destiny" (73).

When she discovers that she is pregnant, Xuela is struck with terror at the thought of a living creature inside her and gathers all the force of her will to expel the child. Then, she takes some money from Jack's counting room and goes to an obeah woman to help her

abort. She does not want a child whom she cannot love, because hers is a loveless world, made up of murder and dispossession. For four days she lies on a dirty floor, blood flowing from between her legs, and goes through the deepest pain of her life. At the end of the ordeal, she feels she is a new person, one that can decide her own destiny, even by changing the course of nature: "I knew things I had not known before, I knew things that you can know only if you have been through what I had just been through. I had carried my own life in my own hands" (83). In a dream, she claims her birthright and all that belongs to her, "an island of villages and rivers and mountains and people who began and ended with murder and theft and not very much love" (89). In a world where death is the only reality, the mastering of one's own body is the only way of claiming one's freedom.

After her first abortion, Xuela sets up her life as an independent woman, living alone to get to know herself better. She leaves the LaBattes with their defeat and resignation, and, changed forever, determined not to let herself be consumed by the whims of others, she moves to a near village, where she finds a job and rents a house. There, she lives on her own, observing herself, terrified at the hardness of her expression and yet content for the authority she has gained over herself. Having nothing to compare herself to, she dwells in emptiness and makes her body her own comfort, allowing

"nothing to replace my own being in my own mind" (100). Like a cruel goddess, she dreams of bearing children in abundance and destroying them carelessly: "I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once" (97).

Xuela's world revolves around herself; she disowns whatever lies outside her body. When one day she meets her father, who makes her the gift of one Ugli fruit and three grapefruit, she recalls how, as a child, she had held herself away from her inheritance when her father had taken her to see a piece of land he had just acquired. To the greed of the society around her, Xuela responds with absolute indifference to possession. To her father's affection, a crippled love reduced to material support, a false affection expressing only the love he has for himself, she responds with indifferent obedience. She never objects to the decisions her father takes about her life. After all, her aspirations reside within herself, and she takes what comes from life indifferently. Although she doesn't become the teacher her father had hoped, she goes back home when she is required to and leaves when her father believes it appropriate.

At home she witnesses the demise of her father's family: her brother, under the burden of excessive demands, failing to assure the continuity of a dreamed dynasty; her stepmother consuming

herself in her grief, becoming a ghostly presence; her sister, having been made to feel worthless all her life, looking for comfort in the arms of a man. She had become pregnant when still very young and shortly afterwards had had an accident that left her disfigured. Only a few years later, she had married the man she had been in love with, but, by then, all hopes of happiness had vanished from her consumed soul.

Xuela stands outside all this, her hardness and absence of expectations enabling her to defend herself against the yoke of power, and watches the game playing itself. Sympathetic towards the misfortune of her siblings, she acknowledges them as her brother and her sister, one in death, the other in pain. She accepts her sister as part of her intimate world when she assists her through an abortion, although no closeness between them is established, since her sister projects all her frustrations and her hate for the world on Xuela. It is because of her sister's jealousy that, after her marriage, Xuela is sent away, her presence under the same roof as her sister's husband felt as a threat.

After her sister's marriage, Xuela goes back to Roseau, where she is employed as a servant in the household of an English doctor and his wife. Philip Bailey, with whom Xuela soon starts a relationship and whom she will eventually marry, is the embodiment of political privilege. He is the conqueror, the kind of man who is

"proud of the pale hue of his skin," feels "blessed and chosen to be that way" (131), and is confident he holds the world in his grasp. This man, who is the heir of the bad deeds committed by his ancestors, lives in a corner of the world he does not like and in this microcosm replicates the patterns of conquest his ancestors had established. Xuela has a good grasp of how apparently innocent and ordinary deeds are in fact indicative of an imperialistic mentality. She does not fail to notice, for example, that Philip's passion for gardening is in fact "an act of conquest," an obsession with rearranging the landscape, not out of necessity to grow food but as a "luxury" for the pleasure of making the "plants do exactly what he wanted them to do" (143). In the same way, he seems to be obsessed with decay and ruin as Xuela sarcastically remarks:

That again made sense, for he came from people who had caused so much of it they might have eventually come to feel that they could not live without it. (143-144)

Such a man, who occupies the highest position in the social hierarchy, secure of being the master of all that surrounds him, can take the luxury of removing his gaze from the things in his grasp and wonder "what makes the world turn, and then he will have an answer and it will take up volumes, and there are many answers, each of

them different, and there are many men, each of them the same" (132).

Privileges of this kind are not given to people like Xuela, who can only ask in despair "What makes the world turn against me and all who look like me?" (132), and no answer will ever be available to them because they are not agents of their own destiny. Xuela, being black, female, and poor, is not in a position to make her thoughts have any consequence in the outside world or even simply in her life. Although she is aware of being a subaltern, and although she regards with suspicion the deeds of white people and feels superior to them, she is not in a position "to make [her] feeling have any meaning" (137). People like her are confined to the margins and doomed to live as if dead, like Lazarus, the black gravedigger who may have been named after the man that Jesus brought back to life in the hope to "protect him from the living death that was his actual life; but it had been of no use, he was born the Dead and he would die the Dead" (140).

Philip's wife also belongs to the privileged. She is full of herself, pleased to be English, proud of her complexion, and convinced of the kindness of her charitable deeds. Moira Bailey, too, lives in a place she does not like and whose people she regards with scorn. But it is precisely in confrontation with these people that she constructs her greatness. She looks down on Xuela, who for being

poor and black she sees as a "woman," whereas she defines herself as a "lady." Xuela, on her part, agrees with the distinction that conveys the falseness of the one and the authenticity of the other:

It was an accurate description of herself, more so than she could have wanted it to be, for it is true that a lady is a combination of elaborate fabrications, a collection of externals, facial arrangements, and body parts, distortions, lies, and empty effort. I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place.  
(159)

The opposition between a woman and a lady continues a theme explored in Kincaid's previous fiction. In *Annie John*, having internalised the association of black women with sexual looseness, the mother makes a distinction between "lady" and "slut," and tries to suppress her daughter's sexuality. In *Lucy*, the protagonist constructs her subjectivity in opposition to her mother, having sex for the fun of it. Xuela, too, claims her identity through sexual pleasure, but whereas Lucy's behaviour is forced, aimed at suppressing the mother-obsessed girl in herself, Xuela's is a deliberate (and the only available) act of self-possession, because "at the moment my self was the only thing I had that was my own" (159).



In the characters of Philip and Moira Bailey, Kincaid shows how the misery that envelops the island does not spare the privileged. Despite their life of ease and comfort, despite the dominion they exercise over others, theirs, too, is "a life of death, a different death from the one of the gravedigger Lazarus, a different one from my own, but a death all the same" (159-160). They, too, are confronted with darkness and have to bear the consequences of their deeds. Moira dies consumed by the tragedy of a broken womb, her skin made black like that of the people she despised by the use of hallucinatory herbs. Her husband marries Xuela, a woman who does not love him and can never bring peace to him, and he dies a lonely man, away from his homeland, the country that gave him a sense of who he was.

The relationship between Xuela and Philip is indicative of the insecurity in human relationships within tense social and political climates. First as lovers, then as wife and husband, their union is not the fruit of love, but the result of defeat. It allows both to make a romance of their life: "Romance is the refuge of the defeated" (216). Love between them is impossible because they live under the spell of history: one is of the victors, the other of the vanquished, and the past cannot be forgotten. They both dwell in loneliness, but their sadness does not come from the same source, and if anything can bring them happiness, they cannot be happy at the same time.

