



Mother-Daughter Matrix Redefined in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of my Mother*

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Abstract

Ideas of motherland, mother's land and motherhood often assumes political implications in the works women writers of double hyphenated identity who also are victims of double displacement and marginalization. Jamaica Kincaid depicts these complex dynamics of mother-daughter matrix. This paper is an effort to locate how mother-daughter matrix acquires deep political and gender-specific implications in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Autobiography of My Mother*. The study also focuses on the symbolic journeys of daughters, first away and finally back to mothers and motherland, in these novels. Using the tools of postcolonial criticism and black feminism, the paper will further analyze how mothering, mother country, mother's land and motherland carry varied connotations in Jamaica Kincaid's works. The study is based on the assumption that Jamaica Kincaid enables her daughter-protagonists to negotiate their journey to selfhood by coming to terms with mothers and motherland.

Keywords: *displacement, marginality, mother-daughter matrix*

Full Text

Mother-daughter matrix depicted in the works of Afro Caribbean American women writers like Paule Marshall and Jamaica Kincaid has added resonance as it gets more complex in the context of issues like mother's land, motherland and mother country. Further, Motherhood and mother-daughter matrix in the works of these writers are intertwined with the dynamics of authorship, empowerment through writing and the tracheotomy of mother, mother's land and mother country. This paper is an attempt to study the mother-daughter relationship and its political redefinition in two novels of Jamaica Kincaid—*Annie John* (1985) and *Autobiography of My Mother*—in the light of feminist and postcolonial interpretations. In this context one should keep in mind the fine distinctive associations of terms like mother, mother's land, motherland and mother country. In Kincaid's works an Afro-Caribbean mother has a body and soul often colonized. Kincaid projects the Caribbean island as the mother's land; pre-colonial Africa as the motherland and colonizer's nation as the mother country.

Jamaica Kincaid's change of name from Elaine Porter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid should be taken as postcolonial gesture. This act can be taken as her rejection of the colonizer's name. Her name is also an assertion of her connection to her race and Caribbeanness. By reclaiming her mother's land 'Jamaica' in her name, she also retrieves her mother's body from the shameful colonial past.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* explores the theme mother-daughter relation. *Annie John* depicts in detail the changing relationship between a daughter and a mother. As a child, Annie's favorite pastime is to watch her mother. Later when she leaves her home, she carries with her a trunk. This trunk contains preserved items from her own childhood—her little embroidered chemise, diapers, baby bottles, first shoes, and her school certificates. These items symbolize love, care and warmth that Annie's mother had embodied when Annie was a baby. Yet, her mother's once protective hand has pushed her out of the door. Annie cannot accept this change and she views her mother's act as betrayal. Thus in *Annie John* mother becomes the focus of Annie's conflicting feelings.

When she is ten, Annie happens to see her parents in bed together. She sees her mother's hand circling on her father's back. From this moment onwards Annie considers her mother's hand as the hand of death. After this episode, her mother no longer seems the most beautiful and powerful person in the world to her but small and shrunken, and Annie John never wants to be touched by those hands again.

Once Annie feels that she is let down by her mother, she transfers her affection to the wild Red Girl. Her mother, however, disapproves of this association. It is over this girl that Annie and her mother have their first real confrontation. From here on it is open war. By the time Annie is fifteen her conflict with her mother is constant. In a heart wrenching exchange her mother accuses her, quite baselessly, of being a slut. Annie John replies without thinking, “like mother, like daughter” (p-102). There is an awful silence that follows and then her mother says, “Until this moment, in my whole life I knew without a doubt that, without any exception, I loved you best” (p-103). Kincaid here presents another yet complex mother figure. Annie’s mother indeed is strict but she can hardly hate her daughter. Like the African American mothers in Morrison or Naylor, Annie’s mother too is a symbol of maternal care and nurturance. However, she is no stereotype of African Caribbean motherhood. She embodies the paradoxes and ambiguities of mothering, which result due to colonial education. She loves Annie but she passes on a negative identity and colonial moral standards to her daughters by calling her a slut. She does not realize the fact that such demanding terms of patriarchy will not help a black girl to gain her identity and self-respect in a land suffering from the evils of colonization.

