

Search for 'Self' in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, *Lucy* and *See Now Then*

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Abstract- *The subject of 'self' is a much wider concept which amalgamates the cultural issues and the social issues which eventually leads to the identity crisis of a black women. The study of Kincaid's novels recapitulates the idea of the fight of an individual self-right from the beginning till the end of life. The three novels run in continuation and present the different stages of a woman's life and the struggle which she encounters at the every phase of life. This paper also contemplates the idea that a woman never fails to strive for her identity even in the adverse circumstances.*

Keywords- *Jamaica Kincaid; Identity; Incorporality; Black Women.*

Cultural representations of the black man were an exclusive right of the colonizer in the colonial era. These representations of the black world were biased and prejudiced views of opinionated Europeans who relegated one half of human civilization to 'darkness'. The African culture was thought to be barbaric and devoid of history. The colonizers formed the myth of black racial inferiority and white supremacy. In the post colonial period the knowledge of the self among the black writers sought pride in their 'negritude' and voiced their subjectivity. The consciousness of 'I' appreciated them to destroy the myth and create a place for the people of Africa in the making of human history, civilization and culture.

The process of colonization left behind the issue of identity of the black men and women among the Caribbean writers. Black women literature reflects how the black women are subjugated and oppressed for their gender, class, sexuality, as well as the black colour of their skin. The black women fight for their lost identity and self. Their writings have emerged over the last two decades. These writings reveal their experience in the black world as well as the hope for a 'new world and possibilities' Michelle Cliff points that these women work against the odds to claim the 'I'. (Cliff) According to Linda La Rue;

The black woman is demanding a new set of female definitions and recognition of herself of a citizen, companion and confidant, not a matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker. Role integration advocates the complementary recognition of man and woman, not the

competitive recognition of same. (Rue 42).

The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself was the first slave narrative by a Caribbean women writer in 1831. Here, Mary Prince presents the sufferings, mental trauma, humiliation and the physical abuses which the black women undergo in the hands of their European masters. It is a reflection of growing of a child into adolescence and trying to attain her identity as a black woman and a human being. Marie Elena John, as an Antiguan writer is known for raising awareness about the 'denial of inheritance rights of women'. She is the first black woman valedictorian of the New York's city college. Her novel *Unburnable* is a mixture of Caribbean history, African heritage and African-American sensibilities. The consciousness of self creeps into the minds of these women as they consider themselves lone and alienated from the society. Zagorka Golubovic in his essay '*An Anthropological Conceptualisation of Identity*' claims:

Personal identity can be developed only by free determination, representing a kind of dissociation from an inherited collective form, i.e. in terms of looking to oneself through his/her own eyes, when self-consciousness is developing – it is the phase when personal free choice takes a decisive role in the process of individuation. (Golubovic 29)

He also points out that "self-identity consists of original filiation and acculturation (education)". (30)

Twentieth century was a time of acute divergence and severance in Europe and Africa. Female writers like Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Jean Rhys from Dominica, Merle Hodge from Trinidad, Sylvia Wynter from Jamaica and Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua were much concerned about the problems of identity and inequality. The femininity which is projected by the writer are about the women who “live in a society in which sexual and emotional relationships have been destroyed by demoralizing and alienating economic manipulations in colonial and neo colonial societies”. (Selwyn 28-30)

Jamaica Kincaid (1949) followed the tradition of writing in defiance of British colonialism coupling with the sentiments of the black women. As Antiguan-American novelists, essayist and gardening writer Kincaid's works are evocative and appealing. Living in the midst of poverty in Antigua, Kincaid was shipped to North America where she worked as an au pair at an early age of seventeen. During this period she was separated from her family, especially her mother. This severance from her family and her native culture made her more assertive towards her career. Later she joined Franconia college and in New York City and started writing for a magazine, her prominent novels includes, ‘Lucy’(1990), ‘Annie John’(1985), ‘The Autobiography of My Mother’(1996), ‘Mr. Potter’(2002), ‘See Now Then’(2013).

