



THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER: NARRATIVE AS AN ACCESS TO POST/COLONIAL TRAUMA

ANNEMİN OTOBİYOGRAFİSİ: POST/KOLONYAL TRAVMAYA ULAŞMA YOLU OLARAK ANLATI

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Abstract

This study discusses the Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid's novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) from the perspective of trauma theory. The study explores how Kincaid is using the loss of the mother as a mode of access into colonial history and how her fictional methodology reflects the methods of trauma studies. By insisting on claiming her body and bodily pleasures, Xuela, the protagonist of the novel, resists the colonialist epistemology based on the denial of the colonized body and existence. What *The Autobiography of My Mother* shows us is that for the postcolonial writer the work of trauma functions as a form of resistance. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid challenges the traditional modes of telling one's own story by narrating her mother's story with a first person narration. Reading the novel in light of trauma theory enables us to analyze how it reckons with colonial trauma; and thereby, offers different ways of imagining the postcolonial self. In contrast to Freudian pathological interpretation of mourning, the study argues that authors like Jamaica Kincaid depathologize mourning, by emphasizing the historical and cultural aspect of it rather than treating it only as a personal and psychological experience. In this novel, Kincaid creatively shows that the search of the personal is always already political and revisions the space of the postcolonial autobiographical writing as a space where the tension between agency and power is constantly negotiated on a personal and collective level.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Karayip kökenli yazar Jamaica Kincaid'in *Annemin Otopiyografisi* (1996) adlı eserini travma teorisi çerçevesinde tartışmaktadır. Çalışma, Kincaid'in annenin kaybedilmesini, kolonyal tarihe erişebilmek için nasıl bir araç olarak kullandığını ve romanın kurgusunun travma çalışmaları metodlarını yansıttığını incelemektedir. Romanın baş kahramanı Xuela, bedenini ve bedensel hazları sahiplenerek, sömürge altındaki bedenin ve varoluşun inkârı üzerine kurulu kolonyal epistemolojiye direnmektedir. *Annemin Otopiyografisi*'nin bize gösterdiği şey postkolonyal yazar için travmanın bir direnme formu olarak işlev gördüğüdür. *Annemin Otopiyografisi*'nde, Kincaid kendi annesinin hikâyesini birinci-tekil şahıs bakış açısından anlatarak, geleneksel anlatı modlarına meydan okumaktadır. Romanı travma teorisi ışığında okumak bize romanın kolonyal travmayla nasıl hesaplaştığını, dolayısıyla da kolonyal dönem sonrası farklı özne konumlarını nasıl kurguladığını görmemizi sağlar. Çalışma, yas tutmayı bir patoloji olarak gören Freudçu yaklaşımların tersine, patolojiyi sadece kişisel ve psikolojik bir deneyim olarak görmekten ziyade, patolojinin tarihi ve kültürel yönlerini vurgulayarak, Jamaica Kincaid gibi yazarların yas tutmayı patolojik olmaktan çıkardığını savunmaktadır. Bu romanda, Kincaid bize yaratıcı bir şekilde kişisel olanın her zaman zaten politik olduğunu göstermekte ve bu anlamda postkolonyal otopiyografi alanını yeniden hayal etmektedir.

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Most of the works of the Caribbean-American writer Jamaica Kincaid revolve around the figure of the mother, which, naturally, also led the majority of the critical studies on her works focus on the same issue. Most of these studies discuss the mother-daughter relationship from a psychoanalytic approach (for instance, see Chick; Ferguson; and Natov). In this study, I would like to shift the discussion of her works from the Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytic framework, and instead, offer a reading of her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) from the perspective of trauma theory. Reading the novel in light of trauma theory enables us to analyze how it reckons with colonial trauma; and thereby, offers different ways of imagining the postcolonial self. In contrast to Freudian pathological interpretation of

mourning, I would like to argue that authors like Jamaica Kincaid depathologize mourning, by emphasizing the historical and cultural aspect of it rather than treating it only as a personal and psychological experience. In this novel, Kincaid creatively shows that the search of the personal is always already political and revisions the space of the postcolonial autobiographical writing as a space where the tension between agency and power is constantly negotiated on a personal and collective level.

