

## GENDER RELATIONS AND REBELLION IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROJECT

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines how the Afro-Caribbean-American writer, Jamaica Kincaid, intertwines discussions of gender relations with colonial and postcolonial rebellion in her writings. In parallel it analyzes Kincaid's non creative writing – *A Small Place* (1988) and *My Brother* (1997) – as well as her novels – *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990) and *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1996) – in order to evidence her underlying autobiographical project that distances itself from the canonical form of autobiography, by substituting a collective I for the central subject of self-representation. From her protagonists' complex relationships with their incipient sexual development, Kincaid moves to the analysis of equally complex and tempestuous relationships between the black colonized woman and her domineering partner, whether himself a Negro, or the white male colonizer who sees her as mere object of desire.

**Keywords:** Jamaica Kincaid. Self-representation. Postcolonialism. Gender relations.

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## RELAÇÕES DE GÊNERO E REBELIÃO NO PROJETO AUTOBIOGRÁFICO DE JAMAICA KINCAID

RESUMO: Este trabalho examina como a escritora afro-caribenha-americana, Jamaica Kincaid, entrelaça em sua obra a discussão das relações de gênero e a rebelião contra os efeitos do colonialismo e do pós-colonialismo. Examinam-se paralelamente seus escritos não ficcionais – *A Small Place* (1988) e *My Brother* (1997) – bem como os romances – *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990) e *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) – em busca da evidência de um projeto autobiográfico que se afasta da forma canônica da autobiografia, ao substituir o sujeito central da autorrepresentação por um Eu coletivo. Da relação complexa das protagonistas com o desenvolvimento incipiente da sexualidade, Kincaid parte para a análise das relações tempestuosas, não menos complexas, entre a mulher negra colonizada e o parceiro dominador, também negro, ou o colonizador branco, para quem constitui simples objeto de desejo.

Palavras-chave: Jamaica Kincaid. Autorrepresentação. Pós-colonialismo. Relações de gênero.

Elaine Porter Richardson was born in 1949 in an Antigua still under British rule, and on turning sixteen she left her homeland to work as an au pair in the United States. From 1965 to 1973, when she had her name changed to Jamaica Kincaid, she took several courses at different levels and started writing as freelance to newspapers and magazines until she was invited to join the staff of *The New Yorker*. Her first publications *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *Annie John* (1985) were awarded prizes and distinctions.

In an evident parallel pattern, *Annie John's* title-character leaves Antigua and, in Kincaid's next novel, *Lucy* (1990), seems to reappear as the same character in New York, under the name of Lucy, keeping the same conflictual relationship with a female figure comes across as the same mother. The change of name draws a parallel with sixteen-year-old Elaine Porter Richardson's paradoxical experience of rejection and allegiance: the name *Jamaica* is a

reminder of the author's origins who, nevertheless, extends the mother-daughter antagonism to her forthcoming books. The second name *Kincaid* was chosen because "it matched the first one", as she explains in her interview to F. Birbalsingh (1996, p. 140).

The ambivalent love-hate relationship with her native Caribbean culture is central to Kincaid's fiction, whose female protagonists rebel against the dominion of the Other that oppresses the female subject in post-colonial patriarchal societies. Thus, Kincaid's fictional world is built around the experiences of growing up in the post-colonial world of Antigua conceptually categorized as *alienated majority*, i.e., the locus where various indigenous groups in contact have been displaced from their ancestral region and cut off from the access to their communities of origin (HOGAN, 2000, p. 11). Throughout her work the author mourns the aftermath of the cruel experience that has turned millions of people – of whom she is just one – into "orphans: no motherland, no fatherland, no gods, no mounds of earth for holy ground, (...) and worst and most painful of all, no tongue" (KINCAID, 1988, p. 31).

The basic premise of colonialism is the ever present belief in racial and cultural superiority, as well as the need to preserve the differences (and distance) between colonizers and colonized. In practice, however, that was not what happened. On the contrary, as Ania Loomba observes "colonialism furnished the impetus to numberless intellectual, discursive and gender crossings" (1998, p. 174). Furthermore, neither colonizers nor colonized managed to return to an entirety existing previously to the colonial encounter. "There is no such thing as an uncontaminated white or European culture; or, on the other hand, a stable and essential black identity that we may link to a specific place of origin" (p. 176).

