

IN THE DAUGHTER'S WORDS: WRITING THE SELF DESPITE ORPHANHOOD IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *MR. POTTER*

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ABSTRACT: Under the scope of postcolonialism, Jamaica Kincaid's *Mr. Potter: a Novel*, brings the life story of the narrator (and Mr. Potter's daughter), Elaine Potter, imbued in her father's life narrative, and by doing so, Elaine frees herself from some cultural, social, political and gender bindings. It is after the death of the father who she never got to know that the orphaned Elaine Potter manages to be helped by her mother's memories as well as her own to take control over her own story and immortalize it. Elaine Potter's coming-of-age is able to subvert doubly for it is an orphan's life narrative (whose familial background is assumed to be unknown) and for her being a Caribbean, black woman writer as well. Issues related to the blurring of genres in the narrative, to literacy, and to mother and daughter relationship are of utmost importance in this article.

KEY-WORDS: postcolonial literature, autobiographical writing, Jamaica Kincaid.

Nas palavras da filha: a escrita do eu apesar da orfandade em *Mr. Potter* de Jamaica Kincaid

RESUMO: Inserido no âmbito do pós-colonialismo, a obra de caráter autobiográfico *Mr. Potter: a Novel*, da autora Jamaica Kincaid, traz embutida na narrativa da vida do Sr. Potter também a história da narradora (e sua filha) Elaine Potter, que, por sua vez, se libera de amarras sociais, culturais, políticas e de gênero. A partir da morte do pai que nunca conheceu, essa órfã é capaz de, com ajuda de suas próprias lembranças e as de sua mãe, tomar as rédeas de sua própria história e imortalizá-la. O romance de formação de Elaine Potter consegue subverter duplamente: primeiro por ser a história de vida de uma órfã cujo *background* familiar seria supostamente desconhecido e também por ela ser uma mulher, negra, Caribenha e escritora. Questões relativas à mistura de gêneros presentes na narrativa são assim como a dificuldade de diferenciá-los, ao letramento e à relação entre mãe e filha também são de suma importância neste artigo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura pós-colonial; escrita autobiográfica; Jamaica Kincaid.

Written by the Caribbean-American Jamaica Kincaid, *Mr. Potter: a Novel* (2002) depicts the life of Roderick Potter intertwined with an amalgam of other life stories told throughout its pages. Mr. Potter is an illiterate *chauffeur* who fathered many girls around the Antigua island, but never acknowledged having done so; one of his daughters, the literate

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one, then decides to write about him. Owing to that, this work could initially be classified as *life writing*, which is broadly defined as *“a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s as a subject”* (SMITH & WATSON, 2010, p. 4).

However, this work’s title, *Mr. Potter: a Novel* makes the readers puzzled, since a novel, according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987), is *“a long written story, not in poetry, dealing with invented people and events”* (p. 708). Thus, the readers are misled by the title until they come across the following passage: *“[t]his sentence should begin with Dr. Weizenger emerging, getting off the launch that has brought him from his ship which is lying in the deep part of the harbor, but this is Mr. Potter’s life and so Dr. Weizenger must never begin a sentence”* (KINCAID, 2002, p. 8). Furthermore, as the plot unfolds, autobiographical traits as well as the blossoming of a woman author, from even before her birth to adulthood, can be observed.

Under the scope of postmodernity, the institutions are being challenged; therefore, all that once seemed natural is to be depicted as a human construct (see HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 1-23). As stated by theorist Linda Hutcheon, *“[t]he borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are[?]”* (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 9). With the deconstruction of the clear borders of literary genres, *Mr. Potter* can be seen as a hybrid, i.e. a mixture of both fiction and autobiographical writing since both author and narrator’s life events present a few similarities. Furthermore, in the work under scrutiny, not only is the genre a hybrid, but also the author and her literary representation.

Having lived in Antigua, and then gone to the United States, both author and narrator were influenced at least by two different cultures, which is in accordance with what theorist Stuart Hall claims about the multi-parted subject who dwells in the postmodern era, and who *“must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural identities, to translate and negotiate between them”* (HALL, 2007, p. 629). It is then, through the merging of genres that the author and narrator’s blurred identity boundaries are shown to be profoundly reflected in this work. Besides, as stated by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, this merging of genres has often featured in narratives written by those who wish to explore the outcomes of colonization (SMITH & WATSON, 2010, p. 12) *“as the author Jamaica Kincaid does.”*

In order to distinguish autobiographies from other life narratives, Phillippe Lejeune argues there is a pact between readers and writers. This pact consists of two evenly important steps: the first are the *“vital statistics”* of the author, that is, at least date and place of birth, as well as educational background, should be the same as the narrator’s; the second is the trust

pact there is between author and publishers, supporting the truthfulness of the "signature" on the cover. Furthermore, much as the novel does not necessarily need to be tied to historical time – the plot can be set in the future, or the past, or even in an imaginary time and space – the autobiography needs historical reference: the plot must be set according to the author's milieu (see LEJEUNE *apud* SMITH & WATSON, 2001, p. 2). Even though *Mr. Potter* does not fit Lejeune's distinction for it is not an autobiography, there are some points which resemble this canonical genre.

