

Makalenin Gönderim Tarihi: 24 Ağustos 2023

Kabul: 15 Ekim 2023

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES AND PATRIARCHAL SUPREMACY IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *ANNIE JOHN*

Kanan AGHASIYEV¹

Habib TEKİN²

Abstract

Annie John is a feminist novel that depicts female oppression as well as the struggle against gender discrimination in Antigua and Caribbean society. Annie, the protagonist, portrays a heroine who is constantly given instructions by both of her parents, her teachers, her doctors, and finally by the entire society. All these people, as expected, have an impact on her female identity. However, as she grows older, she realizes that she does not have to be like everyone else. She can be different, and she does not have to follow in the footsteps of her mother and the other women on the island. Unlike her mother, who is a 'tool' for patriarchy, she realizes that all the laws and do-nots are designed to discriminate against women and praise patriarchal principles in society. The novel's author Jamaica Kincaid attempts to depict a female character who is forced to respect her parents' restrictions while secretly enjoying her freedom. Throughout the novel, Jamaica Kincaid depicts patriarchal domination over women, traditional gender stereotypes and standards, and breaking down old gender norms via the experiences of the protagonist Annie and other female characters.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Roles

Özet

Jamaica Kincaid'in "Annie John" Romanında Toplumsal Cinsiyet Roller ve Ataerkil Egemenliği

Annie John, Antigua ve Karayip toplumunda kadınlara uygulanan baskıyı ve cinsiyet ayrımcılığına karşı mücadeleyi anlatan feminist bir romandır. Romanın kahramanı Annie, her iki ebeveyni, öğretmenleri, doktorları ve nihayet tüm toplum tarafından sürekli yönlendirilen bir kadın kahraman portresi çizmektedir. Tüm bu insanlar, beklendiği gibi, onun kadın kimliği üzerinde bir etkiye sahiptir. Ancak büyüdükçe herkes gibi olmak zorunda olmadığını fark eder. Zira Annie farklı olabilir ve annesinin ve adadaki diğer kadınların izinden gitmek zorunda değildir. Ataerkillik için bir 'araç' olan annesinin aksine, tüm yasaların ve yapılması gerekenlerin kadınları ayrımcılığa uğratmak ve toplumdaki ataerkil ilkeleri yüceltmek için tasarlandığını fark eder. Romanın yazarı Jamaica Kincaid, gizliiden gizliye özgürlüğünün tadını çıkarırken ailesinin kısıtlamalarına saygı duymak zorunda kalan bir kadın karakteri tasvir etmeye çalışır. Roman boyunca Jamaica Kincaid, kadınlar üzerindeki ataerkil tahakkümü, geleneksel cinsiyet kalıplarını ve standartlarını ve eski cinsiyet normlarını yıkmayı, romanın kahramanı Annie ve diğer kadın karakterlerin deneyimleri

1 M.A. at Karabük University, The Institute of Graduate Studies, English Language and Literature, kaasiyev@gmail.com, ORCID-No: 0009-0001-3969-1879

2 Assoc. Prof. Dr. at Marmara University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of German Language and Literature, habib.tekin@marmara.edu.tr, ORCID-No: 0000-0002-2650-8801; Web of Science: AAB-3762-2019

aracılığıyla tasvir eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jamaica Kincaid, Annie John, Feminizm, Ataerkillik, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Roller

It doesn't matter what you do or where you go,

I'll always be your mother;

and this will always be your home.

(Kincaid, 1985: 111)

INTRODUCTION

Annie John is a coming-of-age³ novel that was released in 1985 by Antiguan American female feminist writer Jamaica Kincaid. The novel delves into female identities in a small island nation dominated by patriarchy and conventional gender roles. Annie, the novel's main character, undergoes many changes from her youth to her late adolescence. All the changes she goes through shape her female identity, which subsequently causes her to be indifferent to her own people. The story is based on the author's life, who, like the novel's protagonist Annie, had to move to another country to work and care for her family on the other side of the ocean in America. In the case of the protagonist, though, she is sent to England to study and become a nurse. Her parents, particularly her mother, plan every action she takes. Her mother is a traditional housewife who enjoys housework such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for her husband and daughter. While performing all of her allotted activities, she does not forget to train her daughter to be exactly like her, such as practicing domestic chores, adhering to beauty standards, not playing street games, not talking to guys, and so on. While Annie matures, she meets Gwen and the Red Girl. As can be seen, both of her companions are female because she is not allowed to play games or talk to boys. Her friends represent female identities in Antigua. While Gwen intends to marry the boy she grew up with, the Red Girl is a rebellious heroine who does not care about traditional gender standards and ideals. Both of Annie's friends help her to find her way out in the strictly oppressed and patriarchal dominant Antiguan society.