Jamaica Kincaid's creative corpus enfolds a plethora of issues right from human relationships, to issue of the black female immigrants, alienation, problems of black women in black society and their struggle for identity. Diane Simmons comments “At heart, Jamaica Kincaid's work is not about the charm of a Caribbean childhood, nor is it about colonialism. Nor, finally, is it about black and white in America. At heart, her work is about loss”. (Simmons 466) Kincaid's novels are mostly autobiographical which reflect her struggle as a black woman. In her novels she has tried to picture the fight which she has withstood all through her life, to stand at equal footings with the whites. A close reading of Kincaid's novels depicts that the desire for an individual identity results in the consciousness of self. Kincaid's novels depict how black women have tried to substantiate their own identity apart from their stumble in the past life. ‘Annie John’, ‘Lucy’ and ‘See Now Then’, though written in different periods of time, can be seen as a trilogy due to the subject of black female identity. Henry Louis Grates says:

She never feels the necessity of claiming the existence of a black world or a female sensibility. She assumes them both. I think it's a distinct departure that she's making, and I think that more and more black American writers will assume their world the way that she does. So that we can get beyond the large theme of racism and get to the deeper themes of how black people love

and cry and live and die. Which, after all, is what art is all about .(Grates n.p)

The novels can be seen as the struggle of a woman in three different phases of life. Starting with the journey of a young girl of ten in Antigua, in the novel Annie John, Kincaid explores the experience of the adult girl in England, in the novel Lucy and ends up with the destruction of marriage of a middle aged woman, in the novel See Now Then.

Human being when becomes isolated, perceives his/her identity crisis and the knowledge of one self. Kincaid's striving for the individuality of women begins with the enlightenment of Annie when experiences “unhappiness” (Kincaid Annie 85) deep inside her heart like a black ball.

I was always just sitting there with the thimble that weighed worlds fastened deep inside me, the sun beating down me. Everything I used to care about had turned sour. I could start with the sight of the flamboyant trees in bloom, the red of the flowers causing the street on which I lived to seem on fire at sunset; seeing this sight I would imagine myself incapable of coming to harm if I were just to walk through this inferno. (86, 87)

Annie educates herself and decides to enter into the rational world away from the irrational one. The separation from her mother, friends and finally with her family reflects her despair from life which ultimately leads to the decision of leaving the country and to migrate to a new land in search of her individual essence. Her longing for a separate identity ends with the end of the continuous rain of three months. During this period she suffers mental as well as physical trauma. The long rain signifies the dark side of Annie's life which ends with a hope. This spiritual development of Annie, which takes place when she was only seven years old, enables her to take the hard decision to leave Antigua and her parents for a separate identity.

Kincaid has woven the development of the child's mind and the way in which she achieves realization of the importance of the self. According to Erik Erikson fifth psychosocial stage occurs during the age of eleven years to eighteen year:

What is unique about the stage of Identity is that it is a special sort of synthesis of earlier stages and a special sort of anticipation of later ones. Youth has a certain unique quality in a person's life; it is a bridge between childhood and adulthood. Youth is a time of radical change— the great body changes accompanying puberty, the ability of the mind to search one's own intentions and the intentions of others, the suddenly sharpened awareness of the roles society has offered for later life. (Erikson 39)

Annie's decision of moving ahead in life with a sense of individualization finds expression in Lucy's expedition as a young girl who owes from innocence to maturity. Lucy migrates with a hope to develop a separate identity but she is ultimately lost in the big city. In her own words "I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for". (Kincaid Lucy 161) Snodgrass says it is "a serious reshaping of [her] heart and mind". (Snodgrass 179) According to Simmons "Lucy is getting on her feet in the new world. She is no longer awed or threatened by the apparent perfection of lives in the white Western world. And the simple fact of having survived for a time on her own, away from her mother is empowering". (Simmons 130)

Lucy's identity as an immigrant in the novel runs parallelly within the cultural complexities of the two different nations. In the midst of the new environment Lucy is reminded of the foods cooked by her grandmother "green figs cooked in coconut milk." (Kincaid Lucy 7) Although Lucy is in a new world among new people but she is unable to forget her homeland. The British colonial system and the disintegration of her relationship with her mother are the reasons which drag her to the "in-between". Homi Bhabha points out that, "the 'beyond' is an in-between site of transition: 'the "beyond" is neither new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion". (Bhabha 1) Lucy resembles an individual who lands in an utter loss. "I did not have position; I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair" (Kincaid Lucy 134) According to Janelle Martin "The struggle that Lucy endures as she tries to become an individual ultimately forces her into a space of having two identities. Lucy is now seen as not only an Antiguan but also a Black woman in America". (Martin 44)

