

# The Journey to Salvation in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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**Abstract—** The current research paper discusses the hardships women are enduring to maintain a powerful character that could resist the oppressive forces. Two segments are going to be examined throughout this study: the price children have to pay when parents are unfitted to their roles and the invasion of a homeland. The infestation of a native land and the people's subsequent loss of identity are comparable to the absence of a true mother. In this novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the protagonist explores her journey from the abused childhood to the independent adulthood. The novelist, Jamaica Kincaid, highlighted the autobiographical influences on the main character, XeuLa, besides the impact of the colonization of her home country.

**Keywords:** *Absent parents, Autobiography, Colonization, Jamaica Kincaid.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between children and their parents is one of the most fundamental and insightful ties that children can have. The relationship that is reflected as a bond between a mother and her daughter is the main focus of this research paper. The impact a mother could reflect on her daughter cannot be denied. Some of the most important duties of being a mother are: teaching values, providing a secure atmosphere for the child, and demonstrating unwavering love. In her novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Jamaica Kincaid was reared in Antigua by a mother who died at the moment of giving birth and a father who was rarely found.

The novelist and essayist Jamaica Kincaid, who belongs to a Caribbean origin, was born in 1949 to a middle-class family. The theme of being detached from her mother is a core point in most of her works due to the feeling of negligence when her three siblings were born. Poverty and other hard familial circumstances create a writer who demonstrates an exceptional moving style. As an adult, Kincaid felt increasingly alienated from the social and cultural environment she was raised in.

Nevertheless, the social alienation was due to the writer's homeland evasion at the hands of the colonizers. As a result, the theme of the colonized country parallels the absence of a biological mother. The novelist presents a fragmented character that is being split by the absence of a mother and the colonization of a mother country. It is the heroin's journey to overcome the spiritual fragmentation and maintain a full-imaged powerful woman that is looked upon as a model for

those powerless women who are forgotten at the margin of their society.

## II. DISCUSSION

An influential book, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) details how women's rights and land ownership were violated after the British conquered the Caribbean. Jamaica Kincaid follows both the exploited identity of Xuela, the protagonist, and the growth of her fractured self throughout the entire book. Kincaid alludes to the mother and the land that Xuela misses throughout the entire book as being interconnected (Adamson, 2002. p. 21).

A famous Carib lady author, Jamaica Kincaid, Elaine Potter Richardson at birth, was born in 1949. Her personal experiences have influenced her writing in significant ways. She has had a complicated relationship with her mother throughout her youth. Her life was influenced by poverty and lack of maternal care. Kincaid did not encounter her biological father until she was fully mature. Kincaid was deprived of her father's attention as an adult, thus she is firmly devoted to her missing mother (Braziel, 2009. p. 30).

Although Kincaid was a talented child, she was helplessly ignored by her parents which turned her life to be alienated from others. When her other siblings were born, her connection with her mother worsened. And it is this truth that inspired the novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Kincaid's Caribbean roots have also inspired her to integrate historical occurrences in her fictional and nonfiction writings. She concentrated on the history of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean after the British Empire colonized the region. Kincaid picks female heroines who live in a racist culture and have a dynamic mother-daughter bond in most of her creative works to accomplish this. For example, her books *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990) follow the protagonists' lives during colonization under the cruelty of British colonial ideology and a strained mother-daughter bond (Braziel, 2009. p. 35).

The writer's tale seeks to integrate crucial concerns in order to illustrate postcolonial themes that are prevalent at the moment. As a result, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is classed as postcolonial literature, which is the study of European colonization and its consequences for the society, culture, history, and politics of colonized areas. Kincaid, in reality, produces heroines who refuse being mistreated, socially or domestically, by greater powers. She places her characters in situations that they must overcome the colonial image of

women as inferior to men. The writer also emphasizes the significance of having a voice in a misogynistic culture, which leads to self-awareness and autonomy (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999. p. 64).

Furthermore, the trip from nothing to self-improvement is still challenging and requires both struggle and tenacity. It produces physical and mental distress, including detachment, disorientation, loss of identity, dread, lack of empathy, and other symptoms. Kincaid condemns a culture that tyrannizes women on two levels. First, as a woman living under male patriarchal domination, and second, as a woman created by warped colonial ideology. Kincaid's most famous work, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, presents a protagonist whose life is marked by grief and estrangement. She begins the story with a sense of loss and gloom to portray the character's existence (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999. p. 70).