The major part of critical commentaries on Jamaica Kincaid's work focus on her political and social concerns. The author would have broken up with every parameter of the Western male canon, a notion that meets with Harold Bloom's disagreement. A great admirer of the literary qualities of Kincaid's prose, the famous critic says: "For that to be true, Kincaid's audience would have to be made up solely of academic feminists and post-colonial rebels" (BLOOM, 1998, p. 1). In our view, however, a just appreciation of Kincaid's literature should not bypass considerations about her explicit defense of the female colonized subject, in the rebellious discourse of someone who lived in the flesh the hardships of colonialism.

The rebellious tone pervades her writings. Her garden in Vermont

reminds her both of the beautiful native flowers of Antigua, and of her pride of coming from the Western Indies, simply because those places are beautiful. “People who have nothing to be proud of either deny the lack of beauty of their place of origin or simply appropriate the beauty belonging to someone else” (2000, p. 89). Naming things is but the first step towards seizing them. That is what the first conquerors do, who take possession of the natural beauty and resources of the invaded lands. The dahlias that Kincaid grows in her garden owe their name to the Swedish botanist Andréas Dahl, who seized the beauty of the flower totally oblivious to its native name. Likely complaints resound throughout Kincaid’s books.

Nothing concerning conquered peoples is of any importance unless the conqueror judges it to be so. For universal history, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. It never occurred to him that this world had physical and spiritual existence before he had any idea of its existence. Should I call history what happened to this world and to others like it? Which started in 1492 and hasn’t finished yet? What does history mean to someone like me? (2000, p. 114)

The garden represents Kincaid's artistic vision, which goes far beyond the factual piece of land she cultivates or the abstract concept of gardening, seeking a dialogue with the motives of colonial domination that shaped her life as a writer. In fact, Kincaid's compilation of an inventory of her ego, both in changing her name and in her autobiographical writings, is simultaneously a creative and performative act that is fractured or spread over time. The totality of Jamaica Kincaid's work makes up an extensive autobiography, which challenges the limits of representativeness, in which the discourse that purports to describe the story of an “I” has an evident fictional character: autobiographies are not simple chronicles of facts, but the ingenious manipulation of details and events that acquire factual status during the construction of a particular persona as the subject of the account.

The focus on “(one’s) individual life, in particular the story of a personality” that defines autobiography, according to Philippe Lejeune (2008), acquires peculiar contours in Jamaica Kincaid’s work. The autobiographical characteristics of her work as a whole, however, have not been a major consideration of critics, who have emphasized mostly its central mother-daughter conflict and its significance as a symbol for the broader colonizer-colonized, metropolis-colony dissension. Moira Ferguson’s reference to Kincaid’s *Annie John*, *A Small Place* and

*Lucy* as components of a “fictional/semi-autobiographical saga” (1998, p. 51) illustrates such attitude: critics acknowledge her writings as a reworking of personal experiences, but do not make this aspect their predominant analytical approach.

In a contrary attitude, Leigh Gilmore, in her study of unconventional stories of self-representation, which deals with a subject’s traumatic experiences, explores how these writers challenge the very boundaries of autobiography, by expanding the duration of their testimonies in time and by establishing continuous relationships with historical and familial issues. Thus, the intertwining of individual and collective representation in Kincaid’s work, demonstrates, according to Gilmore, “the close relation between representing yourself and participating in a representative structure in which one may stand for many” (2001, p. 19).

For Paul Eakin (1999), autobiography is the most slippery of literary genres: the question comes down to how to determine the boundaries between literary creation and the “retrospective narrative in prose that a real person makes of his (her) own existence when focusing especially on one’s individual life, particularly the history of one’s own personality”, according to the definition proposed by Philippe Lejeune (2008), in his well-known essay “The Autobiographical Pact.”

The mere confirmation of the historicity of the referent – an individual identified by a name – would, however, set aside considerations about the nature of this 'real person'. In contrast, Eakin quotes Michael Sprinkler, for whom autobiography is a fundamentally unstable, fluid, boundless locale where “concepts of subject, self, and author blend in the act of producing a text” (p. 44).

As a result, despite the referential claims (the historically real name shared by the protagonist, the narrator, and the author of the text), the figure of self remains a creature of fiction. Without an “I” to perform actions, to possess feelings and qualities, the possibility of “having” a story of one’s existence to tell simply evaporates. The subject of autobiography is a fiction.

