

## JAMAICA KINCAID'S *LUCY*: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE SEARCH FOR SELF-FASHIONING

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the protagonist Lucy's struggle for self-fashioning in Jamaica Kincaid's work *Lucy*. This analysis is based on the theories of cultural identity (Hall) and self-fashioning (Greenblatt). It also discusses the protagonist's individual choices in the American society in confrontation with her past, and her strive to overcome her condition of former colonized West Indian immigrant and subaltern.

**Keywords:** Identity; self-fashioning; immigrant.

## JAMAICA KINCAID'S *LUCY*: IDENTIDADE CULTURAL E A BUSCA PELA CONSTRUÇÃO DA SUBJETIVIDADE

**Resumo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a busca pela construção da subjetividade da personagem Lucy na obra *Lucy*, de Jamaica Kincaid. Esta análise baseia-se, principalmente, nas teorias sobre identidade cultural (Hall) e da modelagem da subjetividade (Greenblatt). Também discute as escolhas pessoais da protagonista na sociedade americana em confronto com seu passado, e sua luta para vencer sua condição de imigrante subalterna oriunda do Caribe anteriormente colonizado.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade; modelagem da subjetividade; imigrante.

The Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid, who was raised during British colonialism, spent her childhood and early adolescence in St. John, the capital of Antigua. As a teenager, Kincaid migrated to the United States in the 60s in order to work and support her family back in the island. In the introduction to *Talk Stories*, Kincaid states: "Shortly after I turned sixteen years of age, I was sent to America by my family to work and earn money to support them. I did not like any of it at all. I did not like being sent away, and then I did not like sending them the money I had earned" (KINCAID, 2001, p.10). Kincaid decided not to go back to Antigua, and, after some time, she had the opportunity to start a writing career in the US.

As a former colonized subject (Antigua achieved its independence only in 1981), Kincaid focuses on multiple issues in her works by adopting an aggressive writing style, which

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has intrigued many people. Some dislike her use of a direct tone full of anger against Antigua, England and even the US — the country that has been Kincaid's home for four decades now. In a rebellious tone, Kincaid's narratives are able to convey her experiences as a culturally hybrid subject who belongs to two different worlds: her Antigua, a former British colony, and the US, which represents the new center of Empire.

As an immigrant in the US, Kincaid's own experiences are very well portrayed in *Lucy* (1990). The protagonist Lucy, a 19-year old girl coming from a small Caribbean island in “the fringes of the world” (KINCAID, 1990, p.95), strives to find home in the US. Lucy's life experiences both in the West Indies and in the US enable her to struggle for a home whose location goes beyond the geographical territory. Thus, this paper primarily discusses Lucy's awareness of her cultural identity in the United States, and it also analyzes her struggle for fashioning a new identity, despite her past, as she considers her personal choices in a new territory – one which she strives to make her new home.

## 1. A NEW HOME

Lucy despised her condition of a West Indian subaltern, and even away from a colonial setting she still feels the pressure of being a former colonized. Her ancestors had been Africans brought to the West Indies as slaves and this burden is rooted in her identity. Lucy's subaltern condition reflects Kincaid's own history as a post-colonial subject. According to Carole B. Davies, the acknowledgment of the past linked to enslavement is necessary to encourage the Caribbeans' resistance to the essentialist view Western society has upon them; Davies in the first chapter of *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, comments on Kincaid's recognition of her roots towards self-fashioning:

Further, the Caribbean understood (within the context of the Americas) as the history of genocide, slavery, physical brutality, as in the Kincaid recognition with which I began, demands some sort of understanding of culture either as oppositional or as a resistance, and further as transformational if we are to recoup any identities beyond the ones imposed.(DAVIES, 1994, p.12)

Therefore, Lucy has to oppose or resist the constructions of an identity associated to the British colonization which are reflected on her life abroad, as follows: “[T]he first thing she said to me when Mariah introduced us was ‘So you are from the islands?’ [...] I was about to respond to her

in this way: ‘Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?’” (KINCAID, 1990, p.56)

On the other hand, as an immigrant in the US, Lucy is aware that she is part of a group of people who have had the same fantasies about their ‘new home’. She comments upon her arrival: “Now that I saw these places, they looked ordinary, dirty, worn down by so many people entering and leaving them in real life, and it occurred to me that I could not be the only person in the world for whom they were a fixture of fantasy (KINCAID, 1990, p. 4). And starting with this initial disappointment, Lucy’s memories of home make her homesick as the reality of this new place strikes her. The awkwardness of the new is experienced as soon as she leaves the airport: “The undergarments that I wore were all new, bought for my journey, and as I sat in the car, twisting this way and that to get a good view of the sights before me, I was reminded of how uncomfortable the new can make you feel” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 4).

