Dreaming of Daffodils: Cultural Resistance in the Narratives of Theory

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Abstract
Many critics have pointed to Jamaica Kincaid as one of the most innovative and interesting of contemporary Caribbean writers, and there have been several articles engaging with her fiction through contemporary literary theory. Such approaches have tended to focus on the convergence of feminist and psycho-analytic theories which are centrally concerned, as Kincaid's writing appears to be, with the mother-daughter relationship. In this paper, I wish to shift the critical axis away from the application of theory to Kincaid's writing, in order to explore the way in which her writing itself could be seen as an alternative theory, a 'literary' theory which questions the assumptions within orthodox modes of interpretation, including feminist and psychoanalytic models. In other words, my interest lies with the ways in which post-colonial literature might help us to understand the limitations of certain theories, rather than with the ways in which theory can help us to understand post-colonial literature.
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people of colour have always theorized - but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking.

For those familiar with Kincaid's writing, the strategies which Christian describes as characteristic of this theory - which I would not wish to posit as any kind of exhaustive or privileged model of 'black theory' - will almost certainly be recognisable. As a focus for my reading of Kincaid's creative theoretical strategies, I wish to look at the way in which she problematises and theorizes popular cultural and intellectual narratives of the late twentieth century by
rehearsing them through the eyes of Lucy, her latest Caribbean female protagonist in the novel of that name. I shall look at the characteristically American ideal of arrival, which in Lucy’s experience is also closely associated with exile, often seen as a classically West Indian phenomenon, in order to explore how this cultural or national narrative has been constructed. I also wish to examine how the narrative offered by feminism and particularly Anglo-American feminism relates to Lucy’s experience as a Caribbean woman, and finally I shall discuss the whole debate concerning the ideology of the aesthetic and the way in which it is culturally determined.

My argument is that by playfully engaging with given or naturalised narratives of nationhood and self – those stories through which we feel we know ourselves and others – in *Lucy*, Kincaid draws our attention to the cultural politics which are subsumed within certain modes of storytelling and interpretation. She presents us with conventional narratives in such a way that they interrogate their own conventions. She offers us familiar tales and then de-familiarises them. Dreams of the Middle Passage and of slavery disrupt Lucy’s arrival in America, memories of her mother’s life back in the Caribbean unsettle the Anglo-American feminist discourse with which she is presented, and her perception of the divide between the aesthetic and ideological becomes politicised, as it is constantly in conflict with that of her employer.

In Kincaid’s earlier work, *Annie John*, the narrative ostensibly ends with the final stage of Annie’s journey towards emotional maturity and away from cultural security, as she leaves her mother and her small place to sail for the mother-land. In many ways, *Lucy* may appear to begin from where *Annie John* concludes. This latest fiction chronicles the arrival of a nineteen year old woman from a small West Indian island to the United States of America where she takes employment as a nanny. However, it is a significant difference that instead of travelling to England, the imperial motherland, Lucy has journeyed to America, its contemporary rival. Indeed, I would argue that much of the novel bids for a strong reading of America’s positioning in relation to the Caribbean in terms of economic, cultural and intellectual neo-colonialism.

For Lucy, her arrival in the United States is not to be the entry into Eden, or opportunity for personal genesis, which she had anticipated. Instead, she enters a land which is situated, both seasonally and morally, after the fall. America, in its wintering phase, presents profound disappointment to Lucy who had dreamt of a land where ‘all these places were points of happiness to me; all these places were lifeboats to my small drowning soul.’ Lucy has been betrayed by colonial indoctrination into believing the imperial narrative which couples ‘discovery’ of a land with self-discovery. Yet, even her body language articulates the ambivalence which she experiences at the moment of arrival in America: ‘at first it was all so new that I had to smile with my mouth turned down at the corners’
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(p. 4). As the narrative develops and Lucy’s new life as a nanny to a white, middle-class, nuclear family—who represent the crumbling facade of American civility and liberalism—unfolds, it becomes evident that she has not, after all, arrived in any personal sense. Rather than being an act by which to forget and to separate past from future, Lucy’s arrival only serves to heighten her awareness of herself as exile. ‘Oh, I had imagined that with one swift act—leaving home and coming to this new place—I could leave behind me, as if it were an old garment never to be worn again, my sad thoughts, my sad feelings, and my discontent with life in general as it presented itself to me’ (pp. 6-7). The binary opposition collapses, neither exile nor arrival are complete, and, as migrant and minority Lucy is left without belonging. America is indeed a poor shadow of her dream.