Faced with the conceptual impasse between the referentiality of the autobiographical text and the fictional character of its subject, Eakin goes on to ask what such texts teach us about the ways in which individuals in a given culture experience the sense of self. His approach to the nature and sources of identity that autobiographers claim is based on experience. Although there is a legitimate sense in which autobiographies attest to the experience of selfhood, this testimony is necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed (EAKIN, 1999, p. 2-7). Hence

the preference of the peripheral subject, female in this case, for the autobiographical genre.

The conceptual impasse extends to the field of gender criticism, where the use of the terms sex, gender, and sexuality, as well as the analytical relationships between them are problematic. Most scholars wonder what differences separate gender studies from feminist studies in the academy. For Eve Sedgwick, for example, the premise that gender studies can be separated from the analysis and critique of gender inequality, oppression, and struggle (i.e, some form of feminism) “ignores among other things the fact that gender analysis in itself became possible only under the pressure of more politically aggressive feminist claims”(1998, p. 172). Jamaica Kincaid is not a feminist, but reading her work proves that there is no stauncher advocate for women's rights, or rather, the individual's own rights to freedom of action.

Kincaid's first published work, *At the Bottom of the River*, introduces the first-person narrator/protagonist and her conflicts with the overpowering presence of a domineering mother who sets down rules, chastises improper behavior, gives advice, and imposes restraint on the girl's freedom:

(...) this is how you grow okra – far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen. Make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; 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; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles – you are not a boy, you know; 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; (. . . ) this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; (. . . ) this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; (KINCAID, 1992, p. 4-5)

The mocking tone of the monologue that exposes the protagonist's rebellion against the litany of orders and indictments sets the character of the narrative voice that will be heard again in *Annie John*, *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My*

*Mother*. The protagonist's passionate outburst in the first story in the book, "Girl", contains in embryo the issues that form the gist of our analysis: the striving for individual identity against the odds of domination be it the imposition of rules in the domestic scene or, in broader terms, in the colonizer-colonized political context. Mockery of an authority that attempts to impose restrictions on sexual behavior underlies the ampler imperialist attempt to enslave the bodies of the colonized. Thus, Annie John's budding sexuality is the target of her enraged mother, who accuses her daughter of having behaved like a slut in an occasional encounter with some boys:

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. (KINCAID, 1985, p. 102)

The seeming irrationality of the mother's charges draws a violent response from Annie who, "as if to save herself," turns to her mother and says, "Well, like father like son, like mother, like daughter" (KINCAID, 1985, p. 102). This is the critical point of the severance process related by the narrator/protagonist from the beginning of the book. In the sequence, after a period of severe illness, Annie leaves for her exile in England.

From domestic instructions, "Girl" begins to reproduce the voice of the mother who dictates rules of conduct for the survival of women, in the post-colonial context of subalternization of the female subject. Sexuality is almost immediately related to vagrancy, possibly because the mother is afraid of her daughter's becoming prey to pimps (*deck rats*).

The paradoxes in the Caribbean mother's speech, determined to see her daughter rise in social class, are striking: sexuality is accepted, even recommended, if the man is of respectable class; the girl is instructed to use gimmicks (this is how a man is provoked) to get results from an act that at the same time is shown to be shameful.

It is a mother's duty, in a hybrid community, to teach her daughter not only to be a good housewife, to have good manners, to be always immaculately clean, but also to make her aware of European norms of behavior. The girl should not sing *benna* (African folk songs) in Sunday school, which is incompatible with Christian teachings.

The physical aspect of her passage into adolescence is the main point of contention between Annie and her mother, who in her anxiety to preserve her daughter's chastity reproduces the stereotypical attitude of the colonizer towards women's sexuality, trying to dominate through rigid education the excesses of the tropics. Both Annie John's and Lucy's conceptions of the body, both their own and the bodies of others, have to do with colonial domination and sexuality.

The breaking away from the mother's domination operates initially at the physical level. Annie is able to find some pleasure in her "so recently much-hated body" which became a plus as she excelled at games and was named captain of a volleyball team.

In her relationship with an American young man in *Lucy*, the protagonist is aware she is merely seeking physical pleasure with no thoughts of a bonding relationship, like the one she used to have with her mother: "I was only half a year free of almost unbreakable bonds, and it was not in my heart to make new ones" (KINCAID, 1990, p.71). At nineteen and working as an au-pair for a middle class American family, Lucy continues Annie John's rebellious search for her own self, so as to avoid being made into an echo of her own mother: "I didn't know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone" (KINCAID, 1990, p. 36).

