

## “Indigenous”, Cultural Institutions in Caribbean Postcolonial Ecology: An Eco-Feminist Study of Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*

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### Abstract

The respect and nostalgia for Indigenous knowledge contribute to sustainable development and management of the environment. While there is a focus on race, diaspora and displacement created through colonialism in postcolonial studies, ecocriticism foregrounds human continuity. This paper engages text from black Caribbean, in order to explore the symbiotic relationship between the Indigenous peoples' struggle, which has affected literature. Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* is a novel of environmental protest on survival. This study investigates and explores the bonding in mending the protagonist's broken connections with her natural environment. Using ecofeminism as a theoretical framework, the study takes a postcolonial approach to demonstrate cultural institutions in the Caribbean context. The argument of this paper is that Caribbean postcolonial ecology articulates black women as custodians of culture and resonates a gynocentric community in which women enjoy a pivotal position as environmentalists, storytellers, and secret keepers of healing traditions.

**Keywords:** *Black Caribbean, Ecofeminism, Gynocentric, Indigenous, Jamaica Kincaid, Postcolonial Ecology.*

### INTRODUCTION

A good number of critics have submitted that women are weak, vulnerable and they have no value in the African and African-American (Caribbean) society. Owing to erroneous claim, ecofeminism has been used to carry out the research to explain how black women preserve their culture despite the inferior positions given to them in their society. Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* serves as an essential text for exploring indigenous depictions of identity within Caribbean literature, particularly through the lens of female subjectivity. The novel intricately weaves the protagonist's journey towards self-discovery with broader themes of colonialism and cultural identity, positioning women as metaphors for the primordial self. This study engages discourse analysis to examine how Kincaid articulates these themes, reflecting on the complexities of indigenous identity in a postcolonial context.

Relevantly, this paper informs her readers that black women are custodians of culture. As concerns development, ecology and women, (Shiva, 1989, p.87), in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* argues that “the Western model of development, or mal-development, has been violent for many people, especially women and the local environment”.

At a different level, this article will portray how black women are custodians of culture as evident in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. This study reflects a depiction of Indigenous ecofeminism in Caribbean postcolonial ecology in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. It equally focuses on the ability of female bonding to restore broken connections within a fictional

Caribbean community in Antigua. *Annie John* by a Native African-American ecofeminist writer and environmental justice activist Jamaica Kincaid, is a narrative of *survivance*, survival and resistance, in which the female protagonist, Annie, reconstructs her identity in a gynocentric Indigenous community. Her matrilineal mentors, grandmother, Ma Chess and the Obeah Women re-enter her life as she stands at the threshold of adulthood. The quartet embark on a quest journey where her healing requires a holistic vision where human beings respect the bonds with each other, with plants, rivers, mountains, and all surrounding natural elements, depicting her reconnection with the community and the environment at a larger macrocosmic level. (Anderson, 2000, p.34) contends that:

The Europeans who first arrived in Canada were shocked by the position of Aboriginal women in their respective societies. It was not long before they realised that, in order to dominate the land and the people that were occupying it, they needed to disempower the women. Indigenous systems that allocated power to women were incompatible with the kind of colonial power dynamics that would be necessary to maintain colonial power.

The mythic representation of Indigenous women hence became one of the solutions to maintain control not only over the Indigenous populations, but also over white women. With the redefinition of gender roles, colonization has shaken the foundation of communal structure. Therefore, in contemporary Indigenous literatures, women are revived as sustainers of communal solidarity and agents of substantial change; they are also preservers of healing traditions, secret keepers of herbal medicines and ritual ceremonies. Indigenous feminism intersects with ecofeminism, which is a sub-branch of ecocriticism defined by (Sturgeon, 1997, p.23), “as a movement that makes connections between environmentalists and feminists;” she argues “that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment”. The first ecofeminists have called attention to woman’s ability for ecological conservation owing to the existence of woman/nature symbolic connections with the “Mother Nature”, who is a symbolic figure of precolonial aesthetics.