Philip, his skin "thin and pink and transparent, as if it were on its way to being skin but had not yet reached the state that real skin is" (152), does not even look like someone Xuela can love, and so, from the very beginning, she determines she should not love him. And yet she marries him precisely for this reason, because she could never have married a man she loved since she is not interested in possessing the object of her desire and is determined to stand outside the dynamics of conquest. Nevertheless, by marrying Philip, she conjures up the master-slave relationship and avenges the oppressed by reversing the roles.

From the beginning, she imposes her will on him and cruelly denies to him any source of pleasure coming from her. Her relationship with him destroys the myth of Western superiority and brings out the rage of the vanquished confronted with the false greatness of the victor, when everything is reduced to the ordinary:

To see him eating a meal was always a revolting spectacle to me, but I long ago had learned to stop being surprised by this when I realized that many things which reminded me that he, too, was human and frail caused a great feeling of anger to swell up in me; for if he, too, was human, then would not all whom he came from be human, too, and where would that leave me and all that I came from? (219-220).

The only man Xuela falls in love with, a stevedore named Roland, is someone very much like herself, a vanquished being that does not wear the mantle of defeat, but carries himself "as if he was something precious, but not out of vanity, for it was true, he was something precious" (168). Like her, he is a subaltern, confined to the margins, a presence forgotten in the historical records, but, like her, he is also someone who yearns for more than ordinary satisfaction, always aware that death embraces everything. If Xuela loves him, it is because he, too, is reduced to his humanity, his own self being the only possession he cares for. Their love is possible since they share a common history of dispossession and since they acknowledge and reject the burden of history in the effort to reduce their life to its essence. It is his insignificance for the rest of the world that makes Roland precious to Xuela:

I was in love with Roland. He was a man. But who was he really? He did not sail the seas, he did not cross the oceans, he only worked in the bottom of vessels that had done so; no mountains were named for him, no valleys, no nothing. But still he was a man. (176)

But their union, too, cannot be exempt from the patterns of conquest that regulate nature and history:

And when our eyes met, we laughed, because we were happy, but it was frightening, for that

gaze asked everything: who would betray whom, who would be captive, who would be captor, who would give and who would take, what would I do. (166)

And it is clear from the beginning that it is Xuela who is to determine the course of their relationship. She is the one who, on the first day she sees him, calls out her name again and again until he looks at her, her name already embracing him like a chain. She is the one who sees the end of her love, as he touches her while they are looking at the horizon. She is the one, finally, who shuts her womb in refusal of his silent offerings.

As the novel draws to its conclusion, Xuela comes to terms with her origins, summoning up the lives of her father and her mother. Her father, whom she comes to love only in the stillness of death, embodies the corruption brought by colonialism. His cruelty and lack of sympathy for the weaker are the result of his history. He was the son of a Scot and a woman of the African people, and his entire life was marked by the internalisation of the superiority of one over the other:

This distinction between "man" and "people" was an important distinction, for one of them came off the boat as part of a horde, already demonized, mind blank to everything but human suffering, each face the same as the one next to it; the other came off the boat of his

own volition, seeking to fulfill a destiny, a vision of himself he carried in his mind's eye. (181)

Alfred Richardson chose to identify with the victor and to make of his life a life of ease. He rejected the complications of the vanquished, and came to despise the defeated, the poor, the diseased. He grew vain and ambitious and as an adult he would speak of his father with pleasure and pride, whereas his mother had no clear features in his memory. In his life, happiness was an impossibility. When he was a child, he had been given an egg as a gift from a neighbour, and through it he had collected a small fortune raising and selling chickens. When his father left, Alfred gave him all his money to purchase material for a suit, but the father never returned, and from then on, Xuela observes, his life might have been "a succession of rewards he could never enjoy" (195).

Of her mother, Xuela does not know much. She can only gather pieces of information given by others and imagine the rest. She was one among a few survivors of an extinguished people who were like "living fossils, [belonging] in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case" (197-198). Xuela Claudette Desvarieux was abandoned by her mother as an infant and raised by French nuns who had made her into a "quiet, shy, long-suffering, unquestioning, modest, wishing-to-die-soon person" (199). Alfred may have found beauty in her sadness; she may have loved him, but then she died, unable to

protect herself from the cruelty of the world and unable to protect her daughter.

Her mother's death is the central motif of Xuela's life; it is the event that has brought about her despair and determined her sterility: "how can any child understand such a thing, so profound an abandonment? I have refused to bear any children" (199). When her father dies, she is overcome with a feeling of loneliness for there is nothing in her past and there is nothing in her future. She is alone with herself and with the awareness that death is "the only certainty, inevitable to all things" (228).

The conclusion of the novel, with death embracing everything, leaves a bitter taste, not unlike the conclusion of Kincaid's previous works, but not for this reason does it invalidate the quest for the self which is at the core of the narrative and which is an undeniably successful quest. Politically and personally alienated, Xuela makes of her defeat a victory. If the world around her is crippled by the absence of love and if death is the only reality, one's own self is the only thing worth living for and self-possession is the only way to escape the dynamics of conquest which govern history as well as nature. Since she rejects any kind of power being exercised over her, Xuela is a decolonised subject:

The impulse to possess is alive in every heart,  
and some people choose vast plains, some

people choose high mountains, some people  
choose wide seas, and some people choose  
husbands; I chose to possess myself. (174)





## CHAPTER 6

### *My Brother*

#### The Homicidal Maternal Womb Revisited

If in her sixth book Jamaica Kincaid moves away from fiction for the second time in her career as a writer, she does not move away from the concerns that have always motivated her writing. Once again, non-fiction serves to explain and enrich the reflection on themes explored in the novels and short stories and give them a wider dimension. While *A Small Place* clarifies the social experience underlying Kincaid's fiction, treating the themes of power and dominance within the context of colonialism, post-colonialism and imperialism, *My Brother* relates the personal experience of love and loss which is at the core of her narrative, and thus constitutes a fundamental piece of the collage uncovering the autobiographical sources of her creativity.

Episodes and images recurring in Kincaid's former works of fiction find explicit biographic reference in *My Brother*: The baby brother almost eaten by red ants, the young girl who died in the arms of the narrator's mother, the loss experienced by the narrator at the

birth of her siblings, the first encounters with death, the obeah practices to protect her from evil, there are but a few examples of the author's personal experience transposed into fiction in the previous works and which are here confided to the reader in an unprecedented show of trust. Nonetheless, *My Brother* is not strictly an autobiography or a confession, but rather a reflection based on personal memories. And it is not surprising that a writer like Jamaica Kincaid should turn to this genre, much more flexible in style and themes than the other two, given her predilection for the modernist flux of memory that has characterised her narrative technique from the beginning of her career. The motivation at the source of the narrative is still the same, it responds to a personal need, it is a strategy of survival, used to fill up a void left by a loss, to understand events and cope with reality. Kincaid writes:

I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying. When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life. When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew, instinctively, that to understand it or to make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it. (195-196)

The illness and death of the author's youngest brother, affected by AIDS in his thirties, is a starting point for a painful reflection on the mercilessness of human existence and gives vent to a violent flood of memories. Nothing is stable in life, nothing is true in a permanent and unequivocal way. Life itself seems to be a brief interruption in the eternity of death. People, places, events acquire a different nature not only with the passing of time but also depending on the point of view of the different people involved.