The Autobiography of My Mother can be read as a representation of the identity search of a woman in a colonized country. Being deprived of her mother at birth, protagonist Xuela Claudette Richardson's whole life focuses upon this loss. Not having a mother who acts as a role model for her in her formation of female self, Xuela spends all her life detached from other human beings, for whom she cannot feel love. The difficulty of creating an identity without having the loving reassurance of a mother and other people is the central theme of Kincaid's novel. With the intricate embedding of the search of a woman for her own identity, within the context of a colonial Caribbean setting, Kincaid enriches the implications and impact of the novel. It appears that Xuela's alienation is deeply rooted in the racially hierarchical colonial structure of the society. Kincaid seems to suggest that what is going on in Xuela's life is, partially at least, an outcome of her living in a colonized society where people are deprived of their own language; where people of the same color, ethnic group, and history hate one another; where there is no place for love. It is the "lack" of all of these, interwoven with the "lack" of a mother, that Kincaid's novel addresses. Linking the two forms of "lack," that is, the "lack of a mother" and "lack of a nation" opens us new venues for understanding the intersections of traumatic national and personal histories. Therefore, this study explores how Kincaid uses the loss of the mother as a mode of access into colonial history and how her fictional methodology reflects the methods of trauma studies.

A Brief Account of Trauma Theory

Since the 1990s, trauma studies and cultural trauma theory have been rapidly developing. As one of the pioneers in the field, Geoffrey Hartman in his influential article "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" (1995) states, then newly-emerging, trauma theory offered "a change of perspective" for theory as well as a kind of "exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning" (544). While the use of trauma theory goes back to early 1990s, the relationship between trauma theory and postcolonial studies is relatively more recent. One of

the turning points in exploring this relationship was the Spring/Summer 2008 special issue of the journal *Studies in the Novel*, which critically explored the potentials of making use of trauma theory in postcolonial studies. This article aims to study the complex relationship between these two fields through discussing a postcolonial novel by Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, from the perspective of trauma theory. Trauma theory can be useful in understanding the colonial trauma of slavery and oppression as well as the postcolonial identity that still struggles with such a past. One of the most influential scholars whose works have dominated the field of cultural trauma theory is Cathy Caruth and the Yale Schools critics who started to theorize this field in the early 1990s. In her formulation, the experience of trauma is so painful that it is very difficult, almost impossible to, reach to that experience through normal, discursive language (Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 6). Rather than such language, imaginative literature can give voice to trauma.

Trauma, originally from the Greek word meaning “wound,” signifies a shattering experience of the self, as a result of a major, dramatic experience of violence (either physical or psychological) and injury. One of the central issues in the study of trauma has been the difficulty of expressing it. It has often been stated that traumatic experience is the one that is inaccessible—at least inaccessible via conventional narrative forms (see, for instance, Caruth; Felman and Laub; LaCapra; Sturken). The paradox of representing the unrepresentable or “speaking the unspeakable” (Morrison) has been at the crux of the experience of and theory about trauma. With reference to Freud’s ideas on trauma, Cathy Caruth suggests that

[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its delayed address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (*Unclaimed Experience* 4)

Kincaid’s depiction of the “delayed appearance” of her mother has a similar function in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Before I go into a detailed discussion of Kincaid’s novel from the perspective of trauma theory, I would like to briefly refer to Cathy Caruth’s arguments on the significance of liminal narratives in terms of the representability of traumatic experience.

In trauma studies, Caruth's works speak to several problems relevant to the notion of trauma: the problem of pathology, the problem of finding appropriate ways to frame and discuss "unspeakable" events, the problem of inserting the personal into frameworks of the historical, the cultural and the national. It is through her concession that the conditions and pathologies of trauma inhabit a liminal space, which encompasses ostensibly paradoxical traits that Caruth underscores the value and meaning of trauma. She argues that trauma hinges upon a deeply personal crisis of death, which is contingent upon a crisis of life: the problem of trauma is neither that death was confronted unexpectedly nor that the meaning of survival and existence has become problematic in the face of that confrontation; rather, these seemingly antithetical crises are linked. It seems strange to require an assertion that existential crises encompass both life and death, yet the pathology of trauma generally seems to privilege one mode over another. Caruth suggests an alternative mode of "reception," which has broader implications for larger historical, cultural and political frameworks (Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 5-10; Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4-9).