Though Annie sees herself in her mother, she learns about the inevitable in their life—the necessity of her separation from her mother. Yet she cannot let her mother separate from her. She recalls her childhood illness and her mother’s care during that time. Annie’s trunk full of her baby things is nothing but her trunk full of her sweet memories of mother’s love and care. Role of Annie’s mother can be appreciated better if one thinks about the necessity of daughter to break free from her mother to find her own self. Annie’s mother helps Annie realize the needful contradictions in mother-daughter relationship. Rightly, Annie wants to move away from her mother and decides to move to England. Annie’s mother is left in tears when Annie leaves for England. Annie John cannot bear to see her mother cry and begins to cry herself. But then her mother’s arms tighten around her, and once more she feels smothered and constrained. Annie breaks away, and then frantically waves a red handkerchief as she watches her mother become a figure in the distance. This scene presents the true painful complexity and paradoxes of motherhood and one can say that Annie’s mother is successful in helping Annie to find her necessary selfhood.

Kincaid’s novels also depict a shift in the role of nurturance from blood mothers to other mothers. This shift from mother to other mother is clearer in *Annie John*. After an agonizing quarrel with her mother, the daughter enters a mysterious sickness. All efforts to cure the girl fail. Then, Annie’s maternal grandmother Ma Chess arrives with her touch of magic and rescues her. Annie recalls this mothering/healing touch of Ma Chess:

I would lie on my side, curled up like a little comma, into which I fit...
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 other things
that my mother used to do. (Kincaid 1986, 126)

Ma Chess in *Annie John* is the most convincing picture of an 'other mother' in all of Kincaid's works. She embodies the spirit and magic of African motherhood. Kincaid depicts Ma Chess essentially as a non-European mother figure. She is presented as the African healer, a specialist in bush medicine and Caribbean Obeah woman. She is more like Gloria Naylor's Mama Day who can ward off evil. Though Ma Chess is used to European ways of living, she finds them unworthy for Afro-Caribbean communities. She is the symbol of unconflicted magical female powers that Afro-Caribbean mothers stand for. Besides, by symbolizing local wisdom, magic and healing effect, she also stands for the Afrocentric culture—the culture of the motherland. Thus, other mother and the motherland can be easily interchanged in *Annie John*.

In *Annie John*, writing is linked with magic and foremothers. By doing so Kincaid connects the daughter-narrator and her narrative to Caribbean native tradition and to the body of women's writing. Wendy Dutton in her article—"Merge and Separate: Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction"—talks about Kincaid's art of linking the act to writing to foremothers.

The idea of voodoo running in her family sets Annie up for a unique kind of matrilineage. As just mentioned, however, this matrilineage is not for the protagonist alone; the author shares in it as well. The history of women's writing moves in fits and starts and often centers on the quest for literary foremothers. (Dutton, 1989, 409)

Dutton also finds a parallel between Annie's initiation into voodoo and Kincaid's art of writing. According to Dutton, both indicate strong influence of creative foremothers. She observes:

Just as Annie learns from Ma Chess, Kincaid too allows conjure to inform her work. It has been said of Hurston and could also be said of Kincaid that she used the power of the written text itself as a form of magic. (Dutton 1989, 409)

Gilbert Yeoh reads *Annie John* as a revision colonial texts and especially of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. In an interesting study, "From Caliban to Sycorax: Revisions of The Tempest in Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John", Yeoh argues that Kincaid has empowered maternal figures in this novel by refiguring them on the line of Sycorax and by endowing them with magic. He considers the entire novel

as an effort to reclaim the maternal figure, which is lost in Western discourses and revisions of *The Tempest*:

In Kincaid's revision of *The Tempest*, Sycorax – the play's only significant maternal figure – is resurrected and reconfigured in Annie's all-powerful mother, as well as in the figure of the obeah, Ma Jolie, and her grandmother, Ma terrible powers. (Yeoh 1993, 112)

Sycorax is described as “damned witch” who possesses “Sorceries terrible” in Shakespeare's text. Kincaid subverts Shakespearean hierarchy and foregrounds, in a true postcolonial gesture, the native figure of Sycorax. She makes Ma Chess and Ma Jolie allude to Sycorax's supernatural powers. These mother figures also bring forth a network of female power. By privileging Sycorax in her novel, Kincaid also subverts the earlier postcolonial readings with Caliban at the center. The Sycorax trope in *Annie John*, thus brings along with her reverberations of postcolonial and feminist revisions of a master text.