Lucy leaves for the US to be an au pair and to go to evening school in order to become a nurse, but most importantly send her family money. She arrives in a household “made up of a husband, a wife, and their four girl children. The husband and wife looked alike and their four children looked just like them”. In the first chapter, entitled “Poor Visitor” (a reference to her condition as a poor immigrant girl from the West Indies), her displacement is perceived. Lucy occupies the maid’s room, and complains that she was not even the maid:

I was used to a small room, but this was a different sort of small room. The ceiling was very high and the walls went all the way up to the ceiling, enclosing the room like a box—a box in which cargo was traveling a long way should be shipped. But I was not cargo. I was only an unhappy young woman living in a maid’s room, and I was not even the maid (KINCAID, 1990, p.4)

In this particular reference to the small maid’s room, which made Lucy feel as if she were cargo, Kincaid portrays Lucy as the alienated person in the American society, a metaphor for what had happened to Lucy’s ancestors shipped as slaves from Africa to the New World. Being a slave descendant, a former colonized subject and now an immigrant put Lucy in a subaltern condition, however, all these negative aspects drive Lucy towards the search for a new identity.

Therefore, this different environment may be positive once it makes Lucy argue against her position in the house, and consequently in society: Who is she? A poor visitor? A “girl from

the islands”? A young woman of color trying to find her place in this new American white world? Lucy searches for the answers to these questions as she lives each day in these new surroundings, trying to assert her identity, one that is inescapably cultural—she is a black girl who comes from a small formerly colonized island.

One night, Lucy dreams that she was holding a cotton-flannel nightgown whose label read “Made in Australia”, and wonders: “... and I remembered then that Australia was settled as a prison for bad people, people so bad that they couldn’t be in their own country”. Lucy connects Australia to her situation: she is a prisoner in this new home. Hobsbawn (MORLEY, 2000, p. 9) defines *home*: “Home, in the literal sense, *Heim, chez moi*, is essentially private. Home in the wider sense *Heimat*, is essentially public...*Heim* belongs to me and mine and nobody else... *Heimat* is by definition collective. It cannot belong to us as individuals.” Therefore, Lucy lacks both *Heim* and *Heimat*. In the sense of the private, she does not fit at home anymore; she has never felt part of her own family. Lucy was an only child until the age of nine when her mother got pregnant with the first of her three boys. After each boy was born her parents would make plans for their brilliant lives as they would be sent to schools in England. Until then, Lucy had not perceived that she was being raised to be “nobody”, since her parents had never talked about any plans for a successful career: “I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation. [...] and I began to plan a separation from her that even then I suspected would never be complete.” (KINCAID, 1990, pp. 130-131)

To what concerns *Heimat*, the distortions are so visible that she acknowledges the fact that she is a subaltern sent away. Lucy cannot change what her home country or motherland represents to people. Thus, she decides to reject both her mother and motherland as she moves towards a redefinition of home by fashioning a new identity.

## 2. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DYAD MOTHER/MOTHERLAND

According to Freud, “the nostalgia for the home country is in actuality a nostalgia for the mother’s body” (quoted in Edmondson, 1999: 78). In Lucy’s case, the anguish resides in the psychological loss of her mother and consequently the impossible recovery of “home.” Lucy’s feelings of love and hate are directed to home which is represented either as the mother or the

motherland. An ambivalent condition as both represent the colonial past Lucy tries to escape from – which form her identity as a woman and West Indian immigrant.

Lucy's life back home is intrinsically related to the mother figure. In the US, the presence of the mother is also intense, for Lucy cannot escape family memories. Her strongest role model during childhood was her mother: “My past was my mother [...] And I was undeniably that – female. Oh, it was a laugh [...] I was not like my mother– I was my mother [...] But my mother knew me well, as well as she knew herself: I, at the time, even thought of us as identical” (KINCAID, 1990, p.90; 130). Lucy affirms that as a female she was her mother—a figure that points to the submission to the gender rules present in the Antiguan society.