Once the pathology of trauma is understood in terms of "the structure of its experience or reception" (*Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 4), Caruth turns to notions of the "historical," suggesting that the very ideological framework of "history" takes on new valences and values with the acknowledgement of the intrinsic paradoxes present in manifestations of trauma. As Caruth argues, the pathology of trauma is a pathology of history (*Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 3-4). For Caruth, the very act of naming or exhibiting specific events as "history" presupposes a particular ideological stance, and trauma tends to simultaneously un-cover and re-cover this stance because of its pathology of "inaccessibility." Once that inaccessibility is recognized as a necessary and valuable part of history, modes of discourse not always considered "reliable" or "relevant" also become necessary. Pathologizing history in this way has several interesting repercussions: it changes the foundations of received truths, it calls into question previously privileged points of views, and demands new methods of "bearing witness," methods that recognize and leave intact silences (Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 10-11).

Narrative as an Access to Colonial/Postcolonial Trauma

Such an understanding of trauma could be helpful in understanding the personal and collective stories/histories previously deemed insignificant, nonexistent or silenced. It could be instrumental in our reading of the identity

struggle of Xuela Claudette Richardson, especially with reference to the relationship between history and memory within a colonial context in which larger structures of power like colonization in the specific context of the island of Dominica manifest itself in the everyday lives of individuals. Caruth argues that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, history ... is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (*Unclaimed Experience* 24). Kincaid’s choice of writing the story of her mother as the story of her own as well as writing her personal story in the postcolonial moment as also the story of the colonial past implicates a similar understanding of the interdependence of traumatic history. In her essay, “In History,” Kincaid writes the following:

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?

Should I call it history?

If so, what should history mean to someone like me?

Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and, if so, when I come across these true and precise details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself? (1)

As Xuela states, “history was not only the past: it was the past and it was also the present” (138-139). Implied here is the need for the acknowledgement of the (colonial) past for the work of the (postcolonial) present. Xuela searches for a continuum of herself in writing her story in the story of her mother. Her postcolonial self includes the colonial self of her mother. According to Gordon, “the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never transparently clear as the names we give to them imply. Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine” (3). Kincaid’s novel functions in a similar way too; through its narrative in which Xuela imagines what kind of a life her mother had in a colonial society, Kincaid creates an alternative space of narrative where she uncovers the veil from her mother’s, Xuela’s mother’s, and her own identity and past. *The Autobiography of My Mother* registers different forms of trauma experienced by Xuela and the colonized society: trauma of colonization (material, physical, psychological, and epistemological violence) and the psychic trauma caused by the historical and cultural heritage loss leading to a loss of the self.

Narrated through the eyes of the seventy-year-old Xuela Richardson, a woman of Carib, African, and Scottish descent born on the island of Dominica, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a fictionalized account of Jamaica Kincaid's half-Carib mother, and it is set on the island of Dominica, Kincaid's mother's birthplace. Kincaid, by narrating her own mother's story in the form of first person narration and merging the story of the novel's heroine, Xuela Richardson's, with that of Xuela's mother creates a multilayered narrative and multilayered identities. With reference to her own fiction, Toni Morrison states that "memories within" are the subsoil of her work ("The Site of Memory" 92). She explains her own creative process as a "recollection that moves from the image to the text" ("The Site of Memory" 94). Morrison, here, underlines the importance of affective knowledge--memory, imagination, and recollection—in capturing and representation of certain truths. Kincaid forges a similar path in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. In one of her interviews, Kincaid states that, "I don't aim to be factual. I aim to be true to something, but it's not necessarily the facts" (Bonetti 125). Therefore, like Morrison, Kincaid aims to capture the daily life and existence of people whose stories are not found "valuable" enough to be written by historians; in her case, the stories of colonized subjects. While doing this, she trusts to her memory, recollections, moments of remembrance, and haunting images rather than bare facts or information because she knows that she can only access the truth of an unclaimed past through letting herself be haunted by it. In other words, as Stewart remarks, "there is more to the 'history' *re-membered* in the cultural poetics of ruins, *places*, arresting images, and *just talk* than any master narrative can tell us" (106). Kincaid states that "writing exactly what happened had a limited amount of power for me. To say exactly what happened was less than what I knew happened" (Perry 129).