In this regard, ecofeminists and indigenous feminists find a common ground in the rejection of an established hierarchical, patriarchal system, dominated by the hegemonic white man or the oppressed/oppressive colored man. Contemporary ecofeminists take an activist stance to end injustice, not only based on gender, but also on race and class. *Annie John* describes a woman-centred community in which matrilocality, matrifocality, matrilinearity, maternal control of household goods and resources [...] were and are present and active features of traditional tribal life. The novel nostalgically reconstitutes the pre-colonial aesthetics and Indigenous culture in which women used to have important positions, not only as bearers of children and weavers of communal ties, but also, like Bush, with her hunting and fishing skills, as food providers. It also highlights the importance of inter-female bonding, interconnecting Annie’s fight for the continuity of her matrilineage with her fight for the conservation of the environment.

Researches and reviews on ecofeminism, indicate that ecofeminism is an ideology which clearly shows black and colored women’s experiences. It is also against all forms of oppression in the community, it reconciles all men to their spirituality and connects people to nature and this is characterized by fight against racist essentialism and environmental harm. (Gaard and Murphy, 1998, p. 2) observe, in their introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* that, “third-wave feminism’s ecofeminist practices have, indeed,

been increasingly rooted in the struggles of poor, colonized women of color worldwide to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities in the face of the mal-development and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism”.

Despite the interconnection between women and the natural environment in the Caribbean context, Indigenous feminism and ecofeminism have an anthropological mediation and cultural preservation and sustenance of a kind, and that is the theoretical convergence. Its relevance is, however, justified in an overview that reveals a theoretical gap in postcolonial ecology, which has not been sufficiently explored in Caribbean ecological cognisance. Post-colonial ecofeminism, as applied in this study, helps it arrive at a logical critique of the Caribbean environment from an Indigenous feminism standpoint. The following subheadings shall analyse the trajectories in Kincaid’s *Annie John* as concerns the title under the present study.

## **Understanding the Caribbean Environment: A Theoretical Approach**

The Caribbean postcolonial environment places interest on women’s ability in their daily survival of the community, and their relationship with nature since they preserve it as their companion. This preservation is today an essential issue in the political, economic and cultural circles.

In contemporary ecology, these observations reveal a kind of postcolonial ecology where Indigenous being humans are seen as entwined with the environment and there is a critique of nature being framed as an outside in relation to environments shaped by humans. A theme that will be explored in this article is how Indigenous peoples’ traditional worldviews have been activated in contemporary legislation, declarations on the rights of Indigenous peoples, art and literature with a view to highlighting how the trope and stereotype of the noble savage functions as an inter-text both in narratives reproducing the stereotype and in depictions that problematize, contradict or satirize naïve depictions of Indigenous purity and ecological nobility. Theoretical Framework Discourse analysis provides a framework for understanding how language constructs identities and power relations. In Caribbean literature, this approach reveals the interplay between colonial legacies and the quest for self-definition. Key theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall inform this study, particularly their concepts of hybridity and cultural identity formation. These theories illuminate how Kincaid’s characters navigate their identities amidst colonial pressures.

It therefore follows that if cultural institutions have always been part of Caribbean culture and her literary imagination, why then have Caribbean literary critics not paid much attention to this human and non-human interconnectedness and their postcolonial ecological significance?

The answer is found in what (Armbruster, 1998, p.97), refers to as “eco-irrationality in Caribbean literature which can be described as eco-critical mal-development. It is Armbruster’s opinion that Caribbean’s initially saw ecocriticism as an ideological distraction from their major postcolonial struggles”.

However, (Armbruster, 1998, p.97), defines ecofeminism literary theory as a study of the “important connection between the oppression of women and the destruction and misuse of non-human nature within male-dominated cultures in poetry and prose writings.” Conversely, ecofeminism literary critics, according to Armbruster, can develop an interpretive and analytical tool that allows them to go beyond simply looking for literature that emphasizes

women's or other marginalized people's sense of connection with nature (connections that are inextricably opposed to the dominant culture's alienation from environment and nature). It is Ambruster's opinion that Caribbean initially saw ecocriticism as an ideological distraction from their major postcolonial struggles. So that in his deeply rooted Indigenous poetic tradition, (Ruether, 2013, p.21-22), posits that "ecofeminism also challenges the human misery and degradation of the environment that is being wrought by the Western corporate domination of the world economy thereby soliciting that the entire web of life should be seen as an ecosystem in which neither humans nor any other part of the system can stand without the other".

