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# Postcolonial Reading of Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy

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**Postcolonial Reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*****Samirah Almutairi**Riyadh, Alnazeem District, 3247, Street number 2  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**Abstract**

Jamaica Kincaid is one of the most important contemporary Antiguan- American novelists. In all of her works, Kincaid focuses greatly on the influence of the colonial project from which her nation suffered greatly in the past. This paper offers a postcolonial reading of the novel *Lucy (1999)*. The novel details the life of a girl who left her homeland, Antigua, and went to the United States to work as an au pair for a white family. The paper focuses on the author's as well as the main character Lucy's anger at everything that reminded them of the colonizers, their homeland and family. This anger is seen as a form of hate traced in Lucy's reaction towards the educational system created by the colonizers, her homeland, and any authoritative figure. Lucy suggests that the educational system, which follows the British teachings, in Antigua asserts the domination of the colonizers and the humiliation of her nation. She hates her homeland because she considers it as a production made by the colonizers. Fleeing to the United States is a way to escape her past. Her hate of any kind of domination or control practiced on her is seen in her bad relationship with her mother and employer. Struggling to overcome her anger throughout the novel, Lucy discovers that the aftermaths of her nation colonial past formulates her present and points to her future.

**Keywords:** Antigua, Caribbean literature, colonial past, imperial domination, Lucy, humiliation of the colonized

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### A Postcolonial Reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*

Postcolonial literature refers to a body of literature written by writers of nations that were colonized; especially by European countries. To define what is meant by postcolonial literature, Padley (2006) explains:

The dismantling of European empires in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly after the Second World War, created conditions for an extraordinary explosion of literary creativity by writers from formerly colonized territories. Nations that were emerging out of their colonial past were intent on establishing their own national and cultural identities. One of the main ways in which they did was through literature. (p.122)

In his turn, Chris (2008) points that the term postcolonial literature is "more applicably employed to refer to writings from Africa, the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean" (p. 265). Postcolonialism concerns itself with studying the effects of colonialism on the Third World cultures, societies, how these societies and cultures responded to the colonizers.

A spectrum of literary theories and studies has evolved around the domain of postcolonial literature. The Palestinian-American critic initially triggered postcolonial issues. A theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) that it can be said to have laid the foundations of the postcolonial theory; his book *Orientalism* (1978) is groundbreaking. This seminal book has been considered the beginning of publishing other books in the same field including *Covering Islam* (1981) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which established the field. In his footsteps, there followed a large group of intellectuals and critics who proffered thoughtful critiques that importantly enriched the field. These include many names foremost among which are such critics as the Harvard Professor Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon and Chinua Achebe.

Different theorists of postcolonialism have adopted a number of key terms and concepts to explain their theories. Hybridity, hegemony, subaltern, the other, mimicry, identity, ideology, and ambivalence are some of the key concepts in postcolonialism.

Jamaica Kincaid (1949), born Elaine Potter Richardson is one of the most important contemporary Antiguan-American novelists. She is a prolific writer who wrote novels, short stories and essay books such as *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990), *An Autobiography of my Mother* (1995), *Mr. Potter* (2002), *My Garden* (1999) and *My Brother* (1997). In all of her works, Kincaid focuses greatly on memory and history. She believes that writing is an act of self- discovery. Bouson (2005) argues that Kincaid is:

A memory- haunted woman who continually remembers and tries to make sense of her Caribbean upbringing on the island of Antigua . . . .Speaking openly about her life and work in her many interviews, Kincaid emphasizes the autobiographical and psychological origins in her writings. (p.1)

She has always been overburdened with her history that reeks with servitude, subjugation and bondage. Different critics have approached Kincaid differently. Thus, while some critics see her to be a feminist writer, others see her to be a postcolonial writer. Still others insist that her writings are mainly autobiographical, and others see her as writing in the vein of black women writers. Some critics read her, especially in her later writings, as an immigrating writer. In addition, throughout her writings, Kincaid importantly explores issues such as race, class and gender. This all, anyhow, shows that the writer is multifaceted.

