



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Two Cheers for the Resistant Subject: Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy***

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**ABSTRACT**

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This paper is an exploration of Jamaica Kincaid's novella *Lucy* (1990) to ascertain the protagonist's character as a resistant subject. Lucy registers the postcolonial-feminine rewriting project by standing against the dominant culture and by rewriting her identity. She asserts and informs the Centre of her difference and thus challenges the hegemonic discourse. She has a crucial subject position and offers an interesting point of reference with regard to her ambivalent relationships with the native land and with the so-called superior culture to which she is exposed. Therefore, the paper intends to locate Lucy's resistance in terms of her displacement, as her character is torn between two cultures of home and not-home which resultantly cultivate extreme ambivalence in her. The argument leads to an unavoidable merger of the two terms ambivalence and displacement, which finally corresponds to Lucy's resistant relationship with her mother/mother-land and with the colonizer.

**Introduction**

Ambivalence is a term primarily developed in psychoanalysis by Robert Young. It describes a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action (Young 161). In Weisbrode's words: "Between wanting and doing—desire and action—lies ambivalence" (5). Homi K. Bhabha adapted the term into colonial discourse theory. He applied it to the nature of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. For him that relationship is essentially ambivalent because the colonized subject is never completely and simply opposed to the colonizer. Neither does ambivalence assume that while some of the colonized subjects are 'resistant', others are 'complicit'. Rather it gives the suggestion that resistance and complicity both exist together in the form of a fluctuating relationship within the colonial subject. The way in which colonial discourse relates itself to the colonized subject is also characterized by ambivalence. Colonial discourse can

simultaneously be exploitative and representing itself as nurturing. It is because of this inherent duality that while it aims at producing compliant subjects who can 'mimic' the colonizer—in other words, can reproduce its values, habits and assumptions—it is only able to produce ambivalent subjects whose mimicry can any time lead to mockery. This fluctuation between mimicry and mockery is the essence of ambivalence. And such ambivalence is not only disempowering for the colonial subject. It can fundamentally unsettle colonial dominance too. This makes it ambivalent or two-powered. The effect of simultaneous attraction and repulsion is the production of profound disturbance for hegemonic discourse (Ashcroft et al 12-3). Hence ambivalence dislocates the colonizer as the colonized subject, instead of reproducing the values and assumptions of the colonizer through mimicry, adopts mockery by means of a counter-discursive (Bhabha 85-92).

### Theoretical Background

Displacement versus place denotes a complex interaction of history, environment and language in the experience of colonized peoples. These two parallel concepts also demonstrate how important location and space are in the process of identity formation. In any society's cultural discourse, 'place' becomes an issue only when colonial intervention fundamentally unsettles the key modes of its representation by separating place from space (Ashcroft et al 177). Place as a sense always remains embedded in legend, language and history of any culture; but it is an overwhelming discursive interference of colonialism which makes this a concept of struggle and contention. The sense of place can be disrupted by colonial intervention in many ways. Such intervention can impose a feeling of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies; it can physically alienate large populations of colonized peoples through forced migration, slavery or indenture; it can disturb the representation of place in the colony by imposing the colonial language. A sense of dislocation—a 'gap'—between the environment and the imported language used to describe it, between the 'experienced' place and the descriptions provided by the language, is fallout of colonialism in collective colonial experience: "I had memory, I had anger, I had despair" (Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* 134).

In the present study, the use of the term ambivalence adds to it by going beyond the prescribed relationship, as Lucy's resistant character offers a study of the ambivalent relationship between the colonized subjects (with/in family for example) as well.