In a text which constantly denies us the happy endings which feed our cultural imaginations, it is made explicit that the closure or fulfilment of that old colonial tale which depicts the ‘other’ land as the site on which to achieve aspirations and desires inaccessible at home is still dependent upon economic and social power. The dinner party guests of Lucy’s employers had been, seen and consummated their fantasies of fun and frolics in ‘the islands’, but, journeying in the opposite direction, she is not so comfortably accommodated in her new environs. Although warmly embraced by the family for whom she works, Lucy remains acutely aware of her positioning within all structures of American society, including the home.

The room in which I lay was a small room just off the kitchen—the maid’s room. 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 travelling 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 a maid. (p. 7)

While the spacial configuration of Lucy’s room evidently denotes containment, it more specifically evokes the iconography of the slave ship in which the captured Africans were transported as chattels across the ocean to America. This representation is suggestive of the fact that Lucy’s respectable position of service as a nanny is a not so distant echo of her ancestors’ enforced servitude in this land.

Yet as the reality of American society intrudes upon Lucy’s dream, so other dreams begin to intrude upon her reality. The subsumed slave narrative emerges most dramatically within Lucy’s dreams, one of which she relates to her employers, Lewis and Mariah, one evening at the dinner table.

Lewis was chasing me around the house. I wasn’t wearing any clothes. The ground on which I was running was yellow, as if it had been paved with cornmeal. Lewis
was chasing me around and around the house, and though he came close he could never catch up with me. Mariah stood at the open windows saying, Catch her Lewis, catch her. Eventually I fell down a hole, at the bottom of which were some silver and blue snakes. (p. 14)

Images of plantation life and slave capture emerge alongside that of the yellow brick road to present a montage of the colliding and conflicting messages within this ambivalently informed cultural imagination. The conflation of seemingly opposing cultural signifiers, of desired future and denied past, of hope and fear, signals the complex matrix of competing claims within a migrant consciousness informed by both metropolitan expectations and ancestral histories.

As well as revealing the America of oppression buried beneath the dream of the land of the free, Lucy’s dream and the response of her American employers to it, ‘Lewis made a clucking noise, then said, Poor, poor Visitor. And Mariah said, Dr. Freud for Visitor, and I wondered why she said that, for I did not know who Dr. Freud was’, point to the way in which Kincaid’s fiction foregrounds the limitations of Western theoretical models. I would suggest that the description of Lucy’s dream actually serves to question the value of dominant Western psychoanalytical theories, which see dreams only as ciphers for issues of sexual difference and conflict. While the heavily inscribed Freudian imagery of holes and snakes might seem to invite or endorse this reading, the images of running naked and of cornmeal clearly signify that cultural difference and conflict are also primary determinants within this consciousness. The denial of issues of cultural difference in the development of psychoanalytic theory means that the proposed Dr Freud would be, at best, an inadequate model through which to interpret the dreams of an adolescent Caribbean female. Evidently the cultural context of the Caribbean makes the baffling nature of the already ‘dark continent’ of female sexuality even more inaccessible to Freudian interpretation.

In terms of the theorising narrative, the depiction of Lucy’s dream collapses or de-constructs the space which Western theory often seeks to construct between ideas of cultural difference and sexual difference, in order to present the way in which these two models of differentiation are intimately bound within the construction of a female post-colonial subjectivity.

It is this same denial of cultural difference which also necessitates Lucy’s resistance to the discourse of Anglo-American feminism within the novel. Mariah, Lucy’s supposedly liberal and liberated white employer, who constructs her as the ‘poor visitor’ and in need of rescue attempts to offer her this through the supposedly more authentic voice of a feminist language.

