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Empowering the Self: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* and *China Men* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*

(A Comparative Study)

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ABBREVIATIONS

AJ	*Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid
CM	*China Men* by Maxine Hong Kingston
L	*Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid
WW	*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston

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INTRODUCTION

Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-), a second generation Chinese immigrant in the United States, and Jamaica Kincaid (1949-), an immigrant from the British ex-colonized Antigua living in the States, have acquired remarkable literary positions as leading American writers and have been honored with several awards. Interestingly, there is much in common between the yellow-skinned Kingston of the black curtains and the black-skinned Kincaid of the yellow daffodils. The thesis reads Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) and Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983) and *Lucy* (1990) comparatively as postcolonial autobiographical narratives of women of color in America who identify with their home cultures, the Chinese and the Caribbean. The two women, belonging to racial minorities marginalized by the mainstream dominant culture, write from a gendered, racialized position that reflects their understanding of the construction of gender relations and oppression both in the American and their home cultures and also their understanding of the historical, social, cultural, sexual, racial, and class complexities of women of color in America. Moreover, both women emphasize an empowering yet smothering mother's nurturance and seek self-knowledge through autobiographical writing.

Kingston and Kincaid, from the position of daughters of dominating mothers and the position of females in families that prefer male children and

societies that are governed by patriarchal ideologies and from the position of a racialized/colonized, need to empower the self. They become aware of this need when they search for identity. Empowering the self is studied in their texts as to mean having the right and the ability to choose for oneself, to express oneself, to act, to be oneself, to be free, autonomous, and independent. The thesis has not assumed in advance certain strategies to be investigated in the texts as female strategies of empowering the self, but, on the contrary, the strategies have emerged from the texts and inspired the comparative perspective.

The thesis studies the texts as narrative forms of female self-representation engaged basically with the central concerns of autobiography: the constructions of self and identity in cultural contexts of time and space. It traces the developmental process of Kingston's and Kincaid's self-formation through their individual experiences and analyzes their identity-construction on a postmodern ground which understands identity as changeable and unsubstantial, in a life-long process of construction and reconstruction. It finds in these autobiographical narratives an authentic source to study female autobiographical writing as a means of female self-knowledge and self-empowerment which it presumes are the product of the intersection between gender and genre.

Both volumes together of each author are necessary for the study; Kingston's *China Men* serves as a postscript to *The Woman Warrior* to narrate other

complementary fragments of her self-development and identity-construction in relation to her father after defining herself in relation to her mother in *The Woman Warrior*, whereas Kincaid's *Lucy* functions as a complement to *Annie John* even though the two works were initially published as independent pieces in the *New Yorker* prior to their appearance in book form. The thesis refers to the first-person narrator/protagonist in *The Woman Warrior* as Kingston and Kingston-as-Fa Mu Lan, in *China Men* as Kingston, and in *Annie John* and *Lucy* as Kincaid-as-Annie John and Kincaid-as-Lucy. Most critics identify both narrators in Kingston's two works with Kingston herself who admits the autobiographical element in her works and gives the reader this possibility by adding the supplement "*Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts"* to the main title *"The Woman Warrior"*. Besides, she says in an interview that *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are like "one big book. I was writing them more or less simultaneously" (Pfaff Interview, 25). Kincaid also invites the reader to equate Annie John and Lucy with herself. She says in an interview that Lucy can be a continuation of Annie John "only in the sense that it's about my life and it's the same life I'm writing about, but they weren't meant to be the same person at all … I'm not interested in making the thing whole, I'm interested in parts of things" (Vorda Interview, 99). All the details in her two books direct the reader to think of Lucy as an older version of Annie John, to identify Lucy with Annie John and both with Kincaid herself.

Most of the stories of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* take place in China and America, *Annie John*'s take place in Antigua, and *Lucy*'s take place in Antigua and America telling about the authors, their parents, and their grandparents. While the thesis is not concerned with autobiographical truthfulness and the factuality of events in the narratives and never claims to bring the comparison to a level of generalization, it stresses Kingston's and Kincaid's preoccupation with the same issues however different their perspectives are.

In analyzing Kingston's and Kincaid's individual experiences of mother-daughter relationships, the thesis draws much from the feminist studies of Chodorow, Flax, Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva and others which stress the importance of the daughter's pre-oedipal attachment to her mother, discuss the mother's domination of her daughter, and see the mother-daughter relationship as "continuous, plural, in process" (Hirsch, 210). Chodorow's developmental model of female selfhood stresses the role of the primary attachment of a girl to her mother and the mother's tendency to experience her daughter as continuation of herself, hence the daughter's involvement in issues of identification with and separation from her mother. In analyzing the relationships of the protagonists with others, the thesis assumes that identifying the self with others is one of the protagonists' strategies in their search for identity. The protagonists create self-identity by exploring the self in its relations with others and establish self-

knowledge in a context of a deep awareness of others. This assumption is very much in alignment with the feminist perspective in psychoanalytical objects-relations theory which argues that the female seeks self-identity relying on “a fundamental definition of self in relationship” (Chodorow 1978, 169).

The question of national identity is problematic to Kingston, who, not after a long time and much hesitation, comes to strongly claim her national American identity. Kingston’s complexity stems from her sense of belonging to both countries; the China of her parents, the far away imagined homeland where she has never been and the real America where she lives and has been born yet she is seen as an outsider by the Americans. Kincaid, on the other hand, has no doubt about her Caribbean national identity however her complexity is grounded in her rejection of that homeland where she belongs and consequently her decision to remain the permanent immigrant who will never return home. Paquet argues in *Caribbean Autobiography* that Kincaid, like other immigrant Caribbean writers, believes that her “Caribbean cultural geography”, her island—whether as a nation or as a colonial territory at the time when she leaves it and afterwards as a postcolonial territory—is “not sufficient as a staging ground for her individual identity”, nevertheless, her self-representation registers “her strategies of self-preservation” of the Caribbean identity against “the pervasive sense of personal loss that accompanies radical social change” (2002, 259-261).