#### A. *Violated Childhood*

As both she and her mother are of Caribbean descent, Xuela, the heroin, inherited the virtues of vulnerability and helplessness. The disappearance of her mother, who passed during giving birth to Xuela, adds to her reality's gloom. Xuela will be haunted by the destruction of her territory and the resulting love for her mother until the end of the book. She finds herself in the midst of a path with no clear beginning or ending (Morris, 2011). The novel's opening paragraphs provide the reader a glimpse to Xuela's troubled history and unclear destiny:

My mother died `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 ... and this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 3)

Her father is a cold-blooded individual who cares only about his authority and possessions. He doesn't care about his newborn daughter and is willing to abandon her anyplace in order to get rid of her:

When my mother died, leaving me a small child vulnerable to all the world, my father took me and placed me in the care of the same woman he paid to wash his clothes. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 4)

Xuela's father abandons her to Ma Eunice, his maid, because of his roughness. As she becomes older, Xuela wants to keep a good relationship

with her father, but he ignores her and even forbids her from telling him about her mother's memory. Kincaid establishes a link in the scene where Xuela's father takes her to the maid by having him carry Xuela in one hand while holding a pile of dirty clothing in the other (Kaye, 1990. p. 119) In that painful time, Xuela feels abandoned in a vast universe devoid of affection and care:

It is possible that he emphasized to her the difference between the two bundles: one was his child ... the other was his soiled clothes. He would have handled one more gently than the other, he would have given more careful instructions for the care of one over the other, he would have expected better care for one than the other, but which one I do not know, because he was a very vain man, his appearance was very important to him. That I was a burden to him, I know; that his soiled clothes were a burden to him, I know; that he did not know how to take care of me by himself, or how to clean his own clothes himself, I know. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 10)

Xuela admits that she hasn't received the care any child supposed to have. she helplessly realized that she has to take the lead herself and to maintain a powerful personality to survive (Kaye, 1990. p. 51). She responds to her own thoughts and acts in accordance with her own will because she rejects to be seen as a sufferer or to be pitied by others.

#### B. *The Invasion of a Homeland*

Racism has an additional impact on Xuela's humiliated soul as her father was taken by the supremacy of the white society. He is a materialistic individual who is interested in accumulating wealth and moving up the social scale to attain a noble status (Shlensky. 2012 p. 44). White racism has an impact on people's personal lives as well, which encourages a white man to quickly reject his children of color:

I saw my father every fortnight, when he comes to get his clean clothes. I never thought of him as coming to visit me; I thought of him as coming to pick up his clean clothes. When he came, I was brought to him and he would ask me how I was, but it was a formality; he would never touch me or look into my eyes. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 20)

Additionally, the fact that Xuela has multiple identities adds to the complexity of her life. Her mother is of Caribbean descent, while her father is Scottish and African in origin. Her father lied about having black African ancestry and instead chooses to adopt the privileged identity of an Englishman (Collins, 1990 p.30). He respects the conquerors' dominance and their treatment of the helpless, vanquished natives as objects of contempt. He loves becoming a law enforcement officer with the power to intimidate others. He is a prisoner whose life is associated with brutality and absurd philosophy. To gain a better status, he poses as a brave and honest person, but he is not:

Who is my father? Not just who was he to me, his child-but who was he? He was a policeman but not an ordinary policeman... he was a jailer, he spoke falsehoods, he took advantage of the weak; that was who was he at heart; he acted in these ways at all times in his life, but by the end of his life, the jailer, the thief, the liar, the coward- all were unknown to him. He believed himself to be a man of freedom, honest and brave; he believed it as he believed in the realness of anything he could see standing in front of him, like the warmth of the sun or the blueness of the sky, and nothing could convince him that just the opposite was the truth. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 33)

Additionally, Xuela's mother carries additional pressures as a result of her Caribbean heritage. The Caribbean inhabitants have always been associated with oppression and submission (Shlensky, 2012. p. 45). The strict regulations imposed by the British conquerors ruin their way of life. The colonization of the territory contributes to the development of racial and sexual prejudice, which has an impact on the lifestyles of individuals. The oppressive British doctrine, which allied with men against women, is enforced on Caribbean women. Kincaid is outraged by the idea of degrading someone according to their color or gender (Morris, 2011. p. 23).

For her part, Xuela dismisses the word "weakness" out of her ideology in life. She hates helpless individuals whose fates are decided by a greater authority (Hudson-Weems, 2006). As a member of a Caribbean people who have not resisted British conquerors, Xuela detests sharing her mother's background:

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. They were wrong but I did not tell them so. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 30)

Xuela does not identify with anyone's race or identity in the midst of such a perplexing muddle of identities. She is alone and lost in her enigmatic past and uncertain future:

I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe people who do so. The crime of these identities, which I know no more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear. Am I nothing, then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 35)

Accordingly, Xuela struggles hard to maintain a new persona whose sole guiding principle is independence. As she lacks the proper mother care at her birth and childhood, Xuela learns how to manage a personal life in which she is the one and only leader:

I spoke to myself because I grew to like the sound of my own voice. It had a sweetness to me, it made my loneliness less, for I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I could recognized something of myself. Because who was I? My mother was dead; I had not seen my father for a long time. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 40)

Xuela never learns to love anyone or feels affection from anyone because she does not experience the motherly support like any other child in the world. She continuously trains herself how to lead a life devoid of love (Fernald, 1995). Xuela persuades herself that life is better without love in order to develop a robust personality that could withstand the challenges of life. She was not even thankful to the woman who raised her up as she couldn't define the concept of love in her course of life:

I never grew to love this woman my father left me with, this woman who was not unkind to me but who could not be kind because she did not know how- and perhaps I could not love her because I, too, did not know how... Love would have defeated me. Love would always defeat me. In an atmosphere of no love I could live well; in this atmosphere of no love I could make a life for myself. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 42)

English countryside idealized. (Kincaid, 1996. p. 64)

However, the author develops her own revolting perspective against colonial exploitation through the distinctive character of Xuela. She tries to illustrate the destructive impact of European dominance on Dominica's society. The British government colonized Dominica at a time when Englishmen held positions of power (Shlensky, 2012). They stripped the land of its identity and used their authority to rule it. They inflict great mental and bodily suffering on the weak people by imposing a patriarchal regime (West, 2003). When colonized people revere their land as much as they revere a mother, colonizers trample on it and rape it for their own selfish financial gain. The author is against how colonizers rule and alter peoples' ideology.

The author offers proofs to refute the strong attacker's dominance over the defenseless hostage. The protagonist's early childhood was marked by her muteness due to the lack of familial love. That childhood disfigurement was not noticed by her parents: "Until I was four I did not speak. This did not cause anyone to lose a minute of happiness; there was no one who would have worried about it in any case, I knew I could speak, I did not want to " (Kincaid, 1996. p. 20). Nevertheless, when the heroin could finally overcome that obstacle and manages to speak, she utters that in English language: "Where is my father?", "I said it in English- not French patois or English patois, put 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." (Kincaid, 1996. p. 21)

Even stranger is the fact that colonization's negative effects extend to even innocent children, not only the tyranny of the land or people's lives. Xuela speaks the invader's language out of the blue, which is proves that the history of the place has been thoroughly destroyed. The identity of the people is destroyed, and the innocent children's mother tongue is eradicated (Morris, 2011). In addition, Kincaid develops a heroine who has an innate desire to oppose imperial beliefs since she was a young girl. The aggressor's imposed control over Xuela's thoughts and perceptions has no impact on her.

When she was younger, Ma Eunice warned Xuela not to break a priceless plate with a special illustration of a natural landscape and the word "HEAVEN" engraved on it, but Xuela disregarded her advice. In reality, the image on the plate depicts an idyllic English farmland rather than heaven. For Xuela, the image symbolizes the invaders' false vow in an effort to persuade people that their presence is for the benefit of the occupied (West, 2003). Consequently, Xuela distinguishes the idealization disguise of the conquerors:

This picture was nothing but a field full of grass and flowers on a sunny day, but it had an atmosphere of secret abundance, happiness, and tranquility; underneath it was written in gold letters the one word HEAVEN. Of course it was not a picture of heaven at all; it was a picture of the

Xuela is adamant about fighting the unwanted foreign culture. Even after receiving harsh punishment from Ma Eunice for smashing the dish, she does not feel sorry about it. Furthermore, Xuela is distinguished by her rapid maturity and acute awareness. Mutually, Xuela is unable to interact with individuals her own age. She forges her own path into life while rejecting outsiders' perceptions of her. In order to be the kind of self-sufficient that gives her independence, she turns to her own heart and herself. Due to the loss of both her mother and her practical father, Xuela must constantly battle for her life.

### III. CONCLUSION

The protagonist of this distinguished novel spent a life filled with hardship and pain, enduring many challenges and difficulties. Xuela is a perfect example of a powerful woman who dedicates her entire life to maintain her independence. She innovates a society where she is the lone ruler from absolutely nothing. The difficulties and losses in Xuela's life are evident. Her father improved to be absent all the way through and her mother passed away the time her child was born. No consolation was offered to her to survive in this life, her hardships started the moment she was born as a result she had to lead that sorrowful journey towards her salvation.

The novel tracks her difficulties, emotions, and circumstances as she strives to make her place in an environment without a parent, following her path from infancy to school to maturity. The Autobiography of My Mother, which examines concepts of grief, loneliness, and personality development, was criticized for its unusual storytelling and devoid of a standard storyline but lauded for its rich accounts and individualized character development. In a setting that is unfriendly to her because of her color and gender, Xuela finds it difficult to maintain a powerful character.

In her journey to salvation, the heroin investigates the colonization of her homeland paralleled to the loss of her parents. She was deprived of her parents the same way she was deprived of her mother country. The invasion of her mother country alongside her parent's absences serve in her alienation. The writer emphasizes that the invasion of a homeland is similar to the absence of a real mom, a homeland is a real mother.

Jamaica Kincaid creates a protagonist who works as a model for those oppressed women all over the world. The journey from muteness to outcry sharpens her character as an independent woman who manages to overcome the absence of her parents and the invasion of her town. The model of this novel was born in the very bottom of a society as a trivial creature that has no existence in that community. She manages to lead her life throughout the hardships and maintain a powerful character that knows no succumb.

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