On the same vein, (Smith, 1997, p.19) articulates that "ecofeminist theorists argue that there is no primary form of oppression because all oppressions are interconnected and reinforce one another. However, depending on one's social position, one kind of oppression often appears to be more important in one's daily life than another". Most Native women, for example, are likely to feel the impact of colonisation on their daily lives more than other forms of oppression. Most types of oppression were not present in most Native civilisations before colonisation, which may explain why colonisation appears to be the predominant concern for Native women. The dominance of women and the dominance of nature began with colonialism. Smith adds that ecofeminist theory must take colonisation, particularly the colonisation of Native lands, more seriously in its study of oppression. This is required for several reasons, one of which is that native lands are the sites of the most environmental destruction, as in the Caribbean context.

For this reason, Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Annie John* (1983), is the most extensively read novel that has attracted many readers throughout the world, which can be interrogated from ecofeminist literary criticism. This is because it discusses various issues, mainly postcolonial ecology on romanticism and environmental lapses caused by colonial displacement, particularly in the Caribbean environment.

To this relevance, therefore, (Jamaica Kincaid, 1983) in her novel titled *Annie John*, presents Annie's mother, who keeps their environment clean, and she grooms her girl child to take her place. Hutcherson, J. in her dissertation titled "Placing the body: A study of post colonialism and environment in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, asserts that: "Kincaid goes beyond placing Annie politically, in the cultural geographical sense, and she also situates her as a part of and participant in the environment thereby making much language to be found, and that points to just how interconnected Annie is, not simply with her home, but with the physical being of the island environment itself". In the chapter entitled "Paradise Lost", we deduce that Annie helps her mother with daily activities like washing dresses and tiding the garden. Annie's mother airs their things in the trunk and changes the camphor balls for the clothes to smell good. The neat and healthy environment in *Annie John* depicts women as symbols of domestic diligence and domestic machinery; thus, Annie's father is an elderly man whose wife is far younger than him, and who takes care of his residential environment, including his garden. The researcher articulates that it is Annie's mother's young, productive age that enabled her to maintain a clean and healthy environment where nature and humans romance each other. (Collins, 1991, p.96) In Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, she contends that "the mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women . . . countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women". This shows how women empower their daughters for the future to care for their families and the society at large. (Said, 1994, p.77), highlights the role imagination plays

in recovering land lost as a consequence of colonisation. Said posits that “the role of imagination in recovering land is also highlighted as a constituent element of 'the literatures of postcolonial ecology'”.

Kincaid goes beyond placing Annie politically, in the cultural geographical sense. She also situates herself as a part of and participant in the environment. There is much language to be found that points to just how interconnected Annie is, not simply with her home, but with the physical being of the island itself. Similarly, when Annie is disoriented, uncomfortable, or is experiencing an unsettling change, the imagery of water is used. (Kincaid, 1983, p. 102, 112). In the text, we deduce that Annie's mother repeatedly calls her a slut, Annie claims, “...suddenly I felt as if I were drowning in a well...pouring in through my eyes, my ears, my nostrils, my mouth”. In the midst of her illness, she dreams of drinking in the sea until it is gone, saying, “The sea filled me up, from my toes to my head...[until] I burst open. The water ran back and made up the sea again”. Annie then wakes to find that her body, in her dream state, has literally made water, reverting back to the condition of a small child wetting the bed in fright. In Anjey's article titled “womanism in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*”, he posits that Kincaid (1983, pp. 20-21) lays emphasis on women's creativity and acquaintance with environment and nature. This is seen through Annie's mother, thus we read:

there was the chemise, made of white cotton, white cotton, with scallop edging around the sleeves, neck, and hem, and white flowers embroidered on the front—the first garment I wore after being born. My mother had made that herself, and once, when we were passing by, I was even shown the tree under which she sat as she made this garment. There were some of my diapers, with their handkerchief hemstitch that she had also done herself . . . for instance, the flowers on the chemise, the first garment I wore after being born, were not put on correctly, and that is because when my mother was embroidering them I kicked so much that her hand was unsteady.

The above piece articulates that Annie's mother makes chemise out of white cotton. She is able to decorate the shirt with flowers. Her choice to embroider flowers symbolises women's connection to their environment and nature; their love of nature, and how they long to be close to nature daily. Her creativity helps to economise her family's funds since she uses the dress when she gives birth to Annie. She not only makes chemises, but she also makes diapers and handkerchiefs. She carries out her activity under a tree. The shade of the tree inspires her creativity. The tree symbolises shelter and comfort, which the environment gives to the whole universe. This also shows the harmonious relationship that exists between women and the environment, and it portrays the role of the environment. All of these illustrations, of colonialism and of the connection of Annie's acquaintance to the environment and nature, situate the protagonist and provide a starting point for the journey Annie takes through the novel.