Her novel *Lucy* is one of her most important works because it is "her avowedly autobiographical fiction" (Bouson, 2005, p. 2). The novel details the life of a girl who left her homeland, the West Indies, and went to the United States to work as an au pair for a white family. Critics have read the novel from different perspectives. Because it resembles the life of Kincaid, it is viewed as autobiographical. Furthermore, gender, sexuality, and race are prevalent as the novel unfolds.

The purpose of this paper is to read Kincaid's novel *Lucy* from a postcolonial perspective. Edwards (2007) describes *Lucy* as a "black", "feminist" and "postcolonial" (p. 60). Highlighting the colonial influence the novel manifests, Paravisini-Gebert (1999), in her turn, notes that the "colonial history of race and class" (p. 120) stands out as one of the most important recurring themes in Kincaid's novel *Lucy*. Such submissiveness and humiliation that characterizes her nation now arose as a result of the British colonization and as a result of the colonizing educational system England imposed on Antigua. Even their entertaining of the colonizers who visit Antigua, and their packing and crowding to watch a royal figure while passing by during a visit to the colony are all results of colonialism which Kincaid severely criticizes and detests all through her writings.

In Kincaid's novels, a vein of hate can always be traced, hate directed toward the English colonizers. The influence of the British colonization permeates all aspects of the Antiguan life. Education itself follows the British system, imposing as well as asserting the domination of the colonizer as she points out in her novel *Lucy*. Her first novel set outside her home island of Antigua. This remarkably accounts for the diasporic nature of the work and the sharp contrast. However, Kincaid is keen on drawing comparisons between her native land and America, even though she did not like her own land. This is one of the reasons why Kincaid greatly despised the British system of Education in her country. In her novel *Lucy*, she could not, for instance, stand reading Wordsworth's poem *I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud*, as she found it absurd and meaningless to sing to flowers she never saw and, more significantly, ones that do not belong to her native land and culture. Thus, she could not sign to the flowers of the colonizers.

To explain, Mariah, the employer, and Lucy were visiting a picturesque place when Mariah, to please Lucy, showed her the daffodils thinking Lucy would admire them. The daffodils, to Mariah's shock, aroused a deeply instilled sense of hatred, and Lucy took to be a metonymy of the colonizer. On seeing the daffodils, Lucy was taken aback, and she told Mariah how deeply she hated daffodils. She wants to kill them as they remind her of colonial injustice. She recounts the incident as follows:

Mariah took me to a garden, a place she described among her favorites in the world. She covered my eyes with a handkerchief, and then, holding me by the hand, she walked me to a spot in a clearing. Then she removed the handkerchief and said, "Now, look at this."...Along the paths and underneath the trees were many, many yellow flowers...I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them...Maria said, "These are daffodils". Mariah, mistaking what was happening to me for joy at seeing daffodils for the first time, reached out to hug me, but I moved away. (Kincaid,1990, pp. 29-30)

The daffodils, thus, expose how the colonizer and the colonized look differently at the same thing, and, therefore, see the world differently. Kincaid briefly sums up that daffodils epitomize "a scene of conquered and conquests" (p. 30). Indeed, throughout the novel, Lucy reminds us of, so to speak, the cultural scar resulting from the painful memories of daffodils. Francoir (2008), in her turn, terms this 'the Daffodils Gap'; it is a cultural gap that Lucy could never bridge, tolerate or reconcile with (p. 97). Significantly, Francoir (2008) points out that Lucy, "scarred by the politics" of education, "has come to associate the color yellow (i.e. the color of daffodils and Mariah's pale-yellow skin and hair color) as symbols of oppression" (p. 85). She further explains:

The color yellow, symbolizing the colonizer in the novel, turns into a motif and a recurrent preoccupation all through the novel. All Lucy's dreams are, thus, hued in yellow. She recounts one such dream in which I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when I finally fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried underneath them and was never seen again. (p. 81)

