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In English Literature**

**A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF JAMAICA KINCAID'S *THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER***

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

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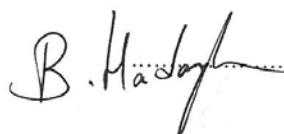
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ABSTRACT

A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF JAMAICA KINCAID'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER*

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Caribbean literature exposes a history of dispossession, exploitation and oppression which has been neglected and often deliberately misinterpreted. In this thesis the destructive effects of colonization and slavery in Jamaica Kincaid's 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* are scrutinized thoroughly. The main objective of this research is to examine Jamaica Kincaid's novel within the framework of postcolonial studies, in the light of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon's theories on the psychology of colonialism. In his book *The colonizer and The Colonized*, Albert Memmi describes his purpose as having been to totally reproduce the portraits of the two protagonists of the colonial drama and the relationship which attaches them. He believes that it is not enough to simply focus on the colonized; instead, the psychological problems experienced by the colonized specifically in the context of their relationship with the colonizers must be observed. Frantz Fanon argues that colonialism had brought together two opposing social orders that were doomed to coexist in everlasting tension; the colonizer's and the colonized's; these tensions cause the moral and spiritual deformity of an ideological system based on racism, oppression, and exploitation. In contrast to Fanon, Kincaid regards *resistance* and liberation in a quite different perspective. As a substitute to Fanon's method of transcending the opposition between colonizer and colonized, Xuela Claudette Richardson chooses and prefers self-love. Instead of attempting to build a "new woman", Xuela refuses to accept the colonizer's views of those like her that lead to self-destruction and self-hatred. Instead, in order to survive, she confidently chooses self-love, albeit an almost grotesque and obsessive one. She believes that it is better than mimicry and *self-hatred*. Despite the fact that Xuela experiences loss, resentment and contempt throughout her life, she still manages to survive. This research finds out that colonization and slavery have negative impact on both the colonizer and the colonized.

Keywords: Caribbean Literature, Postcolonial Studies, The Psychology of Colonialism, Resistance, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

Caribbean literature sheds light on a history of dispossession, exploitation and oppression which has been neglected, partially told, or (often intentionally) misinterpreted. In fact, most Western literary productions and historical accounts represent the Caribbean, from Columbus's arrival in 1492 to the neo-imperialist interferences of the West in the present (a process including the annihilation of the native population, the relocation of enslaved Africans, 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 civilization.

According to the Western collective imagination, the Caribbean is a primitive paradise given by God to the white man to fulfill 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 civilizing mission of Western philanthropism" (Sabrina Brancato 12). The twentieth century's Caribbean literature challenges the hegemony of Western texts and proposes alter/native versions of history, which undermine the subject vs. object hierarchical opposition and give voice to the silenced Other.

The Autobiography of my Mother is narrated by the 70-year-old protagonist, Xuela Claudette Richardson who narrates her life story from the beginning; a vulnerable motherless child, abandoned by her father in her early childhood and left in the hands of first, an insensitive laundress Ma Eunice Paul, and then a cruel stepmother who even tries to kill her. The novel has been lauded by many critics and received a Lannan Literary award for excellence in fiction. Xuela does not yield to male devaluation and coercion of women. Kincaid's texts are filled with

depictions of maltreatment of Caribbean colonials which she uses to inform the reader of historical atrocities of half a millennium.

2. The Significance of the Study

Jamaica Kincaid is an influential figure in the literary world today and her works deeply investigate contemporary social, psychological, domestic, and political domains. Kincaid's writing has been misinterpreted as selfish or a hopeless last resort. This is because she refuses to negotiate community or national space. According to the researcher the application of Frantz Fanon's theories and other psychological approaches to colonization to Kincaid's novel is not only illuminating and beneficial in the realm of colonial and postcolonial studies, but also its contribution to the field is highly in vogue in today's academia.

Focusing on a single novelist and putting her within a specific theoretical framework allows a thorough analysis of the novel as well as the applied theories, indicating valuable points as the text and the analysis move on together. The significance and novelty of the present study is embedded in its analysis of "resistance" in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* which is somehow different from Fanon's treatment of it. Unlike Fanon's suggested kind of resistance which is exerting violence "as a means of reconstructing human relations, opening the way for a new society that could give birth to a "new man"" (Parvasini-Gebert 162), Kincaid's "new man" is of a distinct type. Kincaid's resistance, depicted in the novel, emerges from individual independence of any sort.

3. The Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this research is to examine Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother*, within the framework of postcolonial studies, in the light of mainly Frantz Fanon's

theories brought in *Black Skin, White Masks* on the psychology of colonialism. The destructive effects of colonialism and their outcome on both the colonizer and the colonized will be scrutinized thoroughly. It is crucial to examine that what Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* suggests about the social and psychological effects of colonialism on the colonizers and primarily on the colonized and how Xuela the protagonist, manages to survive psychologically and achieve independence and self-confidence. Furthermore, the problems of class division, corruption and colonial education as they are revealed in the characterization of main characters will be analyzed likewise.