## **Indigenous Institutions and Environmental Sustainability in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John***

Indigenous institutions is, according to **Anderson (2000,p.36)**, “a wide-ranging body of institutions and practices maintained and developed by people, in contemporary indigenous literatures, where women are revived as sustainers of communal solidarity and agents of substantial change; they are also preservers of healing traditions, secret keepers of herbal medicines and ritual ceremonies.” These sets of understanding and interpretation are part of a complex cultural system that encompasses language and classifies practices for the use of

resources. In his foreword to ecofeminism (Lorentzen and Eaton, 2002, p.40), he asserts that “reflecting on women’s connectedness with nature and environmental sustainability, suggests that the ecofeminist epistemological claim follows from the connections noted between women and nature. And the fact that women are affected most by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on culture and nature bearers and custodians, and therefore places them in a position of epistemological privilege”. In the religions of the Caribbean, nature is an integral aspect of their spirituality in the form of groves, thus giving the environment a spiritual dimension. Different species inhabiting the Caribbean environment do not exist in isolation; instead, they exist in aesthetics and admiration of the environment, continually relating with others of the ecosystem. Indigenous identity in Caribbean literature often grapples with historical erasure and cultural reclamation. Scholars argue that indigenous peoples have been marginalised in literary narratives, overshadowed by colonial histories that depict them as extinct or irrelevant. Kincaid challenges this narrative by centring female experiences that embody resilience and cultural continuity. The protagonist’s struggles reflect broader themes of resistance against colonial oppression and the search for a coherent self.

Through communitarianism and the language, women’s self-assertion in the preservation of African culture would be revealed. As signposts to women’s empowerment, the vernacular is one of the characteristics of ecofeminism. Women act as a group and also as individuals to keep nature, living things and the environment healthy at large.

In (Kincaid, 1983, p. 40-42) Annie’s mother’s love for nature can be viewed as she goes to the bushes to touch leaves: “my mother had wandered off to look at some strange kind of thistle, and we could see her as she bent over the bushes to get closer look and reach out to touch the leaves of the plant”. This contention depicts the relationship that women have with their environment and nature. They desire nature, and they go close to it, just like what Annie’s mother does. Likewise, Annie’s mother correlates with nature as she swims in the sea: “My mother was a superior swimmer. When she plunged into the seawater, it was as if she had always lived there . . . and she could tell just by looking at the way the waves beat if it was safe to do so. She could tell if a shark was nearby, and she had never been stung by a jellyfish”.

Kincaid uses hyperbole to show women’s closeness to nature as Annie’s mother swims freely in the sea without any fear and she also has an idea on how creatures in the sea behave. (Collins, 1991, p.96), in *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, contends that “the mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women . . . countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American (Caribbean) women”. This shows how women empower their daughters for the future to care for their families and the environment at large.

Kincaid, as an ecofeminist, through the Red Girl’s attitude, shows that there is nothing that women cannot do; thus, women ought to abandon their traditional way of thinking and use their skills. Women protect their family, as Annie’s mother takes some of her daughter’s belongings to an obeah woman. “She takes Annie’s earrings, neck chain, bracelets and underclothes to the obeah woman when Annie is about to travel to England, for protection from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune”. (Kincaid, 1983, p.134). The fact that the obeah (cultural healing women) is able to protect Annie’s belongings from evil spirits establishes that women are custodians of their culture and environment.

Annie's maternal grandmother, Ma Chess, an Obeah (cultural-healing women) figure, cures patients by practising an aspect of Afro-Caribbean culture. She cures Annie from sickness, and Ma Chess's caring nature is revealed. Ma Chess shows love to her granddaughter as the latter observes that "Ma Chess fed me food, coaxing me to take mouthful after mouthful. She bathed me and changed my clothes and sheets and did all the other things that my mother used to do" (Kincaid, 1983, p.126). Thus, the (*Obeah*: cultural healing women), through their motherly love restore life. The (*Obeah*, cultural healing women) a feminine practice, evokes the pre-colonial world in Antigua.

