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RUPTURED DAUGHTERHOOD: A STUDY OF JAMAICA KINCAID'S
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER

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***Abstract:** Jamaica Kincaid tries to delve into troubled human relationships. She touches upon the core bond of mother-daughter relationship in *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). She transgresses the general attributes associated with this beautiful bond and looks at it from a different angle. This paper will try to revisit the novel not as an autobiography but the troubled life of the daughter who is trying to write the autobiography of her deceased mother who died at her birth. Along with this it will try to categorize Kincaid's several sorts of mother figures in the novel and how each mother is marginalized as a female, as a colonial subject and one of the socially inferior class and the final emergence of her daughter-protagonist, Xuela's identity.*

***Key Words:** Daughterhood, motherhood, self, identity*

Jamaica Kincaid strengthens and portrays her daughter-characters through a series of traumatic experiences in their life. Eventually it is this play of sadness, pain and emotions that led to the creation of their self, a self that is not bound by race, class, society and even love. In the novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela, the daughter in frame, had to face the problem of identity crisis since childhood. All Kincaid daughters try to settle for bonding with people they love, but somehow could not fit into the world. Their self-esteem and self-dignity is always lowered by either their family or the society.

Kincaid's writing consciously "refuses to adhere to race-based identity and advocates the creation of new, mutable identities- in order to escape the limitations of racial labeling. In other words, the motivating factor behind escaping an old identity and taking on a fresh one may exist in a desire to reject a historical background in which the non-white is regarded as the ulterior" (Zarina Mullan Plath). This becomes very evident in the case with her leading daughter characters- Xuela who tries to create for herself a new identity rejecting the old one. Her daughters want to escape their forced identities and reform a new one, separating themselves from the influence of their biological mother who tries to assert colonial view onto them and also the mother-country which represents the subdued colonial status.

A child's psychology is brought to nurture since childhood and it is a gradual process. It is often seen and heard of that, if lived in an uncomfortable and messy house with lots of disruptions, financial, physical, mental, it affects the child's upbringing,

consciously or unconsciously. Kincaid amply fits into this category and gives the mother-daughter couple its due importance unveiling the pain and suffering behind their relationship.

Kincaid denied her daughters the instinctive bond which a child binds since childhood. Due to this lack of love, care and understanding between the parents and the child, the latter suffers a sense of loss and void in leading and maintaining one's life. Xuela too undergoes this process enveloping some negative bonds in their life, either with the presence or absence of anyone or both of their parents. The daughters reconcile themselves in their inner lives and close all doors of beneficiary from the external world. Due to some sort of maladjustment in the family, like lack of proper care, understanding or time, the child's life and future might be ruined in some way. They may not be able to connect themselves with the family in the future. Kincaid's Xuela is an example of such disorder. They suffer from some hidden and in depth pain which they cannot even elaborate upon in front of other. They grow as tortured individuals. But even then, Kincaid has framed them in such a way that they can reschedule and rebuild their life in such a way that they do not need the help of the outside world.

Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* is Xuela's seeking her identity after her mother. A daughter whose mother died at her birth and whose father abandons her, whose step-mother refuses to accept her, is an individual who seeks an identity for herself amidst a loveless atmosphere. In spite of having her father's name and roots, she feels her identity is threatened. The only thing or fact she associates with herself till the age of seventy is "My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing between myself and eternity" (AOMM, 3). It is this fact that helps her identify herself with the world and her mother, her only companion for life.

Xuela intends to write her mother's biography whom she has never met or seen in her life and calls it "autobiography". In this context Veronica Gregg suggests rightly that Xuela herself is her mother's biography: "the one who describes becomes one who is described." She tries to complete the maternal void in her life and find and define herself in her mother.

Xuela's racial mixture also disrupts her in forming a clean identity. On her father's side, he is partly African and part British and on her mother's side she is of the Crib people who are looked down by the African because they are considered an exterminated race before defeat and it is due to them, the Africans face a more subordinate status.

Xuela denationalizes her as she grows up. Since her birth her life is devoid of love, family and society. It is from then she starts thinking about herself and tries to build her life built on her own ethics in solitude. “Through the enigmatic existential protagonist, Xuela, Kincaid traces the resultant spiritual wasteland that is the legacy for this post-colonial victim who rejects the master’s God, but whose disconnectedness with her ancestral past leaves her unable to reclaim the gods of her past” (Elizabeth J. West). Due to this disconnectedness with the past and the present she creates a state of satisfaction for herself.

Xuela understands that she is born in the realm of the defeated and that is why she yearns to constructs her self from the age she has understood the fact:

I am of the vanquished, I am of the defeated... for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge. My impulse is to do good, my good is to serve myself. I am not a people, I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time to make my actions of a people, to make my actions be the actions of a nation (AOMM).