Definitely regarded as an autobiographical work, *Mr. Potter* should not be solely defined as autobiography mainly because it is a term known to embrace the traditional genre that became popular in the Western society by the eighteenth century when

[1] notions of self-interest, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge informed the figure of the "Enlightened individual" described by philosophers and social theorists. And "autobiographies" as studies in self-interest were sought by a growing reading public with access to affordable printed books (SMITH & WATSON, 2010, p. 2).

Due to its popularity, this term has been the most widely (mis)used and (mis)understood one to refer to life-writing in the West in its broadest sense.

After the advent of postmodernism and postcolonial criticism, the enlightened subject, along with other master narratives became the subject of constant questionings. The canonical genre – the autobiography – has implied in its own existence that other kinds of narrating one's life were not genuine: the marginal had been disenfranchised (SMITH & WATSON, 2010). Narratives of women's coming of age, slaves, travels, of women's domestic lives have been underestimated for centuries, which basically means that the object of analysis of this article would have its value diminished if published some decades earlier.

Kincaid's autobiographical writing clearly mixes fiction and autobiographical data, making imperceptible the boundaries of each genre. By bringing some of the "vital statistics" proposed by Lejeune, *Mr. Potter's* content is able to be connected to the life of the author who signs the work. Jamaica Kincaid – whose birth name is Elaine Potter – shares with the narrator the same name, as well as the fact that they were both "orphans", for they never knew their father – the also named Roderick Potter. Both Kincaid and Elaine left Antigua and returned later on so that they could write about their homeland and its people. On the other hand, to name but a few examples of the fictional character of this work, Jamaica Kincaid's mother, differently from her namesake in the story, remarried and had three other children. So, all the autobiographical and fictional threads that wove the plot of *Mr. Potter: a Novel* are

nearly impossible to be told apart, especially if one takes into account the fictional character of one's memory.

With reference to autobiographical selves, Susan Friedman agrees with Georges Gusdorf "autobiographical selves are constructed through the process of writing and, therefore, cannot reproduce exactly the selves who lived" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 72) and she overtly ratifies the fiction implied in this type of work. Gusdorf also claims individuality is a requirement to autobiographers, once this is a privilege of very few. By the same token, minorities are "reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color" (FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 75). Thus, Friedman believes that women, for being a minority, are immersed in an unavoidable sense of collective identity.

While there are theorists who have asserted women's sense of collectiveness as purely negative, others are aware of the strength it endows these subjects. Gathering and basing themselves on their historical experience, as Susan Friedman mentions, is a means of creating another consciousness about their own view on themselves: women develop a double consciousness (see FRIEDMAN, 1998). This bipartite way of recognizing oneself is intricate, to say the least: the women learn to see themselves as individuals "taking into account their historical background" "while also having to develop a notion that they are culturally perceived differently" (see FRIEDMAN, 1998). Supposedly, Elaine developed this "double-consciousness" that, triggered by her father's death, made it unbearable for her the fact that her story could be permanently erased.

In *Mr. Potter*, not only does Kincaid write about her father's life, but she also narrativizes/creates her own familial background, which attaches this work of prose to the broad field of autofiction, and more precisely, to alterbiography. Jana Braziel defines autofiction as "a hybrid genre intermingling fiction and autobiography" (BRAZIEL, 2006, p. 20), that is, once all recollections are fictional, this term refers to the memories that are put together to form the plot of *Mr. Potter*, along with the other fictional data inserted in this autobiographical writing. Alterbiography then, is defined by Braziel as "a textual rendering of autobiography [but] through the inscription of alterity and difference" (BRAZIEL, 2006, p. 20) "related to the overt focus on the other, the colonized, the submissive, Mr. Roderick Potter. This work renders more than just a glimpse over Potter's life: there are also his literate daughter's recollections/creations of her ancestors so their lineage can be immortalized by means of the written discourse.

When seen through the lens of postcolonialism, all the characters in Kincaid's work are involved in the postcolonial dynamics. Besides, abandonment is a recurrent theme in *Mr. Potter* as well as among colonized people. Mr. Roderick Potter, as aforementioned, is a very dogged *chauffeur*, who, while working for a wealthy man, has as his major dream owning his own car, so he can have his own business. Despite his determination professionally, he fails to provide for all his girl children, offering them nothing but his absence. Perhaps, this disregard towards his own children might have been connected to his own upbringing. His mother, the young Elfrida Potter, walked into the sea, and walked into it as if in walking she would eventually come to something new (KINCAID, 2002, p. 70) until she found death, leaving her boy under the care of Mrs. Shepherd. Not having received love as a child, might have made of Mr. Potter a man unable to love his own children.