Contrary to Freudian interpretations of melancholia negatively, Xuela's melancholia due to her loss of her mother and past can be seen as a positive process in that it opens up the present and the future for her. Through the unfinished status and repetition of her loss, Xuela keeps her ties with her mother intact and close. Personal stories like an autobiography of a mother can challenge the received understandings of history by bringing one's past into the present. Through memory and imagination, Xuela is able to capture the colonial past of her mother, and via memory and narrative, she is able to establish a bond between her mother and herself, her past and present. The repeated line of the novel, "My mother died the moment I was born," is significant in that it suggests the idea of connection through separation or loss. Bearing her dead mother's name, Xuela

marks both the site of loss and the site of continuity since she embodies the past as well as the present, her mother as well as her own self.

Xuela's lifelong internal suffering because of not having a mother functions at the metaphorical level as well; being a descendant of a colonized culture, Xuela is deprived of both her "mother tongue"(Caribbean Creole) and "motherland," which leads her to experience a life full of "pain," "shame," "humiliation," "loss," "barrenness," and "self-hatred," words that are repeated throughout the novel. So, Xuela's identity is not reassured at the personal, familial, or social levels, because she always feels that she belongs to a defeated culture which adds the layer of the colonial trauma narrative. However, "loss" also turns out to be a wound, a trace that shapes her identity; through the pain and trauma of her loss, she is able to access her past and her mother. The novel suggests that there is an inevitable and close connection between the past and the present both within the framework of the colonial history of Dominica and the personal history of Xuela and her mother. Walter Benjamin asserts that "History is the subject of structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (261). This notion of ongoing and open relationship with the past allows us to gain new insights on lost objects. In other words, in such an understanding of history, the past remains alive for the political work of the present. Similarly, through her insistence on her "loss" of her mother, Xuela is able to build a bridge between the past and the present. As she writes at the end of the novel,

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become.
(227-228)

The memory of her mother for Xuela seems to have a similar kind of impact that Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "memory-traces ... are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered consciousness" (27). Although Xuela has never seen her mother, her whole life is centered around her mother. During one of her extremely lonely and painful moments, Xuela has a dream of her mother for the first time.

Although in her dream she only sees her mother's "heels, and the hem of her gown," this becomes a crucial moment in her life. As she words it, "When I awoke, I was not the same child I had been before I fell asleep" (18). Seeing her mother's "heels and the hem of her gown" becomes a repetitive image that she sees throughout her whole life, evoking Benjamin's idea that "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (255). Similar to Benjamin's understanding of the evasiveness of history and the difficulty of capturing it in its full account, *The Autobiography of My Mother* through its elusive narrative style draws attention to the difficulty of access to a colonial past that is mostly erased from history and memory.

Knowing that there would be no one to give a reassuring, loving response to her voice, Xuela does not speak until she is four. When she speaks for the first time, it is to ask only where her father is. The interesting thing about this is that the first words she utters were not in patois-- they were in "plain English," which she had not heard anyone speak before and which were "in the language of a people [she] would never like or love" (7). Although Xuela has a father, he is like a shadow, appearing only to pick up his washed clothes every fortnight. During these very brief and cold meetings, he does not show any particular affection for his daughter, which makes her question even his very existence:

I did not know if after he passed from my sight he remained my father or dissolved into something altogether different and I would never see him again in the form of my father. I would have accepted this. I would have come to believe that this is the way of the world. I did not talk and I would not talk (7-8).

After a period of not talking to anyone, she starts to talk to herself, growing to admire the sound of her own voice because

It had a sweetness to me, it made my loneliness less, for I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I would recognize something of myself. Because who was I? My mother was dead; I had not seen my father for a long time (16).