Jamaica Kincaid, the novel's author, shows various female characters. Each female figure represents the problems and challenges that Antiguan women have faced and continue to face in their lives. When it comes to raising their daughters, the novel's mother figures are controlling and strict. However, when it comes to their sons, they are not as rigid as they are with their daughters. Thus, Kincaid may attempt to argue that Antiguan mothers are to blame for existing gender discrimination against women and may glorify patriarchal dominance. At the same time, the story depicts how women are denied the right to speak while being used by males and subsequently abandoned. Alexander, Annie's father, is one of those men who had numerous lovers but never married any of them. On the other hand, Annie's mother is thirty-five years younger than her husband. However, Annie's friend the Red Girl portrays a female character that refuses to conform to any traditional norms. She demolishes all patriarchal conceptions and establishes a new independent female identity. Each rebellious act she commits demonstrates male and female equality. Thus, through the experiences of female characters, the novel exposes readers to patriarchal dominance over women, traditional gender preconceptions and standards, and tearing down traditional gender norms.

3 Coming-age novel (or coming-of-age) is a type of literary genre that focuses on the growing up process of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood.

2. THEORY BACKGROUND

Across Western literature, feminist criticism has acted as a transformative force. It emerged as an insightful response to the historical marginalization of women's voices, perspectives, and experiences within literary works. Feminist critics recognized that these works often perpetuated stereotypes, reinforced patriarchal ideologies, and minimized the complexity of women's lives. By scrutinizing canonical texts through a feminist lens, scholars revealed the nuances of gender dynamics, offering fresh interpretations that unearthed hidden narratives.

In the novel, Jamaica Kincaid describes several types of feminism. However, all these types are linked to each other like a chain. In order to understand more about the feminist background of the novel, it is necessary to look at the history of feminism and the way it developed through different waves of feminism. Feminism is an umbrella term that demands equal rights between both women and men. It started in the 18th century as a social, political, and literary movement. Feminism states the facts that in many parts of the world, women are treated unjustly and discriminated against. They believe that women are stereotyped and unvalued based on unequal concepts created by patriarchy. Feminism demands women's education, right to vote, right to abortion, and divorce while fighting against patriarchal domination over women. Even though feminism started in the 18th century, it took more than a century to function properly. That is why, feminism started to show itself with 'waves.' It is believed that there have been three feminist waves since the end of the 19th century. However, some postmodern feminist activists and critics believe that starting from 2012, the fourth wave of feminism has shown itself. (cf. Grady, 2018). Also, feminist waves created different movements and gave support to movements such as ecocriticism, animal studies,⁴ vegetarian movements, etc. Furthermore, it established a foundation for different types of feminism such as Caribbean feminism, African/black feminism, post-Soviet feminism, etc. Each feminist wave has focused on almost the same issues and problems. However, each of them contains the period's most dominant problems and issues that prevent women's rights.

2.1 Feminism and Its Waves

The first wave of feminism started in the 19th century. The term 'first wave' was mentioned by the American writer Martha Lear in 1968. The primary purpose of the first wave was to demand equal rights for women in politics and social life. Thanks to the first wave of feminism, women got the right to vote in the early 20th century. At the same time, in many parts of the world, it was taboo to allow girls to go to school and occupy certain positions in the workplace. The first wave of feminism fought to destroy all such discrimination. It is believed that the wave ended in the 1960s and was replaced by the second wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s and it did stay for around 30 years. This wave of feminism did not demand political rights as the first wave did because women had already got their rights to vote in many Western countries by the 1960s. However, it switched to social inequalities such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, and gender problems. Also, it supported newly emerged gender theories and backed queer people who sought same-sex relations. The second wave lasted until the 1990s and was replaced by the third wave of feminism which started at the end of the late 20th century. The term 'third wave' was penned down by Rebecca Walker in 1992 in her article "*Becoming the Third Wave*." The third wave was more liberal and tolerant than the previous two waves. The third wave braced Kimberlé Crenshaw's⁵ concept of intersectionality⁶ in which she believed that women are oppressed multiple times at once, and all these oppressions form one oppressed identity of women. (cf. Runyan, 2018). Lastly, starting in 2012, feminism as a movement got a new roadmap in which women's stories started to be shared online. (cf. Munro, 2013). Unlike the previous waves of feminism, the fourth wave activists publish their stories about sexual and

4 Animal studies talks about human-animal relationship and how humans understand animals in human world.

5 Kimberlé Crenshaw is American author and civil rights activist.

6 Intersectionality units three elements: race, class, and gender, and how they effect a person's (mainly

domestic violence on social media without any embarrassment.

2.2 Feminist Literary Criticism

Even though feminist waves started in the late 19th century, the movement itself started whey before in the mid-18th century with the literary works of Mary Wollstonecraft from England. When the French Revolution started, she went to France to experience the revolution and its effect on society. Later, she went back to England and got married to William Godwin, an English romantic literature poet. Later, when she gave birth to her second daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, she died. Interestingly, Mary Wollstonecraft's name is not known very well. However, her daughter Shelly is the writer of *Frankenstein*, the very well-known one of the first gothic and science fiction novels in English literature. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* in which she talked about the importance of women's education. As expected, her work became one of the first literary examples to define women's right to education. However, the matter of education was not the only point she wanted to emphasize in her book. Her most rebellious point in the book was the concept of marriage. She defined marriage as legal prostitution. She argued that women needed marriage only to secure themselves from possible challenges and insecurity in the future. Thus, marriage was the only way to protect themselves from all the misery (which of course was created by men, by patriarchy) (cf. Wollstonecraft, 1792). At the same time, she criticized the concept of job/occupation, saying that women should be in business life as well. Thus, she was the first critical thinker who brought a new wave to the Western world, which later gave support to feminist movements.