Following the unpredictable mechanisms of memory, defying the supposed linearity of time and the limits of space, and breaking preconceived stylistic rules with endless sentences, Kincaid's style conveys the fluidity and flexibility of existence itself. She may refer to the same event at different moments in the course of the narrative, and each time the event will be told in a different way, to add new meanings to it, to enrich it while showing the unreliability of the narrative and the insubstantiality of the event itself as objective reality. The identity of a given subject is also not stable, not fixed. It changes depending on who is observing whom or from what perspective one sees oneself, so that the subject itself, as a definable category, seems to vanish behind the flexibility of the point of view.

As truth cannot be established, things need to be reaffirmed anew. This affects Kincaid's style, leading it towards an almost

obsessive repetition of statements. For example, although she explains at some point that her brother's biological father was a stepfather to her, each time she refers to him she finds it necessary to specify that he was *his* father, not hers. In the same way, the maternal figure is a different person depending on the perspective of the narrative focus: at different moments, she is either *her* mother or *his* mother. And the brother himself is referred to by the narrator either as *her brother* or as *her mother's child* and described in different ways depending on whose gaze he is being submitted to.

It is memory that leads the narrative to and fro, from past to present, from place to place, from reality to fantasy, and conveys a sense of existence as in a state of flux, a hypertext open to different directions, some of them experienced, some of them imagined. And both events and fantasy are real in the recollection of a life which acknowledges physical experience as well as the experience of the mind as valid: "the parts that were imaginary and the parts that were only facts were all true" (119).<sup>1</sup>

Memory is recollection of what life has been, but it is also imagination, a supposition of what it could have been. And Kincaid's book on her brother ends up by being more autobiographical than

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Kincaid's text has a postmodern perspective, refusing to reveal the existence of an objective reality and placing a sense of truth in the narrative itself. In the wake of the Nietzschean "school of suspect," the idea of a transcendent reality is rejected and the factor of truth (in Derridean terms) is reduced to language itself, its constructions, narratives, the stories one tells.

biographical not only because it is more a tale of her life than that of her brother, but also because her brother's life becomes symbolically the life she could have had if she had not escaped from the overbearing and destroying powers of her mother and her motherland. Death, symbolic if not physical, would have been her destiny if she had stayed. And the idea of death is constructed in opposition to writing, which is configured as the means to save one's life in substitution for the maternal womb.

In *My Brother*, the reflection on illness, death, loss, a concern with identity and with the invisible connection between life's occurrences are all inscribed within the theme of maternal power and set against the Caribbean background. The landscape of the tropical island is, as everywhere else in Kincaid's work, more than mere scenery. It bears the visible signs of historical fraud, and it is also what makes things what they are, what determines the character of Antiguan, the peculiar way they experience time and space. It is, finally, with its eternally warm season interrupted occasionally by the fury of a hurricane, a homicidal maternal womb, warm and nurturing to its children while secretly planning to betray and destroy them. And such also is the maternal figure represented in Kincaid's work, a duplicitous character, loving and cruel, sustaining and destroying, adored and hated.

In her previous works, Jamaica Kincaid had explored the implications of maternal power over the daughter's life: the overbearing presence of the mother during childhood and adolescence in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, the interrelation of maternal and colonial dominance in *A Small Place*, the suffocating maternal love defying spatial separation in *Lucy*, the obsessive memory of a dead mother in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. In *My Brother*, the author touches on all these points, disclosing the tale of the love/hate relationship with her mother over the years, from the earliest memories of childhood to the present, reflecting also on the implications that the mother's death would have on her life. But, ultimately, the concern underlying the narrative is a new one. Reflecting on her brother's life, Kincaid explores the turn her life could have taken if she had not been able to remove herself physically and emotionally from the womb of both the biological mother and the motherland. A general reflection on death, *My Brother* is also a personal tale of loss and survival.

The book constitutes two untitled parts, roughly revolving around the brother's illness and his death respectively. The first part briefly introduces the situation, the brother dying of AIDS in the Holberton Hospital in Antigua when brother and sister see each other after many years, before shifting to the past and the memory of his birth, the fourth child, born at home on the night of the fifth of

April 1962, when the author was thirteen years of age. Kincaid remembers the occasion in detail and describes how the family routine was upset that night, making it is clear that the spectre of death will pervade the narrative from the beginning of the tale.

That night the father couldn't take the usual walk recommended by the doctor for his heart problems and the children were sent to sleep away from home in neighbours' houses. Kincaid recollects being sent to the house of a friend of her mother, one whose daughter had died in her mother's arms on the way to the doctor (a central episode in *Annie John*). Stressing her mother's familiarity with death, she recalls:

This was the first person to die in my mother's arms; not long after that, a woman who lived across the street from us, Miss Charlotte was her name, died in my mothers arms as my mother tried to give her some comfort from the pain of a heart attack she was having. (5)

If the memory presents an image of a mother deeply involved in community life, as is typical of Caribbean women, it also evokes the estrangement of mother and daughter that was the subject of *Annie John*.

Her brother's life is presented as being marked by death from the the moment of his birth. Just after his first cry, his afterbirth was "dried and pinned to the inside of his clothes as a talisman to protect

him from evil spirits" (5), but this obeah practice would not prove effective, as the next day, while mother and child were asleep, "an army of red ants came in through the window and attacked him" (5). With her usual interest in the mysteries of existence and her curiosity about the connection between events, Kincaid recalls having wondered one day during her brother's illness "if it had any meaning that some small red things had almost killed him from the outside shortly after he was born and that now some small things were killing him from the inside" (6).

The news of her brother's illness arrives with a phone call from a friend of the narrator's mother. At that moment, Kincaid explains, mother and daughter were going through one of their periods of not speaking to each other and she was in her house in Vermont, deeply absorbed in the well being of herself and her husband and children. Two worlds are thus immediately set in opposition: one inhabited by the love and the harmony of family life, the result of personal choice, and the other full of conflict, chaos and pain, a world that was not chosen but given by fate. This contrast between the life-sustaining atmosphere of her North American environment and the death threatening power of her childhood home, a world the narrator had managed to escape, but that occasionally re-emerges menacing to disrupt the happiness of her chosen life, underlies the narrative throughout the entire book.



When she receives the phone call, the narrator immediately guesses that her brother has AIDS, because the kind of life he has been leading, using drugs and having unprotected sexual intercourse with several partners, seems careless enough to expose him to the risk of contracting the HIV virus. Kincaid recalls the encounter she had with her brother after twenty years of separation (when she first left Antigua to start a new life in the United States she was sixteen years old and he was only three). She might have seemed ridiculous to him then. She had been away for a long time and she was very different from the typical Caribbean woman. She no longer spoke Antiguan patois, the kind of English her family used regularly, and even found it difficult to understand. Her brother was also surprised because he had expected her to be fat, since the model of feminine beauty in the Caribbean is that of a fat woman: "Most women where we are from become fat after a while; it is fashionable to be a fat woman" (8). On that occasion, the narrator had warned her brother to use condoms to protect himself from the HIV virus, but he had laughed at her and at the possibility that such a "stupid" thing could happen to him: "Me no get dat chupidness, man" (8).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In this book, for the first time Kincaid makes use of the Antiguan patois, although not extensively, since she employs it only to reflect direct speech.