In her first short story, published in *The New Yorker*, called “Girl”, Kincaid shows how the Caribbean women raise their daughters, and prepare them to live their lives in conformity to their household chores and sexuality. The account is about a mother who is responsible for passing on to the daughter all the advice necessary for a woman to live her life appropriately; in the imperative mood, the mother tells the girl to do a series of things required from women in the West Indian society:

this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; [...] don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; [...] this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming. (KINCAID, 1978, p. 29)

The advice the mother gives the daughter in order to prevent her from becoming “a slut” seems to be one of the main roles of mothers in the West Indian society, which is due mainly to the morals and religiosity of the colonial period, as de Caires and O'Callaghan (1994, p.628) explain: “Older women within the community are indicated for their role of socializing girls to become ‘young ladies’. This oppressive ‘ladyhood’ is associated with Christian and Victorian strictures as to respectability and morality with their attendant taboo on the expression of sexuality.”

According to Paravisini-Gebert, “The mother's injunctions stem from a need to guide the daughter's behavior toward conforming to social and sexual patterns she has imbued from Antiguan's English colonizers” (PARAVISINI-GEBERT, 1999, p. 51). In order to construct the Antiguan female subjectivity, the mother has a very important function as she raises her daughter to live according to the rules set by a colonial society.

On the other hand, this concern towards moral is harmful as it prevents girls from having productive roles in society. Girls have no participation in the public sphere as their duties are relegated to domestic affairs. The reasons which drive girls' strict education are related to the aspect of making them become 'good wives and mothers' in opposition to becoming 'sluts'. Then Lucy contrasts her life to the one desired by her mother, and affirms that she had become a different person:

I reminded her that my whole upbringing had been devoted to preventing me from becoming a slut; I then gave a brief description of my personal life, offering each detail as evidence that my upbringing had been a failure and that, in fact, life as a slut was quite enjoyable, thank you very much. (KINCAID, 1990, pp. 127-128)

Physically free from her powerful mother, Lucy is ready to search for her home, away from the financial and emotional troubles experienced back then as well as the condition of colonized subaltern. Thus, the American life reflects the dreams of opportunity any poor Caribbean woman would like to have in order to succeed; however, Lucy is not satisfied with her situation, and refuses to be a servant in the US. Lucy intends to pursue her ambitious project of becoming someone important one day by following the American views of happiness and success. However, Lucy finds herself in a marginal position and carries a lot of anger inside since she is treated as "the girl" or "the girl who takes care of the children", and unhappily moves on with her lack of identity in the US (KINCAID, 1990, p. 58). Rivkin and Ryan in "Feminist Paradigms" point out the effects of patriarchal society upon women: "For the women's movement of the 1960s and early 1970s the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral" (RIVKIN; RYAN, 2000, p. 527). As patriarchy is "a relation between men and other men" (FOX-GENOVESE, 1982, p. 22), it puts female in a position of exclusion from the male world, therefore, constraining women's lives to the domestic field; in the case of colonized women, a marginality which overlaps with gender, race, and social class.

One day, traveling on the train to the house on the lake, Mariah, her employer, happily shows Lucy the beautiful plowed fields, and Lucy exclaims: "Well, thank God I didn't have to do that" (KINCAID, 1990, p.33). This statement shows Lucy's awareness of her heritage, for she is a descendant of slaves—a fact that Mariah has not perceived yet. According to George Lamming,

the plow is the “metonymic representation of reified slaves and peasants who implicitly come to consciousness of their humanity” (quoted in NAIR, 1996, p. 12). Thus, Lucy sees her identity in the sorrowful past and hates her island, and consequently, her mother for not giving her the strength to fight the stigma of a colonized woman. By hating her place of birth, Lucy hates her condition abroad, which makes it more difficult for her to find a place in society, and consequently to fashion a new self. Ambivalent feelings are part of Lucy as her former home represents a trap because she cannot live her new life watching the present take the form of her past.

In her act of leaving home, Lucy thinks that everything is going to be left behind. But the problem is that Lucy is not able to leave home behind. Her ethnicity is revealed in the way she talks, the clothes she wears (nun like), her behavior, the things she eats, and the most remarking factor is her feeling of inferiority (the subaltern) built by colonization and reiterated by her mother, who raised her to be a Caribbean woman just like herself, devoted to her husband and family.

Lucy’s intention to fashion a new self is the central element throughout Kincaid’s narrative. The first step towards self-fashioning is the rupture with her mother and motherland which starts when Lucy leaves home. The rejection of her mother’s authority, which resembles colonial power, designs the construction of Lucy’s identity.