(Kincaid, 1983, p.20-21) lays emphasis on women's cultural creativity. This is seen through Annie's mother:

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Annie's mother makes chemise out of white cotton. She is able to decorate the shirt with flowers. Her choice to embroider flowers symbolises women's connection to nature; their love of nature, and how they long to be close to nature daily. Her creativity helps to economise her family's funds since she uses the dress when she gives birth to Annie. She not only makes chemises, but she also makes diapers and handkerchiefs. She carries out her activity under a tree. The shade of the tree inspires her creativity. The tree symbolises shelter and comfort, which the environment gives to the whole universe. This also shows the harmonious relationship that exists between women and the environment, and it portrays the role of the environment. Annie's mother's creativity shows how black women are productive in society. Women groom their children so that what they have created can be used in the right way and kept in good shape. This demonstrates that they care for everything in society. Annie's mother also makes curtains: To further articulate this, Kincaid (1983, p.132) depicts that "the curtains hanging at my window, my mother made with her own hands. The nightie I am wearing, with scalloped neck and hem and sleeves, my mother made with her own hands". Through her creativity, the mother gains respect. Likewise, women give birth to children like Annie John, the Red Girl and Gwen to perpetuate life. Communitarianism is another tenet of ecofeminism that elaborates on how women in Kincaid's *Annie John* preserve the African culture. Ecofeminism, as earlier mentioned, advocates for the dignified inclusion and optimisation of well-being for all members of the community, gender notwithstanding. This tenet embodies all living things: humans, animals, plants, microorganisms, as well as the inanimate components of the Earth. Womanists seek to reconcile living things, especially the relationship between people (women) and nature.

Kincaid, through her work, portrays the relationship between people (women), the environment, and nature. (Vakoch,2012, p.4), in *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, And Literature*, posits that "there is an innate connection between women and nature. Essentialists believe that men have inherent limitations in their ability to connect to the natural world by virtue of their sex". This statement depicts the close link between women and the

environment, unlike men, who have limitations in being closer to nature due to their sex. (Kincaid, 1983, p.1) Annie John demonstrates how women connect to nature. Annie feeds animals: “That summer, we had a pig that had just had piglets; some guinea fowl; and some ducks that laid enormous eggs that my mother said were big even for ducks. . . I had nothing to do every day except to feed the birds and the pig in the morning and in the evening”. Annie takes care of animals in the morning and in the evening every day. Annie’s mother keeps many types of animals like pigs, guinea fowl and ducks. This exposes women’s love for nature’s wellbeing and a stronghold of sustenance for their environment.

As Morton (2007, p.13) states in *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, “ecocriticism, as practised in American literary academia, is too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use”. This endorsement of nature is similar to the field’s reinforcement of the idea that “ecology” is an organic, unified entity that is characterised by adopting every human into an anthropological inclusion following their dominant human interest and strong adherence to nature and environment. Kincaid uses a simile to compare Annie’s mother to a donkey to show women’s connection to the environment. A donkey is an obedient and hardworking animal; women, too, just like Annie’s mother, obey instructions given to them in their homes. Women are also hard-working in society, just like how Annie’s mother does everything possible to keep her house and environment in good fate and obeys her husband. This is re-echoing in ecofeminism as emphasised in this study. It will also extend discourse in the field of postcolonial ecology and ecofeminism.

### **“Indigenous” Depiction of Native Identity in Caribbean Literature: Women as Metaphor of Primordial Self in Kincaid’s *Annie John***

The depiction of native identity in Caribbean literature resonates with Caribbean people going back to their roots through their literary works. Kincaid’s use of native women and traditional images and metaphors that depict native identity informs a profound rebirth of a primordial self that gives meaning to the life of the individuals, especially in postcolonial ecological being. (Edinger, 1972, p.107) In his *Ego and Archetype*, he asserts that “one of the symptoms of alienation in the modern age is the widespread meaninglessness “. In fact, the patriotic minds that are aware and saddened by this degradation of meaninglessness of life are unstoppably concerned to ensure their own individual search for a meaningful life. In consonance with this, (Dieke, 1993, p.126) in his *The Primordial Image*, accentuates that “having suffered seemingly incalculable loss as a result of cultural derailment or divided consciousness or both, brought about by either Western imperialism or American slavery or perhaps, by postcolonial/post slavery social evil, these writers view the medium of symbolic quest as a primary vehicle of the imagination in which to embark upon the crucial search for meaning or native identity”. This depiction of native identity is invariably a projection for meaningful life, and the reason for this consequential expedition of the primordial self is practically demonstrated as an indigenous sustenance in Caribbean literature. As the characters (protagonists) venture on this expedition of the primordial quest, the person makes use of metaphors through which initiation and rebirth of the identity or real self are ratified. Jamaica Kincaid is one of the Caribbean literary writers that have written on this depiction of native identity and the primordial self, using her female characters.

