

Unspeakable Mother: The Politics of Reclaiming the Maternal Pre-Text and Origin in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the representation of identity-formation and mother-daughter relationship in the feminist black American Jamaica Kincaid's novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1997). Attention is given to study how *My Mother's Autobiography* and much feminist psychoanalytic criticism confront the coincidence between the engendering of daughters and mother-daughter affiliation within racial African context. It also looks at some extremely telling parallels between revisionary feminist psychoanalytic paradigms and narrative techniques used in Kincaid's work. First, this paper traces the conversions within psychoanalytic theories, and feminist thinking which modified classical oedipal frameworks, thus the narratives of mothers and daughters do not remain unspeakable. Several elements of these representations emerge with particular force: the impulse to return to a pre-oedipal, pre-verbal moment of origin which, though essentially inaccessible to language and memory, nevertheless is meant to be crucial for merging the fragments of the self; the ideological implications of the mother-daughter bonding as basis for gender difference; and the instability of identity and subjectivity-formation. This paper explores the way in which Kincaid's novel represents the mother-daughter relationship, proceeding from the statement that the mother is often the pre-text for the daughter's fictional project and that the daughter's text seeks to reject, reconstruct and reclaim the mother's message. The paper also addresses one of the central questions that Black feminist criticism seeks to answer: What is the connection between women as material objects of their own histories and the representation of women in narrative?

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, representation and reconstruction of mother-daughter bond, Motherland, Black women, the pre-oedipal, Lacan, feminist psychoanalytic criticism.

1. Introduction

"[B]lack women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives, and, even though they can claim a rightful place in the Afro-American tradition and the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that, for purpose of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space" (Washington, 1986, xvi).

Recently, many women writers have written about the construction of femininity in discourses of motherhood and daughterhood. In the American tradition one might name, among others, Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Mary Gordon, Rosellen Brown, Sue Miller, Jane Clausen, and Sharon Olds. I see these significant examples as a part of the feminist movement's retrieval of the mother/daughter bond, after an earlier feminist stage of what Adrienne Rich calls 'matrophobia' – the fear of becoming like one's mother. The publication of many texts, autobiographical and fictional celebrating mother/daughter bond is interconnected with the second-wave feminism. Adrienne Rich claimed that "The cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story" (1986, 225). Since then there are many works in theory, fiction and autobiography, to write the

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'unwritten story'¹. In particular, I'm interested in the texts of women who write within the tradition of black American feminism. This tradition among the various feminisms that have developed in the last forty years does represent the mother in complex and multiple ways. Black feminist writing provides a useful domain for the examination of maternal discourse, largely oral past and points of resistance to it.

Unlike so many contemporary white feminist writers who define their creative identity in opposition to their mothers, black writers have been preserving what Mary Helen Washington recognizes as the "connection between the black women writer's sense of herself as part of a link in generations of women, and her decision to write" (1984, 161).² Alice Walker explains that in her family hers is the first generation to be college-educated, the first generation involved in writing down the family histories passed down orally by their matrilineal tradition. Walker acknowledges her African American foremothers who are in her words, "handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see, or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" (1984, 240). "[S]o many of the stories I write," Walker asserts, "are my mother's stories" (1984, 240). Mary Helen Washington describes their aim as to "piece together the story of viable female culture, one in which there is generational continuity, in which one's mother serves as the female precursor who passes the authority of authorship to her daughter and provides a model for the black woman's literary presence in this society" (147, 1980). Audre Lorde asks black women to look for "the black mother in each of us": that is, to rely on "intuitive" language rather than analysis and to see African culture's emphasis upon the mother-bond as an alternative to white patriarchal culture's way of thinking (1984, 100). This recalls Walker's rejection to use the term *feminist* and her insistence on using *womanist* instead. As an epigraph to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984), Walker gives different definitions of the term "womanist." First, it is "a black feminist or feminist of color" derived from "womanish," a black folk expression of mothers to female children who are "outrageous, audacious, or willful," who want to be grown up (too soon). Eva Lennox Birch remarks that one reason for this is that "black women writers speak of and from a position of marginalization that is recognizable to women of any color. The examination of racial and sexual oppression in their writing inevitably starts with the bounds of race" (1994, 7). In this sense, Black feminist critics believe that issues that concern black female writers and characters should be expanded and given greater place in literary criticism in general. Their feminist critique is described by Elaine Showalter as the attack on male-centered literary values.³ They also celebrate the portrayal of black women as complex selves.⁴ Paule Marshall, as well as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Jamika Kincaid belong to a generation whose representations of maternal presence and inspiration combined with racial conflicts makes this exceptionally feminist tradition a fascinating one in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence.⁵

2. Black Feminism and Psychoanalytic Criticism

The reinterpretation of ideas of motherhood and mothering which has taken place among feminists depends to a large degree on the interest in the topic of the pre-oedipal bond between mother and child. The Freudian revisionist

¹ Cosslett 1996; Chodorow 1978; Daly and Reddy 1991; Doane and Hodges 1992; Hansen 1997; Hirsch 1989; Steedman 1986; Walters 1992. For a discussion of the nature of "maternal discourse" and the role it plays in feminist theory and writing, see Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, especially chapter five, "Feminist Discourse, Maternal Discourse: Speaking with Two Voices". Hirsch basically argues that the maternal is repeatedly being suppressed in women's writing but if unrestricted it could endorse the pre-Oedipal world of the semiotic.

² See also Mary Helen Washington. (1986). *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women (1860-1960)*.

³ See Elaine Showalter. (1986). "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. 243-70.

⁴ See Bernard W. Bell. (1987). *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, 242-243. See also Michael Awkward. (1989). *Inspiring Influence: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*.

⁵ In "Mothering and Healing in Recent Black Women's Fiction." (*Sage*, 2, 1, 1985, 41-43) Carole Boyce Davies has identified a group of novels in which the mother representation seemed to be established and linked to the social and emotional reconstruction of Black women in their materialist contexts.

Jacques Lacan proposes the notion of the imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child has not yet differentiated herself or himself from the mother and has accordingly not yet learned language (Lacan, 1977). The pre-Oedipal infant lives in a maternal world of sounds and rhythms. The infant has no awareness of the physical boundaries of its body. With the sight of ourselves in a mirror we give up this bodily maternal warmth and enter social construction or the symbolic order, called the 'Law of the Father'. This is the moment of "I" when we create our identity as an "I" as well as "me" (1977, 4). The Oedipal crisis marks the entrance of the child into a world of symbolic order (through his/her acquisition of language). Lacan explains that, "the development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history" (1977, 4). Once the separation is made, the loss of the imaginary is permanent. According to Lacan, the desire of the imaginary is repressed. This act of repression brings the unconscious into being. The Imaginary is the realm of the feminine and the vital source of language that will later be tamed and codified by the Laws of the Father. Lacan calls it the phallogocentric universe (by which he connects maleness to the power of the word he believes men control – "phallus" (1977, 82). According to Lacan, language privileges the masculine over the feminine because entry into the symbolic is Oedipal. That is to say, the infant must search for signs, figurative language, and any language substitutes for the mother. Lacan puts 'woman' in the position of the excluded term. He explains that the position is not inherent, that it is linguistically, rather than biologically, determined (1977, 284, 285).