### Discussion

Lucy as an 'islander' has a long history of displacement. Her ancestral migration was a forced one, but hers is the result of her own feelings of being 'not-at-home' even at her birthplace. Displacement, in her case, points not only to a state of being away from a place i.e. home; but also to a psychological or mental abandonment of the symbols of home. Her refusal to be identified and described by

both patriarchal systems at home (Mother/mother-land) and in exile (Mariah) fosters her ambivalent relationship with the two cultures respectively. Lucy's exile is a chosen one, and in the face of this exile her poverty and her 'history' are the only things which she can ultimately claim as her own. At the end she owns only despair, anger and memory. In the metropolis of New York City, the identity she chooses for herself is that of an artist who cannot go 'back home'. Lucy's expatriation is linked to colonial history as well as neocolonial alienation. But through her decision of staying abroad the narrative demonstrates a stepping beyond the all-too-known postcolonial myths of return and cultural reconnection. In fact, the text works as a battlefield deconstructing the assumptions of oppositional narratives of displacement and exile. Such narratives – forming the center of postcolonial, particularly Caribbean, literary canon – celebrate 'return' as the inevitable result of the estranging experience of 'exile'.

History of colonialism and the contentious role of homeland, of yearnings for identity and origin gave birth to the ideological narratives of 'return'. In Michael Dash's words, "the dialectical relationship between the disorientation of exile and the plenitude of belonging can be seen as a mediative exercise, a means of imaginatively negotiating the trauma of Caribbean history" (451). Colonial discourse belongs to the category of modernist discourses; and in the development of these discourses the trope of exile plays an important role. It is this trope which helps to generate a space of colonial desire. In the colonial discourse, the 'real' landscape of exile evokes nostalgia for 'home' by highlighting cultural differences in colonial terms of civilized versus native. Hence discursive links exist between the notions of exile and nostalgia. And Karen Kaplan particularly expounds these links and interprets how "manifestations of nostalgia participate in Euro-American constructions of exile: nostalgia for the past; for home; for a 'mother-tongue'" (33). Such identifications of the complicities between nostalgia and exile in colonialist discourses of Euro-American modernity can be taken as a sound rationale to justify why Kincaid deliberately keeps away from romantic plots of self/other, Home/Away, exile/return and cultural difference.

However the narrative powerfully and persistently goes on invoking the past. In fact, the major portion of the novel is obsessively preoccupied with memory. Lucy begins her nostalgic monologue from the moment she arrives at 'the center', and for the first time encounters her "fixture of fantasy" (4). It is the starting point of her education in disillusionment, now more evident than before. This disillusionment confirms that she cannot escape the burden of being born into an already-defined world. She has little room to assert her own self and make her presence felt. Her original plan was to start life afresh. This migration from the margin to the centre was carried under a complete denouncement of home and its values, family and its ties. She had decided to dissociate herself completely from a dying rigid world. But the cultural shock of the new forces her to relocate herself in the old world:

A person would leave a not very nice situation and go somewhere else,

somewhere a lot better, and then long to go back where it was not very nice. . . . But now I, too, felt that I wanted to be back where I came from. I understood it, I knew where I stood there. (6)

It is the realization that one cannot get rid of one's past. People carry their own experience of reality with them wherever they go. She instinctively starts judging the present in the light of her past experiences at home; and she continues to compare things by juxtaposing them with her past throughout the narrative. This yearning and looking back at home instills in her a process of simultaneous attraction and repulsion both for her past preoccupations and relationships and for the places, persons and objects around her at the present.

Lucy portrays her life back at home as an agitated affair. She as a rebellious young girl challenges the ideological framework of her family life and local traditions. She refuses to identify herself with the dominant ideology and wishes to escape from it through migration. Her outcry, "After all, aren't family the people who become the millstone around your life's neck?" (8), represents her desire to free herself from a system which sucks personal liberty and does not offer any support to eccentric behaviour or free will. She protests for being constructed as a woman by patriarchal society which demands conformity on her part and would like to see her fit in her expected role. Her vow to teach her children 'bad' words is indicative of her individual attempt to overthrow the hierarchy. Her strong hatred for men folk is another attempt to do the same. She challenges man made sexual taboos and myth of virginity and she continues with her feminine project in the foreign culture also: "By then I already knew that I wanted to have a powerful odor and would not care if it gave offense" (27). Her mother performs the rituals which Lucy strongly detests. That is why she shuns away from her claiming that, "I had come to feel that my mother's love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her. . . ." (36). She does not open letters from home and finally gives a fake mailing address to her mother. She dislocates herself from a place which though warm and affectionate, was reducing her to a non-entity. This process however adds a romantic aura to her past for her and it is always present as a haunting memory which forces her to remind herself continuously, "I could not go back" (10).