The death-evoking description of the brother lying in the hospital, his skin covered with sores and scabs, is contrasted with a life-sustaining image of him as a gardener. He loved plants and had created a small garden in the back of his little house, which was a few square metres away from his mother's house, where she lived with another son. His destiny, Kincaid seems to imply, could have been different. Both her brother's and her own love of plants had come from their mother, who had always grown all sorts of vegetables and herbs with great dedication. Therefore, the author observes, "if his life had taken a certain turn, if he had caused his life to take a different turn" (11), he might have ended up writing a book like Russell Page's *The Education of a Gardener*, a book that accompanied Kincaid through this painful experience, since she was reading it when she received the news of her brother's illness and then when she was at the hospital with him.

Once again evoking and enriching with details the incident of the red ants, Kincaid offers an image of the god-like powers of the mother as wilful creator and destroyer of life. On that occasion, in fact, after she had killed the red ants that had attacked her baby, the woman had rushed outside in anger to tear up and get rid of the okra trees that had hosted the insects. If the episode is meant to be a tale of maternal protectiveness, it also suggests the dangerous power of the mother over her own creations. The tension underlying the

narrative hints at the central concern of this work. Devon, who was now lying in a hospital waiting for death, had inherited from his mother a gift to create and nurture life, but only by removing himself from the homicidal maternal womb would he have been able to make this a life-sustaining gift for himself. A comparison with Kincaid's own life is of course implicit. Like him, she had inherited creative powers from her mother, but, unlike him, she had then invented a life for herself far from home and had thus escaped the danger of death. She had become a famous writer. Her brother's gift for gardening, on the other hand, would never be known to the world.

The mother's duplicity is then discussed openly by the author, who gradually makes sense of her own life while reflecting on her brother's condition. The reasons for her violent feelings towards her mother, feelings which had been expressed through the fictional narrators of her previous books, seem finally to find an explanation. Observing her mother's behaviour towards her dying brother, Kincaid appears to encounter evidence to justify her own ambivalence. She is pained when reflecting on the cruelty and carelessness of her mother on certain occasions, for example when she had gratuitously destroyed a lemon tree that Devon had planted and that "would have been one of the things left of his life," since nothing else "came from him; not work; not children; not love for

someone else" (13). Destroying the one thing that came from him was almost as if she had killed Devon himself.

In a passage that evokes the quest for an independent self on the part of the protagonists of her fiction, Kincaid writes:

I only now understand why it is that people lie about their past, why they say they are one thing other than the thing they really are, why they invent a self that bears no resemblance to who they really are, why anyone would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole. (12-13)

The image of an almost cruel mother, indifferent about causing them pain, is opposed to the one of a nurturing figure, always ready to sacrifice herself for the well-being of her children:

But this too is a true picture of my mother: When he was ill, each morning she would get up very early and make for her sick son a bowl of porridge and a drink of a fortified liquid food supplement and pack them in a little bag and go to the hospital, which is about a mile away and involves climbing up a rather steep hill... (14)

Though apparently a contradiction, the mother's duplicitous behaviour is explained by her narcissistic and ultimately selfish nature which prevents her from separating her children's needs from

her own. Although she truly loves them, she never questions her actions and therefore ends up causing them harm:

It never has occurred to her that her way of loving us might not be the best thing for us. It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might have served her better than it served us. (16)

Kincaid recollects powerful memories of her childhood such as when her mother would feed her by chewing the food to soften it before placing it in her mouth, or when she would relieve her from the mucus of a cold by drawing the mucus from the nose into her own mouth and then spitting it out. But she also recalls the pain her mother had caused her with her harsh reply when, alone and penniless in New York, Kincaid had written to her seeking sympathy and encouragement. With both admiration and bitterness, Kincaid attempts to give a full depiction of her mother as a mother:

Her love for her children when they are children is spectacular, unequalled I am sure in the history of a mother's love. It is when her children are trying to be grown-up people - adults - that her mechanism for loving them falls apart (17)

This kind of love, which holds while the children are defenceless and falls apart when they develop independent selves, is both nurturing and threatening, and always excessive. It may be either a terrible

disgrace or a great fortune. It is a disgrace for the narrator, who still perceives her mother as a menace in her life and thus constantly tries to remove herself from her influence, but it is a fortune for her brother while he lies dying, unable to look after himself.

In regard to herself, Kincaid gives full vent to the bitterness of her feelings towards her mother. She recalls the sense of loss and betrayal suffered when the childhood paradise collapsed and the idyllic union with her mother became a conflictive relationship. Maternal praise turned into scorn, nurturing was replaced by hostility and dominance, and the mother became the main obstacle in the daughter's search for happiness.

The breach between mother and daughter revolves around the birth of the brothers, which is seen as the central event determining a change in her mother's attitude and affecting their relationship. The loving and nurturing mother gradually became sharp and bitter, especially after the birth of the youngest son, Devon, a child she had not wanted and whom she had tried to abort because he represented a burden on the family's meagre economy. It was after the birth of this child that she removed her daughter from school, something that Kincaid recalls with great pain in the awareness that, had she not caused her own life to take a different turn, she could now be as helpless as her brother:

There was no real reason for me to be removed from school, she just did it, removed me from school. My father was sick, she said, she needed me at home to help with the small children, she said. But no one would have died had I remained in school; my brother would have been dead by now had this act of my mother's been all that remained of my life. Had my life stayed on the path where my mother had set it, the path of no university education, my brother would have been dead by now. I would not have been in a position to save his life, I would not have had access to a medicine to prolong his life, however temporarily. And as we sat there, she rubbing his head, telling humiliating stories about him, telling me some God or other would bless me, she did not remember this, she did not remember that if it had been up to her, I would not have been in a position to be blessed by any God, I might in fact be in the same position as my brother right now. (74-75)

Kincaid admits to being so helpless where her family is concerned that only by distancing herself physically and emotionally from them can she prevent psychic collapse. Hers is not a rejection of her origins but a necessary and healthy strategy of survival:

I am so vulnerable to my family's needs and influence that from time to time I remove myself

from them. I do not write to them. I do not pay visits to them. I do not lie, I do not deny, I only remove myself. (20)

Once, she relates, when her mother was visiting her in Vermont, they had a big quarrel during which she asked her mother whether she had meant to cause her so much pain and whether she was sorry. The woman had replied, with her usual self-confidence, that she was never wrong and that whatever she had done, she had done for a good reason. Later, she told one of her daughter's friends that if she had not been so strict, her daughter would have "ended up with ten children by ten different men" (28). She told this friend how she had reprimanded a boy who used to come to visit her daughter with "the excuse" of borrowing some books (this episode of Kincaid's adolescence is evoked several times in the work to illustrate the contrasting points of view of mother and daughter). After her mother's visit, Kincaid recalls having suffered a nervous breakdown and having caught an illness she had had when she was a child.

