

Quest for Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's
The Autobiography of My Mother

M. Premalatha, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. T. Deivasigamani



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Autobiography-My-Mother-Novel-Classics/dp/0374531870>

Abstract

Jamaica Kincaid is a Caribbean Novelist, Short story writer, Essayist, and Gardener. She has written five novels and among these her best known is *The Autobiography of My Mother*. This novel explores on the Caribbean society, culture, and tradition as well as female experiences. Kincaid as a literary artist, with respect to form and style, is only an extension of the complex and a literary tradition. She entered the normal women of American speeches of self-identity and published in many genres: romance, mystery, and literary fiction. While quest for identity and race/gender and Mother-Daughter Relationships are major themes of her writings. Much of her writing is openly inspired by these vinegary tensions of her adolescence. Her characters define the post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, gender and sexuality, colonialism and colonial legacy renaming, colonial education, writing, racism, class, power, and adolescence, mother-daughter relationships. The aim of this article is to develop how Kincaid presents the search for identity in her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* and how she describes female sufferings, atrocities, and oppressions experienced by the major women characters from male chauvinistic society and how they overcome from their sufferings. It is also focuses on how Kincaid under estimate and recasts the post-colonial concept of chase by showing that gender inequality is a conceived through interaction with the Caribbean society.

Keywords: Relational identity, race, gender, class, sexuality, postcolonial society, Adolescence, social, cultural.

Introduction

Jamaica Kincaid was born in Elaine Potter Richardson and grew up in relative poverty with her mother, a literate. She has written in five novels namely *Annie John*, *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *Mr. Potter*, and *Now See Then*. The present article explains and exposes the quest for self-identity and gender in equality in the Caribbean society. She presents women character as a strong personality throughout her novel. The novel speaks of how the women are losing their identity and how they are treated and how they are suffered, how they are searching for their self-identity in the Caribbean society. Her women characters are struggling to get their identity as a human being like equality, sexual of riches right way of educators.

Wilful and Unfaithful Male Characters

In the *Autobiography of My Mother*, all male characters are wilful and most of them unfaithful to their wives. Their behaviour, however, is generally accepted as normal by society. Jack La Batte's wife Lise, for example, even supports her husband's affair with teenage Xuela, because she wants her husband to be happy. The heroine's grandfather had many children from different women and her son, Xuela's father, is proud about this fact. However, if a woman is promiscuous, society does not accept her behaviour. Elizabeth is banned from school because of her relationship with a man. When the wife of the protagonist lover Roland finds out about their affair, she blames for her husband's unfaithfulness, and not Roland. In the street, where everyone can see it, she slaps her in the face and calls her rude and offensive names. Kincaid emphasizes the absurdity of the gender stereotype according to which it is normal for men to have many sexual partners, while for women it is abnormal. If a woman breaks this discriminatory rule, she is punished by another woman. The man, who is equally responsible, is not punished at all.

=====
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: Vol. II Black Writings: A Subaltern Perspective

M. Premalatha, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. T. Deivasigamani

Quest for Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

Criticizes the Traditional Gender Roles

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid also criticizes the traditional gender roles in the family. After the death of his wife, Alfred Potter places his baby in the care of a strange woman, instead of trying to take care of her by him. His daughter, who did not get any love as a child, never forgives him for having abandoned her when she was so vulnerable. Kincaid also criticizes the fact that because of the traditional gender roles, women have to stay in the household, working for free, doing things that no one can see and no one will praise. Elizabeth, seeing the life of her mother, spent:

sweeping the ground that would shortly only be dirty again, [...] cooking food that would only be consumed, with more food needing to be cooked again, [...] making clothes clean that would only be worn and be dirtied and need to be cleaned again.
(124)

Female Subordination

She is only happy that thanks to her powerful father, she will have the chance to marry a rich husband and rent a servant. Another female identity dealt in the novel is, female subordination to men. In the society, women are seen only as their husbands' wives or as their fathers' daughters, not as equal citizens. When Mr. Potter dies, Elizabeth, who lives in his house, lets Xuela choose the clothes in which their father shall be buried. However, Elizabeth does not do so because her sister is older, and the father always loved her more. She gives her sister this honour because Xuela is the wife of an English doctor - someone from the upper class, superior to the class of herself and her husband. For Elizabeth, the conventional rules of their society are more important than family bonds.

Denial of the Right to Access to Education

The denial of the right to an access to education for girls is also dealt in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Hannah Wooley, who lived in the 17th century, wrote about the education of women: "Most people in this corrupt century believe that a woman has learned enough and is sufficiently educated, when she is able to distinguish her husband's bed from the beds of other men" (97). This situation, described in the novel, is very similar.

When Mr. Potter sends his six-year-old daughter to the primary school; everyone is surprised and does not understand why a girl should go to school. Xuela's stepmother also objects to the fact that the girl attends school explaining that she would be much more useful at home. In the patriarchal society, described in the novel, only boys are given the opportunity of education and the girls stay at home with their mothers, learning household activities. All members of this society obey the rule that boys should learn a profession and girls must learn household tasks. When someone breaks this rule even women object, while they should be happy about the positive change. Without education, the women will never learn that their lives could be dedicated to other activities than bearing children and taking care of the household that they could work and become financially independent of their husbands. Moreover, without education, women will not be able to have equal professions to men.