The narrator declares that the lineage of orphans portrayed in this work reaches back not so much into eternity as into a sentence that would begin with the year fourteen hundred and ninety-two (KINCAID, 2002, p. 72). By remarking on the year in which America was discovered by Columbus, a parallel is drawn between colonialism and this lineage of orphans, which is ratified by Julie Everett's statement: "[there is] an epidemic of child abandonment in the postcolony" (EVERETT, 2009, p. 53). Subsequently, she posits that "orphanage in these postcolonial texts results from a lack of familial cohesion, which points once more to the far-reaching effects of slavery and colonialism" (EVERETT, 2009, p. 53).

An unconscious perpetrator of the orphanage, the also orphan Roderick Potter, is a mere product of colonization: submissive and subjected to the dynamics of colonial power. The way Potter is said to live throughout the narrative – not minding being a *chauffeur*, said to exist in a blankness or even unable to understand, know and make himself known to others – is undoubtedly a consequence of the colonial process. The theorist Stuart Hall argues "colonisation is never only about the external processes and pressures of exploitation. It is also about the ways in which colonised subjects internally collude with the objectification of the self produced by the coloniser" (HALL, 1996, p. 69). Hence, Mr. Potter (once more) passively fits the role he has been subjected to.

Having absented his name from the birth certificate of all his daughters, Potter passes on the line that was drawn through him, through his mother, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so on. Conversely, one of the children he fathered decides not to go through life as Potter had, and claims: "[t]he line that is drawn through me, this line I have inherited, but I have not accepted my inheritance and so have not deeded it to anyone who shall follow

meö (KINCAID, 2002, p. 143). Bearing in mind that women's oppression is political, economic and culturally implied (see BAHRI, 2007), the narrator Elaine Potter, by rejecting this line and all the inheritance that would come with it ó the lack of a father figure, the legacy of illiteracy, passiveness, silence and submission ó, she states her agency by dominating this line, being in control of herself and her story so she can (re)write it.

Both products of the colonial background, Mr. Potter and his daughter Elaine Potter were not the only ones: many people were subjected to the colonial culture and values, the despisal of their own culture, low quality education and, especially, to exploitation in its broader sense. To Kincaid, "autobiographical writing has [í] served as a tactic of intervention in colonial repression" (SMITH & WATSON, 2010, p. 45). Besides, the author of *Mr. Potter* appears to see the act of writing as emancipator as well as life-saver, as once claimed in an interview to *The Missouri Review* (2002): "it was the thing I knew. Quite possibly, if I had another kind of life, I would not have been moved to write. That was the immediate thing, the immediate oppression, I knew. I wanted to free myself of that".

Since it is directly related to writing, the issue of literacy is not peripheral in Kincaid's postcolonial setting. Being literate endows both author and narrator with power to act and thus be in control of their destinies. At the same time, when dwelling and writing across traditional and cultural boundaries, the postcolonial (woman) author ó usually connected to poverty, underdevelopment and illiteracy ó by no means takes oral tradition for granted. Much on the contrary, whenever the issue of written tradition comes to surface, it is crucial to bear in mind that much of the narrative derives from memories and stories that were passed on, not by means of the written word, but by orality ó which underscores the equal relevance of both traditions. Moreover, as Everett posits, being illiterate does not necessarily insert one under the scope of oral tradition, nor does literacy expel others from orality (EVERETT, 2009, p. 54). For instance, in *Mr. Potter*, the literate Annie Victoria Richardson is the one who orally transmits stories to her daughter, while the illiterate Roderick Potter is not portrayed as a transmitter of traditions or any family anecdotes. In fact, the influence exerted by Richardson over the narrator is vital when it comes to the portrayal of Potter: many of the narrator's recollections have been somehow shaped by her mother's judgment.

In being empowered to become the creator of her father's life story, as well as her own, Elaine Potter, the narrator, had to make a twofold effort: to exercise agency as a woman in a patriarchal society and postcolonial milieu, as well as to ratify her own selfhood in spite of being an orphan. This agency acquired by Elaine is undoubtedly shared with her mother.

The fact that Richardson was not an illiterate orphan herself makes of her a contributor to her daughter's agency mainly because she was the one who started this new legacy of literacy and empowerment by being able to read and write.