In this way Xuela voices herself, the prolonged emptiness in her life has made her realize the power and faith within herself. She learns to become independent and relies on nobody else’s world. She views life in her own terms and does everything according to her wishes. “She presumes to see life in its veritable emptiness- a vision that escapes the racial victor (Whites) as well as the racially vanquished (Blacks). The power of her vision, however, only offers a life filled with a lingering emptiness, for she sees death as the ultimate power over life” (West). Xuela becomes the iconoclast of the defeated. Though her action is not to please anyone, yet through her act she creates a tradition of a victor from the defeated.

Xuela’s despairing life forces the reader to sympathize even with her immoral acts like having multiple affairs and living as a person who is not bound by any customs or law. Due to the immense lack of love in her life Xuela turns out to be an individual who has hardened herself from all sides. She created a protective shield over her body not to be affected by any exterior pain or trauma. She uttered in one part of the novel that, “I could feel that to love was beyond me, that I had gained such authority over my own ability to be that I could cause my own ability to be that I could cause my own demise without complete calm. I knew too, that I could cause the demise of others with the same complete calm. It was seeing my own face that comforted me. I began to worship myself” (AOMM, 99-100). Xuela could very well position herself in the society. She rises to a huge level from where the ills of the society can never touch her. She becomes a powerful and undefeatable image.

“Xuela sees herself as both a physical and spiritual hybrid. She discloses the complexity of racial realities and racial constructions but does not demonstrate that her own story is significantly influenced by this social paradox. The novel ends with a

racial discourse and a discourse on personal desire that have not been merged into a unified narrative” (West). Whatsoever be it, it is Xuela’s personal life that hits the reader’s mind and heart. One is forced to sway in Kincaid’s narrative structure, the way she handles both the issues, both intricate, separating and merging them at times.

Xuela’s desire to see, feel and know her mother is so strong that she imagines her mother within herself. Even though she knows her search for her mother is futile yet she never fully resigns to it: “I missed the face I had never seen; I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was coming, as if I were expecting someone to come... I was just looking for that face, the face I would never see, even if I lived forever” (AOMM, 5). Such internal runs throughout Xuela’s life, a maternal void which is strongly felt by her. She yearns for the maternal attachment between her and her mother, which is both physical and spiritual. She finally comes to a point where she decides that she will never bear any children. She fears the function of a mother because she is never sure if she has the potential to rear a child or bestow mother love on to it.

Xuela considers her life as a legacy of loss, left by mother, neglected by her father, not accepted by her step-mother and her siblings and looked down by the society due to her racial status. All these force her to become disconnected with the society. Xuela tries on her part to associate with her father and his family, but to no avail, she always is in the status of the rejected. In her initial period of consciousness as a child she felt vulnerable amidst the cruel society. But Xuela with tremendous gut faced the world and turned her position of vulnerability into its opposite. From a disillusioned life she converted it into a brighter one.

The unconquerable void that Xuela faces in her life leads her to a self composed world where she is her own master. “Xuela, then, learns of self through a self – reflexive process- she cannot gaze into the eyes of a parent and find her image. She will, like her father, create herself, and she will, ironically, create a self that mirrors the father she so despises” (West). This suggests she will be someone who is profound in worth and a sight of awe for people. Xuela has learnt from her father the ruthless road to success. Even if he denies her his love and to some extent his name and his time, yet Xuela could take in whatever was necessary for her.

Xuela draws a large amount of self-satisfaction from her ‘self’: “My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was comfort to me, and no matter how swept away I would become by anyone or anything, in the end I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind” (AOMM,100). When Xuela finds everybody away from her instead of feeling weak and fragile, she garners strength from herself.

Xuela’s concern was more into personal loss and personal desire; racial matters are to some extent of lesser concern. It is her personal life which is enveloped in gloom and dismay due to lack of love and care received from her parent’s side. Her shattered life

cannot be weighed in terms of racial intolerance. Xuela's marrying a white man at the end whom she cannot love or accept at the core of her heart clearly reveals this fact. She married him because he was someone whom she could always dominate and who always looks up to her. She derived enough pleasure hurting him and making him wait on her. Likewise she cannot link herself with either the Blacks or the Carib people. According to Elizabeth West, "Xuela represents the existential protagonist who seats herself at the center of the world, constructing codes of ethics and morality that originate in her own self-conceived and self-validated paradigms. She does not appropriate the discourse of spiritual enlightenment often found in bildungsroman." She is someone who knows how to build a life out of ruins and then play the role of life on her own.

Kincaid even dismisses the role of Christianity in Xuela's life. Xuela is her own God who has the ability to make and mar her. She becomes an individual who do not need religion or society to lead her life. She becomes a displaced heroine of the world in whose life there is only tumultuous uproars. She lives in a spiritual wasteland which only affirms her isolation, alienation, loss, so on and so forth.