Kincaid explores effectively the dynamics of the child-mother relationship in her novels. In her depiction of child- mother bond, mother plays a dynamic and constructive role and she helps the child to pass through the charms of maternal love and the necessary pangs of weaning. *Annie John* can yet again be cited as a good study of mother's role in daughter's journey towards selfhood and survival in a racist-patriarchal society. Patricia Ismond argues in her article, *Jamaica Kincaid: 'First They Must Be Children'* that the mother figure in *Annie John* helps her daughter to explore her own self very deeply.

Her mother, in effect, was the medium through which she entered her first world. She provided her with her earliest glimpses of the bigger world; she was the one most responsible for initiating her into the inner areas of self by arousing those complex emotions and sensitivities associated with the experience of growing up. (Ismond, 1998, 338)

Ismond also observes that mother figures in Kincaid's works impart the essential lesson of openness to their daughters. She considers the mother-daughter friction as an important stage in daughter's self-development. According to Ismond, mothers in Kincaid embody the essential paradoxes of the world and thus they signify the life in totality for the daughters.

Growing up in *Annie John* involves an openness and receptivity to all manner of emotions and impulses, creative and destructive—love, dawning cruelty, generosity, possessiveness, instincts of hubris. In other words, the child is fully in touch with the complex motions of her own nature and being. It is also the freedom of the child's natural curiosity, the intentness with which it relates to the world around it, animate and inanimate forms

alike. In Kincaid's testimony, the mother comes to contain and embody the world because of the totality with which the child lived that first relationship with her, and the struggle to be reconciled with her mother contained in embryo the struggle to be reconciled with life itself. (Ismond 1988, 340)

What one finds in *Annie John* is a condition where girl is powerless and the mother is all-powerful. By creating such a situation, Kincaid reminds the readers that mother-daughter matrix can have a political implication too. Though mother-daughter relationship and daughter's struggle for independence are not political, Kincaid tells that such issues can be conditioned by the political. Mrs. John, Annie's mother is conditioned by colonialist teachings, as stated before, and she is not aware of the damage that she is causing her daughter and their relationship. In her efforts to protect and caution her daughter, Mrs. John institutionalizes her daughter. And, Annie's revolt against this institutionalization is another subtle resistance to colonization. Annie learns that her mother represents the colonizer's ideals and her rejection of her mother is an attempt to fly the colonial yoke that binds her mother.

John's relation with Annie gets estranged when the girl reaches her pubescent years. She takes a stand of a distant, censoring mother. This stand of Mrs. John has distinct political overtone. Simone James Alexander detects colonizer's attitude to colonial female self in Mrs. John's response to a self-asserting Annie.

Similar to her daughter, who has undergone transformation from a young girl to a "young lady," Mrs. Jon, once a loving and caring mother, has been transformed into a distant, hateful other, embodying the colonizer. Like the colonizer, who colonizes the female body by regarding it as an object of shame and filth (it becomes desirable only when sexual connotations are attached to it), Mrs. John's rejection of her daughter's body is inadvertently a rejection of the black female body. Whereas Annie's body was a site of harmony during childhood, upon entering womanhood her body becomes a site of conflict. (Alexander 2001, 52)

Mrs. John not only imbibes colonizer's ideology but also that of patriarchy. She admonishes Annie of female sexuality by addressing her as "slut." This word refers to, by implication, a fixed patriarchal code of conduct for young women to become "good" wives. Simone Alexander considers the use of this word as an imposition of patriarchal rules on the daughter. She also argues that Mrs. John considers her daughter's sexuality as the enemy and she fails to make out that patriarchy and colonialism have succeeded in setting the mother against the daughter.