4. Methodology

This research aims at applying postcolonial theories to Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* in order to provide answers to the questions posed by the researcher earlier. Frantz Fanon's works are without doubt, the most well-known of psychological attempts to theorize the effects of colonialism. Although the present study draws mainly upon his *Black Skin, White Masks (Peau noire, masques blancs, 1952)* as its central theoretical framework, it also benefits from related theories by Albert Memmi. Examples, notions and points might be taken from Kincaid's other works where necessary.

Black Skin, White Masks by Frantz Fanon was the first book to explore the psychology of colonialism. On the words of Ziauddin Sardar, the book "examines how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors" (Fanon x). Fanon emphasizes heavily the root of what he calls an inferiority complex, which he declares is a massive psycho-existential complex derived from the juxtaposition of the black and white races (Fanon xvi).

The Wretched of the Earth is a psychiatric and psychological analysis of the dehumanizing effects of colonization upon the individual man and woman. Fanon discusses how the use of language (vocabulary) is applied to the establishment of imperialist identities, such as *colonizer* and *colonized* in order to teach and psychologically shape the native and the colonist into their respective roles as *slave* and *master*.

The emphasis on examining the relationship between colonizer and colonized is also taken up by the Tunisian critic Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) in which Memmi describes his purpose as having been to "reproduce, completely and authentically, the portraits of the two protagonists of the colonial drama and the relationship which binds them" (qtd. in Ward 193). He assumes that it is not sufficient to simply focus on the colonized; instead, we need to observe the psychological problems experienced by the colonized particularly *in the context of* their relationship with the colonizers.

5. Literature Review

In his dissertation, "Jamaica Kincaid: A Multi-Dimensional Resistance to Colonialism," (2012) Leon E. Stennis argues that colonialism, or its impact, as a relation of power is threaded through the related themes of gender, the environment, and global capitalism in Jamaica Kincaid's work – in other words he is interested in how the intersection of these themes heightens Kincaid's critique of the impact of colonialism on the people of Antigua and the Anglophone African Caribbean. By colonialism or its impact, he refers to the structural imposition explicitly or implicitly of economic, cultural, and political, control of the people of Antigua. The major contribution of his study to the field is the identification, through a postcolonial materialist feminist theory framework, of the intersections of these themes and how

that makes clearer many of the subtleties that often leave vague the impact of colonialism on Antigua and the Caribbean.

Louise Linder in an article titled "My mother died at the moment I was born" Mother and Daughter in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (2011) argues that the relationship, or rather lack of relationship with her mother, is what defines Xuela and makes her into an independent, anti-social and a very powerful woman. She discusses and argues that the mother-daughter relationship is a symbol of history and colonialism in the West Indies. The main question Linder is concerned with in the essay is thus the relationship between mother and daughter. In this case, the relationship between Xuela and her mother does not really exist, since she has never even seen her mother's face. Nevertheless, it has exerted a heavy influence on her life.

April Pelt in her article "Weary of our own legacies": Rethinking Jane Eyre's Inheritance through Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (2011) suggests that Kincaid's treatment of inheritance in *The Autobiography of my Mother* is one point of departure from Jane Eyre. Brontë's and Kincaid's protagonists both raise moral issues about the transmission of property from one generation to the next, but only Xuela seems concerned with the origins of mentioned property. Furthermore, while Brontë uses "inheritance" in its most literal sense, Kincaid extends the scope of "inheritance" to include the violent historical and cultural forces that helped shape Xuela's ancestors and her island (75). Pelt continues that Kincaid calls attention to the ways in which Jane's and Xuela's "legacies" are intertwined: the same economic and legal systems that made it possible for Bertha Mason's family to accumulate a fortune, also led to the forced migration and enslavement of Africans, the near extinction of the indigenous Caribs, and the formation of a colonial administrative system that rewarded corruption and promoted

mistrust among the island's poor inhabitants. Therefore, when Xuela declares, "In a place like this, brutality is the only *real* inheritance" (Kincaid, 1996, 5), she points to the fact that in the West Indies, no inheritance, whether financial, cultural, historical, or even biological, is untouched by the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Izabella Penier in her article "Re-conceptualization of Race and Agency in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*" (2010) aims to explore how Kincaid deals with the trope of race in her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, how she uses racial imagery to uncover the hidden mechanisms that explains the intricacies of identity formation and how she demolishes ideological foundations that paved the way for racial exploitation. She especially focus on how Kincaid challenges, undermines and recasts the (post)colonial concept of race by showing that racial identity is a shifting category conceived through interaction with other categories of identification such as class and gender.