Lucy's ambivalent relationship with her mother and her desire to disidentify herself from her mother opens up the question of power which governs their relationship. The power principle becomes more evident when the mother stands for mother-land or home: "My past was my mother" (90). In this connotation, 'mother' acts as a determining force which exerts its powers over every individual and particularly over an individual growing as a woman. This power structure of a society produces resistance in those who see themselves as victims of it, and subsequently they desperately try to avert from it. No wonder Lucy hates her mother (mother-land), and this hatred inculcates extreme anger in her as she, despite of her persistent struggle, fails to neglect her social make up, class, race and gender. The ghost of her history keeps tormenting her.

But Lucy alone is not responsible for her history as she wonders, "How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?" (41). Her anger gains a new vent when she continues with her project to assert herself in 'the centre'. Her displacement in the centre begins with her disillusionment from an unexpected cultural encounter, which reminds her that "how uncomfortable the new can make you feel" (4). All things together; the apartment, the elevator, the refrigerator, the day-old food, the pale-yellow sun, and the weather make her an outsider. She recognizes that being an 'islander', her position in 'the new world' will not offer her any other status than that of a slave. In other words, she carries the burden of her history with her. The fact that she is a product of the slave-trade and 'the beautiful happy family' is representative of those who benefited from it, establishes a complicated ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The gulf between the two is too vast and enormous. They can not coexist at the same plane. The differences of linguistic codes, nature of experience, economic and social set up, history, customs, and beliefs can never be erased or homogenized. This relationship will always be associated with power. In no other terms the colonizer and the colonized can coexist than dichotomies of master/slave, self/other.

Lucy is addressed as a 'visitor' and an 'islander'. The superior tone and pseudo-sympathetic concern of Mariah and Lewis and a show off of patronizing humane approach toward her, expose a typical mind set of the colonizers. Lucy is hardly considered as an equal, as an individual who possesses a 'free will' or who has a right to personal freedom. She, for them, represents a race, a region and an awful history. That she can have 'ideas', 'view points', and a definite stance regarding her 'personal liberty', is something very shocking to Mariah. Lucy is continuously misread and misinterpreted in the centre and she in her turn persistently tries to put them correct. The misreading of Lucy's dreams: "Dr. Freud for Visitor" (15), and "What a history you have" (19); shows a failure of any possible communication between the colonizer and the colonized. Meanings, notions, and views will always be misunderstood in the absence of a linguistic machine which interprets it correctly. Such a device can never be invented perhaps.

Lucy's relationship with Mariah is as complicated and ambivalent as her relationship with her mother: "The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother" (58). In fact, she recalls the image of her mother whenever she appreciates the woman in Mariah, someone with good intentions and protective behaviour. She comes to love Mariah as she can share with her all her feelings and emotions; something that her mother could not offer her. But the moments when Mariah tries to make her see things her way, are crucial in their relationship. This parallelism between Mariah's love and the love of the mother back at home, reminds Lucy that both the women, in a way, desire to fit her in their ideology; to appreciate, interpret and understand things as they do. Lucy's disidentification with their dominant ideology causes her to distance herself from them. She recognizes the suborning role of power which underlies every relationship.

That is why she never indulges herself in any false notions of unconditional love which is evident through her affairs with the boys at home and with Peggy, Hugh, and Paul in the foreign land. Her sexual adventures are more than exploring her own sexuality. Rather she challenges and mocks at the male-oriented sexual taboos (of virginity for example). She also rejects any Westernized feministic thoughts because she feels that they do not address her condition. Throughout the narrative she conveys a forceful message that, there is no all inclusive determining definition for anything or for everyone.