Moreover, in Europe, like many other Western literatures, the German literary canon itself underwent a transformation under the scrutiny of feminist analysis. Works by iconic German authors like Goethe, Schiller, and Kafka were re-examined through a feminist lens, revealing previously overlooked dimensions related to gender roles, societal expectations, and the portrayal of women. Simultaneously, previously marginalized female authors garnered newfound attention, and their contributions to literature were recognized and celebrated.⁷

As a result of feminist movements and feminist studies, feminist literary criticism emerged in literature. As in the movement, feminist literary criticism discusses the problems that patriarchy created in order to have permanent control over women. It focuses on social, economic, political, and domestic challenges and discrimination that women face in a literary piece. At the same time, feminist literary criticism seeks to give support to female writers and fights for the encouragement of female authors. Also, at the same time, first and second-wave feminist movements brought concepts that later helped to develop feminist literary criticism. Later in the 1980s feminist literary criticism got its popularity with the American female author Lisa Tuttle's ideas. Until 1970, in the first and second wave of criticism, feminist literary critics focused on only female writers and their representation of female characters in literature. Even until the 1970s, the concept of female characters was challenged by saying that female characters did not carry any universal thought. Starting in 1980, feminist literary criticism, became an inspiration and foundation point for several new emerging literary theories such as vegetarian criticism, eco-literary criticism, intersectional literary criticism, animal literary criticism, etc. Also, in feminist literary criticism emerged the theory of gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter, stating the fact that for a literary work to be feminine, it has to be written and read by women. Otherwise, it is femininity could not be understood. (cf. Plate, 2016). However, today, feminist literary criticism has a broad view, and like many other literary theories, it tries to seek any kind of relationship, that represents women in many ways, in a literary work.

3. ABOUT THE AUTHOR JAMAICA KINCAID

7 The mentioned methodology and reading of feministic criticism is applied internationally in different Western literary genres (cf. Akyıldız 2006, 2007, 2014; Çoşan and Tekin 2021, Dağabakan 2011, 2012; Dağabakan and Nacak 2016).

Jamaica Kincaid was born in Antigua in 1949. Elaine Potter Richardson was her given name at first. However, when she began penning short stories, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid. Her desire for anonymity stemmed in large part from the fact that all of her writings deal with patriarchal, colonial, social, and gender issues in Antigua. If she had gone by her true name, she feared that she would have been found out. She also feared that if her writings failed, her people, Antiguan would make fun of her. However, since Antiguan readers wouldn't be familiar with her pen name [which is also her passport name at the moment], nobody would be able to make fun of her. (cf. Archivist, 2017). Because she was forced to immigrate to the United States when she was 16 and has lived there ever since, she is referred to in literary circles as an Antiguan American or Caribbean American writer. Her writings usually talk about mother-daughter relationships, gender roles, women's rights, female identity, queer identity, and colonialism in her native island Antigua.

She travelled to America to work as an au pair after spending her youth and adolescence in Antigua with a large family to feed and support her relatives there. She claims in an interview at the *25th Chicago Humanities Festival* that she had to immigrate to America, work as a servant there, and support her family because she was the oldest kid in her family, and she had no choice but to accept. She says in the same interview that she did not enjoy the thought of becoming a servant and that she was certain that she did not want to be one in the slightest. Because of this, she began seeking a new position and started working as a photographer in New York. Kincaid started writing for the *New York Times* in 1973 after changing her name. Later, in 1976, she began working as a full-time writer for the *New York Times*.

4. ON THE NOVEL'S DISCOURSE

The novel is considered to be a coming-age novel. Annie is the only protagonist of the novel, and the story starts with Annie's childhood. At the beginning of the story, readers learn that Annie is a bit younger than a primary school girl. Annie's family is small, and she is the only child in the family (unlike traditional Antiguan families). There is not much said about her parents in the novel. However, it is understandable from the context that her mother is a beautiful strong woman with traditional values, who has dedicated her life to her husband and only daughter Annie. She tries her best to nurture and raise Annie by her strict rules. On the other hand, unlike her mother, her father is an old man who had many lovers in the past. However, he is a soft-hearted person. He works as a carpenter. Since Annie does not mention a lot about her father, it could be an approach to show her carelessness and lack of love towards her father. However, the way she describes her mother makes the readers have the thought that she loves her mother more than anyone in the world and that her mother is Annie's role model. Unlike her father, her mother does not work. She is a housewife who does domestic chores and takes care of the household. Interestingly, her father had many other children before Annie was born. However, he never got married to any of the mothers of his children and eventually ended up with Annie's mother (who is way younger than him).

