RESEARCH ARTICLE

History and Decolonising: A Critical Study of Jamaika Kinkaid Fictions

*M Premalatha1, Dr. T Deivasigamani2

1PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India.
2Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India.

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental anti-colonialist strategy that Jamaika Kinkaid employs is to erase the voice of the patriarch who narrates The Water-Babies and to replace it with that of the West Indian girl, who fluctuates between mimicking him and speaking in her own tentative fashion. With its Manichean constructs and its didacticism regarding social issues such as child labour, the British education system, and even the poor state of sanitation in England, Kingsley's work can be described as a master discourse. Physically, this article manifests education, region and racism on the broader sense.

Keywords: Anti-colonialism, The Water-Babies, Child labour, British education system, Sanitation.

The narrator of Kingsley's work speaks with the authority of the patriarch and with the joviality that comes with confidence in that authority. When the colonial child who has been educated in a British system speaks, she attempts to mimic that authoritative British voice, but all that she coopts is a hint of the joviality:

The children have already learned to write their names in beautiful penmanship. They have already learned how many farthings make a penny, how many pennies make a shilling, how many shillings make a pound, how many days in April, how many stone in a ton. (20-21)

Her false confidence is conveyed in the unnaturally breezy tone, and this impression of falseness is made stronger when her own uncertain voice is heard:

But how can my limbs that hate be the same limbs that love? How can the same limbs that make me blind make me see? I am defenseless and small.... My charm is limited, and I haven't learned to smile yet. I have picked many flowers and then deliberately torn them to shreds, petal by petal. I am so unhappy, my face is so wet, and still I can stand up and walk and tell lies in the face of terrible punishments. I can see the great danger in what I am - a defenseless and pitiful child. (22-23)

In this rewritten version of The Water-Babies the tentative voice of the young female colonial runs counter to the remembered voice of the Father that has been imprinted on the minds of the subjects of Empire, who were fed a steady diet of British books, and because it is offered as an alternative, the narrative of the colonial undermines the authority of the master discourse.
Kincaid’s anti-colonialist sensibilities are also evident in her indictment of the West Indian education system. The narrator describes herself as “primitive and wingless” (24) and as “defenseless and small” (22). These adjectives all serve to fix her as other within the Manichean constructs that the Empire sets up. The experienced and competent coloniser equates colonials with children who must be guided and shaped, as Kingsley’s Tom must be. The narrator is eager to learn how to perceive through British eyes:

I shall try to see clearly. I shall try to tell differences. I shall try to distinguish the subtle gradations of colour in fine cloth, of fingernail length, of manners...I shall try to separate and divide things as if they were sums, as if they were dry goods on the grocer’s shelves (22-23).

Her Caribbeanness is negated within the British education system, which universalizes British ways of seeing. The portrait of the classroom and the school playground in “Wingless” shows to what extent the English education system did mould West Indians, particularly through language. The narrator’s voice changes in these segments, since she adopts English idiom as well as a syntax and rhythm that recall English primers:

“Now they singsong here and tumble there, tearing skirts with swift movements. Must Dulcie really cry after thirteen of her play chums have sat on her? There, Dulcie, there.” (21)

Kincaid suggests that a colonial education fooled West Indians into considering themselves British. It inflates the narrator’s sense of self to the point where she likens herself to Columbus, one of Europe’s emblems of original thought and discovery. She makes the equation, however briefly, because her education has provided her with this emblem and given her a mistaken sense of confidence- perhaps she too can be a discoverer. However, although the colonial is encouraged to mimic, as Bhabha has delineated and as was evident in Myal, she is not expected to be the great thinker or actor that the European is. She is not meant to discover or to achieve anything herself. Kingsley himself was critical of the British examination system in his work, but Kincaid’s critique exposes the depth of the damage that the colonial education system caused by encouraging mimicry and by breeding a false sense of identity.

By incorporating children’s literature and specifically the imperialist text The Water-Babies, Kincaid unsettles the official history of her region. She challenges the Empire’s equation of colonial and child, and she reveals the insidiousness of the British education system and the success with which it used language as a tool to deter the growth of a West Indian identity. This critique of colonial schooling in the West Indies recalls Brodber’s Myal, in which Ella is so damaged by her British education that she becomes a zombie who has no sense of her culture or even of her self. But much as Brodber depicts, Ella finally attempts to subvert the coloniser’s efforts in the classroom by re-reading the English primers, Kincaid overlays the voice of the patriarch with that of the female colonial child. By retelling an imperialist tale in a female colonial’s voice she reclaims the power to fashion her own history rather than accept the one that the patriarch has given.

Kincaid’s monkeys, which actually appear in Annie John, Lucy, and A Small Place as well as in At the Bottom of the River, transmit a variety of meanings. Like the figure in Dream, they signify racism. In addition, in this novel the primate contributes to the notion of the palimpsest, for the vehicle “monkey” automatically carries the tenor “evolution.” As well, Kincaid’s figure evokes the Trickster nature that is present in Louisiana. In “Wingless” the mother laughs scornfully at her daughter because of the manner in which she is eating:

“You should see how you look trying to remove all the strings from the bananas with your monkey fingernails,” the woman tells her. (24)

The suggestion is that although the mother herself is black, having been educated by the Empire she perceives the world through European eyes. In her reaction to the child handling the fruit, a racist undertone is laid
down. She refers to the girl’s “monkey fingernails” in the voice of the European coloniser who equates blacks with lack of refinement and with apes. She is mimicking her master. The child responds with deep fear to the mother’s seemingly frivolous comment because it conveys the degree of insidiousness with which the Empire educated the colonial. The mother has obviously internalized a key racist stereotype. However, the implied association between the narrator and the African Monkey Trickster subverts Europe’s racism. According to Ferguson, Kincaid’s monkeys signify:

"simultaneously the ubiquity of resistance, noncomplicity, and mimicry.” (20)

Because of all of the attendant connotations of “monkey,” this animal invariably serves as a powerful anti-imperialist trope in post-colonial discourse.

In the interview with Wachtel, Kincaid stated that injustice is not rooted in race relations so much as it is in power politics. Any individual or group, given the right circumstances, is capable of abusing power. As well, the author has likened history to musical chairs, explaining that in writing “Ovando” she,

was trying to understand how for some people who found themselves sitting down it would become important to try to remove the apparatus for the game to continue- so that they would never again be standing up. (Perry 501)

What this implies is that having found themselves the victors, Western Europeans worked at freezing time, in a sense: controlling the course of events to maintain the position of power that they held in that moment in history. In Kincaid’s other works we have seen West Indians struggle against the dominion of the coloniser or slide into a life of resentful misery. Kincaid’s work has redefined West Indian allegory and has significantly augmented the region’s tradition of historical fiction.
References