In Antigua, Lucy was always reminded of the colonizer. Everything around her on the island reminded her of the colonizer, particularly language and education. Said (1993) states that, "to be governed, people must be ...educated, and of course ruled in regulated places" (p. 327). At school, Lucy objected to sing the song of 'Rule Britannia', and found it demeaning for a conquered nation to sing a song of victory for the colonizer. Furthermore, she found it ridiculous to criticize the colonizer whose language she herself speaks. Parvisini-Gebert (1999) remarks that the "colonial system ...imposed its own values and cultural standards through a system of education that fell outside local control" (p. 123). One of the ways she was punished at school was by making her write many lines from John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, the British colonization of Antigua imposed itself on all aspects of life in Antigua social, cultural, linguistic and religious and that deformed, distorted and eliminated all that was natively Antiguan.

She was often humiliatingly asked if she came from the islands, which was a continual reminder to her of belonging to the colonized lands. This, in addition, asserts that her land was not even worth being named, as it referred to, together with the other group of neighboring islands, anonymously as the islands:

I had met Dinah the night after we arrived here on our holiday, and I did not like her. This was because the first thing she said to me when Mariah introduced us was "So you are from the island?" I don't know why, but the way she said it made a fury rise up in me. (Kincaid, 1990, p. 56)

This demonstrates the ambivalence, one of the terms used by the theorist Bhabha, underlying how the colonizer and the colonized look at each other. The colonizer, represented by the white (or yellow) race, as represented by Dinah, Mariah's friend, here, looks at the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, "the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupt. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse." ("Key Terms in Postcolonial Theory, 2017).

The novel *Lucy* was a clear expression of the author's anger at everything that reminded her of her homeland and family as she came back to see her native land, people and family and the submissiveness of the land. Her hatred turned first to her parents, especially her mother that she despised, and then to her surrounding world. Indeed, due to the colonial past and the humility stigmatizing her people, Lucy got determined to flee from the land of the defeated, "When I turn nineteen will be living at home only if I drop dead" (Kincaid, 1990, p. 112). It was colonization that caused that breach between the native Lucy and her native land and people.

Lucy, the protagonist, is nineteen when she arrives in one of the American states, as an au pair, to help a wealthy family with their children. The novel has been seen as a *bildungsroman*, i. e. a novel that traces the growth as well as the mental development and awareness of the protagonist. She used to think that leaving her colonized land and her people who have an inherent sense of lowness and meanness which they publically demonstrate when they see the vanquisher. On arriving in American, however, Lucy does her best to forget completely about her past that always represented a fettering burden to her. "I looked at a map. An ocean stood between me and the place I came from, but would it have made a difference if it had been a teacup of water? I would not go back" (Kincaid, 1990, pp. 9-10). She received many letters from her mother which she kept unopened. She even finally burnt them all. In America, Lucy was adamant never to return to her motherland despite her longing for her land and an overwhelming feeling of "homesickness" after being in America for a while (Kincaid, 1990, 124). As Paravisini-Gebert (1999) argues that Lucy has asserted "the protagonist's separation from her past" (p.119).

Lucy's hate of her past resulted in her hate of any kind of control or domination practiced by any one or any authority over her, even if that was the authority of her own mother. The mother-daughter relationship in this novel was one of the most complex of all mother-daughter relations in literature. To Lucy, mother represented domination and the past that she has long dreamt of getting rid of. She rebels against any and everything that reminds her of past which means history, and, therefore, colonization. To her shock, she discovers that the past largely interferes with her present and foreshadows and to some extent models and fashions her future.

Conclusion

To conclude, Kincaid's *Lucy* is a novel that importantly exposes the evil and ruining effects of colonialism. This research has, thus, attempted to provide a postcolonial reading of the novel. When Lucy moved from one continent to another, she thought that servitude and bondage that were brought about by the British colonization behind back. To her shock, however, she discovered that the imperial history that determined the past of her native land and people actively formulates her present and points to her future. Suffering from the aftermaths of the colonial past inevitably determines her very being and identifies who she is and establishes an essential part of her identity. The language she speaks is a constant reminder of a past of slavery, a past that she is trying her best to escape from.

#### **About the Author:**

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