For Xuela, her life begins and ends with death. This is the only reality for her. According to her, this life is just a "false paradise" (AOMM, 32) which is enveloped in life and death and its vicissitudes. Since her birth is marked by her mother's death she denies the birth of her own child. Her aborting her own child is an ample example to prove it. Again, after this act she feels her 'self' is now strengthened to a much larger extent. She builds herself through pain, suffering and an act of destruction. Through the experience of physical and psychic trauma, Xuela again gives birth to herself, this time through a new experience.

She at times compares herself with her father, his way of loving and thinking about only himself. This is because though he never bestowed any love on her, failed to be a father, yet he was someone who was "on his way to becoming a man of this world. He loved, he loved; he loved himself" (AOMM, 113). This is the only trait Xuela inherited from her father. In this way she feels that she was like him, not like her mother who was dead. As Xuela says, "My feet knew the road as if I had made it myself" (AOMM, 105), she marches ahead with great gusto. At times Xuela voices her hidden feelings but which is very rare when her feelings blows her down:" Why am I not valued? Is the question she wanted to ask the world the world as constituted by her mother and her father; but she could not ask such a question, she could not begin to suspect there might be an answer" (AOMM, 114). Xuela's disapproval and rejection by her father and death of her mother thereby denying her mother nurturance, care and love breaks her as an individual. But Xuela never resigned to her fate, rather she decided to fight with her destiny and give her life own way. Defeat or failure was to her only a way of seeing her past and the present which guides her to set her feet in the future.

Xuela believes in this world of trauma, pain and suffering, the core reality of the realization of the self, “the only thing I had that was my own” (AOMM, 159). Xuela in this process of pain and isolation discovers the truth of life, the hard core reality of human being.

Xuela’s realization of ‘self’ is clearly articulated in her own words when she says:

The impulse to possess is alive in every heart, and some people choose vast plains, some people choose high mountains, some people choose wide seas, and some choose husbands; I chose to possess myself. I resembled a tree, a tall tree with long, strong branches....The way I walked depended on who I thought would see me and what effect I wanted my walk to have on them. My face was beautiful, I found it so (AOMM, 174).

Xuela becomes aware of the gross realities of life and forgoes all pain and suffering. She has made herself a strong lady who is no more vulnerable in this cruel world; she has transformed herself from dependent to a dominating one. She has composed and framed herself in such a way that the society fears her, her presence signals threat to others, she has become a person who is not bound to any law and order or customs of the society.

Xuela decides to live in the reality, the present. She feels the present is always perfect. She will never live in the past, whether it is happy or sad, or in the future, which she never longs for. For her, “the past is a room full of baggage and rubbish and sometimes things that are of use, but if they are of real use, I have kept them” (AOMM, 205). Xuela’s decision to live in the present and undermine the past and the future strengthens her to face the world in her own way. She maintains her life in such a way that somehow or the other she will live her present and make it perfect. Since her mother had died at her birth and was unable to protect herself and Xuela in this cruel world and her father who was able enough to protect her but did not, breaks and then makes Xuela who she has become eventually. Xuela felt superior when her father died “as if such a humiliation, death, would never happen to me. I was a child then, but you are a child until the people who brought you into this world are dead; you remain a child until you understand and believe that the people who brought you into this world are” (AOMM). At this thought instead of crying over her father’s death, Xuela rejoices her status of a senior now, when she is no longer anyone’s child.

She strongly supports of her living at the end of the world and at the brink of eternity, where she is a lonely individual who “had never been sentimental” (AOMM, 214) and writes the pages of her life. Xuela universalizes herself at the end when she says, “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 anybody’s” (AOMM, 218). Similarly she is in this world between good and bad but she is a separate individual who has her own worth; she associates herself with her deceased mother she could identify and merge

into one with her. Till the end her only identity remained, “My mother died at the moment I was born” (AOMM, 225), a line which is repeated like a chorus in her life. She finally settles down to submit only to the eternal realities like life and death, not to any people, nation or race. In this way Xuela creates herself, an extreme individual who creates her own face, her life amidst a horrid turbulence, living in solidarity and isolation, refusing to become powerless and raises herself to her own God.

In this way Kincaid creates ground for Xuela to create a ‘self’, a ‘self’ which is not bound by and to anyone. Kincaid casts her heroine as fearless and powerful individuals who rule their own lives. Amidst the cruel outpourings from society they create their own paradise in disagreement to everything which is against their will. But this identity of her’s is in some way or other associated with their mother. Xuela emerges from her troublesome life and this emergence is a process of her attachment and detachment with her mother. With this creation of the self, Xuela like other Kincaid daughters become iconoclast for their race, women and isolated individuals.

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