### 3. 0SELF-FASHIONING

In *Renaissance Self-fashioning* the historian Stephen Greenblatt analyzes the constructions of the subject from More to Shakespeare, taking into account these writers’ characters and historical contexts. Greenblatt coined the term “self-fashioning”, which refers to the creation of the self:

As a term for the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern, the word had been long in use, but it is in the sixteenth century that *fashion* seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of the self. [...] But, more significantly for our purposes, fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving. (GREENBLATT, 1982, p. 2)

Based on Greenblatt’s definition for fashioning, I argue that Kincaid builds her character Lucy based on an inner struggle to fashion the *self*, bearing the illusion that she may be able to shape

her identity by herself. An idea that Greenblatt argues to be problematic: “[...] human history is the product of men themselves, but they also anticipate the perception that this product is shaped, in Lukács phrase, by forces that arise from their relations with each other and which have escaped their control.” (GREENBLATT, 1982, p. 209)

Lucy started to perceive herself as a separate entity from her mother just after her brothers’ births; her plans for separation began as she goes through some sort of late mirror stage. According to Lacan, before the mirror stage the child does not have a self-image which defines it as a separate person; on the contrary, it sees itself as a “whole” reflected in the gaze of the Other—the mother: “The child assumes the mother is himself, and his primary desire is for her desire (of him)” (RIVKIN&RYAN, 2000, p. 123). After separation starts, the individual becomes fragmented and never achieves wholeness again.

As Lucy grows older, she no longer intends to please her mother in order to be accepted. After her first winter in the US, Lucy admits: “I could now look back at the winter. It was my past, so to speak, my first real past – a past that was my own and over which I had the final word” (KINCAID, 1990, p.23). Thus, Lucy does not want the past to restrain her plans of independence, as she adds:

For I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face? (KINCAID, 1990, p. 31)

Lucy decides to fashion a new identity by rejecting her family, her homeland and its colonial past, and escaping her mother’s authoritarian love as well; this process of separation from the mother is necessary for a new beginning; however, she cannot isolate her prior identity and acquire an entirely new one. In relation to that impossibility, Greenblatt cites Marx’s famous passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past. (GREENBLATT, 1982, p. 210)



In the process of separation, Lucy mourns the loss of her mother's love, and feels that perhaps this is the only true love she has ever had: "My life was at once something more simple and more complicated than that: for ten of my twenty years, half of my life, I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true love in my whole life I would ever know" (KINCAID, 1990, p. 132). For Lucy, it becomes almost unbearable to achieve this separation because she would have to renounce her "only true love". This love Lucy desires is, according to Kristeva, the love necessary to enter the "symbolic and ethic Other so difficult for a woman"; moreover, "with the arrival of a child and the start of love (perhaps the only true love of a woman for another person...) maternity is a bridge between singularity and ethics" (KRISTEVA, 1986, p. 297). Then, through this "bridge" both the child and the mother experience the bond with each other, even before birth, which enables it to enter the world of socialization and subjectivity. However, Kristeva relates the dyad mother/infant to the abject, and points to the individual psychosexual development, which is marked by the moment the child and the mother are separated, and the child begins to see the boundaries between itself and its mother. According to Kristeva, the mother, not the father, constitutes the Other; thus, Kristeva makes use of Lacan's mirror stage, but values the mother as the important link to the child, and consequently, subject development, saying that it is the mother who is responsible for making the child enter the space of the Symbolic. However, the mother constitutes what is minor and repulsive in a patriarchal society; therefore, female bodies, the immigrant, and the dispossessed in general are the abject (KRISTEVA, 1982, p. 2). Since the mother is the abject, the child both loves and rejects her, especially the girl child; thus, women are caught in a trap: by rejecting the mother, and identifying with the father, they are in fact, rejecting themselves.

Lucy feels that she has to separate from the mother and motherland—the abject—in order to create a new self. As Greenblatt points out "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other [...] must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed." (GREENBLATT, 1982, p.9) Therefore, Lucy decides to live her life the American way, and chooses Mariah as a surrogate mother who gives her advice on sex and even takes her to see a doctor: "She had taken me to her own doctor, and every time I left the house on an outing with Peggy, Mariah would remind me to make sure I used the things she had given me"(KINCAID, 1990, p.67). But, when Lucy misses a period, she remembers the lessons taught by her mother:

Without telling me exactly how I might miss a menstrual cycle, my mother had shown me which herbs to pick and boil, and what time of day to drink the potion they produced, to bring a reluctant period [...] The only thing now was that I needed those herbs, they did not grow where I was and I would have to write to my mother and ask for them. (KINCAID, 1990, p.70)

The last thing Lucy wants is to bend to her mother's help, and decides to do everything that contradicted her upbringing. Then Lucy welcomes the American life, with the new behavior patterns of the 60s, when women, in general, celebrated their bodies by means of free love, which together with drugs were part of the counter-culture, which contributed to liberate human sexuality towards individual autonomy.