Xuela as a Protagonist

Kincaid identifying the Xuela as a Protagonist as those who have gained privilege by their cruelty and utilization of cultural environment. She fails to provoke her personal narrative. She is black, but she is a complex identity. Her mother was "of the Carib people" who had been exterminate by the British and were disliked by those of African origin. Her father was the product of a union between a Scots-man and a woman of African descent. She has both a physical and spiritual mixture and will exposure of self-identify herself as having come from many but belonging to none. She discloses the complexity of gender reality and gender constructions but does not demonstrate that her own story is considerably influenced by this social paradox. The protagonist of this novel's own longing begins at the moment of her birth with the traumatic loss of her mother. From early childhood, she seeks her mother, though she knows that it is a vain search: "I missed the face I had never seen; I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was coming, as if I were expecting someone to come . . . I was just looking for that face, the face I would never see, even if I lived forever" (5).

Gender Inequality

Kincaid also points out the Gender inequality of girl students at school. "Xuela is the only girl in her class and her teacher, also a woman, sees her as an intruder" (14). The girl is very intelligent and learns extraordinarily quickly. The teacher thinks that it is abnormal for a girl to be so bright and she explains to the class that Xuela is possessed, because her mother was a Carib Indian. In other words, the teacher, trained in a patriarchal way, denies the possibility that an ordinary girl could be as bright as a boy. She searches for an excuse for this "abnormal phenomenon," which is something negative in her eyes.

When Xuela attends another school, her teachers still treat her differently than her male classmates. She says:

I was modest, which is to say, I did not seem to them to have any interest in the world of my body or anyone else's body. This wearying demand was only one of many demands made on me simply because I was female. (41)

They do not think that she might be interested in the education itself; they do not regard her as an equal student. Apart from female discrimination at school, Kincaid also shows the problem of discrimination against daughters by their parents. Xuela's stepmother values her son more than her daughter. She neglects the girl and gives all her love and affection to the boy only because he is male. Moreover, the boy, named Alfred after his father, is encouraged to believe that he takes after his father. The similarity with his mother is unimportant also, when Elizabeth is born, it is in the middle of the day and people say that it is a bad sign. However, when Alfred is born, the time of the day does not matter at all. According to the sexist belief, spread in the society described in the novel, "any time of day a son is born is the right time" (107).

Another example is valuing male children more than female children in the book is Jack La Batte's attitude towards his illegitimate children. Only his sons are named with his surname, the daughters are not. According to Schowalter, "the struggle against sexism is among the goals of

feminist writing" (6). In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, through the mind of the heroine Xuela, Kincaid points out the injustice of sexist treatment of girls.

Authentic and Truthful Situations of a Woman's Life

In the collection of essays "Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives", "authenticity and truthful reproduction of the real world" (47) are presented as the highest literary values. There are many examples of authentic and truthful situations of a woman's life in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. For example, when Xuela starts to menstruate, the author describes the process by which the heroine produces sanitary napkins. Xuela says:

From a baker I bought four bags, the kind in which flour was shipped, and after removing the dyed brand markings through a long process of washing and bleaching in the hot sun, I made four squares from each and used them as napkins to catch my blood as it flowed from between my legs. (65)

Gloria Steinem in her article "If Men Could Menstruate" describes that by openly writing about menstruation: Kincaid breaks the taboo made of this natural process by the male-dominated society. Moreover, Kincaid does not hesitate to write in detail, one could say in a naturalistic way, about such taboos as a woman's sexuality, masturbation, bodily smells, and abortion (313). However, the author does not attempt to shock the reader; she describes these features as normal, natural, every-day things. Another female identity feature in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, is the character of Xuela. Although Xuela has no support from any close person, she trusts herself and is self-contented. She states:

I could sense from the beginning of my life that I would know things when I needed to know them, I had known a long time ago that I could trust my own instincts about things, that if I were ever in a difficult situation, if I thought about it long enough a solution would appear to me. (59)

The girl, who grows up in an environment in which women are subordinate and completely dependent on men, is headstrong, does not need anyone's help and trusts her own skills. In fact, Xuela is the opposite of the "submissive woman" model, which the society expects her to become. First of all, she refuses to wait on a man. She strictly adheres to her motif of independence but uses man as a sexual object just for pleasure. The heroine falls in love with only one man, Roland, because she has the feeling that he does not want to possess her. When she realizes that he wants her to bear his children, she loses her interest in him. She refuses to bear children and when she becomes pregnant, she does not hesitate to abort her child, Xuela does not want others to decide for her what she should do.

Conclusion

Kincaid's novel *The Autography of My Mother*, is presented the girl children have completely denied their identity and equality. The main reason is, women's subordination by proving that a woman is able to work as hard as a man, When Xuela starts to work as a road-builder, she cuts her hair and wears men's clothes. She does not look attractive at all. Nevertheless, she earns a lot of money and wins her independence. Thus, the young woman proves that the

beauty myth, according to which only beautiful and attractive women can become successful, really is only a myth. She "[carries her] life in [her] own hands" (174) and feels happy.

References

- Kincaid, Jamaica. *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Plume, 1997.
- Wooley, Hannah 'About the Education of Women' *Aspekt* 2/2000-1/2001: 97. 'Life Events'
- Jamaica Kincaid, BBC World Service London. November 2005 Jarkovska, Lucie. *Prohledneme Gender Ove Stereotypy in Formankova, Lenka and Rytirova Kristyna ABC Feminism*. Brno: Nesehnuti, 2004.
- Jarkovska, Lucie and Navratilova, Jolana, *Mytus Krasny, in Formankova, Lenka and Rytirova. Kristyna ABC feminism*. Brno: Nesehnuti, 2004.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Steinem, Gloria (1996) 'If Men Could Menstruate' *Aspekt* 2/2000-1/2001: 313.
-

M. Premalatha, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Annamalai University
mprema287@gmail.com

Dr. T. Deivasigamani
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Annamalai University
drdeivasigamani@yahoo.co.in