Perhaps aware that her father is the only flesh-and-blood connection to her mother, Xuela tries, in vain, to reach her father. With "the plaintive cry of a small wounded animal," she starts to write letters to her father:

My dear Papa, you are the only person I have left in the world, no one loves me, only you can, I am beaten with words, I am beaten with sticks, I am beaten with stones, I love you more than anything, only you can save me (18-19).

The traumatic loss of her mother and Xuela's everlasting longing for love and approval from a dead mother and a nonexistent father become the central defining feeling for her. This sense of unchangeable loss dominates her life, as she says "Everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain" (7). This deeply-felt loss is also connected with her permeating sense of death. Death anxiety is one of the fundamental anxieties experienced by trauma victims (Herman 33).

In addition to this isolation, self-hatred and hatred for those who look alike make Xuela feel "hopelessly trapped in history" (Simmons 107). The complicated racial and colonial history of Dominica leaves its traces on the relations between people of color living on the island. For instance, Ma Eunice, the laundress who washes her father's clothes and looks after her, is indifferent to her, and idealizes anything related to British culture. It is not because Ma Eunice treats her unkindly with a specific reason, but just that, "In a place like this, brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given," so Xuela does not like her, and she misses the face that she has never seen (5). She is deprived of not only parental care and affection but also friendly love. She lives in such a society that even children know that they are not to trust each other. She describes this feeling of mistrust between her and her school friends as follows:

We were not friends; such a thing was discouraged. We were never to trust each other. This was a motto repeated to us by our parents; it was a part of my upbringing, like a form of good manners: You cannot trust these people, my father would say to me, the very words the other children's parents were saying to them, perhaps at the same time. That "these people" were ourselves, that this insistence on mistrust of others-that people who looked so very much like each other, who shared a common history of suffering and humiliation and enslavement, should be taught to mistrust each other, even as children, is no longer a mystery to me (47-48).

At school, her extraordinary memory skills are seen as an evidence of her being evil; her teacher and friends do not believe in her:

I learnt to read and write very quickly. My memory, my ability to retrieve information, to retrieve the tiniest detail, to recall who said what and when, was regarded as unusual, so unusual that my teacher, who was trained to think only of good and evil and whose judgment of such things was always mistaken, said I was evil, I was possessed—and to establish that there could be no doubt of this, she pointed again to the fact that my mother was of the Carib people (16-17).

However, it is ironical and significant that it is through her “unusual” memory she establishes a connection between her mother and herself, and what the colonial mindset and education tries to suppress and deny is owned by her “unusual” memory. One of the major scholars working on the relationship between trauma and memory, Sturken states that, “Memory establishes life’s continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity” (1). Through her memory, Xuela has access to her traumatic past that remains crucial but elusive to her. So, through her memory, Xuela recaptures her identity as a descent of Carib people, “who had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden” (15).

The role of colonialist ideology infused in colonial education plays a fundamental role in this learnt-self-hatred of the colonized self. As Kincaid also states in her 1991 essay “On Seeing England for the First Time,” it is through her English education, she is made to feel self-contempt and contempt for her community. Dominica island in *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a place where everything about the non-English is in doubt; what is “real” can only be defined with the vocabulary of the English. Language as it reflects the power and racial stereotypes of the colonial Dominica is central to Xuela’s authority over her story and revolt against the expectations of the colonial Other. The first words that Xuela learns at school are the words written at the top of the map in the classroom: “THE BRITISH EMPIRE” (14). People live in a kind of schizophrenic existence in that they are not sure of what they themselves see with their own eyes; as Xuela says,

Everything about us is held in doubt and we the defeated define all that is unreal, all that is not human, all that is without love, all that is without mercy. Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do

not know the truth of it. Our God was not the correct one, our understanding of heaven and hell was not a respectable one (37).

Kincaid in one of her interviews states that,

I was brought up to understand that English traditions were right and mine were wrong. Within the life of an English person there was always clarity, and within an English culture there was always clarity, but within my life and culture was ambiguity. A person who is dead in England is dead. A person where I come from who is dead might not be dead. I was taught to think of ambiguity as magic, a shadiness and an illegitimacy, not the real thing of Western civilization (Bonetti 129).