The relationship between Kincaid and her mother is contrasted with the relationship between herself and her own children. As a mother, she is very far from being the dominant and self-confident mother she had known as a daughter. On the contrary, she sees herself as being as vulnerable to her children's needs as they are to



her expectations: "I spend a good part of my day on my knees in apology to my own children" (27). On the other hand, she acknowledges that in her children's eyes she is the one holding power over their lives, that to them she is a source of satisfaction and disappointment, pleasure and pain, a contradiction which is seen as natural in the relationship between mother and children. To make her children aware that she is "as vulnerable to someone as they are to me" (62-63), she took them to Antigua with her on one of her visits to her sick brother, but this turned out to be another weapon in her mother's hands to use against her, to affirm her supremacy:

My mother, looking at my children, told me they loved her ("Dem lub me. Dem lub me a lot, you know"), and there was something strange in this, as if in time they would come to love her more than they loved me, and there was something boastful in it, as if to say that everyone eventually loves her, as if to say that anyone who loves me will love her, only more so. (63)

The wall of defence that Kincaid constructs against the influence of her family collapses when she hears that her brother is dying. She is unable to react and has the sensation of falling into a deep hole, overcome by the fear that he would die before she could see him. She is surprised to realise that, although she hardly knows

him, she loves him. When she had left home he was only three years old and she does not recall having had any particular feeling of affection for him. After that, she had only seen him once, when she visited Antigua after twenty years of absence. She had always thought of all her brothers, she says, as her mother's children. It was from her mother that she had always tried to remove herself, but Devon's illness made her realise that her brothers too were part of the family she was constantly running away from; they, too, had a threatening power over her, the power of making her feel as if she was "falling into a hole, a vapor of sadness swallowing me up" (23). This newly discovered love for her brother, the fear of his dying without her being able to see him, takes her back to Antigua once again.

When she was in the hospital with him, she recalls, she became overwhelmed by the desire to escape. The death-threatening atmosphere is contrasted with the life-sustaining world of her American family:

Sometimes when I was sitting with him, in the first few days of my seeing him for the first time after such a long time, seeing him just lying there, dying faster than most people, I wanted to run away, I would scream inside my head, What am I doing here, I want to go home. I

missed my children and my husband. I missed the life that I had come to know. (22-23)

All the same, when she returned to Vermont after her first visit to her brother in the hospital, she felt she missed him, although she did not feel love for him anymore, only a very powerful feeling that she could not call love.

Perhaps being with him had given her the chance to feel temporarily relieved from an unconfessed sense of guilt for having abandoned her family, for not having done anything when she had received the news that her father had died leaving her mother a pauper. Therefore, she missed "being in the presence of his suffering and the feeling that somewhere in it was the possibility of redemption of some kind" (50). But what made her think and talk about him was not at all love. It was rather the same kind of mixed feeling she had for her mother, powerful enough to threaten her psychical stability:

My talk was full of pain, it was full of misery, it was full of anger, there was no peace to it. How did I feel? I did not know how I felt. I was a combustion of feelings. (51)

On her first visit, a ride through Antigua from the hospital back to the hotel where she was staying (she had refused to stay in her mother's house) brought back memories of childhood and family

memories she had heard from her mother, such as her brother's involvement in a murder when he was a boy. These memories, most of them connected with death, touch small but significant moments of her life as a child until the moment she resolved not to live in Antigua: the maternity ward where she was born; the old Dead House which was not there anymore; the Princess Margaret School where she had studied; the undertaker Mr. Strafee who looked like death to her when she was a child and had not yet seen a dead person; her godmother who was a seamstress and whom she used to visit; the Englishman who used to sell her mother beefsteak tomatoes; the ditch she used to throw herself into because she was afraid of some cows passing by and which was not there anymore; the Happy Acres Hotel which had also disappeared; her mother's old friend with whom she spent part of the summer and from whose house she used to see people attending funerals at the St. John's city graveyard (one of the central episodes in *Annie John*), and it was then that she "decided that only people in Antigua died, that people living in other places did not die and as soon as I could, I would move somewhere else, to those places where the people living there did not die" (26-27). The whole island appears to be pervaded with death, with things that are no more and degraded because of its economic dependence on other parts of the world and because nothing is produced there: "Antigua is a place like that:

parts of everything are no longer being made anywhere in the world; in Antigua itself nothing is made" (24).

The general rack and ruin of the island is illustrated not only through the description of the conditions of the hospital, which was better run under colonial rule, but also by the attitude of Antiguans towards people affected with AIDS. There is no public concern for them and, since there is no cure, it is generally felt that there is no need for medicines that would slow the process of the disease. For this reason, no resources destined for health care are employed for the treatment and care of AIDS-sufferers, and patients are abandoned to their destiny in an isolated wing of the hospital and forgotten by society.

Dr. Ramsey is an exception to this general attitude of Antiguans towards people suffering from AIDS. This figure, whom the author greatly admires and to whom she devotes long passages, provides the occasion for her to make generalisations about the character of Antiguans, although she does so through contrast. For example, Dr. Ramsey is very punctual, whereas in Antigua "people never arrive when they say they will; they never do what they say they will do" (32), and he is very kind, loving and respectful towards people, especially those who need him and who are less powerful than him, something that the author "had long ago thought impossible to find in an Antiguan with authority" (32). When he

visited Devon, he examined him with his bare hands and then stayed to converse with him like an old friend. Later, he talked to his sister and told her how wrong it is to give up on HIV-positive people, because "you never know when a cure might come along" (35). On that occasion, the author could not tell if "he was asserting native Antiguan foolishness or faith in science" (35).

Dr. Ramsey, who was the only doctor in Antigua to be publicly involved with AIDS and who was responsible for promoting information about it, also gave the author the opportunity to meet other Antiguan people involved with the disease and to discover positive behaviour among Antiguan people. For example, at a workshop organised by the doctor, she met a couple whose thirty-year-old daughter had died of AIDS and who were there to help other people who might find themselves in the same sad situation. Kincaid comments:

This was something very new to me: ordinary people in Antigua expressing sympathy and love for one another at a time of personal tragedy and pain, not scorn or rejection or some other form of cruelty. (37)

Antiguan character, the past and present of the island, fill the narrator's head as she fluctuates between observation and memory. At the workshop, Dr. Ramsey had given a lecture and had shown pictures of people affected by the sexually transmitted disease.

Kincaid gives a detailed description of the shocking images of suffering and death which had had a deep impact on her and had made her remember a similar feeling of pleasure followed by fear she used to have as a child when, enjoying the view of a full moon and the mountains in the distance, she would see a light moving and, thinking that it was a jablesse, would run to bed and pull the sheets over her head, and would soon "become afraid to fall asleep with the sheets over my head because I might suffocate and die" (38).

Both ideas of pleasure and of death are associated with childhood, which was for Kincaid a world inhabited by excessive emotions and in constant jeopardy. Her present life, on the other hand, the one she has purposely chosen for herself, is presented as ordinary and pleasant and something she cherishes above all things. Her sexual life, for example, is defined as "a monument to boring conventionality" (41).

This existence of harmonious happiness safely sheltered from the perils of excess is opposed to her brother's life. His licentiousness and carelessness contrast with her sobriety and control; yet while acknowledging the destroying nature of the Caribbean environment, Kincaid holds her brother responsible for the turn his life has taken. She had left and had started a new life far from home. He had stayed and was now dying. His life could have

been different, had he found a way to express and affirm himself. He had a remarkable personality and could have achieved something in his life, the narrator suggests, but the overpowering mother and the oppressive Antiguan environment had clipped his wings and left him a lonely, diseased man in a hostile environment:

Locked up inside him was someone who would have found satisfaction speaking to the world in an important way, and that someone would not have needed to greet every passerby, that someone would not have time for every passerby, that someone would have felt there isn't enough silence in the world. (59)

His restless and rebellious nature had borne no fruit. He had been interested in the history of the Caribbean and had been critically aware of his homeland's colonial past. He had become a Rastafarian, changing his name for one of a Hebrew prophet. Nonetheless, all this had led him only to a peripheral and invisible existence, one that counts for little and leaves no trace on the pages of history. He had wanted to rebel against the powerlessness that history had imposed on his people, but he had ended up becoming powerless by his own means. Most of the time jobless and economically dependent on his mother, he had spent his life hanging around with friends, smoking marijuana and seducing women.