As time passes, Annie's body starts to change at the age of 12. She starts to feel that she is not the same as she was before since she faces physical developments in her body. She realizes that some parts of her body get bigger, and hair starts to grow in hidden areas of her body. Slowly, her parents start to call her 'young lady' as her body changes. However, Annie gets irritated with the phrase 'young lady.' This factor becomes the very first isolation and alienation from her parents. However, she starts to completely dislike her mother when accidentally she sees her parents making love. Her imaginative world about her pure and sinless mother gets destroyed. Later, she experiences her first menstruation. Annie faces a tremendous cycle of pain. However, her mother does not seem to care much about it. As time passes, she makes new friends, but only female friends, as she was forbidden to be friends with boys. Her very first friend is Gwen. She meets her at her new school. Their friendship is so strong that Annie decides that they will live together in the same

house once they are grown. Later, she makes another new female friend, a girl named Red Girl. Interestingly, Kincaid does not give the Red Girl a proper name.

As time passes, as Annie grows, her mother's restrictions also increase. Her mother forbids her from playing marble games with boys, she forbids her to talk with boys, walk on certain streets, and go to the lighthouse. Annie turns into a rebellious character. She does everything that her mother forbids. She plays marbles with boys, and she turns out to be the best player. She goes to the lighthouse to see her friend the Red Girl, and she finds the courage to talk with boys on the street. The Red Girl enlightens her worldview because the Red Girl is the only girl she sees that breaks all the standardized gender roles. Annie realizes that spending more time with the Red Girl can be more educative and life-changing than staying with her mother and learning house chores. By this time, Annie does not love anything about her people, her friends, and her family, and the only thing she wants is to leave the island (probably Antigua) and go somewhere far. That is what happens, not by her own will, but by her parents. They send her to England to study at a nursing school at the end of the novel.

4.1 Patriarchal Power in Annie John

Jamaica Kincaid shows several references to the patriarchy and male domination over women in Antigua as well as other Caribbean countries. Even though the writer does not talk a lot about her father or other men, readers can experience the male privilege and power over women through the experience of female characters. Unlike Annie's mother, her father's name is only once mentioned at the very end of the novel. He is called Alexander. (Kincaid, 1985: 100). She talks about her father, saying that he had had many lovers and even got children before Annie was born. In the novel, he is older than Annie's mother, who is supposed to be his wife. As a young man, he had a lot of relationships with several different women. However, he never got married to any of them. At the beginning, in the second chapter of the novel, the heroine (Annie John) talks about her father. This is the first introduction of her father where she speaks of his past:

I would hear an angry voice [a woman shouting] saying angry things. [...] I knew that it was one of the women that my father loved and with whom he had had children, and who never forgave him for marrying my mother and having me. It was one of those women who were always trying to harm my mother and me (Kincaid, 1985: 15-17)

As is seen from the quote above, as a child, some women always tried to hurt her. It usually happened when Annie or her mother were passing through those women's houses. Those women would shout and scream at Annie's mother and even try to harm them physically. As Annie describes, those women were her father's previous lovers. Her father had a lot of relationships, and he never took seriously any of those relationships. As a result of his relationships with those women, he had several children. However, he never took care of the children. Even, Annie's mother does not talk about it. She accepts the past as it is, and she believes it is normal for a man to have a lot of relationships before and after the marriage. However, the ironic part of the story is that Annie's father is thirty-five years older than her mother. Another strange fact is that those women, with whom Annie's father had sexual relationships before, truly loved him while he used them for lovemaking. Even though, in the novel, years have passed, those women have not forgotten her father and they still have affection for him. From the way they act towards Annie and her mother, readers can see the possible love that remains in those women's hearts.

However, Annie's father does act as if nothing happened in the past. He ignores his children from other women.

Even when he passes on the same street in front of his ex-lovers' houses, he acts as if he never saw them. Also, he is not the only one that pretends to ignore everything. His ex-lovers act the same way. They act as if they did not see him before, and they did not have any love relationship. They act as if the children are not the result of their love relationships:

they [her father's lovers] must have loved my father very much, for not once did any of them ever try to hurt him, and whenever he passed them on the street it was as if he and these women had never met (Kincaid, 1985: 17)

In their article *Mother the Agent of Patriarchy: With Reference to Jamaica Kincaid's Short Story 'Girl'*⁸ by Lakshmi and Jayachandran, they describe Caribbean men to be promiscuous. Caribbean men are allowed to have several relationships at once while women are expected to be virgins until they get married. At the end, they would leave those women and call them *slut*. It is also possible that they can have children with those women. However, the men do not take responsibility for those children or the women they slept together. In the end, he gets married to a woman who has not been touched before while leaving all the previous women behind. (cf. Lakshmi & Jayachandran, 2017). The same scenario happens in the novel. Annie's father has met many women, however, now he pretends as if he has not seen them before. This factor shows the patriarchal privilege over women in Antigua and Caribbean society.

Another important example of patriarchal privilege in the book is when Annie describes her father's youth when he had lived with his grandmother because his parents had to move to South America (Kincaid, 1985: 21).