Mariah left the room and came back with a large book and opened it to the first chapter. She gave it to me. I read the first sentence. ‘Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is female – this word is sufficient to define her.’ I had to stop. Mariah had completely misinterpreted my
situation. My life could not really be explained by this thick book that made my hands hurt as I tried to keep it open. My life was at once something more simple and more complicated than that...’ (p. 132)

To Lucy, the text is meaningless and burdensome as it refuses context. Lucy must reject the language of the surrogate mother because it rejects her specific cultural and historical positioning. The language of the text, like that of Mariah herself, speaks to middle class white women, with little awareness of its exclusivity. The generalised statements concerning gender, which Mariah’s feminism advocates, do not correlate to the cultural differences between women which Lucy has already observed.

Although I would not wish to deny the very real marginalisation, which the novel clearly reveals, that Lucy does experience as a woman within her home society, her Caribbean cultural heritage is clearly womanist/feminist both in ethos and in practice. Baffled by American women’s obsessions with ageing and beauty, Lucy asserts her own code which confidently articulates a positive female subjectivity: ‘Among the beliefs I held about the world was that being beautiful should not matter to a woman, because it was one of those things that would go away, and there wouldn’t be anything you could do to bring it back’ (p. 57). From her childhood in the Caribbean, Lucy has also learnt of the herbal abortifacients from her mother and thus is in possession of one of the primary objectives of the early American women’s movement – control over fertility. Moreover, her Caribbean upbringing has instilled into Lucy the significance of solidarity amongst women: ‘It was my mother who told me that I should never take a man’s side over a woman’s... It was from her own experience that she spoke’ (p. 48). As well as exposing the alienating ethnocentric bias of a certain type of Anglo-American feminism, Lucy’s simple statements seem to suggest that within Caribbean women’s lives theory and practice are not discrete, as Kincaid juxtaposes gender politics which are to be lived with those which are to be argued.

Here and throughout the novel, Lucy’s thoughts and dreams testify to the ways in which certain intellectual spaces still remain colonised within Western thought. It is Mariah who is trapped within the monologic narrative unable to negotiate the differences between language and living and self and other, not Lucy. It becomes clear that the narratives of opportunity and belonging (of having arrived) and of liberation (here through feminism) have been transculturally marketed in versions which are deeply ethnocentric and exclusive, and which, moreover, with a certain cultural complacency, deny the coexistence of alternative models, such as those which Lucy brings with her from the Caribbean.

However, as well as revealing the cultural biases and blind spots within existing theoretical models, Kincaid’s novel also explores the basis upon which we evaluate, by rehearsing the way in which we judge our notions of the aesthetic and the ideological. This process is staged most crucially
within the narrative when Mariah initiates Lucy into the joys of Spring by telling her of a field of daffodils.

She [Mariah] said, 'Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they’re in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive...I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria’s Girls’ School. I had been made to memorize it, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils. After I was done, everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me, and later they told me how nicely I had pronounced every word, how I had placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where that was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to have heard his words ringing out of my mouth. I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside false, inside true. And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation, but inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem. (pp. 17-18)

Mariah’s admiration for this seemingly simple field of flowers acts as a powerful catalyst for Lucy’s memories of cultural imperialism. What is essentially an aesthetic experience for Mariah constitutes a powerful ideological situation for Lucy. Her retrospective vision of reciting Wordsworth’s poem works as both a literal example of colonial education and as a metonym for the colonial apparatus’ promotion of an aesthetic which is ideologically motivated in its very essence of seeming to be devoid of ideology. ‘Daffodils’ was promoted pedagogically as an apolitical text and yet becomes highly politicised when analysed within the colonial context in which Kincaid places it. The poetic subject (daffodils) signifies the forced adoption of the motherland and the attendant suppression of difference. In addition, the process of learning by heart further supports the hegemony’s underlying need for mimicry which Lucy publicly performs but privately attempts to negate.