The relevance of Lacan for feminism arises from his treatment of language. Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language; "What I am, and what I am able to imagine myself as being are linguistic features because they take place entirely in language" (Ruth Robbins, 2000, 115). According to Lacan, the unconscious reveals the fictional nature of sexual categories, and formations of masculinity and femininity crucially connect to language. According to Lacan, we are not born as subjects but begin by making imaginary identifications. Such identifications will always often be fictive. In this sense literature as a figurative language is marked out as masculine (1977, 284). More positively, the meaning of the feminine could always be open to redefinition because it is less 'formed' by the symbolic.⁶ Psychoanalytic theory and social experience both suggest that the leap from body to language is especially difficult for women.⁷

Thus, Lacan's theories pose problems for feminist literary critics. If language is controlled by the law of the Father then so is literary criticism. What then are the feminist maternal theories of symbolic borders crossing/entry? In the Lacanian system, the unconscious is a feminine space; it is the space of the other. It is from this point that much feminist commentary upon Lacanian conceptions takes off. French theorists have made a provocative exploration of maternity which offers a revision of the Freudian and Lacanian models of subjectivity by privileging the maternal presence in the pre-oedipal stage rather than the paternal and oedipal, in the formation of the gendered and speaking subject. They also make links between writing, femininity and the pre-oedipal. Helen Cixous describes *L'écriture féminine* (feminine/female writing) as a form of writing, with its inspiration in the body, which originates from the mother's voice.⁸ For her, women's speech is located in the body which through its menstrual blood, and its mother's

⁶ Lacan's works are drawn on by feminist critics, including Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose and Mary Jacobus, to argue that gender is not biological essence but a linguistic construct (Mitchell and Rose, 1982; Jacobus, 1986).

⁷ In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to explicit parallels between psychoanalysis and women's writing. Examining the work of Jane Austen, Mary Shelly, the Brontes and Emily Dickinson, among others, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers deliberately expose their psychic and social apprehensions in repetitive images of enclosure and doubles (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). These feminist critics and others. They claim that women writers reproduce their own mother-daughter bonding in the development of female characters' identities.

⁸ See Troil Moi. 1985. *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 113-19. See also Ann Rosalind Jones. (1996). "Writing the Body: Toward An Understanding of "Écriture féminine."" In *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. (238-331).

milk, becomes the locus of an erotic of writing and speaking.⁹ Though accessible to both sexes, in a phallogocentric culture it most often occurs in texts written by women.

The other significant theory of the maternal is the one proposed by the French theorist Julia Kristeva, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach and Art* (1981), where she defines maternal imagery as the semiotic subtext, and argues for the existence of a hidden and "inexpressible" maternal discourse, or "repressed" feminine aspect of language (242; 238). Evidence of the semiotic can be witnessed in pre-oedipal infants, and in non-rational discourses that are marginalized by the symbolic order. For Kristeva, women's psychological position facilitates the access to the pre-symbolic, to what she calls the semiotic, which challenges or disturbs the primacy of the symbolic. Kristeva links motherhood with the *maternal jouissance*. She claims that this *jouissance* is both feared and undervalued by a phallogocentric culture.¹⁰ Since it is beyond all presentations and therefore can disturb and undermine all presentation. *Jouissance* (traditionally translated as a kind of orgasmic pleasure) is found in a moment – the pre-oedipal or, as the French feminist Luce Irigaray has named it, "the dark continent." – which had been "unpresentable and unspeakable" in classic psychoanalysis, linguistics, philosophy, history, politics and literature (quoted in Whitford, 1999, 37). Irigaray's remarks about the feminine might be associated with the 'primary imaginary'. Lura Green defines "the primary imaginary" as "the register arising from the pre-Oedipal encounter with the maternal body", for instance, "fluidity, contiguity, excess, multiplicity, the blurring of boundaries, and so on" (2012, 12). Unlike Kristeva's notion of the Semiotic "Irigaray's primary imaginary register actually *begins* with/in the womb" (Green, 2012, 12). In the work of Irigaray, moreover, female silence and marginality in language is substituted by an other, precisely feminine speech.¹¹ In identifying a characteristically female pattern of selfhood in relation to language, and in locating that pattern not in autonomy but in fluidity and connectedness, these feminist theorists are much more in tune with the ideals of the feminist theory.

However, historically, psychoanalysis privileges gender over race and focuses on phallic power. Unfortunately to be a colored woman, African, or a Carib is to be a visual signifier of permanent marginality. A significant accusation levelled at Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva concerns the way they downplay *differences* between women. This is apparent in the number of accusations when they tend to discuss 'woman' rather than 'women'. Their analyses do not always acknowledge the fact that class, race and sexuality can fracture and complicate such simple categorization. By placing their work in the context of race, Black American women suggestively complicate ideas about the female body as source for a subversive writing. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out clearly, "the experience of Afro-American women has left them simultaneously alienated from and bound to the dominant models in ways that sharply differentiate their experience from that of white women [...] Slavery bequeathed to Afro-American women a double view of gender relations that fully exposed the artificial or problematic aspects of gender identification" (1990, 174). In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject* (1994), Carole Boyce Davies argues that, "this reading of Black motherhood and its representation also speaks to the need for feminists to racialize and historicize their definitions of motherhood." She adds that the ideas of these psychologist feminist critics about maternal thinking "become empty and limited understandings if they do not configure the issues of race and history" (137).

But how can women of color gain a place in hegemonic tradition? How can they compromise their predicaments of marginality and aspirations to centrality? Carole Boyce Davies argues that "the repositioning of women in language occurs when we reverse, interrupt or dismantle the cultural mythologies which position women in language in negative ways; when we challenge how the feminine in language is addressed" (1994, 163). Davies rejects the French feminists' *L'écriture féminine* rewriting of some of the Lacanian positions on language, which still has the function of privileging

⁹ See Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement. 1986. *The Newly Born Woman*. See also Susan Sellers (ed.), 1988. *Writing Differences: From the Seminar of Helen Cixous*.

¹⁰ See *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach and Art*, pp. 129-5, 224, 242.

¹¹ See especially Luce Irigaray. (1977) (1985). *This Sex Which Is Not One* (trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Bruke. Cornell University Press).

the phallus. She explains that “writing by Black women [...] offers ways of viewing speech as it links with storytelling and performances [...] The play between the articulation of language, silence and other modes of expression weaves its way through women’s writing.” She adds that African and Caribbean women writers are “attempting to access these various forms of pre-symbolic language” (162-63). As Barbara Smith points out, the oral tradition links between this maternal tradition and new generations of black women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Margret Walker, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. They "incorporate the traditional black female activities [...] into the fabric of their stories". Smith argues that this "is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specifically black female language to express their own and their characters’ thoughts accidental" (1985, 73). They connect black women's artistic creativity very firmly to a maternal past; although the hidden creative spirit of the mothers was thwarted by oppression and abuse, much can be learned from their hidden spirituality. These forms and themes in the Black female literary tradition can be celebrated rather than criticized (Smith, 1985, 168-85). In turn, Black female languages find their way into the discourses of criticism. One major theme that such a criticism might examines is that the trope of motherhood. Complicated feelings shape the portraits of mothers in the feminist black American discourse; the issues of connection and separation which spread through this body of writing have political as well as psychological significance. Within this context, a focus on this mother/daughter narrative is deeply rooted in racial history, feminist consciousness, and political engagement.