Not only does Richardson play an important role in contributing to the narrativization of Mr. Potter's life and passing on a different legacy, but, as a mother, her relationship with her daughter is quite significant in the analysis of women's biography. According to the psychoanalytical view on female autobiography, Chodorow posits that mothers tend to take their daughters as an extension of themselves (CHODOROW *apud* FRIEDMAN, 1998). Hence, in *Mr. Potter*, Richardson sees the importance of literacy as means of empowerment equally to herself and to her daughter. Towards the path to adulthood, this dual relationship remains central in Kincaid's writing as it does in her real life, as claimed in an interview to *The Missouri Review* (2002):

I perhaps am a writer because of her [my mother], in a very specific way. For instance, I love books because of her. She gave me an Oxford dictionary for my seventh birthday. She had taught me to read when I was three-and-a-half years old. [í] But you see her with these marvelous gifts and sense of self - people who have less of this than her have done things, ruled the world for instance. She's in her seventies and she's quite something.

Through the pages of her work, Kincaid is able to give voice to a woman who is literate and, therefore, able to control the course of her story, but she also enables an orphan who supposedly had no history to be told and is often unable to act on her behalf or to speak. Oddly enough, *Mr. Potter's* narrator exercises her agency by making use of a narrative tool quite unusual for an orphan: the autobiography. As for creating herself by means of writing, the orphan in question rejects the role of victim she is expected to have and exercises her *double* agency as a woman and orphan (EVERETT, 2009). The narrator writes about/creates her family in order to reassure her own existence even though her condition as an orphan grants her the role of "a quintessential autobiographer", that is, a writer who does not work under the evaluative look of a family, what leads her to create a self that is more personal than social (2009, p. 46). Everett herself, due to that, also mentions that an orphan writes in order to become rather than to become someone else, as claimed Foucault (FOUCAULT *apud* EVERETT, 2009) p. 46). Based on the personal construct that is the product of an orphan's autobiography, the story's narrator was successful as she interwove many of her relatives' lives with hers, creating and "recollecting" while struggling to become the woman she finally came to be. *Mr. Potter*, so, much though fitting the category of *bildungsroman* or portraying

the coming-of-age of a character ó it undoubtedly fits perfectly under the heading of *kunstlerroman* too ó the coming-of-age of an artist: Jamaica Kincaid.

As aforementioned, Roderick Potter's death is definitely a starting point to Kincaid's narrator. As the story unfolds, the readers are presented to a curious Elaine who is searching for her father's grave, and probably jotting down people's recollections of either Potter's funeral, or living days: Emma, Jarvis, one of his daughters, the grave master are only a few of the many sources to this work. Potter's death made his story possible to be told once

[í] only when you are dead can a person be really known, because when you are dead you cannot modify your actions you are in a state of such stillness, the permanent stillness of death, you cannot reply to accusations, you cannot make a wrong right, you cannot ask forgiveness, you cannot make a counteraction so as to make a wrong seem not to have occurred at all, you make the wrong perfect in the imagination, you make the wrong perfect in actuality. (KINCAID, 2002, pp. 50-51).

These memories are the main source to this man's life. His death would silence him forever were it not for his daughter's recollections of him. Perhaps, being aware that Potter could no longer deny anything that would be said of him, Elaine decided to extinguish the abandonment that was still attached to her. Killing the perpetrator of the *ölineö*, the father who never loved her, was a sign that she was now empowered to create herself and more importantly, provide the man who ignored her with a story, wishes and feelings.

According to bell hooks, by writing about her own life story, she "wanted not to forget her past, but to break its hold. This death in writing would be liberatory" (hooks, 1998, p. 429). Similarly, Kincaid's literary representation hopes to experience two deaths: her father's and her own. In spite of the limitations inscribed in this genre ó since it is seen as "a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them" (hooks, 1998, p. 430) ó by writing autobiographical narratives, a woman is able to free herself from the past and immortalize stories. Besides, one might be seeking the storage of memories without resorting to their mnemonic devices ó which may succumb to forgetting and even gradual blurring ó so a familial tradition can be transmitted to future generations (see hooks, 1995).

Mr. Potter's narrator, Elaine, is able to speak (on behalf) of her father, her mother, and of her ancestors, is able to endow identity to members of her family by means of representation, by writing their stories, and, therefore, gaining agency and control over her own life. It is important to bear in mind the fact that Elaine is able to write and immortalize

her ancestorø and her own story, as a woman who exercises double-agency ó not only because she is the narrator who has gained voice through what was written on the bookø pages, but also as an orphan who has managed to weave a self-referential narrative, which renders her own õcoming of ageö.

Finally, in this *õbildungsroman* in the truest senseö (EVERETT, 2009, p. 46) in which Elaine becomes her own creator, and writes her father so that her own story can be written, she challenges her expected role of orphan, female, colonized and exerts her agency by breaking the silence and writing her life story. In fact, this narratorø agency can be considered multi-faceted rather than just doubled if her writing is seen as challenging to all the õropesö that tie women. Furthermore, despite not having been fully exploited in the academia, the self-writing of orphans in the postcolony may lead to a widening of the canon, enclosing other voices, enclosing the oppressed (see EVERETT, 2009).

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