'my father would go to visit his friends. He would then return home at midnight and fall asleep next to his grandmother. In the morning, his grandmother would awake at half past five, a half hour before my father, and prepare his bath and breakfast, and make everything proper and ready for him' (Kincaid, 1985: 21)

Even though her father was a grown-up man, his grandmother would prepare his breakfast and bath. In order to prepare everything for her grandson, she would wake up before he does so that everything gets ready for when he is awake. While he would go to see his friends, his grandmother had to sleep earlier so that she could be able to get up in the morning before her grandchild did. However, while he had the chance to sleep earlier and wake up earlier, he preferred to go out to spend time with his friends, knowing that his grandmother would be there to prepare everything in the morning. This factor of dependence and reliance shows male privilege and domination over women. Perhaps, in this part of the book, the writer tries to ask several questions to her people in Antigua: Could a woman go out at that time of the night, would it be safe? Would people accept it as something normal if a woman went out at night? Wouldn't people call those women immoral, expecting that they were out to spend some time with their lovers? Or changing the gender norms and roles: What if it was the men who would wake up in the morning to take care of their women, while women went out at night to meet up with their friends? As it seems from the quote, Jamaica Kincaid tries to awaken people about the traditional and unquestioned gender rules. She tries to draw people's attention to the existing male domination.

Kincaid mentions the same notion about women not being able to walk outside almost in the middle of the novel. Gwen is a friend of Annie. They meet at school and become best friends until Annie meets her other friend the Red Girl who turns out to be even better than Gwen. Annie and her classmates always go to Sunday school to sing choir. However, Gwen's father does not allow her to go, stating the fact that it is dangerous outside at night: 'It would be dangerous for

8 *Girl* (1978) is Kincaid's one of the first prose poems. It has the same story as in *Annie John*. It talks about mother-daughter relationships. There, Kincaid mentions the promiscuous relationship of men.

her, a young girl, to walk home alone at night in the dark.’ (Kincaid, 1985: 58). Later, Annie continues her speech and adds that all the streets have streetlights. There is no reason to be afraid of something (Kincaid, 1985: 58). However, she also states that there is no point in telling any of these to Gwen’s father because he will still not allow Gwen to go out. Thus, readers could interpret it in the way that Antiguan and Caribbean men would give different excuses in order to keep wives and daughters inside. This fact could be the result of two different reasons. Firstly, Antiguan men think that women do not deserve to have fun outside as men do. That is why they give such excuses like Gwen’s father. The second reason could be that they really want to protect their women because they are aware of the possible harm that could be done to women by other men. At the same time as Annie’s father did to other women by having many relationships with many different women and having illegal children, Gwen could experience the same situation. She could be used and then left alone. Even worse, she could be left with a child.

Annie’s mother always warns her about boys. She does her best to prevent Annie from talking to boys. Apart from talking, her mother warns her that she must not play games with boys on the street. Except for secretly playing games with boys, Annie tries to avoid talking to them until she comes across her childhood ‘friend’ Mineu. Mineu and his friends started to make fun of her by calling her ‘Madame’ (Kincaid, 1985: 73), and Annie responded back in order to ‘shut their mouths’. However, once she is back home, her mother gets angry with her and calls her a ‘*slut*’ (Kincaid, 1985: 58) because of talking to the boys. From her mother’s behaviour towards her daughter, it could be said that she does not even want to listen to why Annie had talked with those boys. She does not question and finds her guilty. This part of the novel could give the readers the notion of male domination over women through women themselves. Her mother, supposedly, could understand or at least try to ask why Annie had to talk with those boys. However, without even realizing she works in the favour of patriarchy by judging her daughter.

After encountering her old childhood friend Mineu, who mocked her on the street, Annie remembers all the games she played with him. However, in all the games they played, she was given the lesser part (Kincaid, 1985: 73) while Mineu was the strongest hero in the games. Even in one of their games, Mineu makes Annie sit on a red ants’ nest:

In a game we were making up on the spot, I took off all my clothes and he led me to a spot under a tree, where I was to sit until he told me what to do next. [...] I realized that the spot, he had picked out was a red ants’ nest. [...] he fell down on the ground laughing. [...] His mother refused to admit that he had done something wrong (Kincaid, 1985: 58)

Kincaid tries to say that even in their childhood, children know that women are lesser than men and that men are more powerful. That is why they have the thought that men can do anything they want, and women should obey what men say. Mineu’s mother refuses what her son did. That is why all the children grow up with patriarchal views in their minds. Consequently, it all leads to female discrimination which is accepted as normal by parents like Mineu’s mother. Ironically, Mineu’s mother is a female figure. However, she ignores the discrimination that is done to another female figure in the novel. In this sense, both Mineu’s and Annie’s mothers work for patriarchal standards. While Mineu’s mother does not punish her son for what he did to a little girl, Annie’s mother judges her for talking to boys.