In *Lucy*, as well as in *Annie John*, the protagonist lives a moment of identification following a confrontation with the mother. It occurs when Lucy presses her mother to tell her why she had been named Lucy: "I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived". Lucy's feelings evoke Annie's response to her "like mother, like daughter" confrontation, itself a scene about naming and identity. But the scene ends differently. Lucy does not fall ill; instead she becomes aware of her own identity: "I was transformed from failure to triumph," she insists. "It was the moment I knew who I was . . . whenever I saw my name I always reached out to give it a strong embrace" (KINCAID, 1990, p. 152-153). Lucy thus articulates a form of post-colonial resistance, through the affirmation of an independent identity that she has reached against powerful odds.

The same system of British education that erased and colonized indigenous history attempted to erase female sexuality and to control the female body; the mother is merely the innocent herald of Victorian propriety – the echoes of the mother's voice in the short story "Girl", "this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to throw away a child before it even becomes a child" resound throughout the ensuing novels. Thus under the pretext of strengthening the

womb, the mother initiates her young daughter into the secrets of the herbs that would bring on a reluctant missing period, though both mother and daughter pretend to ignore that a weak womb was not the cause. “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 to each other at the end” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 70). Motherless Xuela, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, resorts to the wisdom of an elderly woman “to throw away a child”. Paradoxically, the refusal of Xuela – who would represent Kincaid’s fictional mother – to become a mother presupposes the negation of Kincaid’s very existence in the “real world”.

In an extension of the girl-mother dispute for autonomy and control, the issue of marbles reappears in the novel *Annie John* (1985) specifically as a matter of gender. “I’m so glad you’re not one of those girls who like to play marbles” (p. 61) declares her mother, oblivious to the fact that Annie hides marbles – beautiful objects of desire and exchange – under the bed and invents school assignments so as to be able to leave home and play with boys. Annie’s complex relationship with the development of sexuality comes to a head in the above-mentioned dispute with her mother, who calls her a “slut” when she surprises the girl engaged in innocent conversation with a boy on the way back from school.

Kincaid admits that by seeking to understand the relationship between her fictional creatures – mother and daughter – and by observing the mother’s power and eventually her declining authority, she was led to a broader view of the colony-metropolis relationship. She confesses that consciously she must have regarded her personal relationship as a sort of prototype of the larger social situation she had witnessed (KINCAID, quoted in BIRBALSINGH, 1996, p. 144).

It’s amazing how Kincaid identifies with the shout of freedom that concludes the fictional life stories of Annie John and Lucy. Her non-conformism stands out as she confronts difficult situations fearlessly and rejects every kind of categorization. She refuses to be included in critical or literary traditions, to be classified as West Indian, feminist, or postcolonial and states that “she cannot stand to be in a group of any kind or school whatever” (KINCAID, quoted in CUDJOE 1997, 221).

Admittedly, Kincaid has no active part in any of these groups, but it is impossible to deny the marks of feminist thought, nor the libel against the abject position of the female postcolonial subject both in her literary work and in her statements to interviewers.

In fact, feminist perspectives have been part of postcolonial studies since their inception, in view of the common concerns of the two movements. The

characterization of all native and colonized peoples as incapable of self-government in the predominant colonial discourses is similar to the situation of women in patriarchal societies. In the context of colonialism, where the female subject is doubly colonized by virtue of sex and subjection to the hegemonic power of the white/black man, the plight of women's situation inspires passionate reactions in the literature written by women, whether or not feminists.

In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, Kincaid admits, for example, that *Annie John* corresponds to some extent to her life, but is also “faithful to other things, a path that [her] life has not taken” (BIRBALSINGH, 1996, p. 138). The third chapter of the book offers clues to the comprehension of Kincaid’s view of autobiographical writing. One of the twelve-year-old girl’s first school assignments is writing an autobiographical essay to be read in front of the whole class. Annie describes the previously idyllic relationship between her and her mother in order to cover up their current state of conflict, after the pre-Oedipal unity of the early chapters is broken. The passage serves as a metaphor for the novel as a whole, in which lies must enter the autobiography when it is intended for an audience.