Mrs. Sweet is depicted as devoted women who servers her family to its fullest, cooks meal for her children, knits socks, looks after the children:

...she went about her duties, making the instruments and the musicians. Her concentration was unwavering, her devotion was without question, and her love had no limits. How the dear Mrs. Sweet loved Mr. Sweet and so too she loved all that he produces, fugues, concertos, choral pieces, suites, and variations. (Kincaid See 51)

Mrs. Sweet adopts every possible way to cope up with her husband and the children but still she is devoid of the love and respect which she deserves as a female member of the family. Kincaid has presented Mrs. Sweet as an alienated character who pens down her bitter experiences of life. She acquires her own corner in the house as "the world is vicious" (142) In spite of her full devotion to her family

she receives hatred from her family. Mrs. Sweet's suppressed desires of becoming a writer which she conceals from her husband and children, reflect that women at the hands of patriarch kills their own aspirations. Her long desire for an individual identity leads her to frustration which is seen toward the end of the novel. The following passage reveals how her hopes shatter and her days end in immense pain:

Oh now, Oh Then, said Mrs. Sweet out loud, but it didn't matter, it was as if she said it to herself, for no one could ever understand her agony, ever, ever understand, her suffering, her pain, no words could express it, nothing in existence could convey or express her existence just then, now or ever her husband's voice, her husband had been enfolded in an entity called Mr. Sweet. (156).

The difficult times, the struggles, the agonies and the pains of Annie, Lucy and Mrs. Sweet results in their spiritual development and the realisation of the self. All the three characters undergo an existential crisis which leads them with the sense of self and helps them to march forward for a new life. According to the philosophy of existentialism "Existence" must "precedes essence". This theory deals with the existence of an individual in a world that is governed by reason rather than by emotion. Sartre defines existentialism as "the attempt to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism". (Wood vii) Human being gives values and true meaning to his life through his own consciousness. This mainly comes through the loss of hope in the individual identity. To quote Albert Camus's 'The Myth of Sisyphus'

In the universe that is sudden deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile.....This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitute the feeling of absurdity (Abrams 1)

In the Caribbean society mothers consider their daughter as their own extended part. "Female identity within Antiguan culture can only be defined in terms of the mother, and since, the mother passes down the culture, she is the source of national identity". (Byerman 28) The relationship between mother daughters has a significant role in the formation of the self. Annie's confronts a deep attachment with her mother and identifies the world through her mother's eyes. According to H. Adlai Murdoch "the quest for identity in which the protagonist engages in this novel is mediated primarily by Lacanian paradigm of the alienated subject". (Murdoch 325) The alienation which Lacan talks about is "split inherent in subjectivity" which he describes as "identity is realized as disjunctive of the subject... since it is the subject who introduces divisions into the individuals, as well as into the

collectivity that is his equivalent". (325) According to Lacan "in the imaginary stage the child seek to erase all the difference and otherness by imagining himself as the person in the mirror and seeing himself and his mother as the same" (Nayar 75) This concept can be parallely drawn in the novels. Annie is unable to achieve harmony with the environment around her and so identifies the image of other with her mother. Annie realizes herself as a separate identity from her mother and feels betrayed, lost and alienated when she witnesses the love making scene of her parents. This relationship fades as Lucy senses a discord between her inner self which tries to see her as an independent being and the outer world where she finds herself as a reflection of her authoritative mother. Lucy builds a negative image of the love of her own mother as she finds her "mother's love designed solely to make me into an echo of her" (Kincaid *Lucy* 36) which compels her to be a copy of her mother and draws her back from the desires of attaining an independent self. The rejection of the mother figure reinforces Lucy's desire for her individuality. Harold Bloom says "Although Lucy's mother is physically absent from the narrative, she is powerfully evoked. Contours of her mother's life provide the protagonist with a blueprint for her existence". (Bloom 81) Unlike Annie and Lucy, Mrs. Sweet herself is projected as a mother figure. She has immense feeling of affection for her daughter on the contrary of which she receives disliking from her daughter. This exasperated Mrs. Sweet and makes her isolated.