It matters, then, for us to know that a feminist psychoanalytic criticism is likely to better understand the black mother figure through the agencies of history, black literary criticism and cultural theory. It is impossible to relate the theories of Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous and Chodorow to the stylistic aspect of works of fiction by African American writers in any systematic way. However, the identification of femininity with an experimentally fluid form of writing which subverts the reader’s expectations of linear, rational discourse, merging identities and ego-boundaries in a manner like that which occurs in the pre-oedipal mother-infant bond, is a feature of black American feminist writer Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Mother’s Autobiography* (1996) considered in this essay. This narrative extends the themes which characterize Kincaid's work in general – mothers and daughters, sexuality and power. Her work deals with the Caribbean history of the interaction with British colonialism. A reading of Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* with feminist psychoanalytic theory will illustrate how this culturally obscured personal history of the mother-daughter can be uncovered and explored.

3. Reading Psychoanalysis: The Matrilineal Narrative/Pretext

The Autobiography of My Mother fits into the subgenre of the novel known as bildungsroman. The focus of the genre is to lead the reader to a greater personal enrichment as the protagonist develops from childhood to psychological and intellectual maturity. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out that “The bildungsroman has been the favorite genre of Caribbean writers, who have used its focus on the central character’s growth to create parallels between their experiences and those of the West Indian colonies in which their lives unfold” (2008, 131). *The Autobiography of my Mother* is set in Dominica in the early 20th century. It explores the experience of growing up female in the Caribbean landscape and Caribbean folk culture. The novel is Kincaid’s own intertext of childhood and adulthood. For example, the landscape of Rousoué the capital of Dominica resembles Kincaid’s birthplace Dominica. Her relationships to the landscape and its folklore have been explored in her novels *At the Bottom of The River* (1978), *Annie John* (1992), and short stories "In the Night", "Girl", and "Holidays". Michelene Adams argues that “although it is not truly autobiography [...] Kincaid legitimates those who had no place in official histories”, and “though it is not technically the autobiography of her mother, writing the text presumably does help Kincaid make sense of her past” (2006, 10). At a very young age, Jamaica Kincaid left her own colonial home for the United States, the new home. Yet 'home' and mother are ambivalent, paradoxical terms for a writer of the colonial race and class whose allegiance is to the mothering experience of the Caribbean culture and mother land. *The Autobiography of My Mother* accounts the growth of Xuela, the protagonist, toward maturity and independence as a reflection of her society’s advancement from

colonialism to independence. In *The Autobiography of my Mother*, Kincaid elaborately builds thematic parallels between her protagonist's ambivalence toward her domineering father, the uneasy relationship with her absent mother and Dominica's history of subordination to British colonialism. And the mother is a symbolic figure here because she can also be read as the Caribbean motherland. What Kincaid constructs in her fiction, particularly in *The Autobiography of My Mother* is, I would argue, a feminist anticolonial narrative becoming aware of its own history. Kincaid interrelates history and gender, and images of anti-colonialism as her version of symbolic boundary crossing/entry.

I want to look at Kincaid's recognition of race, gender and history in relation to the maternal in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and to use the feminist theory of the semiotic as discussed earlier. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid labors over how women can name their mothers. Indeed, the book is explicitly concerned with matrilineage as a way of constructing the female subject. The novel is narrated by the seventy-year-old Xuela Claudette Richardson. Xuela takes us through her life, which was spoiled from the beginning by the death of her mother during childbirth. Abandoned by her father with his laundress until the age of seven, Xuela finds herself motherless and without a connection to her past. Alone at the end of her life, she tells us the story of her loss and longing. The text starts with a profound statement, setting the overtone of the story: "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind" (3). The mother's absence is central to the text: "This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif of my life" (225). The confrontation with this loss is articulated throughout the narrative.

Kincaid is creating the maternal body as a text. One of the main motifs of this text is mourning. Kincaid actively replaces chronology – linear history – with maternal memory and dreams:

I lay down to sleep and to dream of my mother- for I knew I would do that. I knew I would make myself do that, I needed to do that. She came down ladder again and again, over and over; just her heels and the hem of her white dress visible; down, down, over and over. I watched her all night in my dream. I did not see her face. I was not disappointed. I would have loved to see her face, but I didn't long for it anymore. She sang a song, but it had no words; it was not a lullaby, it was not sentimental, not meant to calm me when my soul roiled at the harshness of life; it was only a song, but the sound of her voice was like a small treasure found in an abandoned chest, a chest that inspires not astonishment but contentment and eternal pleasure. (31)

This passage shows that in the confrontation of loss, the polarization of presence/absence and life/death are challenged. The dead mother is almost more present than the living. Both the imagery and structure of Kincaid's text are drawing the reader into a realm of maternal plenitude and pleasure. The narrator's mourning indicates an attraction to the maternal *jouissance*. The maternal is presented both as ideal and more real than real, absent yet omnipresent. Yet at the same time there is an awareness of the danger of this temporary realm. The mother's rhythmic voice/ or "humming" (32) that the daughter always hears in her dreams represents a now lost sensuous, semiotic past. The "semiotic", according to Kristeva is an "archaic language" of instinctual drives heard in the rhythms, melodies, and bodily movements of the mother. The narrator states: "to this day she will appear in my dreams from time to time but never again to sing or utter a sound of any kind - only as before, coming down a ladder, her heels visible and the white hem of her white garment above them" (31-32). The semiotic space borders on, runs counter to, yet inscribed within the symbolic order as unsettling disturbances "heard in "the unconscious" of linguistic practice."¹² Throughout the text the metonymic chain of references to spirits, ghosts and haunting recalls the Lacanian definition of desire as an endless movement referring back to the loss of the mother. In a sense this entire text is haunted by the mother who is dead but still there, gone but saturating her daughter's writing.