In *Questions of Travel*, Kaplan explains that the notion of a politics of location in feminist criticism assumes that "identities are formed through an attachment to a specific site—national, cultural, gender, racial, ethnic, class, sexual, and so on" with the assertion that "that site must be seen to be partial and not a standard or norm" (25). Accordingly, Kincaid's Caribbean identity seems to be formed during the seventeen years she spends at home. In Kingston's case, identity is formed through the attachment to more than one site. And moreover, China is an imagined site nevertheless most of its specifications have some influence on her identity. Kingston's and Kincaid's separation from family-home/home can be considered as a movement in space which does not erase their abilities to preserve and restore, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or undelibrately, what is important to each of them; that which is acquired from the place she has left. Considering their disturbance about their sense of belonging to a certain place and their much often sense of estrangement in the 'here' and 'there', 'home' and 'away', 'inside' and 'outside', the concept of space in their works rings a bell to that of Bachelard's in *The Poetics of Space*, in which space is nothing but a "horrible outside-inside" (218):

> Outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides. . . . The center of "being-

> there" wavers and trembles. Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of possibility of being. (217-8)

In postmodern theories of identities and geographies, the terms 'travel', 'displacement' and 'exile' have acquired several linked and contradictory concepts. The thesis uses 'travel' to mean the voluntary movement of the solitary protagonists in geographical locations, and uses 'displacement' to refer to the psychological impact of their estrangement. Referring to the protagonist as an 'exile' has no particular political significance or a historically specific definition but to express the protagonist's displacement which is psychologically rooted in singular rather than collective terms, while 'exile' as a physical location has been used to refer to the new place of dwelling at a distance from the point of origin, away from family-home/home.

The Woman Warrior, *China Men*, *Annie John* and *Lucy* come as literary representations of the postcolonial concerns about displacement, the rupture between self and place, and the crisis of identity of the oppressed by a dominant racial group. Postcolonial literary theory pronounces the inability of Euro-American theories "to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing" (Ashcroft et al, 11), hence the need for its methods for the reading of these texts:

> Post-colonial theory has proceeded from the need to address this different practice. Indigenous theories have developed to accommodate the differences within the various cultural traditions as well as the desire to describe in a comparative way the features shared across those traditions. (11)

The feminist attitude in Postcolonial literary theory argues that most feminist scholarship and politics have assumed a white subject and calls to read the writings of women of color, postcolonial women and postcolonial women's writings to investigate what feminism means to women of non-Western cultures. Kingston's and Kincaid's works, therefore, offer a rich material for research in this discipline. Like many women in many societies and like many women of color in America, Kingston and Kincaid are in the peripheries and margins of their societies; they are, as Nfah-Abbenyi describes postcolonial women, "multiple fragments burdened by a discourse that is disabling in multiple ways". From a comparative viewpoint, their works agree with Nfah-Abbenyi's supposition that as there are "diverse and differing voices within feminism(s)", likewise "there can be no one, 'unified' post-colonial literature or theory" (19) as both of them experience oppression and write from a position of marginality imposed by race, class, and gender yet from a different perspective. Kingston writes from a Chinese "diasporic perspective" which generates new opportunities for "postcolonial reevaluations of politics in ethnic identity formation and cultural transformation" (Liu, 1). Kincaid, on the other hand,

writes from the colonized's perspective to show the many destructive ways colonialism, as a system based on racism, exploitation, and oppression, has effected her self and her daily life and to assert her need to cleanse the colonial heritage of inferiority and submission to achieve her self-decolonization.

In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* and *Annie John* and *Lucy*, Kingston and Kincaid can be read as postmodern female versions of "the artist as displaced person" (Levin, 64). Their sense of displacement seems to be more of a dominant psychological mood than being basically linked to the physical space. As both of them leave their homes without reluctance searching for self-identity in the new place, they tend to be ready to face the new situation. Kingston's and Kincaid's awareness, as female writers, of their cultural displacement becomes empowering because it helps them to accept the contradictions, create new subjectivities for themselves and create new relationships with the new place. Therefore, their ability to embrace displacement in exile agrees with Edward Said's theory of literary critical practice as a process of distance and displacement that enable insight and creativity:

> On the one hand, the individual mind registers and is very much aware of the collective whole, context, or situation in which it finds itself. On the other hand, precisely because of this awareness—a worldly self-situating, a sensitive response to the dominant culture—that the individual consciousness

> is not naturally and easily a mere child of the culture, but a historical and social actor in it. And because of that perspective, which introduces circumstance and distinction where there had only been conformity and belonging, there is distance, or what we might call criticism. (1983, 15)

The private cannot be separated from the political; the private is the political in Kingston's and Kincaid's works. Their experiences "defy any apolitical reading of [their] texts" (Fox-Genovese, 67) that attempts to trace the aspects of their self-empowerment as female writers of color in America. As marginal groups in a racial society, what hurts them most is what Said terms as the Western "positional superiority" (1978, 7). Their self-empowerment, in consequence, cannot be attained apart from political and social considerations which condition, restrict, and influence their self-development and identity-construction. Like most people of marginal groups, and as it is noticed in their works, they "have little investments in concepts of unity, coherence, and universality because their own political efficacy depends upon forcing a recognition of the value of difference and diversity upon the dominant culture" (Schueller, 52). Therefore, their self-empowerment is realized through and is implied in their ability to "celebrate marginality as a position of writing and not to postulate a new source of authority or a new hierarchy" (57).

The development of the feminist awareness of the fictional counterparts of Kingston and Kincaid as