As Lucy lacked freedom back home, in the US she finds her way towards the desirable freedom, and although the place encourages her actions, her cultural identity, that is, her West Indian upbringing, does not entirely allow her to be this person:

One day the maid who said she did not like me because of the way I talked told me she was sure I could not dance. She said I spoke like a nun, I walked like one also, and everything about me was so pious it made her feel at once sick to her stomach and sick with pity just to look at me. (KINCAID, 1990, p.11)

One day Lucy met Hugh, her friend Dinah's brother, and he seemed to accept her ethnicity: "But when we were introduced the first thing he said to me was, 'where in the West Indies are you from?' and that is how I came to like him in an important way" (KINCAID, 1990, p.65). Although Lucy denies having fallen in love with Hugh, she liked the fact that he acknowledged her difference without prejudice against her.

Lucy also tries to construct her new space through the identification with others by having a relationship with an Irish girl, Peggy: "From the moment we met we had recognized in each other the same restlessness, the same dissatisfaction with our surroundings, the same skin-doesn't-fit-ness" (KINCAID, 1990, p.145). As Hall explains, identification "is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group" (HALL, 1996, p. 2); In order to behave as an American girl, Lucy rejects the position of a colonized person— an identity constructed through the "gaze of the Other." As Stuart Hall explains: "it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks" that identity can be constructed (HALL, 1996, p. 4).

Through the use of a "bad" behavior, Lucy achieves a strong persona that authorizes her counter-discourse and points towards her new identity. Lucy refuses the options her mother and

the British colonial society had offered her; however, as she fights these authorities, Lucy remains locked within a search for power, which in her view will lead her to an identity of her own.

In order to refuse the authority of the Other, Lucy carries “two-facedness” as her mark. When in elementary school, she had to recite a poem: “I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside false, inside true” (KINCAID, 1990, p.18). Thus, Lucy’s inner self brings this conflict. When she meets Paul, she explains her “two-facedness”:

I said, “How are you?” in a small, proper voice, the voice of the girl my mother had hoped I would be: clean, virginal, beyond reproach. But I felt the opposite of that, for when he held my hand and kissed me on the cheek, I felt instantly deliciously strange; I wanted to be naked in a bed with him. (KINCAID, 1990, p. 97)

She greets Paul: outside what her mother had intended her to be, inside how she really felt— a female Lucifer. Kincaid’s representation of Lucifer as a hero for Lucy makes her protagonist a rebellious heroine, who imitates Satan, and becomes a kind of female devil. Lucy’s mother explains her choice of name: “I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 152). According to Paz, rebellion alludes to the Christian religion, but in a negative way, that is, related to hell: the “fallen prince”; hence, the rebellious lives in eternal inconformity, always on the margins (PAZ, 1996, pp. 261-65). Yet, according to Greenblatt, this encounter between what brings authority and a subversive power is one of the necessary steps for the process of self-fashioning:

[S]elf-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, that what is produced in this encounter partakes of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack, and hence that any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss. (GREENBLATT, 1980, p. 9)

Lucy’s mother acts as the authority; on the other hand, Lucy’s personification of Lucifer functions as the alien. Lucy’s rebellious and subversive feelings allow her to choose a position and act accordingly, and, eventually, she dismisses her mother’s teachings and follows the subversive power within herself.

Lucy’s ethnic identity struggles with her individual choices. It is a battle between what she is and what she intends to be. As Lucy fights for individual freedom – an act so common in the American society during the 1960s –, being a woman of color coming from a colonized

society makes it even more difficult for her to fashion an individual identity different from the cultural one she possesses. Unfortunately, at the end of the narrative, Lucy does not seem to come to terms with either her West Indian background or her new “Americanized” life, and her dilemma continues as to whether or not she will eventually be able to deal with these ‘two selves’. For this reason, Lucy goes on carrying the burden of being a young black woman all alone in the white world, the girl who sings along with the song coming from the small radio on her dresser: “put yourself in my place, if only for a day; see if you can stand the awful emptiness inside” (KINCAID, 1990, p. 08).

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