The last part wasn't quite a lie. That's what would have happened in the old days (...) I didn't have the courage to show my mother in an unfavorable light in front of people who barely knew her. But the truth was I didn't have the courage to show others that I had fallen out of favor with my mother. (KINCAID, 1985, p. 45)

In building Annie's life story, Kincaid explores the limits of a child's perspective. Instead of focusing on childhood from an adult’s point of view – as in conventional autobiographies – she plunges the reader into a child’s immature and mysterious perspective about love, death, sex, history and the formation of individual identity. In the construction of her female characters, Jamaica Kincaid, like other writers from ethnic minorities, returns to the mother figure to define her life, her history and her identity.

In addition to the strong matrilineal bond, the aspect of Caribbean culture that prepares the young woman for an independent life is the storytelling tradition, which emphasizes the importance of orality in preserving the identity of groups which do not have access to their home culture, like the alienated majority of the Caribbean. In the role of *griot*, the African storyteller, it is the mother who weaves Annie's life fabric. Illustrative is the recurring ritual of examining the contents of the chest in which Annie's baby clothes were stored. The mother would lift one piece at a time, recreating the girl's past with vivid accounts of what each item meant: baptism clothing, baby bottles, school report cards, the first notebook,

school awards — symbols of the girl she used to be and of the woman she would become.

Sometimes I knew the story firsthand because I remembered it well; sometimes what she told had happened when I was too young to know things; Sometimes before I was born. Whatever the case, I knew exactly what she was going to say, because I had heard the stories many times but never tired of it. (KINCAID, 1985, p. 21)

Narratives make the past as real as the present. Annie's mother's crucial role in recreating the past and her influence on the writing of the girl's memories is repeated in Jamaica Kincaid's development of the art of writing: "The way I became a writer was that my mother wrote my life for me, and told my life to me" (KINCAID, quoted in PERRY, 1998, p. 134).

The concepts of the mother as the source of life – nourishing, sustaining, cherishing and tutoring – of motherland and of writing form an indissoluble triad, which is essential for the nurturance of the child character and for the development of her identity in the traumatic passage to adolescence, when the mother-daughter conflict deepens.

From the child's perspective, all the acts of the mother, such as the prohibition of participating in boys' games, the destruction of the books Annie had bought with stolen money and hidden under the house take on epic proportions: "My mother would kill me if she had the opportunity. And I would kill my mother if I had the courage" (KINCAID, 1985, p. 89). This chorus, which accompanies the character's dream journeys along broad shaded paths of lush vegetation, represents the epitome of the mother-daughter conflict, which ultimately leads to exile. For Annie, this is a permanent separation from her parents as well as from everything she had been or done before.

Everything I would do that morning until I reached the ship that would take me to England would be for the last time, for I had decided that no matter what happened my path would follow only one direction: away from home, from my mother, from my father, from the eternally blue sky, from the eternally hot sun, from people who said to me, "This happened when your mother was pregnant with you." (KINCAID, 1985, p. 133-34)

The character's passionate outburst portrays Kincaid's contradictory and paradoxical relationship with the mother and father entities, associated in her

writing in the mother-paradise dyad, not the Caribbean made up as a tourist paradise, but the place of origin of “a kind of benign, wonderful, innocent moment that you share with that great powerful being who, as you discover, will never set you free” (KINCAID, quoted in BIRBALSINGH, 1996, p. 147).

Hence, the supposedly paradisiacal Caribbean is not Kincaid's source of inspiration. In *A Small Place*, in a tone of deep revolt, the author draws a caustic profile of the deficiencies and deformities of her homeland, the cruel balance of centuries of English colonial rule, which robbed them of their language, land, name and traditions (KINCAID, 2000b, p. 31).

Her character Annie also rebels against the effects of colonization, but less aggressively if compared to her rebellious attitudes towards her mother. The illustrative incident occurs at school during a history class when Annie writes under the portrait of a melancholy Columbus, who fell in disgrace with his royal protectors. "The great man can no longer stand up and carry on." As punishment, the girl is ordered to copy two chapters of *Paradise Lost*, exemplary punishment, which plunges her into the colonizer's literature. The racism that is part of life in the West Indies, the revolt and the hatred it originated, are evident in the narrator's memories:

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. But we, the descendants of the slaves, knew quite well what had really happened, and I was sure that if our ancestors had gone from Africa do Europe and come upon people living there, they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans on first seeing them, and said, “How nice,” and then gone home to tell their friends about it. (KINCAID, 1985, p. 76)