By imposing these rules upon her daughter, Mrs. John advocates patriarchal law and order. As such, she sheds her femaleness and if not literally then figuratively enters the asexual zone. She no longer identifies

through sexuality and femaleness with her daughter: instead, she appears to adopt a masculine, colonial role, as she colonizes her daughter's body. Female sexuality becomes an enemy, while the "real enemy," colonialism, is masked and is therefore overlooked. (Alexander 2001, 52)

Mrs. John also signifies the colonial mother, England. Like the mother country, which establishes an ambiguous relationship with the colonial subject, Mrs. John embodies both devouring and nurturing images. Annie, the daughter is enticed by the nurturing image in the mother, only to be subsequently zombified. Signifying the colonial mother country, Mrs. John takes possession of her daughter's body, mind, and soul.

Annie's mysterious illness can be considered as the signal of her identity crisis, a result of being imposed with the rules and values of the white world through the agency of black mother. Entry of grandmother Ma Chess enables an initiation of Annie into adulthood, sexuality and identity. Here, Kincaid makes a point that, as mother-daughter relationship is often mediated by colonization and patriarchy the biological mother is unable to initiate her daughter to adulthood and female sexuality. Ma Chess establishes, by curing Annie, an argument that the relationship between the grandmother and her granddaughter is more spiritual than material.

In the final section of the novel Annie leaves for the colonial mother country, England. This journey can be considered as a part of her ongoing negotiation for her identity. Although her initial feeling about her Caribbean identity and mother's land is as an "unbearable burden," Annie reestablishes her connections with her mother and Antigua in a significant recollection of seventeen years of life. This act of recalling is also an act of re-remembering to the Antiguan past and tradition. Through her memories, Annie re-familiarizes herself with her mother and her mother's land. The trunk that she carries to England holds the legacy of survival and bond between generations of women. It also asserts the point the past and Caribbean foremothers will constitute a decisive part of her future life.

The Autobiography of My Mother (1996) is about a girl who loses her mother at the time of her birth. After the death of her mother Xeula is entrusted with other women. Maternal absence causes not only psychological problems in her but also a big spiritual vacuum, which remains unfilled throughout her life.

Xeula's father, a jailer, who symbolizes colonial interests of conquer and wealth adds to her problems. He remains distant father who leaves his daughter in the care of his washerwoman. Xeula remembers the paternal abandonment distinctly:

When my mother died, leaving me a small child vulnerable to all the world, my father took me and placed me in the same woman he paid to wash his clothes. It is possible that he emphasized to her the difference between the

two bundles: one was his child, not his only child in the world but the child he had with the only woman he had married so far; the other was his soiled clothes. (Kincaid 1996, 4)

One-day, Xuela has a dream--of her mother coming to her. But this dream is indistinct though it is comforting. Even at the end of the dream, the mother figure remains elusive and mysterious:

I saw my mother come down a ladder. She wore a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels, and that was all of her that was exposed, just her heels; she came down and down, but no more of her was ever revealed. (Kincaid 1996, 18)

Again Xuela listens to her mother's song in her dream. This song brings comfort and pleasure to the daughter despite the mystery that it creates:

She sang a song, but it had no words; it was not a lullaby, it was not sentimental, not meant to calm me when my soul roiled at the harshness of life; it was only a song, but the sound of her voice was like a small treasure found in an abandoned chest, a treasure that inspires not astonishment but contentment and eternal pleasure. (Kincaid 1996, 37)

Xuela tries to reclaim her mother from the past. The past appears vague and silent. Xuela's mother is also a symbol of Carib culture--a culture, which is on the verge of extinction. By reclaiming her mother, Xuela also tries to retrieve the endangered Carib tradition. She observes with minute details the racial marks of a Carib woman when she describes her mother with a purpose. The word 'mother' in the description is synonymous to Carib tradition.