4.2 Traditional Gender Stereotypes and Norms in Annie John

Kincaid does not forget to mention traditional gender stereotypes and norms in Antiguan society in her novel *Annie John*. One of the very first examples could be given when Annie experienced her first menstruation when she was around twelve years old. She says that she had horrible pain and as a result, she told her mother about her case. However, even though Annie had a lot of pain, and she was not mature enough to understand what was happening, her mother

said that all these were expected to happen. And that was the only thing she said about her daughter's first menstruation experience (Kincaid, 1985: 41). In such cases, anyone would expect that the mother would be the one who teaches her daughter. Ironically, Annie's mother does not do anything and ignores her child's pain. Because her mother did not help or support her, Annie started to feel ashamed when she walked outside. Her psychology got affected. She felt that everyone was talking about her: 'She is menstruating today. She is menstruating today.' (Kincaid, 1985: 42). Because she was thinking too much about her menstruation, she fainted and passed out at school (Kincaid, 1985: 42). The way that her mother behaves with Annie shows the suppression in society towards women. It is not acceptable to talk about one's menstruation issues even in secret. People see it as something shameful and embarrassing while all women go through the same natural experience. Yet, they are too shy to talk about it.

Annie's description of her mother and her mother's approach towards Annie's future is another example of rooted traditional gender norms and standards. Annie describes her mother as a hard-working woman who does cleaning and cooking all the time. Because she believes in traditional gender roles, she prepares Annie for her possible future by giving her daily house chores. Annie calls those house chores 'rehearsal' for her future when she becomes the mistress of her own house with a husband (Kincaid, 1985: 49). Edith Clarke in his *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (1966) book says that the Caribbean women are supposed and expected to do almost everything at home and in the yard. They have to cook, look after children, wash harvest, and do many other tasks whereas men do not do very much at home. In some cases, they do not even have a proper job as breadwinners. However, luckily Annie's father is a carpenter. He has a job even though he is an old man. Yet, he does not help his wife with her house chores. Also, Kincaid gives a hint about the types of jobs that men have had for generations when Anne talks about her father's great-grandfather's job as a fisherman (Kincaid, 1985: 92). As it is seen, Antiguan men had one single job outside as carpenters, fishermen, etc, while women had to do all types of work at home and outside in the yard.

Even though Annie was the smartest girl in her class during all her study years, her parents decided to send her to be a nurse while she could have followed a different and more prestigious path. For a smart girl like her, she could be a nice doctor rather than being a nurse. However, her family does not ask her even once and sends her to England⁹ to study at a nursing school. Annie talks negatively about going to England, but at the same time she says that it is better than staying in Antigua and continuing with the life she has (Kincaid, 1985: 99). Otherwise, if she had stayed in Antigua, she would be forced or brainwashed to get married just like her best friend Gwen got married at a very young age (Kincaid, 1985: 100). However, the saddest and most heartbreaking part of the novel is when Annie realizes that all her life has been a project of her parents. She says: 'including this one' (going to England and studying nursing) (Kincaid, 1985: 101). And even after finishing high school, when she is supposed to be mature and make her own decisions, she is forced to go to England. No one asks her opinion if she wants to go, or perhaps she wants to study something else. She understands that she and women in her society do not have any right to make their own plans or make their own roadmaps for their future.

4.3 Breaking Traditional Gender Norms

Even though gender norms and stereotypes are strictly absorbed in the novel, the Red Girl, Annie's second-best friend after Gwen, breaks those traditional norms through her actions. Annie meets the Red Girl when she tries to get some guava fruits from the guava tree. Annie tries to throw stones into the tree so that she can hit the fruit and get it. However, the Red Girl comes around and asks Annie which one she wants. Then the red girl climbs the tree, picks the fruit, and gives it to Annie (Kincaid, 1985: 45). Of course, seeing such a girl for the first time, Annie gets surprised that

⁹ Why England? Antigua and Barbuda (short: Antigua) was a British colony until 1981. It was one of the last countries to get independence from the British. During the colonial period, Antiguans preferred to go to England to study and the USA to work. Jamaica Kincaid had to go to America to work as an au pair when she was 16 years old.

girls can climb trees like boys do. Later, she describes:

I had never seen a girl do this before. All the boys climbed trees for the fruit they wanted, and all the girls threw stones to knock the fruit off the trees. But look at the way she climbed that tree: better than any boy (Kincaid, 1985: 45)

As it is seen, the Red Girl breaks all the norms by using the same physical potential as all boys do. Unlike other girls, she finds enough encouragement to climb the tree. The idea that girls cannot climb up trees shows discrimination and subalternity of women in a patriarchal society. While men can enjoy the beauty of nature without any restrictions and bans as they please, women struggle to enjoy the same things. However, the Red Girl's act shows gender equality and a rebellious act of women towards patriarchy. Another example of the Red Girl and the way she breaks the gender norms is her and her mother's carelessness about beauty and beauty standards. Annie's mother pays some money to a woman from a different neighbourhood to make Annie's hair every day before school. Annie is supposed to tie her clothes perfectly, clean her shoes so that they can shine, and often take baths. However, it is not the same case for the Red Girl. The Red Girl takes a shower only once a week as she does not like to take a bath. The funniest part is that she takes a bath only when she visits her grandmother. Otherwise, she would not take any baths. Ironically, the Red Girl's mother does not force her to take a bath, comb her hair, tie her clothes, change her outfit, or do any other self-caring (Kincaid, 1985: 46-47). Thus, The Red Girl and her mother are against the beauty standards. They do not care what people think about how they look like women and eventually the Red Girl becomes a symbol of freedom for the heroine, Annie.