The suppressed subtexts in the above passage come to light in Kincaid's virulent accusations against the British ruler:

You loved knowledge and wherever you went you built a school, a library (yes, and in both places they distorted or erased my story to glorify yours) ... If you saw the old library ... the beauty of us sitting there like the faithful at the communion table,

sharing, over and over, the legend of how we find you, your rights to do the things you have done to us, how beautiful you were, are, and always will be ... (KINCAID, 2000, p. 36, 42)

Belonging to two different worlds creates in Kincaid's protagonists a conflict of identities that strikes the author herself, in the attempt to determine who her reading audience is: English-speaking white readers who would have little interest in her writing – because of her colonial origin, as the daughter of poor peasants – or her countrymen from Antigua, from where she was informally banned in 1985 by opponents of her offensive writing. In Kincaid's words: "As I write, I am less and less interested in the approval of the first world, and as I have never had the approval of the world I come from, I am not sure where I am. I am once again an exile" (KINCAID, quoted in FERGUSON, 1998, p. 51).

The word exile is central to the autobiographical saga created by Kincaid, which continues in *Lucy*, whose protagonist adds a new layer to the hybrid narrative of autobiography and novel by telling her own story, which rewrites familiar themes. Annie John's painful protest on parting from motherland and family still rings in the reader's ears. Rebelliousness and the desire to sever every link sound hollow against the mother's words that "lacerate her skin": "No matter what you do or where you go, I will always be your mother and this will always be your home"(KINCAID, 1985, p. 147). It is one more obstacle that the young person must overcome on the path to maturity.

Annie's dream journeys in the novel come to fruition in the effective exile that leads her to England – the path of most Caribbean people seeking an identity – whereas Lucy, in a radical rupture, replaces the metropolis, and the consequent view of the colonial subject as a stereotype of submission and native exoticism, by means of exile in the United States, where, according to Kincaid, it is possible to "invent a voice and see it accepted as yours ", arousing interest "not for who you are, but for what you have to say" (KINCAID, quoted in BIRBALSINGH, 1996, p.142).

Lucy's reaction to the United States as a symbol of the new is ambiguous: the feeling of strangeness causes discomfort, much like the new clothes she wears. Live, the places that used to populate her dreams as "lifeboats of her soul" seem "ordinary, dirty, and worn by so many people in and out of real life" (KINCAID, 1990, p. 4-5). The pale winter sun is not warming and she longs for the heat of

the tropics. For the first time in her life, she feels cold outside and inside. It annoys her that people she eventually comes to meet should see the Caribbean simply as a place to have fun, in spite of the fact that she has no intention of returning to a place that suffocates her. Geographical separation can break physical links, but the deep liaison between Lucy and her past cannot be undone: “I thought that by merely changing places I would be forever free from the things I despised most. But it would not be so. With each passing day, I saw the same in everything and the present taking shape – the shape of the past” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 90).

The novel *Lucy* unfolds in Manhattan in the 1960s – shortly before Antigua's partial independence in 1967 – where Lucy arrives to work as an au pair with an upper-middle-class American family. Thus, the protagonist is surrounded almost exclusively by whites. Although Lucy does not experience obvious manifestations of racism, Kincaid makes clear the protagonist's cultural perceptiveness by employing the strategy of inversion: Lucy is both fetishized –everyone seeks to be pleasing to her – and treated with condescension in a mockery of the old hierarchical relations between colonizer and colonized. Both Lucy's bosses and family friends pretend to ignore the race and class differences that are part of her life. Lucy is not deceived by this procedure, although she does not state it openly, and from the beginning, consciously or not, is dedicated to undermining all kinds of authority and asserting her right to contest.

Her aggressive behavior against Mariah, the young American mistress, marks the reaction not only against maternal authority, –“Sometimes I loved Mariah because she reminded me of my mother. Sometimes I didn't love Mariah because she reminded me of my mother” (1990, p. 58) – but against the patronizing paternalism of the hegemonic class. Mariah is kind, understanding, sincere and even naive in her attempts to approach Lucy. The young woman's revelation that she descends from Indians, “as if she announced possession of a trophy,” is naive. Lucy's reaction is negative. She is unable to understand why should the victor want to side up with the defeated.