This was my mother. She wall tall (I am told – I did not know her, she died at the moment I was born); her hair was black, her fingers were long, her legs were long, her feet were long and narrow with a high instep, her face was thin and bony, her chin was narrow, her cheekbones high and wide, her lips were thin and wide, her body was thin and long; she had a natural graceful gait; she did not speak much (Kincaid 1996, 198)

With the death of her mother, Xuela goes through the feeling of maternal abandonment. She feels that physical and spiritual connections with people and places missing. As motherhood is the agency of learning and initiation, maternal absence results in troubled relation with the community in the case of Xuela. Not only does she fail to connect to people but also fails to know her female self. In Chodorowian terms, mother's absence in early childhood of Xuela results in her identify crisis.

My mother died at the moment I was born. You are not yet anything at the moment I was born. You are not yet anything at the moment you are born. This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif in my life. I cannot remember when I first knew this fact of my life, I cannot remember when I did not know this fact of my life; perhaps it was at the moment I could recognize my own hand, and then again there was never a moment that I can remember when I did not know myself completely. (Kincaid 1996, 225)

When Xuela grows up, she does not want to be a mother. Though she becomes pregnant, she aborts the baby. In fact, she becomes an expert in the art of abortion that she helps her father's daughter to terminate her pregnancy. By denying herself, the role of a mother, Xuela refuses to connect herself to a community. This decision of Xuela too is a result of the lack of proper mothering in her childhood. She is not initiated properly to belong to a race or to a nation. Xuela observes:

For years and years, each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart's and mind's decision to never to bring forth a child. I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. (Kincaid 1996, 225-226)

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* one finds the daughter/protagonist, a colonized female subject mourning the loss of her mother, her people, a culture and a language all at once. Simone Alexander argues that the protagonist's mother is a symbol of colonized land and the daughter's act of writing her mother's personal history is a political act of recalling the history of colonial oppression in Caribbean islands. Alexander observes:

In recounting her mother's history, the protagonist, Xuela Claudette Richardson, relates a history of generations: the history of her mother's people, the Caribs, and her mother's land, the Caribbean island of Dominica, and the devastation that these indigenous people and the land suffered as a result of colonial intervention on the island. Thus, Xuela's mother embodies an entire history: a people and their colonization. She is the metonym for the mother's land. (Alexander 2001, 75)

Xuela's name too has some political significance. Her name is her mother's name, whose name in turn is the colonizer's name, or the name of father who too represents colonization. Xuela becomes an adopted daughter but she rejects her adopted mothers, as she believes that adoption bears his resemblance to colonization. Since she is denied a developmental bond with her mother, Xuela is unable to connect to her surrogate mothers or to her adoptive mother's land, Dominica. Kincaid yet again works on the equation of mother as a metonym for the mother's land and states that loss of Xuela's mother signifies the loss of her

mother's land. Further, Dominica appears strange and defaced due to colonization—in its scenes of cruelty and brutality.

Colonization has deprived Xuela of not only a mother and a mother's land but also her mother's tongue. Despite being born in a land where people speak French patois or English patois, Xuela's first utterance is in plain English—a language she had never heard anyone speak. She speaks in the colonizer's tongue and she knows, to her anguish, that she is bound to the colonizer and that she has to negotiate for her identity even in terms of the language. Xuela, the colonized subject has two options here: to remain silent and let her subjectivity to be overrun, or to utilize "the language of the criminal."¹ Xuela chooses the latter and uses the narrative frame of a biography in which the personal life overlaps into the community lives to expose the brutality and injustices of colonial forces. Xuela is like Caliban; she uses the language of the criminal to curse him.

Xuela, like her mother and the other inhabitants of Dominica, has lost the right to be herself. Like the Dominicans, she too is dispossessed of identity, of a mother's land and subsequently of the mother tongue. Like them, she suffers a conflation of identities, which then prompts her to challenge the Caribbean identity. Xuela interrogates her own cultural identity and her existence. This interrogation is the result of an identity crisis.