¹² Mary Jacobus. 1986. *Reading Women: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Colombia University Press, New York. (149)

The absence of mother is interwoven with race and sexual politics. Xuela is born of mixed race; she is part Carib Indian, a fading and conquered culture on the island, and part Scottish and African. The island itself has been colonized by England, and the natives have become subjugated by their rule. Her mixed background only contributes to the oppression forced under the English colonization. *The Autobiography of My Mother* offers a parallel reading of mother-motherland and father-colonial *patria* and offers an allegory of the relationship of mother-motherland and colonialism. The pre-oedipal is inevitably implicated in nostalgia for lost origins which cannot, by itself, provide the grounds for a counter discourse. She places the Caribbean into a myth of lost origins:

She was of the Carib people [...] they were no more, they were extinct, a few hundred of them still living, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case. That these people, my mother's people, were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness [...] they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves. (197)

The daughter's self-portrait is constructed around an empty center: vanished people and disrupted harmonies. To continue the comparison of Lacan's mirror phase, it was not possible for Xuela to receive an affirming reflection of herself from her mother, who is dead with no history to give this recognition. Xuela's mourning signifies an absence of identity which engulfs the mother-daughter dyad. The mother-daughter relation seems necessarily to be founded on a series of losses: Loss of the mother means loss of the self or perhaps a recognition that the self has always been absent. The daughter's writing of the mother represents an image in which itself represents the creation of her self-portrait, and through this self-portrait appears the mother's lost face and history. The daughter's attempt to recapture the mother in the self and the self through the mother is endangered by her refusal to identify with the defeated motherland/mother-culture. She states, "someone was of the defeated, someone was of the resigned, and someone was changed forever. I was not of the defeated; I was not of the resigned" (93). Here we see the dangers of merged identities: because the mother has not been allowed into life, her death implicates the life of her daughter. Equally, as the daughter has not been able to give her mother the life that has been denied, she is complicitous in her death. This quotation which speaks about the mother leaves the reader with the image of a different mother-daughter language than the one in which this text was written, a language which is a haunted landscape.

This polarization of the figure of mother and of an autonomous, uncontaminated self has its links to the landscape of the island as a female figure as a mother. Kincaid's disjunctive vision explains the contradictions of trying to place her mother as the subject of her own life and representing the maternal function/fiction. There is a lyrical and careful observance of the maternal/Island as a crucial source of female identity. Within the narrative's poetry (a poetry of recurrent themes, images and statements), Xuela refers above all to her homeland, this landscape of identity, as a female, the contours of a female body. She writes, "my world then – silent, soft, and vegetable-like in its vulnerability, subject to the powerful whims of others [...] – was both a mystery to me and the source of much pleasure" (17). The cedar trees, the lagoon, the wild animals and birds she used to know, are no longer part of her daily life. Orphaned for the third time when her father asked the school to adopt her. Nonetheless, sent home on the riverboat, she experiences a thrilling form of rebirth because she is again part and parcel of nature. The narrator remembers sitting on the bank of "the river that had become a small lagoon when one day on its own changed course", and "it was while sitting in this place that [she] *first began to dream about [her] mother*; [she] had fallen asleep on the stones that covered the ground around[her], [her] small body sinking into this surface as if it were feathers (18)." The semiotic is, here, imaged as the lagoon, whose gulf or banks she enters. This transitional space indicated by the progressive verb tense of the "sitting", "sinking", the space of difference between the binary opposites of the symbolic/semiotics she cannot resolve, is familiar yet completely new, a return to the pre-oedipal, to that which has not been conscious.

Her landscape is rich with the picturesque and vivid portrayals of the island. It is the maternal space of her

childhood with its markers of nature – flowers, intense smells, and the rhythms of birds and animals. She has exact knowledge of plant forms, as well as their tropical intensity. It has been untouched wilderness. “The overbearing trees (the stems of some of them the size of small trunks) that grew without restraint” which she “could tell them all apart by closing [her] eyes and listening to the sound the leaves made when they rubbed together” (17); they are the protective layers of a womb; the rubbing of the trees connotes a maternal heartbeat; the floating waves of “the blue-glinting water” lapping around her invokes the flow of the amniotic fluid precedes birth; “the porous, graying, wet sky [...] following me to school for mornings on end, sending down on me soft arrows of water” is a reassuring companion that spells the return to an earlier form of peace and harmony. These layered allusions to the archaic times of a pre-oedipal time or a prenatal life and to the historical moments of pre-slavery days in Africa again configuring the mother as a sheltering presence whose disappearance generates the search for some collective empowering meaning. There is another indirect illusion to the narrator’s vulnerability – the funeral flower – the white flowers – is also the figure of the self that is reflected in the lagoon of language, the dark medium of self-knowledge, the white symbol of death attraction:

and I loved that moment when the white flowers from the cedar tree started to fall to the ground with a silence that I could hear, their petals at first still fresh, a soft kiss of pink and white, then a day later, crushed, wilted, and brown, a nuisance to the eye. (17)

Xuela’s sensations of colors, scents, her feelings of enchantments, and the juxtaposition of binaries, “fresh”/“wilted”, “white”/“brown”, “silence /I could hear” suggest that Xuela might be able to encompass future and contradictory experiences. This echoing pattern of disfiguration and death gives an important improvisational rhythm to the text, the ebb and flow of musical counterpoint, and suspend meaning between suggestive similarities the reader is free to associate or not.

4. The Mother/Mother Country: Race, Gender and History

There is a polarization between nostalgia for a pre-colonial/pre-oedipal past and a rejection to accept any time except her own painful present. For as Xuela states, “the present is always perfect [...] the past I don’t long for it. The present is always the moment for which I live. The future I never long for it, it will come or it will not; one day it will not” (205). If the mother is a figure for the lost potentialities of history and for Africa, it is unsurprising that images of death and decay in a world of a vanished community begin to pervade the daughter’s self-recollection during those years of loneliness and wandering in which she feels “hunted”. She can’t experience her own self in a unified way, past and present can never coincide completely. Her mother’s death transforms the past by reorienting it towards an un-lived future in which the lost potentialities of love and motherhood denied any possibility of peace and transformation. Past and present continually struggle against each other.

The narrative shows that the daughter invokes her absent mother in order to learn to face the loss of various kinds. When the child’s experience of absence becomes specifically racial, a new and negative dimension is added to her loss of identity. Her teacher made her know that she was a little colored girl. This discovery of the ethnic self is mirrored by the other colonial culture of the school. (16-17) This education is Xuela’s first experience of difference, and functions in the text as another moment of self-discovery and identity recognition. She writes:

My teacher looked at me: I had thick eyebrows; my hair was coarse, thick, and wavy; my eyes were set apart from each other and had the shape of almonds; my lips were wide and narrow in an unexpected way. I was of the African people, but not exclusively. My mother was a Carib woman, and when they looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but had survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the

Carib people [...] she pointed again to the fact that my mother was of the Carib people. (15-16)

This theme of women being looked at and looking at themselves is clearly involved here within this historical and racial context. Xuela here is increasingly shaped by the look of others, and this specularization comes to dominate both her representation of herself, and the representation of her mother. The reader is caught up in a web created by these over-determining gazes and is forced to recognize her own participation in the specular economy. The childhood memories of that time are the negative images of blackness which will keep recurring in the later stages of her life.