She equally rejects Mariah's advice to write to her mother, whose letters the girl had left unopened. The conquest of maturity and knowledge becomes increasingly elusive for Lucy. The mother figure still stands in the way: “I came to the conclusion that my mother's love for me was only meant to make me an echo of herself, but I would rather be dead than just echo someone” (1990, p. 36). Therefore, the journey towards self is hampered by the impossibility of breaking

the inexorable connection with the mother. That her mother is no other but an extension of herself is Lucy's repeated assertion, which gives voice to her most persistent fear:

My background was my mother: I listened to her voice, and she spoke to me not in English or the French patois she sometimes used, or in any language that needed the help of language; she spoke to me in a language any woman would understand. And there was no denying what I was – woman. It was to die of laughter; I had spent so much time saying I didn't want to be like my mother, who understood nothing of the story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother. (KINCAID, 1990, p. 90)

Awareness of the impossibility of breaking with the past is preceded by cruel intimate conflict in the protagonist's recurrent attempts to move away from the mother-motherland dyad which allots women a servile role – housewife or, at best, nurse – while assigning illustrious careers to the sons. The narrative voice recalls that Lucy felt a “sword cut through her heart” whenever she realized that the mother's tears of pride were reserved to her sons' accomplishments, whereas “there was no parallel scenario in which she saw me, the only offshoot identical to her” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 130). Proud and passionate now that she had the life she had always wanted “far from my family, in a place where no one knew much about me; hardly anyone even knew my name, and I was more or less free to come and go at ease” (p. 158) Lucy can't find within her the happiness she had expected.

The ambiguous position regarding identity, homeland and family also prevails in Kincaid's life: “I am so vulnerable to the needs of my family that I occasionally turn away from them. I don't write, I don't visit, I don't lie, I don't deny, I just walk away”, she writes in the memoir *My Brother* (1997b, p. 20). On the other hand, she rushes to the bedside of her brother, whom she had not seen since the age of three, who is dying of AIDS.

As noted, Kincaid's work reconfigures the literary imperatives of intertextuality as instead of placing her work in dialogue with that of other authors she establishes cross-references among her own texts. It is in the taxonomic organization of this self-inventory and of the connections that emerge between its fictional and nonfictional voices that Kincaid forces the limits of autobiography and memory. Kincaid's work illustrates Paul Eakin's

assertion about the writing of autobiography as “an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation in which acts of self-narrativity play a major role” (1999, p. 101).

The process of identity formation has not yet ended for Jamaica Kincaid. Recalling her professional trajectory: upon arrival in the United States, she was a freelance reporter for several magazines, devoted herself to photography, and was a staff member of *The New Yorker*, as mentioned before. She married Allen Shaw, the editor’s son, had two children, and divorced her husband some time later. Her conversion to Judaism is illustrative of her search for new horizons.

Extremely conscious of her freedom of thought, she refuses to regard her conversion as identifying: “I do not write about being black, or belonging to Judaism, because I do not believe in this kind of group identity. I never integrated being from Antigua, black, female, or Jewish. This should not stop me from looking at other people's suffering. I do not believe I converted to Judaism to separate Jewish suffering from non-Jewish suffering” (KINCAID, quoted in LEV ARI, 2003). Kincaid is deeply sincere and aware of the choices she makes without worrying about the suffering or criticism she may bring upon herself.

Her latest novels *Mr. Potter* (2002) and *See Now Then* (2005) follow the same path Kincaid established as her own: plots that include familiar names and situations, such as a female writer who returns to Antigua to write the story of her father, or an ugly divorce that ends the domestic idyll of a New England family. In spite of Kincaid’s repeated assertions that her novels are not autobiographical, both stories bear striking resemblances to her personal experiences.

We see Kincaid’s work as revolving around a central core – the need to break the obsessive relationship with a mother figure both as a source of love, and as an object of repudiation for symbolizing power, authority and domination, and working as well as a metaphor for mother-country. Her whole fictional or non-fictional literary output constitutes, in our view, a sole story that constantly returns to the raw material of self in order to conclude how that self can be recreated. Towards maturity, Annie John, transmuted in Lucy, achieves her ideal of freedom, even if accompanied by renunciation and suffering, in a clear parallel to the path of her creator, whose lyricism translates the ideal of ceaseless pursuit of freedom and perfection:

I had no name for the thing I had become, so new was it to me, except that I did not exist in pain or pleasure, or east or west, or up or down, or past or present or future, or real, or not real. I stood as if I were a prism, many-trusted and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that could never be destroyed. (KINCAID, 1985, p. 80)

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