Matrophobia and 'The Mother Wound' in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*

Precious Sodimu
N0726335@my.ntu.ac.uk

Word Count: 1392

Key Words: matrophobia, bildungsroman, displacement, detachment, transgenerational trauma

Abstract

This article examines the effects of colonialism on the immediate relationships within the afro-Caribbean family, with a specific focus on the relationship between mother and daughter. This article takes a microscopic look at the development of matrophobia and 'the mother wound' in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, and how this family dynamic results in toxic domesticity. This article will also discuss the effects of the family dynamic on one's navigation through childhood and adolescence.

The traditional mother-daughter relationship that has been told is challenged by Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, examining the damaging effects of colonialism on the afro-Caribbean immediate family relationships. Narrated as a bildungsroman, *Annie John* discusses the development of matrophobia and 'The Mother Wound' resulting in a loss of innocence and emergence of toxic domesticity. Kincaid's fictional family in the novel are a representation of the destruction and dismantling of the black nuclear family during slavery, outlined by Willie Lynch in 1712.

Antigua, the backdrop against which *Annie John* is set, remained colonised by the British until 1967, and as the novel takes place during the 1950s colonialism is a running motif. Kincaid uncovers the transgenerational trauma instilled into black nuclear families during slavery and the negative impacts of this. During the height of slavery in 1712, Willie Lynch outlined what he believed were infallible methods that slave-masters could use that would preserve slavery for three hundred years. One of the methods described to 'make a slave' included dismantling the black family whereby the male would be removed from the family unit, resulting in a disruption to both the psychological and emotional development of the other members[1]. The domino effect of the physically absent father figure that Lynch describes is reflected in Annie's physically present but emotionally detached father. Annie narrates that her father was abandoned as a child by his parents and deprived of emotional support. Annie narrates, 'how terrible it must be for all the people who had no one to love them so and no one whom they loved so' and refers to her father as an example[2]. At this point in the text, Kincaid compares Annie's unwavering love for her mother with the detachment experienced by her father when he was a child. In doing so, Annie expresses compassion for those unable to feel the extent to which she loved her mother, suggesting that the bond between Annie and her mother is superior. Annie's grandparents left her father to go to South America, abandoning him and possibly acts as a foreshadowing for Annie's departure from Antigua to London at the end of the text.

Though 'The Mother Wound' is not a clinical diagnosis, it is characterised by an emotionally volatile or absent mother and as a result of a strained relationship with one's mother, the relationship with the self is compromised[3]. In the early chapters, Kincaid illustrates Annie's fascination with her mother of the same name, Annie's mother became her reflection and this closeness is presented through the many tasks they shared. The closeness is replaced by her mother's hostility and detachment; from taking baths together to her mother's stern instruction that '[she] just cannot go round for the rest of your life looking like a little me', Annie's mother creates the separation[4]. The necessity to establish some distance and sever the overly attached bond between Annie and her mother may be debated. Did the emotional distance act as a detriment or benefit for Annie's emotional development? Perhaps Annie's mother did not anticipate the pain or confusion that her daughter would feel, however, Kincaid describes how Annie experiences feelings of 'bitterness and hatred'[5].

---

[1] Willie Lynch, 'The Willie Lynch Letter: The Making of a Slave', <https://archive.org/details/WillieLynchLetter1712/page/n2> [accessed 3 November 2019].

[2] Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 22.

[3] Sherry Gaba, 'The Mother Wound: How our relationships with our mothers effect our co-dependency' <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/addiction-and-recovery/201910/the-mother-wound> [accessed 3 November 2019].

[4] Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 26.

[5] Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p 26.

In psychoanalysis, displacement is described as a 'redirection of emotional feelings from their original'[6]. 'The Mother Wound' causes Annie emotional pain as a result of her mother's rejection, and she displaces her feelings of anger and ambivalence towards her mother onto her friendships which she romanticises. Keja Valens writes that 'the pursuit of desire between girls in *Annie John* is intertwined with anti-colonial struggle, for it undermines colonial heteronormativity'[7]. Kincaid explores sexual desire between girls as a by-product of a disintegrating relationship between mother and daughter, challenging the conventions of a classic bildungsroman. The deviation from 'colonial heteronormativity' that Valens describes may be presented through the emotional rift between Annie and her mother. Annie is, in essence, forced by her mother to become more emotionally independent from a young age and in turn, she disassociates herself with all things that feel 'normal', including her mother. Annie admits that as a child she 'had been afraid of [her] mother dying, but since [she] had met Gwen this didn't matter so much', suggesting that Gwen had replaced her mother and became the object of her affection[8]. Kincaid uncovers the irony of using simplistic language, a true testament to the coming-of-age narrative, to describe feelings as complex as love and hatred.

As an extension from the 'The Mother Wound', Kincaid arguably creates undertones of matrophobia in Annie's character which is the fear of becoming like one's mother. Annie's exploration of self and broad understanding of the world become the foreground of her life, while her mother fades to the background. However, perhaps Kincaid is demythologising the family home by presenting a mother-daughter relationship that naturally contracts and relaxes. Simone A. James Alexander proposes that 'the mother-daughter relationships in Kincaid's work can be classified as a … relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in which the (powerful) mother fits the profile of a coloniser and the (powerless) daughter is the colonized'[9]. While Alexander may be partially right in saying that there is an element of control and hierarchy between mother and daughter, I do not believe that it is comparable to the extreme coloniser-colonised relationship. As Annie matures, her confidence and willingness to explore life outside of the confines of her childhood home increases; she engages in several friendships and learns more about the world she lives in. This does not reflect the image of someone who is 'colonised' by their parent. There is power in Annie's curiosity first-person narrative that *Annie John* is told.

Kincaid subverts the standard form of a bildungsroman and explores the psychological impacts of what appears to be a rather dysfunctional relationship with one's mother. However, though an alternative interpretation of a coming-of-age novel, *Annie John* expands on both the emotional and psychosexual development of young girls. The Lynch Theory serves as a possible explanation for the dysfunction within the nuclear family. However, it is not the primary reason. Kincaid restores Annie's loss of innocence as a result of 'The Mother Wound' through the simplistic language used to reflect the cognitive processes of a child. In summary, the possible elements of toxic domesticity perhaps are not toxic at all, they are just different.

---

[6] <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199534067.001.0001/acref-9780199534067-e-2383?rskey=yFUcx6&result=2446> [accessed 10 November 2019].

[7] Keja Valens, 'Obvious and Ordinary: Desire between Girls in Jamaica Kincaid's "Annie John"' in, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, (Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 123-149, p. 124.

[8] Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p.51.

[9] Supriya M. Nair, 'Toxic Domesticity, Curative Kinship: Individual and National Trauma in Domestic Fiction', in *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), p. 67.

Bibliography

Gaba, Sherry, 'The Mother Wound: How our relationships with our mothers effect our co-dependency' <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/addiction-and-recovery/201910/the-mother-wound> [accessed 3 November 2019]

Kincaid, Jamaica, *Annie John*, (London: Vintage Books, 1997)

Lynch, Willie, 'The Willie Lynch Letter: The Making of a Slave', <https://archive.org/details/WillieLynchLetter1712/page/n2> [accessed 3 November 2019]

Nair, Supriya M., 'Toxic Domesticity, Curative Kinship: Individual and National Trauma in Domestic Fiction', in *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours*, (Chartlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), pp. 49-76

Valens, Keja, 'Obvious and Ordinary: Desire between Girls in Jamaica Kincaid's "Annie John"' in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, (Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 123-149