The AIDS virus giving an end to his existence represents the success of the effort of Western imperialism to keep Black people in a powerless position. Nonetheless, Kincaid suggests, Blacks are fully responsible for their condition because they have subsided into the role of the victim that history has accorded them. With pungent irony, she observes:

How unlucky people are who cannot blame the wrong, disastrous turns life can sometimes take on racism; because the hardness of living, the strange turns in it, the there-but-for-the-grace-of-God part of it is so impossible to accept and it must be, in some way, very nice to have the all too real evil of racism to blame. (49)

Acknowledging the subaltern position of Black people, Kincaid rejects the victim perspective and calls for an individual commitment for racial uplift, implicit in her remarks on her brother's myths and her daughter's ambitions:

The walls of his house were plastered with magazine pictures of Americans who have been extremely successful in the world of sports or entertainment. All these people are of my and his complexion. My daughter likes to sing. It is perhaps the pictures on my brother's wall that make me discourage her from singing in a way that might bring her public attention. I have said to her father, "Does the world really

need one more somewhat brown person singing?" My daughter loves math and is very good at it. Maybe she can find satisfaction singing to herself while poring over numbers that will explain some small mystery in the universe. There may be someone of my brother's hue, or my daughter's hue, or my own hue who has been awarded the Nobel Prize for physics or chemistry, but if such a person exists, my brother does not know of it, my daughter may know of it, I do not know of it. (44-45)

The portrait Kincaid paints of her brother evokes the masculine ideal of the "playboy" which has a tradition in the Black Diaspora in the New World and which has replaced patriarchal definitions of masculinity in the wake of the capitalist era.<sup>3</sup> Devon is a black

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<sup>3</sup> Afro-American scholar bell hooks observes how capitalism changed the nature of gender roles for both whites and blacks and led to an increased embrace of a phallogentric "playboy" ideal. The advancement of capitalism altered patriarchal rule in the household, since most men worked for someone else and the state began to interfere in family matters, so that a man's rule over his family and kin could no longer be asserted by virtue of his patriarchal status, but it was "wage-earning power that determined the extent to which a man would rule over a household, and even that rule was limited by the power of the state" (hooks. 1992, 94). A direct consequence of capitalism was an alteration in the representations of masculinity. In the analysis of Paul Hoch in his *White Hero, Black Beast*, the concept of maleness was gradually reduced to a restricted number of spheres: "The shrinkage of the concept of man into the narrowed and hierarchical conceptions of masculinity of the various work and consumptions ethics also goes hand in hand with an increasing social division of labor, and an increasing shrinkage of the body's erogenous potentials culminating in a narrow genital sexuality" (Hoch, quoted in hooks. 1992, 94). Under a feminist perspective, bell hooks interprets this change as a shift of emphasis from the old patriarchal status to a phallogentric ideal which was centred on genital power, physical domination and sexual possession of the feminine body, and observes how "this served the interests of a capitalist state which was indeed depriving men of their rights, exploiting their labor in such a way that they only indirectly received the benefits,

Antiguan man belonging to the low class who has no social and economic power, and he is a lonely man: "He does not make anything, no one depends on him, he is not a father to anyone, no one finds him indispensable" (70). Lacking other means to achieve self-esteem, he asserts his masculinity by placing the emphasis on his powers of seduction and on his physical attributes. Even when he was in the hospital, "looking as unattractive as a long-dead corpse" (43), he would try to seduce women passing by, and his disease did not stop him from having unprotected sex with women without telling them of his condition or from trying to seduce his nurse. When the social worker brought him a box of condoms, he told her "that he could not live without sex, that if he went without sex for too long he began to feel funny" (66). He said the same to his sister, who bitterly observes:

He had been trying to tell me that there was something unique about him, that he was an

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to deflect away from a patriarchal power based on ruling others and to emphasize a masculine status that would depend solely on the penis" (94). Since the phallogocentric model was more easily accessible to all men, masculine power could be extended to black men, who had been denied the access to the patriarchal ideal, so that now, also unemployed black men could assert masculine status by virtue of their physical attributes. The "playboy" alternative affirmed itself among white and black American men in the 1950's, parallel to an increasing repudiation of the old ideal requiring a man to marry and provide for his family. Nevertheless, this ideal, as hooks explains, was not new to black men, who had long practised the art of phallogocentric seduction, as it is demonstrated by traditional vernacular stories and blues songs. This analysis concerns the North American society, but, in the absence of a study on masculinity in the Caribbean (Fanon's study could be helpful, but it does not specifically treat the phallogocentric ideal), it can be applied to the colonial context of the West Indies, where black men were also denied access to the patriarchal model and were deprived of their rights and of the privileges of economic status.

unusual person, a powerfully sexual man. Powerfully sexual men sometimes cause people to die right away with a bullet to the head, not first sicken and slowly die from disease. (67)

He took pride in being such a good singer that women would take off their clothes listening to him: "Me nar joke, mahn, when me sing, gahl a take ahff she clothes" (68). Women are not the object of his desire (only after his death does Kincaid learn that he had had homosexual relationships), but the means to assert some sort of power, the only way to make himself seen. He expresses his personality through his penis, "his imagination passing between his legs" (70). It is for this reason that awareness of this sexually-transmitted disease does not prevent him from trying to have sex with other people and even exacerbates the phallocentric emphasis in a desperate attempt to defy death and assert existence. Since his penis is the only means to affirm himself, desperation overcomes him when he realises that he is really dying. The tragic scene in which he shows his penis to his sister on her last visit before his death illustrates his identification with the phallus and the sense of failure and helplessness when he sees his own death in the deterioration of his genitals:

I stood looking at him for a long time before he realized I was there. And then when he did, he

suddenly threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus. When he grabbed his penis in his hand, he suddenly pointed it at me, a sort of thrusting gesture, and he said in a voice that was full of deep panic and deep fear, "Jamaica, look at this, just look at this." (90-91)

It was only after his death that Kincaid fully realised the extent of the tragedy of her brother's life. Only when she came to know that he was a homosexual did she understand how painful his life had been, especially after the detection of his disease and the consequent hospitalisation. He had not been able to let the world know who he was, and, if he had managed to live with this duplicity for a period of time, after the first hospitalisation he had painfully kept his secret concealed while giving a false image of himself, the image of the seducer of women, the phallogocentric man. His life is compared by the narrator to the opposite of flowering, which is what life should be instead. His, on the contrary, had been "like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls

off at your feet" (163). Finally, she realises that her brother's life and hers were the different faces of the same coin:

His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best - and I only knew them best because I was from them, of them, and so often felt I was them - and they were - are - the people who ought to have loved me best in the whole world, the people who should have made me feel that the love of people other than them was suspect. (162)

Her brother's fate would have been her fate if she had stayed, and the identification between the two is complete at the end: "I shall never forget him because his life is the one I did not have, the life that, for reasons I hope shall never be too clear to me, I avoided or escaped" (176).