"Small places, then and now: Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, and the futures of postcolonial criticism" (2010) is an article by Anthony C. Alessandrini who regards Frantz Fanon's legacy by placing him in conversation with Jamaica Kincaid. He argues that this conversation has the potential to help us re-imagine ways for postcolonial criticism to more effectively address our current moment of globalization. This means not only reassessing the insights found in the work of Fanon and Kincaid but also reassessing the larger potential found in imaginative writing to help effect transformations in the postcolonial political situations we face today.

In his 2008 book *Situating Caribbean Literature and Criticism in Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies*, Seodial Frank H. Deena centers Caribbean literature and criticism at the

foundation of multicultural and postcolonial studies through an interdisciplinary, international, and intercultural manner. He believes that the Caribbean, more than any other region, has suffered from European imperialism -- annihilation of the native population, piracy amongst the European powers, uprootedness and violence of the slave trade, and subsequent systems of indenture -- but has received the least critical attention. He discusses that Caribbean criticism --s shaped by the region's socio-economic, political, and historical phenomena -- has a more complex and significant marriage with postcolonial and multicultural studies than acknowledged by the international community.

One of the newest additions to the growing body of criticism concerning Kincaid's work is Mary Ellen Snodgrass's insightful *Jamaica Kincaid: A Literary Companion* (2008). The analytical sections of Snodgrass's guide are thematically structured. She offers an introduction and guided overview of Kincaid's characters, plots, humor, symbols, and classic themes, the 84 A-to-Z entries combine commentary from book critics, interviewers, and feminist historians, with abundant references to primary and secondary sources. The entries explore themes that are central to Kincaid's writing, such as "mothering" and "colonialism." Snodgrass provides the criticism devoted to them, also discussing less familiar topics.

"Just Look at That Post-Colonial Shuffle!" is an essay written by Mustapha Marrouchi in 2007. It is an embrace not only of a life lived on the edge but of an anxiety—an anxiety about the post-colonial sense of self being overwhelmed in Jamaica Kincaid, whose narrative registers an existence amazingly open to breeze, birds, and rainfall in the Caribbean, to the arrival of daylight and evening. Marrouchi assumes that *The Autobiography of My Mother* is strangely enclosed even if it examines the experience of the goings-on of life, crystallizing something that is fluid and resistant to crystallization. He believes that Kincaid performs this embrace brilliantly and

passionately. Her endeavor to tell of dislocation, childhood, deracination, love, and death is not, really, a nostalgic one, in spite of all she says about loss, uprooting, and the act of returning; her elegiac notes are her most strained. The narrative has the hard-headed exuberance of a 19th-century novel even if it centers on "failure" as an integral part of modernist creativity. Like a heroine of dubious energy, Kincaid keeps inventing and reinventing herself, bruising herself as she looks for acceptance—and it is to this drive, this desire, that he believes his essay is well-suited.

Understanding Jamaica Kincaid (2007) by Justin D. Edwards is a comprehensive survey of the life and works of Jamaica Kincaid, a writer deeply invested in themes of exile and exploitation. Edwards discusses Kincaid's recurring interests in familial relations, Caribbean culture, and the consequences of colonialism and exploitation. He also identifies and examines the novelist's foremost thematic concerns—the flow of power and the injustices handled by people who endure social, economic, and political changes.

In her 2006 article "*The Autobiography of My Mother: Jamaica Kincaid's Revision of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea.*", Joanne Gass observes the similarities between Brontë's novel and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, noting that both Jane and Xuela are motherless girls raised and neglected by women (65); both end up married to representatives of patriarchal British imperialism, powerful men who are, at the story's end, almost completely infantilized (71). Due to *Jane Eyre's* resonance within Kincaid's body of work, she declared Brontë's novel essential to understanding both her and her writing. Gass asserts that Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* reveals "yet another level of racism" that both *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* ignore—which is the maltreatment of the indigenous Carib population by people of African

descent (65). In doing so, Gass argues, Kincaid gives voice to the indigenous Carib people repressed by Bronte's and Rhys's narratives.

Jamaica Kincaid and Caribbean Double Crossings edited by Linda Lang-Peralta in 2006 includes a collection of essays by scholars from the Caribbean and scholars who focus on Caribbean studies and take a new look at Jamaica Kincaid's recent fiction and non-fiction. They focus on themes in her work that have become part of recent theoretical discourse, from the history of conquest in the Caribbean, to the identity of the post-colonial subject, the effects of imperialism, and the double consciousness of the diasporic writer.

Elizabeth J. West in "In the Beginning There Was Death: Spiritual Desolation and the Search for Self in Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*" (2003) states that *The Autobiography of My Mother* retains a critique on racism; specifically, the narrator addresses issues of white privilege and black despair. West argues that early in the novel Xuela locates herself as the racial other. She remembers speaking first in the language of the oppressor. Although she speaks the language of the conqueror before uttering her native tongue, her innate rejection of British things emerges early. West believes that Xuela involuntarily rejects the message of reverence for the oppressor suggested in various images in the novel.