Though Jamaica's narrative might be seen as a movement back, to homeland and identity, it reflects the ambivalence of racial place. This narrative is susceptible to identity disruption which manifests itself in discontinuities and breaks. Through her Carib mother and Scot-African father Kincaid sets up a psychoanalytic articulation of difference and contradiction which escapes the misrepresentation of colonialism: "My father was named after Alfred the great, the English king, a personage my father should have despised, for he came to know this Alfred [...] through the language of conqueror" (p. 109-110). The daughter juxtaposes her matrilineal genealogy with the racial/sexual politics of colonial history. Her father is a Creole and his story represents an important historical period of the narrator's nation.¹³ Xuela's father who "had inherited the ghostly paleness of his own father, the skin that looks as if it waiting for another skin, a real skin, to come and cover it up" (49) represents the "hierarchy of color" (Humm, 1991, 83) which is a quality of the Caribbean culture which has been noted in "the sense of the harshness of post-emancipation economic life. It was also, and mainly, a man's world" (Humm, 1991, 83). Indeed, Xuela refers several times to the economic benefits that the color-coded imperialism gives to a man like her father whose "skin was the color of corruption: copper, gold, ore"(181).

She describes her Methodist father as an "incredible mimic" (139). He despises the African beliefs, and he has a passion for a postcolonial modernity represented by colonial education and language. Her father who is representing the colonial patriarchy brings the narrator to Rousoué the capital of Dominica and fixes her into symbolic order. Xuela says, "he wanted me to keep going to school, he made sure of this, but I do not know why. He wanted me to go to school beyond the time that most girls were in school [...] He gave me books to read" (40). This is the decisive moment of her entry into the phallic-ruled social and linguistic networks, which Lacan defines as the symbolic order. Out of her insecure social position as a black female in a colonized patriarchal culture comes her talent to speak English as a sign of power. She claims English as her own language. At age four she utters her first words: "Where is my father?" I said it in English — not French patois or English patois, but plain English — and that should have been the surprise: not that I spoke, but that I spoke English, a language I had never heard anyone speak" (7). She adds, "I learned to read and write very quickly [...] My ability was regarded unusual" (16). Although the game of linguistic fantasy is a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure for the Creole girl, it does offer her a brief psychic space. The previous scenes of nonrecognition (either her account of racism in the English school, or the weekly visits of her father to drop the bundle of dirty laundry) are the primal motivation for the journey of self-recognition through English language.

Xuela does speak the maternal, using her father's language, appropriated from the colonizers, but against the full force of the symbolic order. She says, "this education I was receiving had never offered me the satisfaction I was told it would; it only filled me with questions that were not answered, it only filled me with anger [...] it would lead to a humiliation so permanent that it would replace your own skin" (78-79). The self-possession she experiences from the

¹³Maggie Humm explains the historical significance of Creolization in Jean Rhys' literature which I find relevant and helpful to understand *The Mother of My Autobiography*. Humm explains that "the Creole Caribbean of the 1830s and 1840s was a society of bankrupt post-Emancipation white plantationers [...] In terms of the colonial/Creole order the action of the British law in emancipating the slaves from 1833 allowed Caribbean racial groups to enter society carrying with them their cultural backgrounds. Creolisation in this sense was an aspect of white control which was, necessarily, intensely specular [...]" (82-83). See Maggie Humm. 1991. *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

exercise of phallic power (reading and speaking English) is finally unsatisfying. In her mimicry of male subjectivity, something of her female otherness remains, nagging, subversive. Color structured Caribbean class position, and its genetic values inevitably associated the status of women with blood and family history. Her difference symbolizes namelessness, darkness, absence, and lack. She says, "I own nothing, I am not a man" (132). This passage also reflects the sense of the ferocity of the symbolic law, and its consequent denial of the empirical experiences of motherland is unmistakable. On her first day at school, she noticed on the wall of her classroom "a map; at the top of the map were words "THE BRITISH EMPIRE". These were the first words I learned to read" (14). The map is the colonial signifier of a conquered race, its economy, and geography.

The semiotics of the map can be seen in her father's face, body, and house; it is the sign of the colonial male's power and associated female disempowerment. She says:

His face was like a map of the world [...] his cheeks were two continents separated by two seas [...] He had a broad back. It was stiff, it was strong; it looked like a large land mass arising unexpectedly out of what had been flat; around it; underneath it, above it I could not go (91-92).

Even her father's big house is reduced to constricting walls with icons of empire and masculinity superimposed. She feels that it confines her: "his house had a view of the sea, the black Dominica sea, a sea that was a tomb, and his history which was made up of man and people was locked up in it" (185). The narrator adds, "I could not see anything of myself in this house; I could see others. I did not belong in it. I did not belong anywhere" (107). There is a sad irony in that the nearest Xuela comes to seeing her father positively as valuable is only when her father is lost into death. She says, "his skin then, just after he died, looked like the color of something useful" (212). Carole Boyce Davies explains that "the big house" as acquired by the black male, then becomes in literature by black women "a trope for Black/African nationalism and the parallel locus of final destruction of any positive relationship between Black men and women as Black manhood aligns itself with male dominance" (66). This may explain why Xuela, like her author, Jamaica Kincaid, is unable to assert a fixed and definable racial identity. She insists, "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so" (226). She cannot legitimate her own existence, let alone visualize a genuine future of her own nation/motherland. Clearly, race and nation are singled out here as colonizing signs produced by an essentializing and controlling power external to the inner self and bent on denying her access to spaces other than the ones to which she apparently belongs by virtue of her concrete situation.

Xuela's efforts to reject and transcend those myths of nationalism and race end in failure because she remains unable to imagine empowering and enabling counter myths. Having absorbed all the racist myths about miscegenation represented by her father, Xuela becomes a living symbol of sterility and barrenness. At the novel's end, which is also its beginning she is returning home – old, alone and childless. She says, "My body now is still [...] For years and years, each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning my heart's and mind's decision never to bring forth a child (225-226)." Surprisingly, for a novel that places such emphasis on the importance of maternal genealogy does not produce a child. The inclusion of this negation of motherhood within matrilineal narratives functions as an inner disruption; breaking the coherence of the framing maternal narrative directs our attention to the limitations of these narratives as a source of women's liberation. Kincaid underscores these limits through the sad narrative of Xuela's several abortions, Xuela says, "I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would be never a mother to them [...] I would destroy them with the carelessness of God" (96-97). This text articulates the subversive potential in this oppressive situation. Abortion is a point of liberation here. Thus, a link is made between Xuela's ownership of her body and her control of her own story and its writing: "This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become" (227-28). This strategy allows a greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of subjectivity, in and out of its biological

mandates and social constructs.

Xuela chooses not to be a mother herself, and distances herself forever from the illusory possibility of an unexamined and unmediated participation in the network of relations which constitutes culture/nation. She says, "I felt I did not belong to anyone, that since the one person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want anyone to belong to me" (104). She articulates not only her desire for autonomy in the very same male/white language of ownership, but also her freedom of choice in the related term of possession "belong". But to conceive of the self as that which can be possessed, and thus given away, necessarily assumes the possibility of self – as property, the same supposition that underlies slavery. As a woman tied by biology, race, and circumstances to the fate of being eternally reproductive, Xuela struggles to disengage herself from this self-sacrificing repetition, to produce a self, herself a speaking "I". She writes:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from (227-28).