Who was I? My mother died at the moment I was born. You are not yet anything at the moment you are born. This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif of my life. I cannot remember when I first knew this fact of my life, I cannot remember when I did not know this fact of my life; perhaps it was at the moment I could recognize my own hand, and then again there was never a moment that I can remember when I didn't know myself completely... I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so. The crime of these identities, which I know now more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear. Am I nothing, then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned. (Kincaid 1996, 226)

In spite of her deprivation, Xuela refuses to be assimilated to the hegemonizing cultural standards of the colonizer. One can see her asking herself—"Am I nothing then?" And in the same breath she refutes: "I do not believe so." This certainty in her negation comes from her symbolic return to her mother's land, Dominica and from her re-presentation of Caribbean people which have given her a redemptive Caribbean sensibility.

Kincaid has also used a novel technique in *The Autobiography of My Mother* to suggest Xuela's progressive identification with her mother and her efforts of

reclaiming her with the help of memory. Kincaid has prefixed the photograph of Xuela's mother at the beginning of each chapter. This photograph, which remain hidden or partly visible in the opening pages of earlier chapters become fully visible in the opening page of the last chapter. This can be taken as a nonverbal/ preverbal statement of the daughter/ narrator's identification her mother. This technique can also be taken as the daughter's final statement of reclaiming mother's shape, hence her body and by extension of mother's land. Thus, by reclaiming her mother, Xuela reclaims her mother's land, the mother culture, Dominican island and the island's history.

Jamaica Kincaid, thus, weaves a complex mesh of associations and overtones of mothers and mother's land in *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. The mother in mother-land in her works indicate the land. The land in turn is the metaphor of body, which is the connecting bridge. Mother country, England as it stands in *Annie John*, is the land of alienation and incomprehensible contradictions for the protagonist in Kincaid's fiction. Ironically, the protagonist is initiated to the practices and conventions of the imperialist mother country by the biological mother. Thus the mother figures assume some political significance too *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. The mother, thus, becomes the "cord"¹⁶ that at once unites and disunites the daughter with the mother's land, motherland and the mother country.

Kincaid's concern with mother imagery in *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, further, can be considered as her interest in maternal body and maternal land. Kincaid unfolds the lives of the protagonists in a fixed, and often colonized, geographical location. Colonial Antigua is the locale of Annie's formative years in *Annie John* and colonial Dominica is the geography of Xuela's entire life in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. These novels deal with the colonial past of the Caribbean islands. These novels can also be considered as strong postcolonial statements as they deal with and resist the colonization of Caribbean islands and the maternal subjects.

Kincaid also tries to decolonize the mother's land and motherland in her fictional art with the help of a collaborative narrative technique. She brings the collective experiences of Caribbean black women in *Annie John* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* to subvert the regimental colonial narrative modes. Instead of an individual protagonist relating his/her life story, these novels are based on narratives, which are generated out of blending of voices and discourses. Kincaid brings into her repertoire what Carole Boyce Davies calls "multiple lives as single texts."² For instance, in *Annie John* reside the voices of Annie's mother, of her ancestors and of healing mothers such as Ma Jolie and Ma Chess. Kincaid's text also becomes a site where colonial interests clash with the postcolonial subject.

Kincaid achieves decolonization of the authorial subject and the text not by enabling the self of the protagonist to have complete control of the narrative, but by establishing an inevitable link between the self of the narrator and the Afro-Caribbean community. This link brings what Davies describes the “collaborative story telling”³—an art in which the multiple yet distinct lives of women from varied social settings are documented in a single text. By using this narrative mode, Kincaid rolls into one through the voices and discourses of many women fiction, fantasy, facts, history, folklore and reality. Collaborative story telling is also a gesture of valorizing the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women of the past. Kincaid also uses this community voice as a technique to people the Afro-Caribbean women in her text and to enhance the cultural context of the Caribbean motherland.

Notes

1. Jamaica Kincaid uses this phrase to describe the colonizer’s tongue in *A Small Place*
2. Simone A. James Alexander considers mother figure in Afro-Caribbean Women’s novels as an inevitable umbilical cord, which unites the island daughter to the colonial mother country, in her *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.
3. See Carole Boyce Davies’ “*Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Story Production*,” p-6.

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