In her essay "Speaking in (M)Other Tongues: The Role of Language in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*" (2002) Giselle Liza Anatol focuses on the role of language as spoken by Xuela, the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*. According to her, Xuela's use of language can be examined not only for its nationalist messages, but also for suggestions of how women fit into the nationalist project and society as a whole. Xuela employs a lot of languages that could be regarded her "mother tongue": in addition to "standard" English, she also

speaks a "vernacular" form of English and a French-lexified Creole, or "patois." Anatol argues that Xuela's use of language serves to register her developing anti-colonial attitudes. It helps her to formulate a postcolonial subjectivity as well as a strongly woman-centered identity.

"How Jamaica Kincaid Writes the Autobiography of Her Mother" (2002) is an article by Veronica Marie Gregg in which she focuses on Jamaica Kincaid's anger directed toward Europe's role in the West Indies and the Eurocentric construction of the history of the West Indies. A question Gregg attempts to explore is how Kincaid fits into West Indian literature. She believes to read her work within the context of other West Indian women writers is to be informed of what she shares with them and to better understand the traditions out of which she comes. In her article she discusses Kincaid's emphasis on history and language, as these are two of the most compelling and deeply engaged concerns of her own work and of Anglophone Caribbean writing as a whole. She includes an analysis of *A Small Place* alongside *The Autobiography of My Mother* to reveal the complex ways in which Kincaid's writing treats language, history, and the Caribbean.

Alexandra Schultheis begins her essay "Family Matters in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*" (2001) by quoting Amit S. Rai's article "'Thus Spake the Subaltern...': Postcolonial Criticism and the Scene of Desire,". Rai asks the following question: "If we are sure today that the subaltern cannot speak, can we be as sure that her ghost does not, especially when postcolonial criticism seems to re-present the discourse of that ghost?" (Rai 91). According to Schultheis in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, that ghost speaks in multiple voices which obscure the lines between fiction, biography, autobiography, and criticism. She adopts Rai's figure of the ghost here not to overshadow the powerful subjectivity of Kincaid's narrator, Xuela, whom Kincaid calls "more godlike" than her previous protagonists, but to focus

on her ability to surpass traditional literary and political realms. Although Xuela's life story is intensely personal (due to the fact that she avoids mentioning of the island's political affairs in favor of her own thoughts and relationships), it is filled with the history of colonialism and slavery. The story also draws on Kincaid's own life (as does all of her fiction) and that of her grandmother, such that, as Alison Donnell writes in "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self," "we cannot be certain who the auto-biographer is [of] this text, or if there is more than one, for if this is Kincaid's mother's auto/biography, then Kincaid is still present as the 'ghost' writer/biographer" (127). The layered voices of the female narrator disrupt familiar patterns of subjectivity and nationhood as well as the autobiographical form.

In her doctoral thesis *Mother/Motherland in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid* (2001) Sabrina Brancato offers a close analysis of six of Kincaid's works, including *The Autobiography of My Mother*, interpreting the focal theme of the love-hate relationship between mother and daughter as a metaphor for the dialectic of power and powerlessness governing nature and history. Placed in the specific context of the Caribbean in colonial times, the mother-daughter plot is regarded as an allegory of the conflict between the motherland and the colony. The association is played out at two levels, with the nurturing figure of childhood embodying the African-rooted Caribbean world, and the scornful mother of adolescence evoking the subjugating colonial power. Two conflicting worlds, the African and the European, meet in the duplicitous figure of the mother.

In her 1999 *Jamaica Kincaid: a Critical Companion*, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert explores Kincaid's three autobiographical novels, *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *Autobiography of My Mother*, and her collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River*. She asserts that these works touch on the universal theme of coming-of-age and the female adolescent's need to cut her ties to her

mother. This anxiety is expressed in the social landscape of post-colonial Antigua, a small Caribbean island whose legacy of racism influences Kincaid's protagonists. On the word of Paravisini-Gebert, Kincaid's fiction rewrites the history of the Caribbean from a West Indies perspective and this milieu shades the experiences of her characters.

6. The Organization of the Study

Successively, following a related literature review in the last section of chapter one, the second chapter of this thesis, benefiting from a thorough examination of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and related sections of his *The Wretched of the Earth* and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, announces the methodological and theoretical framework by which the novel would be studied and assessed. Chapter three provides complete background information on the part of Jamaica Kincaid and the setting of the narrative, the Caribbean. In chapter four the focus is placed on the body of the novel and the detailed scrutiny and application of the mentioned methodological premises. Finally, the last chapter contains the conclusion of this study.