The text's most radical strategy is the fusion between being the mother as she is written and resisting being a mother as she writes. Xuela can be read as the woman haunted by societal demands that she be a mother. She becomes the most clarifying representation of society's expectations and contradictions surrounding gender. She was born within a bounded space, and therefore rewrites the notion of limited spaces because of mothering

Tensions, then, exist around struggles to tell a difficult story; to place on record those things silenced or repressed, such as problematical responses to motherhood; to speak the unspeakable maternal pretext. Xuela is not the fostering caring figure but the narrow-minded reality, made by her own lack of choices. Gerda Lerner in her documentary history of *Black Women in White America* (1973) also dismisses the thesis of powerful nurturing black mothers: "The question of black "matriarchy" is commonly misunderstood. The very term is deceptive, for "matriarchy" implies the exercise of power by women, and black women have been the most powerless group in our entire society" (1973, xxiii). Xuela seems to recognize her incapability of reproduction because of the dead-endedness of black women's own traditions, burdens and legacies of colonization and slavery. There is a growing insistent sense that a larger and deeper memory is pressing itself upon our attention here. This deeper memory is expressed above all in a constant emphasis on the recurrent theme of abortion which repeats itself in the narrative so often that it has the force of an obsession. Xuela's actions must be measured and weighed against a destructive past, as a response to the atrocities of the past. Carole Boyce Davies explains a historical fact: "that there were Black women during slavery who terminated their babies' lives rather than allow them to be offered up to the destruction of slavery" (137). Kincaid is addressing what cannot be said about the M/m/other due to the repression and suppression imposed on her by her colonial-patriarchal culture, or as Michelean Adams names it " a motherless society propelled by the values of the father" (2006, 10).

The Autobiography of My Mother dwells on images, phrases and metaphors which connect and repeat themselves so often that it has a highly poetic hunting. Her vision of "the ship full of people" (137) is a major example. A large part of the experience being described is recognizably that of the slave ship which represents the very worst time of slavery. Kincaid has placed Xuela outside the historical experience of slavery. However, she contains the effects that slavery had its profound fragmentation of the self and of the connections the self might have with others. The singularly repetitive pattern of abortion, barrenness and "the ship full of people" would seem to point not to referents beyond the text but to the allegorical disfiguring of generation upon generation of black individuals whose plight of slavery is ignored or covered up, except in the memory of those who grieved for them. For her, "the ship full of people" is an eternal reality. There is a re-entry of the past into the present. "History was not only past: it was the past and it was also the present [...] I did not see the future" (138-139). In her essay "The Site of Memory" Toni Morrison argues that memory is like the overflowing of a river which, after being diverted or "straightened out", floods back

eventually to reclaim its original path. "Writers are like that", she argues, "remembering where we were, what valley we ran through [...] It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remembers as well as how it appeared" (1990, 305). In a more discursive reading, of the return of the ghost of the past, the narrative of *My Mother's Autobiography* becomes the ritualistic act which demonstrated the return of the repressed.

The Autobiography of My Mother is a deeply imagined historical novel, in which what is commonly called the supernatural is also the manifestation of history. Parts of the narrative treat Xuela's unsettling evidence of identity through the conventions of the woman-river story (her specific uncanny knowledge of her motherland). She writes:

I saw it happen. I saw a boy in whose company I would walk to school swim out naked to meet a woman who was also naked and surrounded by ripe fruit and disappear in the muddy waters where the river met the sea. He disappeared there and was never seen again. That woman was a something that took the shape of a woman. It was almost as if the reality of this terror was so overwhelming that it became a myth, as it happened a very long time ago and to other people, not us [...] they no longer believe what they saw with their own eyes, or in their own reality. (37)

If this nightmare/vision of the woman-river is the voice of collective loss of memory, the narrator is the voice of repressed memory. Like a haunting unfinished business, she returns irresistibly out of the margins of the past and the margins of contemporary consciousness. Furthermore, as it works communally, this memory is one of the ways by which "counter memory", to use George Lipsitz's concept, is created:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. [...] Counter-memory looks to the past' for the hidden histories excluded from the dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces the revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. (1990, 213)

This is similar to Freud's words, "something repressed which recurs", something supposedly dead returning painfully to life, through the supernatural at work in the world of common reality. Kincaid interweaves the extraordinary story of the river-woman within the commonplace of her matrilineal narrative. It seems that the destructive power of slavery is manifested here. For Kincaid this particular act of identification is a way of making sense of her own life. This manifestation of slavery haunts her people who had tried to repress the pain of its memory, but which must be faced and exorcized. As Adrienne Rich has put it, "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (1986, 237). The loss brought about the Imperialist patriarchal law and hegemony is a painful endorsement of separation and fragmentation, of lost connections to the mother/Motherland. It becomes a symbol of an obscure and occulted historical past. For Kincaid this past is mediated not through recollection but imaginative investment and creation.

This passage emphatically underlines the interrelation between the specificity of location/history and the demands of the river-woman for an audience and necessary attention. *The Autobiography of My Mother* draws a painstaking effort to be the voice of that occluded past, to fill the void of collective memory. Xuela says:

Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is without mercy. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it. Our God was not the correct one, our understanding of heaven and hell was not a respectable one. Belief in that apparition of a naked woman with outstretched arms beckoning a small boy to his death was the belief of the illegitimate, the poor, the low. I believed in the apparition then and I believe in it now. (38)

Sam Heigh explains the significance of the symbolic status of the river woman in the Caribbean folktales “as the most ancient mythological figure of the Antillean cultural imagination, a figure inherited, it would seem from the Carib Indians of before slavery” (2000, 197). He adds that there are “various other ‘river women figures: the Jamaican ‘river Muma’ or ‘Mammy Water’; river goddess of the Bahamas or of African-American communities” (201). In Kincaid’s narrative it is reminiscent also of another figure, again popular throughout the Caribbean: “that of the wicked ‘White Lady’. This is a figure who is usually depicted as evil and dangerous, has typically been taken to be a symbol of, and a warning against, the evils of slavery and colonialism” (201). This river woman is specifically harmful and dangerous to man, as they lure and tempt them to their deaths at the bottom of rivers or of the sea. Kincaid is attempting to imagine the other side of these folk stories, the side which has been silenced and covered over.

Far from pre-colonial purity, Kincaid creates Xuela as Creole figure – at once pre-colonial and colonial. Xuela is acting in non-stereotypical female figure. Kincaid adopted this tradition of the river-woman in the narrative in a renewed manner. Xuela herself acts as an evil or dangerous temptress of men. Very unusually, she does allow herself to love Roland, an African stevedore who steals bolts of Irish linen for her to make dresses from but abandons the relationship and the passion she felt for him. Xuela eventually marries her father’s friend the English doctor, Philip Bailey, after his first wife poisons herself. She worked as a nurse in his clinic. What Kincaid highlights is the recognizable socio-psychological trope, namely that of nurse that enables Xuela to be a visible role model of the Other, self-made into self, in the full density of otherness with her powerful language and the medical power of obeah. She says, “It was said of me that I had poisoned my husband’s first wife, but I had not; I only stood by and watched her poison herself every day and did not try to stop her [...] I had introduced the discovery to her – that the large white flowers of the most beautiful weed, [...] created a feeling of well-being and induced pleasant hallucinations” (207). In an act of revenge against Philip’s demanding first wife, Xuela decides “It was she who would lie down and die” (208). The narrator is prepared to cross psychic boundaries. She finds pleasure in becoming an Other in mirroring and reflecting the white wife. Xuela says,

We did not like each other [...] they had a quality of something other, something other than ourselves, we were human and they were not human, and each thing about them that was different from us made us doubt about their reality; they were cruel in ways we had never thought of [...] Her otherness was not particularly offensive; it was just that I became more familiar with it [...] I would always look forward to seeing her face, not with pleasure, from curiosity, and was always taken aback that it held nothing new: no softening, no tears, no regrets, no apology, she was a lady, I was a woman. (157-158)

The representation of mirroring allows Kincaid to rescue women from the allegorical closure of colonial imaginary. Ultimately, Xuela rejects Philip's wife because she is disconnected from the body. She is cold and sexless, even unnatural. Unlike Xuela, her relationship to the physical world is one of scorn and disdain.