Reflection on death underlies the whole of *My Brother*, but it is certainly more explicit and extensive in the second part, beginning with the affirmation in capital letters "my brother died" (87), and it is such a concern with death that permeates the narrative until the closing lines of the book. In the closing lines, although the narrative continues to follow the to and fro of memory, skipping frenetically

from past to present to recall significant events in the narrator's life, the meditation goes beyond the private concern. The process of remembering activated by personal loss -Kincaid's brother's death from AIDS-, turns into a reflection on the human condition which subverts established epistemes.

Relating her brother's illness and death and her reaction to the thought and the actual occurrence of his death, Kincaid constructs a configuration of existence which does not correspond to commonly accepted parameters based on a dichotomous opposition of life versus death. In her perspective, death is larger than life. Coinciding with existence itself, death is eternal and actually embraces life: "everyone is living in death" (88), only we do not see it, we do not anticipate it unless we have a mortal disease or risk a mortal danger of a different sort. But death is always present, inevitable, awaiting everyone: "We are all acquainted with death" (95). And everyday we see people dying and we know that something could happen to us and give an end to our life, so, the narrator wonders, "why is it so new, why is this worn-out thing, death, someone dying, so new, so new?" (193). No explanation is given to this human reaction to death, but life is inscribed within death in the affirmation that "the dead never die" (121), because, after all, we are all already dead.

It does not matter to the author that she writes for a "perfect reader" who is dead, Mr. William Shawn, former editor of *The New*

*Yorker* and her former father-in-law. Nor does it matter that the childhood books that had inspired her were destroyed by her mother in a moment of anger, because:

The source of the books has not died, it only comes alive again and again in different forms and other segments. The perfect reader has died, but I cannot see any reason not to write for him anyway, for I can sooner get used to never hearing from him - the perfect reader - than to not being able to write for him at all.  
(198)

In *My Brother* Jamaica Kincaid revisits the geographical and symbolical spaces of her past, the home she has made herself an exile from. In the final analysis, it is the maternal womb she has managed to survive and which, instead, has killed her brother.



## Conclusion

As we have seen in the course of our study, Jamaica Kincaid's work inscribes itself in the Caribbean literary tradition in many ways. In the first place, it is located in the Caribbean and it is deeply imbued with creole traditions and beliefs, which are set against hegemonic metropolitan cultures. Cultural location - Caribbean geography and imaginary - is more than a landscape in the narrative: it is the foundation of agency and the source of creativity to the artist and the means through which the narrative articulates experience. Moreover, Kincaid's works develop tropes and themes which are peculiar to Caribbean experience and Caribbean literature, such as alienation and exile, childhood and the passage into maturity, the centrality of female figures and the conflicts produced by a history of abuse and cultural dominance. As is typical of most Caribbean literary production, her work is largely autobiographical (in fact, so much of Kincaid's life goes into her work that it is sometimes difficult to discern the author from the narrator-protagonist) and, at the same time, it is highly involved politically; Kincaid is successful in obliterating any neat division between fictional and non-fictional narrative as well as between political and non-political writing. Finally, as happens with the majority of

Caribbean works of fiction, it is the narrative itself that generates the theory and not the reverse. Being based on direct experience rather than on intellectual speculation, and such experience being resolved as political resistance in the narrative, the fiction constitutes the ground for theory, which, in Kincaid's case is a theory of liberation.

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. Once again, the cultural location of the subject -a gendered location- foregrounds the literary transposition of experience and is paramount to the theoretical implications of the creative dynamics. Portraying the double alienation of the colonised woman, Kincaid's work also fits into the literary tradition of Caribbean women writers. Hers, like many works of Caribbean women focusing on the passage into maturity, proposes a model of female development which comes to be more positive than the one we find in the majority of white narratives. Nonetheless, whereas in most Caribbean women's narratives the uncertainty in human relationships is overcome by forming bonds between women, Kincaid's concern with relational interaction is central but not decisive. In fact, her characters refuse to be trapped by any kind of bond, where the roots of the conflict are often to be found, and struggle to achieve their aims by themselves.

The quest for independence, the central theme of Kincaid's narrative, is played out at different levels. The process of identity formation is always subjected to a dialectic of power and powerlessness and the concept of difference is the fundamental idea at work in the quest for identity, be it a personal quest of the daughter confronting the mother, or a political quest of the colonised subject confronting the coloniser. In fact, the conflict between mother and daughter, which is the recurrent plot in Kincaid's works, goes beyond both the personal and the social spheres to construct a larger political metaphor. On one level, therefore, the conflict articulates a universal theme, which concerns the necessary passage from the pre-oedipal union of mother and child to the affirmation of the child as a separate individual. On the other hand, the same conflict comes to involve social concerns because it is set in the specific context of the Caribbean, dominated by poverty, racial divisions and fixed gender roles. Finally, the conflict comes to represent an allegory of the relationship between Europe, the mother-country, and the Caribbean island, the daughter-colony. Therefore, the recurring plot establishes continuous parallels between maternal power and imperial power. Both mothering and imperialism consist a narcissistic practice, since they tend to force the subjected individual into a mirror image of themselves. Both practices produce alienation and engender an inevitable process of

separation which does not end without pain. In the same way as the child needs to seek a detachment from the mother in order to become an individual, the colony must break free from the oppressive mother country. Nevertheless, the achievement of separation is often followed by a sensation of emptiness which can be dangerous. Freedom brings with it a sense of loss, and if it is true that Kincaid's protagonists are always prepared to face these consequences and strong enough to overcome them so as to become full individuals responsible for their actions, the same cannot be said of their political counterpart, the colony. Indeed Kincaid's vision seems to be much more pessimistic in this respect, as it emerges from the discontent that she expresses in her essay on Antigua and in her latest work.

The mother/motherland metaphor offers itself to different levels of interpretation. First of all, the maternal figure is undoubtedly duplicitous, since it is at the same time oppressive but also nurturing, and at times it is even presented as a source of creativity. In its association with the homeland, the attentive and loving mother of childhood represents the African-rooted Caribbean world, a world which provides protection and happiness but which is inevitably but irremediably lost: the pre-colonial, like the pre-oedipal state of bliss is a paradise which can never be regained. On the other hand, the mother of the adolescent stage, the one that becomes scornful and

overwhelming when the daughter shows the first signs of an emerging maturity, represents the oppressive Mother England, violently struggling to keep the daughter subjugated. Therefore, the two conflicting worlds, the African and the European, coexist in the contradictory figure of the mother, and, while the daughter must turn against the maternal power in her quest for independence, it is from the mother herself that she draws the strength and the means to achieve her freedom. In this way, the recuperation of the African legacy allows a reconciliation of the daughter with the motherland.

In Kincaid's works the quest for an independent self is the guiding thread of the narrative, where the association of mother and motherland is introduced as a leitmotiv but only on some occasions made explicit. In her works of fiction there seems to be a prevalence of the personal theme over the political, whereas in *A Small Place* and in *My Brother* the urge to comment on its political conflicts leads the author to interpret her personal experience as part of the collective historical experience of her homeland.