Annie's mother forbids her from playing marble games. However, she secretly starts playing after she receives three marbles from the Red Girl. She likes playing marbles so much that she finds it hard to stop: 'devoted my spare time to playing and winning marbles.' (Kincaid, 1985: 48). However, she was forbidden to play this game because according to her mother thoughts, only bad street kids could play such a game: 'I am so glad you are not one of those girls who like to play marbles' (Kincaid, 1985: 49). Also, another reason for her mother's anger towards marbles was because the majority of the players were boys. Rarely, a few girls like Annie and rebellious players like the Red Girl could be seen in marble games. Once her mother realizes that Annie plays marbles, she gets very angry with her. Yet, Annie denies the fact that she plays marbles (Kincaid, 1985: 55). Annie's rebellious act shows her understanding of gender discrimination. That is why, like many other kids, she wants to play marbles and enjoy as much as boys can. She questions why girls cannot be given the same privileges as boys. Why are girls always given the lesser parts of the games? Thus, she decides to break the gender norms and enjoy the same privileges as boys.

At the end of the novel, Annie talks about her father. There, for the first time, readers learn her father's name, Alexander. She starts describing her father's life and again for the first time, another detail reveals itself. Readers learn that her father is 35 years older than her mother, and even her mother is a little younger than her father's first illegal children:

My father's name is Alexander, and he is thirty-five years older than my mother. Two of his children are four and six years older than she is. Looking at how sickly he has become and looking at the way my mother now has to run up and down for him, gathering the herbs and barks that he boils in water, which he drinks instead of the medicine the doctor has ordered for him, I plan not only never to marry an old man but certainly never to marry at all. (Kincaid, 1985: 100).

Because her father is too old, his young wife always has to take care of him and prepare herbal medicine. Annie, before

her departure to England, promises that she will not marry at all. She thinks that if she gets married, all she does will be taking care of her husband like a servant. She knows that if she gets married, she will have the same fate as her mother. Her only entertainment will be taking care of a man with whom she will be forced to share her whole life. Thus, Annie is being rebellious to the traditional values of marriage once she realizes the age difference between her parents. After a few pages, she describes her parents having a conversation with her about her marriage and her future husband. There, her parents tell her that they will not be surprised if she gets married in England. Her response to her parents is ‘How absurd!’ (Kincaid, 1985: 100). without thinking a moment. There, readers can see her anger about marriage.

Like in many countries, in Antigua, as it is understood from the novel, girls get married at an early age. Annie’s first best friend, Gwen, has the same faith. She gets engaged at an early age. Even though her age is not mentioned in the novel, it is possible to guess that her age is almost the same as Annie’s. She is probably around 16-17. Annie has always thought that Gwen was a smart and intellectual girl. However, when Gwen tells her that she is to get married soon, Annie cannot believe her ears (Kincaid, 1985: 104). Kincaid’s description of Gwen talks about the early wedding ages in Antiguan society. Women are supposed to get married at early age while men can have fun as much as they want with many different women. In the end, when men get married, they are old and in need of help like Annie’s father Alexander while their wives are young like Annie’s mother and Gwen. Kincaid shows that Antiguan women are discriminated against and powerless. Their fates are not in their own hands. However, Annie is different from the rest of the women in Antigua and she is luckier. She is different because she rebels against the marriage tradition of her people. At the same time, she is lucky because her parents give her the chance to study nursing even though they do not give her a second option to study. She uses this chance for her own benefit and decides that she will never come back to this land, and she will never see those people again (Kincaid, 1985: 100). At the end of the novel, as if Annie’s mother understood that her daughter will never come back, her daughter will never obey the traditional rules of Antiguan people, her daughter will never have a husband. The mother understands that her daughter will have a different fate and a different life. She will have a life that her mother had wished as a young girl but could never have. That is why, heartbreakingly, she says: ‘It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother, and this will always be your home.’ (Kincaid, 1985: 111).

CONCLUSION

Annie John, published in 1985, is one of Antiguan American female feminist writers’, Jamaica Kincaid’s coming-age novels. The novel explores female identities in a small island nation where patriarchy and traditional gender roles are dominant. The main character of the novel, Annie, goes through tremendous changes starting from her childhood until her late teenage years. All the changes she experiences establish her female identity which later makes her indifferent to her own people. The novel represents the life of the author who, like the novel’s protagonist Annie, had to travel to another country in order to work and provide food for her family on the other side of the ocean in America. However, in the case of the protagonist, she is sent to England to study and become a nurse. All the steps she takes are planned by her parents, particularly by her mother. Her mother is a traditional housewife who loves to take care of house chores such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her husband and daughter. While doing all these tasks that she assigned for herself, she does not forget to teach her daughter to be exactly like her, such as practicing house chores, following the beauty standards, not playing games on the street, not talking to boys, etc. While Annie grows up, she makes friends, with Gwen and the Red Girl. As it is seen, both of her friends are female since she is strictly forbidden to play games and talk to boys. Each of her friends represents a female figure in Antigua. While Gwen decides to end up getting married to a boy that she grew up with, the Red Girl illustrates a rebellious character who does not care about traditional gender

norms and values. Both of Annie's friends help her to find her way out in the strictly oppressed and patriarchal dominant Antiguan society.