The final section follows the married couple’s gloomy honeymoon and Philip’s bafflement at the abundance of nature, the Creole language he does not understand, the Island prevalent sensuality, the mysterious stranger he has just married, and above all a culture that seems secretive and frightening and that includes Obeah potions and spells. After they were married, they moved from Roseau the capital of Dominica “far away into the mountains, into the land where my mother and the people she was of were born” (206). She desires to possess him and merge with him in a pre-oedipal/pre-colonial return to an undifferentiated satisfaction of needs – thus, the rhythm of the narrative recapitulates her pattern of life. Kincaid even takes that journey further across the frontier of the imperial terrain. Her project is to break the boundary of race, as constituted by the paternal symbolic language, by attacking the racist misogyny of colonial men. The reciprocity of black women and white men, as a wife and a husband is a microcosmic reversal of misogyny and racism.

Invoking the biblical Adam’s sighting of his embarrassing nakedness in Genesis, Kincaid clearly represents

whiteness as a Fall. The white man is as an outcast in this novel. Kincaid involves a redefinition of the white body as well, this involves representing the white body as being unwholesome and unpleasant: "his hair was thin and yellow like an animal's that was not familiar with; his skin was thin and pink but had not yet reached the state that real skin is; it was not the skin of anyone I have loved yet and not the skin I dreamed of" (152). Xuela associates revolting feebleness with the white body, "you could see in his hands that he had no confidence, no public confidence and non in private either: his hands were small, not in proportion to the rest of his body; they were pale, the color of a bad-luck cockroach in its pupa stage; they were not the hands that could invent or gain a world, they were hands that could lose a world" (146). There is an obsession with apocalyptic sexual/racial encounter between the colonized and the colonizer. Kincaid continually depicts a continuum between geography and sexuality. As he awakes from the loss of his power in a forest garden, the white man first discovers his abandonment in horror. Thrown out of the 'symbolic' civilized of England, Philip faces the wild zone of feminine:

Each day he would walk along the perimeter of the land on which he lived; it would always remain strange to him, this land on which he had spent most of his life. He would stumble, he did not know its contours [...] coming to a place where the land had split into two, a precipice, an abyss, but even that was closed to him"(218-219).

This scene shows the difference between Xuela's intimate, intuitive understanding of landscape and her English husband's strong fear of its dangerous abundance and racial/natural freedom. She writes, "now he busied himself with the dead, arranging, disarranging, rearranging the books on his shelf, volumes of history, geography, science, philosophy, speculations: none of it could bring him peace" (224-25). Xuela is linked to a more complex knowledge made up of earth gods and Carib history and geography. It supports her through her first steps towards recovery of her self-respect, but much of it, she finds, must be discarded when she meets the reality. Her country paradise is flawed, overrun, like everywhere else, by white capitalism represented by her English husband. She says, "he looked at the land on which he lived, he made decisions, his decisions were limited to what pleased him, his idea of what might be beautiful, and then what was beautiful. He cleared the land; nothing growing on it inspired any interest in him"(222). Indeed, *The Autobiography of My Mother* lies between Philip's England and her extinguished Carrabin origins, between the opposite categories of colonizers and colonized.

However, Kincaid limits a patriarchal imperial territorial control in favor of the warm semiotic and complex matrix of motherland. By doing this, she managed taming of patriarchal imperialism. Away from the appropriating colonizer Philip, Kincaid shows that the Caribbean island is an image of the power of the semiotic (the pre-oedipal world):

He and I lived in this spell, the spell of history [...] Each morning the great mountains covered in everlasting green faced us on one side, the great swath of grey seawater faced us on the other. The sky, the moon and stars and sun in that same sky – none of these things were under the spell of history, not his, not mine, not any body's [...] to be part of something that is outside history, to be part of something that can deny the wave of the human hand. (218)

Kincaid establishes the return to the motherland as simultaneously threatening and desirable. For Xuela, it is overwhelmingly the place where her mother is; as such, it becomes the land of lost desire, holding the hope of her self-restoration. This return to the motherland is nourished by hopes of returning to an imaginary origin while knowing well that her pursuit is bound to remain unsatisfied. However, Xuela is both disarmingly casual about her accomplishments, and self-conscious that "I am not a people, I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time to make my actions be the actions of a people, to make my actions be the actions of a nation" (215-216). Conscious always of the dead weight of the past that cannot be fully exorcized, except in fantasy, Xuela refuses all the determining constraints of the personal,

and the domestic, to which she is heir. Xuela says:

I am of the vanquished, I am of the defeated. The past is a fixed point, the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge (215-216).

For Xuela, the past needs not be a burial place; it can be a holder of memories that can be called back to renew the present. Kincaid's emphasis on woman's traditional role, as guardian of the past, is to give the old tales new birth. She says, "he thought I made him forget the past; he had no future, he wanted only to be in the present [...] But who can really forget the past?" (221) In the end, this is how the narrator, like her author, chooses to define her place, determining the direction of the community in the light of her past burdens. What Kincaid says most clearly in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, is that there is no abiding home to inherit: women must make their world. Thus, reforming her "defeat" into "the beginning of [her] great revenge" will be her own arrangements to live by. She gives him a return to past/to the bottom of the river. This reminds us once more of traditional tales of river-woman, of young mermaids who assumes a human form in order to live with human man on land. She says, "he had become all the children I did not allow to be born, some of them fathered by him, some of them fathered by others" (224). Therefore, this journey could be interpreted as the biblical return to dust. She buried him in her motherland, "I could oversee his end also. I gave him a kind and sweet burial [...] What makes the world turn?" (224)

Though Xuela is caught in the imperialist hegemony of this mixed marriage, Kincaid allows her to be a first interpreter and a speaking subject: "He now lived in a world in which he could not speak the language. I mediated for him, I translated for him. I did not always tell him the truth [...] I blocked his entrance to the world in which he lived" (224). It is important to notice that if Kincaid does mediate historical events through women who remain inevitably marginal in dominant society, there are ways in which Kincaid invites the reader to thwart this domination. Kincaid deliberately celebrates an articulate Black woman, Xuela, who is authentically subversive of patriarchal history because she is positioned on the boundary between races, between languages and between histories. She says, "He spoke to me, I spoke to him; he spoke to me in English, I spoke to him in patois. We understood each other much better that way, speaking to each other in the languages of our thoughts [...] He was an heir, and like all such people the origin of his inheritance was a burden to him" (219-220). Xuela actively contests the male colonial power here with the vernacular language. Excluded out of the colonial 'symbolic' order of English/England, Philip is submerged in the colonized feminine vernacular. The narrative replaces the colonial gaze with a black semiotic vernacular as an example of the syncretic possibility of self/Other identification. Her continuous divergence between the rhythms of the vernacular voice and the limited colonial language is a clear example of Kincaid's faith in the black woman as bearer of linguistic variety and as maker of more complex dynamic of linguistic appropriation.