Her double consciousness, or two-facedness as she calls it, is testimony to her ambivalent position as black and female in relation to colonial cultural authority, which is represented by the poem, the poet, and the institution of the school. By appearing to subscribe to the version of aesthetics pedagogically promoted, but internally reacting against it, Lucy has clearly politicised and resisted the stifling appropriation of a culturally inauthentic voice. Indeed, when Mariah at last takes her to see the daffodils, which she had so carefully and painfully eulogized as a young girl, Lucy’s reaction is a spontaneous and most vehement desire to cut them all down. ‘It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers, I saw sorrow and bitterness. The same thing could cause us to shed tears, but those tears would not taste the same. We walked home in silence’ (p. 30). Although Mariah’s and Lucy’s bewildement at the situation may be mutual, from her analysis of their
conflicting responses, it is evident that Lucy experiences and comprehends the politics of cultural difference in a way her American employer cannot. Nevertheless, within the narrative, Lucy does attempt to communicate to Mariah the consequences of cultural and historical positioning upon ways of seeing. On a very American train journey, Mariah again attempts to invite Lucy into the beauty of her world.

Early that morning, Mariah left her own compartment to come to tell me that we were passing through some of those freshly plowed fields she loved so much. She drew up my blind, and when I saw mile after mile of turned-up earth, I said, a cruel tone to my voice, 'Well, thank God I didn't have to do that.' I don't know if she understood what I meant, for in that one statement I meant many different things. (p. 33)

As before, aesthetic and ideological are revealed as relative states. In this instance, Lucy's historical affiliation is with the labour which ploughed the fields, whereas Mariah's is with those of leisure, and thus visual pleasure. While the politics of this situation may seem clear to us as readers, this perception cannot be so confidently assumed by Lucy, for whom the task of communicating across a widening cultural chasm is deeply problematic. However, Kincaid does not appear to be bidding for a reading which emphasises the aesthetic as simply a frivolous position, an Anglo-centric luxury denied to, and irrelevant to those outside the dominant economic group, as later in the book she neatly inverts the line of judgement. As Lucy watches Mariah and her adulterous husband posture romantically, she notices how 'She leaned her head backward and rested it on his shoulder (she was a little shorter than he, and that looked wrong; it looks better when a woman is a little taller than her husband), and she sighed and shuddered in pleasure' (p. 47). Lucy's observation that it is aesthetically pleasing for a wife to be taller than her husband is a particularly playful and incisive context for the inversion of the divide, as this is a statement which Mariah, with her criteria of Western feminism, would clearly interpret as ideologically motivated.

The aporia which divides Lucy and Mariah testifies to the culturally constructed nature of value systems and therefore questions the whole basis upon which we make judgements about ourselves, each other, and literary value. By re-presenting and unravelling the politics of certain national and intellectual narratives, Kincaid reveals that a Caribbean or a post-colonial female subjectivity is too complex to be articulated simply by feminist or colonial discourse theories or by national allegories, all of which are too often predicated on a belief that the other can easily be understood by the methodologies constructed by the self in order to 'discover' difference, and which further have a tendency to theorize that other into the self.

By arguing for a more complex subjectivity, both syncretic and shifting, Kincaid's novel Lucy not only offers a compelling and engaging presentation of the Caribbean migrant consciousness, but it also makes us question
our confidence in making judgements which fail to encompass a consideration of cultural and gender orientation, although it very clearly does not deny the significance of working through the process of cross-cultural communication.

NOTES


3. Jamaica Kincaid, Lucy (London: Jonathon Cape Ltd, 1991) p. 3. All subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.

4. It is interesting to note that the text which Mariah offers as this ‘catch-all’ revelation of gender politics is Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. Her unproblematic presentation of this text supports both the insensitivity towards issues of cultural difference and the neo-colonial appropriation of others’ voices for the purposes of a self-as-other denial of difference which clearly inform Mariah’s feminist position within the novel.

5. The root of Lucy’s problematic relationship with her mother, which in one sense forms the ‘heart’ of the novel, is traced to the fact that her mother had privileged and inflated her sons over Lucy. The positive role model which her mother presents to Lucy in terms of gender is compromised by her patriarchal attitude towards her only daughter which seeks to severely limit Lucy’s opportunities (pp. 130-131).

6. Womanist is a term adopted by many African-American and Caribbean critics who wish to distinguish their own gender politics from those of mainstream Western feminism, especially with regards to the positive promotion of female attributes.