Mariah's projection of the ensnaring symbols of the 'daffodils' and the 'spring', and the 'lake in spring time', is a metaphor of a colonized agenda to cultivate a 'civilized' and 'cultured' world in those 'others' who are assumed to be unintelligible to appreciate the idea of 'beauty'. As a colonized subject Lucy had to learn the poem about the daffodils by heart and had also read about this particular lake in some geography book; symbols that did not belong to her landscape and ideas associated with them that did not match her circumstances and surroundings. She, therefore, deconstructs this white myth of education by suggesting to Mariah that she cannot own them. By doing so, she on the one hand resists the western cultural hegemonic design, and on the other hand dislocates the dislocaters, as Mariah is obviously disappointed and shocked by such forceful rejection. Lucy's ambivalence dethrones the authority of the colonial discourse. This 'writing back to empire' method, which the colonized have to adopt to give voice to their culture and identity, takes place very ironically in 'the heart of the civilization'.

Kincaid – and through Kincaid Lucy – asserts a hard-earned understanding that leaving home can rarely succeed in leaving home behind. And both the writer and her protagonist allow the paradoxical consequences of that predicament: "I wondered if ever in my whole life a day would go by when these people I had left behind, my own family, would not appear before me in one way or another" (8). Lucy longs for 'escape' from her past, yet neither forgets nor resolves her tussle with that past. Instead she narrates an internal oscillation between hate and love. Although it is a tale of parting from the mother and the motherland, for Lucy it guarantees no avoidance from the colonial and sexual fate of being 'echo' or a copy. This provides an open-ended view to the narrator's future, and affirms the novel's dual objective: that denying herself – what she is and what her past has made her – is a dead end which Lucy must avoid, while trying to unfasten "some almost unbreakable bonds" for herself (71).

Adam Phillips, the psychologist, explores Freud's use of memory and forgetting, and comes to the conclusion that both memory and forgetting possess killing properties. About forgetting Freud is ambivalent; and memory has got certain evasive mechanisms. This results in a psychic economy which is "at best a paradox and at its worst a double-bind: remembering is a way of killing off the past, and therefore so is psychoanalysis when it works" (Phillips 28). Remembering as a way of killing raises the question whether psychoanalysis is a way of making the

problematic past accessible for disposal. And if to remember is to renounce, "then memory may be a process akin to mourning; and forgetting may be either a refusal to mourn—a refusal as it were against one's own entropy—or its completion" (28).

The ambivalence, that continues to linger in Lucy's resentful and wistful remembering of the past, is emphasized by the possibility of mourning's capacity to make the past "available for disposal" (Phillips 28). Such possibility can also account for those complex motivations and consequences which augment Lucy's multiple refusals. It can even be said that a latent strand of the narrative in fact consists of an obsessive longing for some kind of return. But the prospect of return continues to exist as impossible. And its being impossible comes to be a state of future possibility for Lucy. The impossibility of return also highlights the role of suspended fantasies and desires in Kincaid's narrative practice. Lucy says "I wanted to die in a hot place. The only hot place I knew was my home. I could not go home and so I could not die yet" (141). Here the paradox of memory as having killing properties (embodied in the form of return) and suspension as having a creative function is affirmed. Lucy must be kept suspended between Home and Away, between Island and Mainland as the only way of staying alive. Such suspensions make room for the future, for "contingency" (Phillips 38). If no going back is possible, and if all narration, memory and separations remain incomplete, then the past which is lost can be neither forgotten nor recovered. "The only way to truly forget the past is to dispose of it, to kill it, and the only way one can do that with any assurance is by dying" (38). And *Lucy's* protagonist is primarily insistent on neither dying nor forgetting.

Hence from Lucy's story Lucy eventually comes up in a suspended state between a nostalgic killing and embrace of the lost past. This is obviously an ambivalent as well as conflicted stance withstanding any solution or peace of mind. Here the question which arises is that why Kincaid prefers such ambiguous and irresolute strategy. The answer lies in Kincaid's writings which reflect the writer's own ambivalence toward the hegemonic discourses of modernity and modernism, despite her being celebrated for writing against Euro-American formation of modernism as the supreme aesthetic and cultural model. Kincaid's interviews particularly illustrate her complex bond with the western tradition of modernism. While recounting the course of her life as an Antiguan woman and writer, she communicated the complexity of her views in an interview with Selwyn Cudjoe:

...after I read these other things [Robbe-Grillet, Woolf, Joyce, etc.] I knew, for instance, that I would never go back to Antigua, that I would never be able to live comfortably in Antigua again. . . . I thought that I could never go home, because it would kill me, drag me down. It was a total act of liberation. (403)

The same complexity of views is discernible in Kincaid's contradictory perspective on racialization and race in the context of both contemporary United States and colonial Caribbean history. For example, in *Lucy* the protagonist repeatedly observes her white employers' indifferent presuppositions about race and

class prerogatives. Such assumptions are effective in wiping out the traces of colonial histories of exploitation and appropriation which go on endorsing those privileges. Lucy refuses the traditional bisections of aesthetics/pleasure and politics/power. She reminds Mariah as well as her readers that experiences of 'freedom' and 'beauty' are necessarily premised upon certain material basis. When Mariah wishes Lucy to share with her the beauty of her own beloved Midwestern landscape, Lucy's response is an abrupt refusal. On seeing Mariah's freshly furrowed fields, she says with a cruel tone in her voice "'Well, thank God I didn't have to do that'" (33).

Lucy's stance also suggests a difference between Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. She views American blacks as being less defiant and less rebellious, and consequently "not at all like my relatives" (32). And it is the standpoint of Lucy's creator that African Americans are unduly fettered to their history and identity of being a minority. While talking to Moira Ferguson, Kincaid remarked:

I think that American black people seem to feel – almost – that being black is a predestination in some way. They have a nationalism about it what we don't have: black nationalism. . . . Black nationalism in this country is very much because there is an acceptance, in some way, of how the majority of the population have thought about black people. There is very much an internalization of that. . . . [West Indians] have never really buckled, may be because they are a majority. It is still very peculiar to hear West Indians talk about racism because it is all borrowed. (165)

Keeping in mind Kincaid's comprehension of neocolonial regimes and colonial history, her concern about racialization and trauma as being 'borrowed' seems peculiar, particularly when so much of her writing persistently resonates the lament over so much of everything's being borrowed from somewhere else in the contemporary Caribbean. This is the ambivalence pervading Kincaid's attitude towards history and her own past; and the same ambiguity defines the fluctuation existing in *Lucy* between interpreting history as a decisive, unavoidable wound and perceiving the past as a tale about the person "you no longer are" (137).

## Conclusion

*Lucy* is not just a narrative of pure postcolonial rebellion. Kincaid makes deliberate use of evasive tactics to suggest that writing can be used as a tool to renegotiate the terms and conditions of woman's relationship with nation, displacement and exile. She appropriates modernist discourses of liberation and negation, and then complicates the evident complicities by giving a specific account of her narrator's historical and material situation. Lucy is marked by the ambivalent mediations with the mother, the motherland and the new country. Such negotiations suggest alternative narrative possibilities for exiled women by refusing scripted uses of exile and psychological and political forms of nostalgia. The following words by Kincaid particularly mark her lack of respect for stable, whole and coherent narratives of history and self, and her lack of interest in discourses of origin and

authenticity:

...people who look like me [should not] cling to their narrow definitions of themselves. . . . What you ought to do is just take back. Not just reclaim. Take—period. Take anything. Take Shakespeare. Just anything that makes sense. Just take it. That's just fine. (Ferguson 168)

Rey Chow observes that although throughout the narrative Lucy muses on her past and longs to escape from it, a desire that lurks behind these musings is for a “true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (41). Lucy's tale is reminiscent of the conquering spirit of modernity (Kaplan 3). But Kincaid's modernity is different from that of the mainstream white male authors. She depicts a “non-duped” subject in Chow's jargon, one who is seduced but not duped by modernity. Hence *Lucy*, a nostalgic rhetoric of longing and expatriation, goes on existing as a crucial intervention within modernist colonial discourses. And its paradox of suspension between remembering and forgetting works not as a deadening but as a creative force.

Notes

Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Harper Collins Canada Ltd, 1990) 41. All subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated by page number in parenthesis.

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