Kincaid's rebellious nature towards the defiance of colonial authority is reflected through the image of "Lucifer" which is coupled with the awareness of self among the black women in her novels. Annie's reflection of her own self in the mirror while she was passing through the market street reflects the realization of her miserable condition as she identifies herself with the young Lucifer. "I looked old and miserable. Not long before, I had seen a picture of a painting entitled *The Young Lucifer*". (Kincaid *Annie* 94,95). Through the painting of young Lucifer, Annie tries to contemplate her situation. Releasing from the mundane activities and the illusions of all the relationships which she has encountered during her small life span, she experiences a spiritual development. Her identity is a flux as she is trapped on a crossroad. She wants to go on an illusionary world. She gets deeply involved in the painting of young Lucifer and in the process she transcends the boundaries from Antigua and England. Annie weeps as she is trapped in the control of situation. She experiences her loneliness but is helpless to herself. Diane Cousineau writes in *Letters and Labyrinths*:

When Annie sees her face reflected in a shop window, she is appalled in part by the alarming changes that adolescence has brought—her image strange, unexpectedly large, and ugly—but also because she sees herself through the eyes of her mother's disapproval and

therefore identifies with Lucifer in his fallen state, 'lonely and miserable'. (Cousineau 95)

Similarly, Lucy compares herself to the Lucifer. "I felt like Lucifer, doomed to build wrong upon wrong". (Kincaid *Lucy* 139) In the hope of her own individuality she leaves her home, disintegrates with her family, and stops writing letter to her mother until her father's death. Lucy's struggle in the new space and her tendency to dissociate herself from the world of labour leads her to alienation. Commenting about Lucy Kincaid says, "being thrown out into this cold, bleak world as a very young person, to serve". (Web n.p)

Through the colonial ideologies in the novels the writer has tried to dig out the fact that colonialism has resulted in the consciousness of the loss of their real identity after the independence. Though being in the post colonial era, they are still fighting for their individuality and identical self. Annie's resistance of the education implemented by the British colonies implies her willingness of independency. Through Annie, Kincaid has tried to focus that the prospect of the female in the country is changing. The protagonist is an example of the mutinous attitude of the youngsters who are not ready to accept the imperialist ideologies as the traditional women do. In the words of Franz Fanon "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Woodward 51). These people yearn to become 'beings' from a mere object or things lead them to migrate to the western countries. Kincaid has presented this aspect through Lucy who moves with the tradition of "American Immigrant literature" where the characters shift to America with the aspiration of a better future and career. Lucy's longing for a distinct individuality, her desire to become a nurse and attain an admirable self in the society finally results in the loss of her future aspirations and the aggravation come out in the form of sexual desires. Through the ruined marital relationship of Mr. Sweet and Mrs. Sweet, Kincaid presents the impacts of colonialism on the lives of the black women that still prevails in the post colonial era. The novel hints at the intermingling of two different and opposite cultures, which becomes one of the reasons for the disintegration of their relationships which ultimately results in her decision to leave her husband and her children. The writer portrays the vast difference in the culture of Mrs. Sweet and Mr. Sweet as she belongs to the black world and Mr. Sweet belongs to the white world. The yellow Formica of the kitchen counter is "an idea very revolting to Mr. Sweet, for a kitchen counter should be white or marble or just plain wood but Mrs. Sweet would go out of her way to find such an abomination, yellow Formica, to cover the counter and then she would paint the wall in the kitchen those Caribbean colours: mango, pineapple, not peaches and nectarine. . ." (Kincaid *See* 15)

The issue of identity among the female writers in the post modern era is something more than a woman fighting for her rights and equality. It has become the question of claiming the 'I'. The identity crisis which Kincaid handles is more about the spiritual development of an individual. She is mainly concerned about the inner realization of female self. The three novel ends up with the awareness of incorporeality of the protagonists. Annie's realization of her real self takes her to a new world with much higher aspirations, Lucy sinks and floats through the currents of life to reach her destination and Mrs. Sweet, detaches from the world around her when she comprehends that even being devoted towards family she failed as a wife and as a mother. Hence, all the three character through their struggle evolve with a definite meaning to their life, with a better understanding of their self. Though the characters do not reach to the ultimate goal but they remain as an example for the continuous striving for the self and identity to a woman.

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