The writer, Jamaica Kincaid depicts several female characters in the novel. Each female character portrays the struggles and challenges that Antiguan women went/go through in their lives. The mother figures in the novel are dominant and strict when it comes to nurturing their daughters. However, if their children are boys, they do not show the same strict attitude as they show their daughters. For example, Annie's male friend Mineu tricks Annie into sitting on a red ants' nest. However, his mother denies what he did and does not punish him for his behaviour (Kincaid, 1985: 73-77). Thus, Kincaid might try to say that Antiguan mothers are the reason for the existing gender discrimination against women and praise patriarchal dominancy. At the same time, the novel illustrates the ways in which women are given no right to speak while they are being used by men and then left alone. Annie's father, Alexander is one of those men who had many lovers but never got married to any of them. On the other side, Annie's mother, who has been given no option but to be a victim as a young woman to be forced to get married to an old man, is thirty-five years younger than her husband. However, Annie's friend the Red Girl depicts a female character that does not want to obey any traditional values. She destroys all the patriarchal concepts and creates a new independent female identity. Each rebellious act she takes shows male and female equality. Thus, the novel shows readers patriarchal power over women, traditional gender stereotypes and norms, and breaking down traditional gender norms through the experiences of female characters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akyıldız-Ercan, C. (2006). Elfriede Jelinek'in Romanlarında Meta Olarak Kadın. Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, cilt. 6, sa. 36, ss. 69-76.
- Akyıldız-Ercan, C. (2007). Grimm Kardeşlerin Masallarında Kadın İzlekleri. Atatürk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, cilt. 7, sa. 39, ss. 31-40.
- Akyıldız-Ercan, C. (2014). Cinsiyetin Toplumdaki Yeri (Elfriede Jelinek'in Seçilmiş Romanlarında Kadınlık). Çizgi Kitabevi, Konya.
- Archivist. (2017, April 10). *Interview with Jamaica Kincaid | The Missouri Review*.
- Bhattacharya, S., & Commerce, P. (2020). Beyond Postcoloniality: Female Subjectivity and Travel in Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 5.
- Bratt, K. R. (n.d.). The Emergence of Voice and Identity in the Context of the Neocolonial Experience: The Writings of Jamaica Kincaid. *The Repository at St. Cloud State*.
- Chicago Humanities Festival. (2014, October 29). *Jamaica Kincaid on writing, her life, and The New Yorker*
- Clarke, E. (2021). My Mother Who Fathered Me. In *Duke University Press eBooks* (pp. 248–252).
- Coşan, L. (2009). Frauenliteratur der 70er Jahre in Deutschland und in der Türkei. Peter Lang.
- Coşan, L., & Tekin, H. (2021). Multikulturelle Synthese am Bosphorus: Iclal Cankorel. In M. T. Öncü & E. Büyüknisan (Eds.), *Übersetzerforschung in der Türkei II* (S. 27-44). Logos Verlag Berlin.
- Grady, C. (2018, July 20). The waves of feminism, and why people keep fighting over them, explained. *Vox*.

- Gregg, V. M. (2005). *Caribbean Women: An Anthology of Non-fiction Writing, 1890-1980*.
- Kincaid, J. (1978, June 19). "Girl," by Jamaica Kincaid. *The New Yorker*.
- Kincaid, J. (1985). *Annie John*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kincaid, J., & Bonetti, K. (1992). An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid. *The Missouri Review*,
- Lakshmi & Jayachandran, (2017). *Mother the Agent of Patriarchy: With Reference to Jamaica Kincaid's Short Story 'Girl'*
- Munro, E. (2013). Feminism: A Fourth Wave? *Political Insight*, 4(2), 22–25.
- Ondeková, E. (2006). *Feminism in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid*.
- Ouaali, I. (2015). *Finding Selfness in Postcolonial Caribbean Short Fiction: Intersectional Feminism and Diasporic Displacement in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid and Nalo Hopkinson*.
- Öztürk Dağabakan, F. (2011). Dillerde Cinsiyet: Almanca ve Türkçede Cinsiyet Kavramları. Atatürk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi, ss. 281-300.
- Öztürk Dağabakan, F. (2012). Toplumdilbilimsel Bir Kavram Olarak «Kadın Erkek Dil Ayrımına» Türkçe ve Almanca Açısından Bir Yaklaşım. Atatürk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi, ss. 87-106.
- Öztürk Dağabakan, F., & Nacak, N. (2016). Die Frauensprache als eine soziale Sprachvariation im Werk «Die Klavierspielerinnen» von Elfriede Jelinek. Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, cilt. 57, ss. 1-16.
- Plate, L. (2016). Gynocriticism. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, 1–2.
- Runyan, A. (2019). *What Is Intersectionality and Why Is It Important?* AAUP.