Against this colonial influence and dominance, Kincaid claims her rights to whatever she is denied. She says later on in the interview that, “The thing that I am branded with and the thing that I am denounced for, I now claim as my own. I am illegitimate, I am ambiguous” (Bonetti 129). Similarly, language becomes one of the major tools through which Xuela defies the colonial forms of knowledge. Claiming the language of the colonizer as her own is her way of claiming control over the power that would obliterate her: “I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else” (56-7). Through her use of the colonizer’s language successfully, Xuela acknowledges and registers the African-Caribbean inheritance that remains unacknowledged because it is either seen as shameful or insignificant or nonexistent. Thus, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the silence of the subaltern is broken.

In addition to claiming her history with all its complicated nature, through claiming her own traumatized body Xuela refuses to be seen among the defeated. For the patriarchal colonial mind-set, control over female sexuality has been one of the major ways of disciplining the colonized body. As Helen Tiffin points out, “an inescapable aspect of that [colonial] violence involves the erasure and abuse of female bodies and female sexuality” (912). In Kincaid’s novel, sexuality becomes a space of resistance and freedom that deconstructs the European frame of mind, where the agency and pleasure for the female body is denied. In the hateful and indifferent colonial environment, Xuela discovers her body as a shelter where she can console herself and forget her loneliness. This is how she, for the first time, finds out the pleasures of her own body. She comes to think she can reenact herself through her body. In a society where another form of existence is denied and not extended to female members of a colonized society, her bodily pleasure is the only

valuable thing to which Xuela powerfully adheres. Through her awareness of her body as a source of resistance and sexual pleasure, Xuela carves out a space for her own reality and identity. She sees that only through her body she can construct her “self”, so her body becomes a site for challenging and subverting the colonial understandings of bodily pleasures. The sense of incompleteness, sense of “void,” urges Xuela to other bodies. At fifteen, she experiences her first sexual intercourse, with one of her father’s friends, Monsieur LaBatte. Then, she thinks, she is not the same person she had been before (71). Her own body and her sexual pleasure is her sphere of refuge that she can take shelter in when she remembers all that she has lost. It is not accidental that her first sexual experience coincides with her remembrance of her losses: “It was that time of day when all you have lost is heaviest in your mind: your mother, ..., your home, ...; the voices of people who might have loved you or who you only wish had loved you; the places in which something good, something you cannot forget, happened to you.” (69). This a text that closely reminds the “irretrievability” of traumatic experience/loss that Caruth refers to (*Trauma. Explorations in Memory* 153). Xuela’s taking pleasure in her body becomes one of the ways of enabling her to acknowledge and deal with this loss.

Turning down Madame LaBatte’s expectations of a baby from her, because Madame LaBatte herself is infertile, she gets an abortion, which is the beginning of a new period in her life: “I was a new person then, I knew things I had not known before, I knew things that you can know only if you have been through what I just had been through. I had carried my own life in my own hands” (83). This is a turning point in her life because by claiming her body, her past and the traumas coming with that past, Xuela reverses the colonialist logic that tries to prison the colonized body, self, and history. The act of abortion can be read as a rebellion against the biological and cultural constraints on women’s bodies within the patriarchal culture of reproduction. It is also one of her ways of defiance against the cult of domesticity in colonial patriarchy. Her control of her reproductive capacity limits her lovers who would like to tame her sexual energies through a pregnancy and maternity. By rejecting every discourse that would tame her body and self, she also rejects the racial and colonial expectations from her. This also means claiming the stories and selves that are unspoken by her community.

After aborting her baby, her sense of loneliness and alienation increases, and she vows never to be a mother:

My life was beyond empty. I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them (96-97).

Following this traumatic experience of the self, Xuela goes through a period of extreme isolation, leaving LaBatte's house, finding a job, and living on her own. As if she is trying to get rid of her female appearance, she wears the clothes of a dead man and cuts her hair: "I did not look like a man, I did not look like a woman ... I spoke to no one, not even to myself. Inside me there was nothing; inside me there was a vault made of a substance so heavy I could find nothing to compare it to" (99). Xuela is relieved of this painful isolation period only when she again turns to her own body:

My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a 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 (100).