We have seen that the collection of short stories *At the Bottom of the River* anticipates all the themes and patterns which Kincaid develops in her later works. It does so in a fragmented style which reproduces both the semiotic order of the pre-oedipal world and the African-rooted Caribbean tradition, thereby defying Western notions of logic and proposing instead a more flexible way of interpreting

reality. In this collection we find melancholy for the loss of the pre-oedipal and the pre-colonial world, the intense relationship of love and hate with the overpowering mother and the oppressive motherland, the alienation proceeding from the experience of being mothered (seen by the subjected child as a process of othering), the beauty and the cruelty of nature and the mystery of life and death. All these themes, which Kincaid will select for later works to provide a more complex analysis, appear intermingled in the short stories. For instance, although the interrelationship between motherhood and colonialism is already present, it is not explicit and is often contradictory: sometimes the mother appears as a symbol of the oppressive mother-country; at other times she is herself the victim of colonial logic. Likewise, the young protagonist seesaws between conflicting feelings of love and hate, dependence and separation, while the mother, identified with the colonial motherland, sees the child as an extension of herself, a narcissistic mirror image. But then, as the child grows up, she suffers rejection by the mother (biological and colonial) and is made into a subaltern; she feels powerless and has to strive against the threat of erasure. *At the Bottom of the River* is the journey of a young girl through the first experiences of life; it is a painful journey which forms her as an individual. At the end the protagonist achieves a strong sense of her identity and claims a

name of her own, although she has not lost completely the innocence of childhood and sees herself as part of the natural world.

The young protagonist of the short stories comes back as an adolescent in Kincaid's first novel. In *Annie John*, set in colonial Antigua in the 1950s, the socio-historical setting is more articulated and the theme of cultural oppression treated more explicitly. The interrelationship between motherhood and colonialism is clearer than before, for the geographical location is paramount in the treatment of the mother-daughter theme. In fact, the paradigm of female development presented and questioned in the novel is the product of an environment marked by poverty, political oppression and the conflict between European and African cultural survivals. In the process of growing up, the girl has to come to terms not only with the emotional disorders common to adolescence but also with the cultural conflicts characterising her colonial society; she has to defend herself against a mother who is subjected to colonial logic and against a whole community which threatens her sense of self. This novel is one of the most complex and thorough analyses of the mechanisms by which race, gender and class problematics interfere in the process of identity formation. Moreover, the theme of death, which Kincaid explores more thoroughly in her latest work, is here introduced as a metaphor of the irremediable loss of childhood innocence. The conclusion of the novel, which marks the gaining of

independence for the protagonist, emphasises the tremendous but inevitable sense of void which comes with freedom.

Freedom and its accompanying emptiness are at the centre of Kincaid's third work. In *A Small Place* Kincaid moves away from fiction temporarily to discuss in detail her preoccupations with the conditions of her homeland after its attaining independence from Britain. This controversial essay is not only an attack on British colonialism and American imperialism but also, and above all, a sharp and angry criticism of the country's mismanagement by the government of post-colonial Antigua and of the misuse of freedom on the part of Antiguan people themselves. After about twenty years of voluntary exile, the author feels alienated from her homeland, a country which seems unable to reconstruct itself as a nation and make use of historical evidence to call for real social change. In this work the personal quest for freedom becomes collective as Kincaid explores the mechanisms of power involved in the formation of national identity and analyses the ways in which social conditions shape human consciousness. And the autobiographical note becomes explicit as she sees her experience as a product of the historical experience of her homeland and makes herself an advocate for her people's freedom by revealing historical lies and calling for resistance and empowerment.



Kincaid's second novel, *Lucy*, starts where *Annie John* had left off in so far as it builds on the sense of emptiness which follows the attainment of independence after a painful struggle. Annie has changed into Lucy, a young woman who starts a new life away from home and has to cope with painful memories and new power relationships threatening her sense of self. In this novel, Kincaid portrays the sharp tension between the African-Caribbean and metropolitan cultures and gives a wider perspective on the conflicts with the biological mother and the colonial motherland. The awareness of the ways in which social factors shape human consciousness arrived at in *A Small Place* translates into fiction in this work and reflects Kincaid's deeper understanding of the interrelations of power structures and personal development. In the North American setting the protagonist comes to terms with a white middle-class world which identifies her as a subaltern, a colonial object, and she finds herself caught up in a set of power relationships replicating those of her homeland: her white employer's replacing her mother's power; North American imperialism replacing British colonial power. In her struggle for independence, Lucy represents the resisting post-colonial subject opposing the assumptions which are at the root of Western culture and on which both colonialism and imperialism are founded. Like all Kincaid's endings, the ending is painful and unhappy, but, more than any

other, it points to the need to recuperate one's past. In fact, it is only through memory and the self-determination inherited from the African world her mother embodies that Lucy is able to carry on with her struggle against all forms of subjugation.

*The Autobiography of My Mother* is, as we have seen, the most enigmatic of Kincaid's works, but also the most complex and mature. It is also the most allegorical of her novels, since the story of the motherless protagonist symbolises the loss of a people whose history has been erased. Once again the central idea is the need to invent one's self out of a loss, but here the political implications are deeper, for, as the dead mother represents the exterminated Carib people, the protagonist is the post-colonial subject created out of a mixture of races and cultures, the one who carries the burden of a history imbued with death. In the brilliant characterisation of Xuela, Kincaid portrays the destructive effects of history on individual life. As we have observed, the novel challenges the dichotomous logic at the base of oppressive power structures like colonialism and patriarchy, but then it goes beyond the political allegory to acknowledge that the dialectic of power and powerlessness pervades all forms of human relationships and is even present in nature. The protagonist's refusal of mothering is proposed as an act of resistance and self-possession. While acknowledging the pervasive and inevitable presence of death in the world, the text is

an attempt to defy death by celebrating the power of sensation and the uniqueness of each individual.

Marking Kincaid's evolution towards a more metaphysical perspective on human existence, the concern with death as an all-pervading force constitutes the core of Kincaid's latest book, *My Brother*. Here, starting from a personal loss, the death of her brother from AIDS, Kincaid engages in a painful reflection on the mercilessness of human existence while she abandons herself to memory and revisits places, people and events belonging to her past; she recollects and evaluates what her life has been, but also imagines what it could have been. Observing her brother's fate, the author explores the turn her life could have taken if she hadn't removed herself physically and emotionally from the destructive and overwhelming power of her mother and her motherland. The text thus inscribes the reflection on death, illness and loss within the theme of maternal power, and ends up opposing the idea of death to that of writing, seen as a strategy of survival and as a means of escape from the homicidal maternal womb. Writing is finally envisaged as an act of resistance which saves one's life.

In this study we have attempted to uncover and develop the theory generated by Kincaid's ongoing narrative. We have argued that her fiction is strongly feminist and anti-hegemonic, that her works constitute a linear progression towards the theorisation of an

alter/native womanhood in a post-colonial geography, and that the articulation of a decolonised female subjectivity is achieved through a politics of resistance both at a physical and a metaphysical level. As we have seen, all this is worked out through parallel formulations of motherhood and colonialism, where the conflict between an overbearing mother and her self-assertive daughter may be read as a larger metaphor for the conflict between the motherland and the colony. Through memory, historical revision, and a repositioning of the outsider as a privileged cultural subject and of the borderland as a creative site, Jamaica Kincaid succeeds in building up a discourse of opposition and counterknowledge.

Kincaid once said: "I suspect that if I wasn't writing, being the person I am who has become politically conscious, then I would be throwing bombs. If I didn't have the pen, I would certainly be someone who would take up the sword" (Vorda 1991, 26). Hers is, without doubt, a work of resistance.

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