5. Conclusion

Kincaid has interrogated the notions of gender by which black woman has been subordinated and silenced. Fixed notions about the woman's role as mother, or indeed the need for a woman to be a mother at all, have been investigated in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Kincaid has dared to explore the inexpressible about motherhood. It is the heritage of the *mother* that the Afro-American woman must regain as an aspect of her own personhood – the power of the female/mother within. The search for self-definition beyond those imposed by race or gender has enabled Kincaid whose work I examined to identify a matrilineal source of self-expression, which she celebrates in the ancestral mother who inhabits her fiction. The psychoanalytic literature suggests that identifications are part of the process of individualization, a step prior to the separation by, and recognition of, the self as separate, autonomous. Yet in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela knits into the narrative of the self, powerful identifications with the dead mother, suggesting that such identification may be the end, rather than the beginning, of the process of individualization. The narrative is full and

empty of her mother; it denounces any presence/absence opposition. In this sense Kincaid's project is always necessarily contradictory: the revelation/representation of something that has never been and cannot be revealed or represented becomes a spiral of language which tries to open into new ways of perceiving and thinking. The use of language intersects with the work of feminist psychoanalysis explicating the underlying contradictions that disrupt her work. The narrative involves an elision of mother and daughter. In other words, we need to recognize the importance, among other things, of identifications and elisions – my mother/myself- to recognize their cultural/racial specificity and to recognize also that narration of the female self may not necessarily be narrations of the individual. This identification represents lineage and tradition, explanation and validation of the roots of identity, and offers us reinterpreting history in her defiant rejection of linear narrative of history. The juxtaposition of the contradictory psychoanalytic paternal and maternal makes *The Autobiography of My Mother* into, not an incoherent text, but an extraordinary accurate representation of the contradictions of femininity. The use of language explicates the underlying contradictions that disrupt the narrative as all. The text uses the paternal language to speak the connection to the maternal. The use of the father's language to make present the mother's body is the basis of the narrative; the daughter must both write and live to be the daughter of both parents. Xuela's presentation of her parents can thus be situated within both the Freudian understanding of the family, and the Lacanian emphasis on language as formative of all knowledge of self and other.

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الإنكار اللغوي للتعبير عن الأم: سياسة استرجاع النص الأمومي الجوهري الملهم للكتابة الإبداعية في رواية (السيرة الذاتية لأمي) الكاتبة الأمريكية جامايكا كنسايد

رباب طه الكساسبه *

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة ماهية تشكيل الهوية الجنسية كمفهوم ثقافي مكتسب في رواية (السيرة الذاتية لأمي) للكاتبة الأمريكية جامايكا كنسايد. وتمزج هذه الدراسة ما بين التفاعل النقدي النسوي النفسي مع أطروحات فرويد الأوديبية في تشكيل مفهوم الذكورة والأنوثة والعلاقة بين الأم والابنة، ذلك أن الأم هي المصدر الرئيسي لتحديد الهوية الجندرية للابنة وتطورها.

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى القاء الضوء على إشكالية الجدل الواقع في النقد النسوي في تلقيه للتحليل النفسي الفرويدي والتصدي له. تجد هذه الدراسة تطابقاً كبيراً ما بين الأطروحات النسوية النفسية الناقدة للتحليل النفسي حول الأنوثة عند فرويد وعمل الكاتبة الأمريكية جامايكا كنسايد "السيرة الذاتية لأمي" الذي يعنى بتشكيل الهوية الجندرية للفتاة وإشكالية العلاقة ما بين الأم والابنة في إطار الهوية العرقية الأفريقية.

أولاً: تقوم هذه الدراسة بالربط ما بين التحليل النفسي النسوي والذي قام بمجمله بمراجعة نظريات فرويد الأوديبية لأنها كانت من منظور ذكوري - حيث يعتقد ان الذكورة هي الأساس والمعيار في التكوينات الاجتماعية - وما بين فهم العلاقة الجوهرية ما بين الأم والابنة في ضل نواحي اجتماعية وسياسية معقدة وتبيان كيفية انعكاس هذه العلاقة في العمل الإبداعي النسوي للابنة ككاتبة.

ثانياً: تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على عناصر عديدة في هذا التصوير السردى الإبداعي لجدل العلاقة ما بين الأم والابنة، ومنها الاندفاع نحو العودة الى المرحلة "ما قبل الأوديبية" أي مرحلة النشأة في رحم "ما قبل اللغة". إذ ان اللغة هي الترسخ الرمزي للذكورة في الوعي الجمعي والثقافي، رغم ان هذه المرحلة ما قبل الأوديبية لا يمكن الوصول اليها من خلال اللغة، وهذا هو التحدي بالنسبة الى الابنة ككاتبة. إلا انها مهمة جدا لدمج شذمات النفس وفهم الخطاب النسوي حول الذات الإنسانية بأبعادها المجنسة.

إن هذه الدراسة تهدف الى إمطة اللثام عن ان الإلهام الأساسي للمشروع الإبداعي للكاتبة الابنة، هو علاقتها الجوهرية بالأم - الأصل والمنشأ - حيث أن هذا التحليل النفسي النسوي الناقد يتماهى تماما مع ما قدمته جامايكا كنسايد في "السيرة الذاتية لأمي". حيث توضح هذه الدراسة أن هذا هو المنطلق الإستراتيجي للكاتبة في مشروعها الإبداعي و ينبع من الإلهام الأساسي باسترجاع النص الأمومي من طي الإنكار اللغوي وجعله أساسا لصوت السرد الروائي، إذ تسعى الكاتبة الابنة لرفض الخطاب التقليدي ، وإعادة تشكيل واستعادة الأم وجعلها محور عملها. كذلك، تقوم هذه الدراسة بطرح أسئلة مهمة تحاول الأطروحات النسوية البحث عن إجابات لها: ما هو الرابط ما بين المرأة كنتاج مادي للتكوينات الاجتماعية والسياسية، وبين تصوير الابنة الكاتبة للذات الإنسانية بأبعادها الجنسية في العمل الإبداعي؟

الكلمات الدالة: جامايكا كنسايد، تصوير وتشكيل علاقة الأم-الابنة، الوطن الأم، المرأة السوداء، ما قبل الأوديبية، التحليل النسوي النفسي.

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