It seems that Xuela holds on to her "female identity" since she is quite conscious that it is the only form of identification that she has; she becomes aware of this especially when she understands how differently she and Moira, Philip's wife, define themselves. While Moira, being a member of a powerful colonizer nation, defines herself through being English, Xuela, being a descendant of a defeated colonized nation, defines herself through her bodily existence:

[Moira] was a lady, I was a woman, and this distinction for her was important; it allowed her to believe that I would not associate the ordinary, the everyday--a bowel movement, a cry of ecstasy--with her, and a small act of cruelty was elevated to a rite of civilization (158-159).

And she continues:

I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place. She [Moira] would never describe herself in this way, she would shrink from such a description, such a

description has at its core the act of self-possession, and at that moment my self was the only thing I had that was my own (159).

Conclusion

Through her bodily pleasures, through her resistance to erasure from history by mastering the colonizer's language and denying the sacred motherhood status of the colonial patriarchy by choosing not to give birth, Xuela rewrites the story of her mother and thus her own story by claiming an identity that denies the story and the roles assigned to her by the colonial history. This is how Xuela confronts the colonial epistemology that confines her in its own logic and emerges as the authority of her own life. As Helen Tiffin, in her discussion of West Indian literature by women, states that this corpus of works "offers a locus of debate over the retrieval of the body from and within western discursive erasure" (909). With its unapologetic vision of the self and the history, *The Autobiography of My Mother* can safely be categorized under this corpus. What *The Autobiography of My Mother* shows us is that for the postcolonial writer, the work of trauma functions as a form of resistance. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid challenges the traditional modes of telling one's own story by narrating her mother's story with a first person narration. That is, narrating the story of the mother as the story of the daughter, Kincaid draws attention to the interconnected nature of the colonial and the postcolonial histories and traumas. This gesture of claiming Xuela's past by writing the story of her mother in the form of an autobiography also suggests that through memory and narrative, a common understanding is built between them. Kincaid's choice of narrative technique in that she employs Xuela's (the daughter's) voice to tell the story of the mother also implies that experiences of loss and colonization produce non-linear histories and narratives. Xuela's story becomes the story of the (m)other within the self that retains the memory of the past and loss. This technique also blurs the boundaries between fiction, biography, autobiography, and history.

The Autobiography of My Mother's greatest success is in its complex depiction of both agency and defeat in a postcolonial context. Kincaid's narrative draws attention to the erasure of layers of colonial past and identities in the Caribbean islands as well as offering survival strategies of a postcolonial subject Xuela with feelings of inferiority, and self-hatred. Autobiography is a mode where the self represents itself as a speaking subject in control of one's life/story. However, *The Autobiography of My Mother* enunciates the autobiography of someone who is not

the writing self. The absent presence of a dead Caribbean mother is the occasion and the means of the narrative and the narrator. In that sense, *The Autobiography of My Mother* represents the impossible. The narrating self writes the life of another in the form of autobiography. In other words, she gives voice to a life that she has not lived herself. She claims the life and the story of this woman by embodying that life and that story as her own. The lost mother cannot be captured or registered as she is but her absent presence can be acknowledged as a haunting image. The haunting image of the dead mother leaves its imprints on the lives of the daughter who claims the story of the colonial mother as her postcolonial self. Therefore, the autobiography of the mother told by the daughter writes both the experience of annihilation and creation.

The German critic Theodor Adorno wrote in 1973 that “[after] Auschwitz, it is no longer possible to write poems” (qtd. in Felman 33). Adorno reevaluated his idea of the position of art in representation in 1982 when he wrote “It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (qtd. in Felman 34). Felman explored how Mallarmé’s and Celan’s poetry challenged the traditional notions of history and truth, and served as a means of testimony, as a way for a silenced story to find a voice. It seems crucial then not to dismiss the power of literature, of art, and to explore a variety of modes of representation and presentation in order to ensure that the horrors of trauma are transmitted to as wide ranging an audience as possible.

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