In *Annie John*, women symbolise the primordial self, embodying both personal and collective histories. The protagonist’s relationship with her mother illustrates this connection; her mother’s authoritative figure represents colonial values while simultaneously being a source

of identity. As Annie navigates her adolescence, her desire for autonomy clashes with societal expectations rooted in colonialism, highlighting the tension between personal agency and cultural heritage.

The mother-daughter dynamic is crucial in understanding Annie's identity formation. Kincaid portrays maternal figures as both nurturing and oppressive, reflecting the duality of colonial influence on Caribbean women. Annie's eventual separation from her mother signifies a critical moment of self-assertion, yet it also underscores the complexities of female identity within a postcolonial framework.

Education plays a significant role in shaping Annie's identity. Kincaid critiques the colonial education system that seeks to indoctrinate rather than empower. As Annie grapples with her educational experiences, she confronts the contradictions inherent in her upbringing, striving for knowledge while resisting the cultural impositions it entails.

Annie John's quest for identity is emblematic of broader struggles faced by Caribbean women. Her journey reflects the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within colonial contexts. Kincaid's narrative illustrates how women navigate their identities through relationships, societal expectations, and personal aspirations.

Bhabha's notion of hybridity is evident in Annie's character development. She embodies multiple identities: colonial subject, daughter, and emerging woman, reflecting the complexities of postcolonial existence. This hybridity allows Annie to challenge normative narratives surrounding femininity and identity, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of self.

Significantly, in Kincaid's *Annie John*, is the introduction to indigenous idealism and cultural astronomy by Annie John's mother, notably beginning with death. and then obeah women and then Ma chess. Living on the outskirts of town, Annie John, at ten years of age, develops an overwhelming fascination with the cemetery and the "sticklike figures" that loom in the distance". (Kincaid, 1983, p.4). We note, "after her mother explains that the figures are people attending a funeral and implies this burial is for a child, Annie John becomes paralyzed by the notion of death immediately, the connection between Annie's mother and death is explicit "I had not known that children died. My mother knew of many people who had died in such a way". (Kincaid, 1983, p.4). "Kincaid's conflation of mother-daughter-death signifies not the beginning of the child's story as much as the death of her connection with her mother and her motherland and lends insight into the end of Annie John's narrative. As with Antoinette, knowledge of death introduces Annie John to the body of religious and spiritual beliefs connected to the practice of (*Obeah* the cultural healing women), a belief system handed down through the female line, which was believed to be a direct communication with the spirits. For (Kincaid, 1983, p.4) She posits:

We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. Sometimes they showed up in a dream, but that wasn't so bad, because they usually only brought a warning, and in any case you wake up from a dream. But sometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home, and even though they might not be able to come into your house, they might wait for you and follow you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them.

This is further explained by Ma Chess's connection to nature is seen as she usually baths in the sea before using herbs: (Kincaid, 1983, p.123-124). "Ma Chess never took a bath in just

plain water and soap. She took a bath, once a month or so, in which things like animal and vegetable had been boiled for a long time. Before she took this bath, she first swam in the sea”.

Ma Chess does not bath with plain water and soap but she boils animal and vegetable which are elements of nature to bathe with. Animals and vegetables in her bath symbolize power to purify her physically and spiritually. She also bathes in the sea. The sea is an element of nature which connotes her connection with the gods. This forms the bond between God, man (women) and nature.

The practice of (*Obeah* cultural healing women) by Indigenous cultures stands in opposition to the imposed Western religion brought by the colonists, as it widens the gulf between slaves and slave owners and enables slaves to maintain some control under the oppressive system of white domination.

Within the first pages of her narrative, Annie believes death is also something associated with deformed or neglected children. When the young and sickly Nalda dies in Annie's mother's arms, and when Nalda's mother is incapacitated by grief, Annie's mother must prepare the child for burial. Annie remembers: (Kincaid,1983, p.6), "I could not bear to have my mother caress me or touch my food or help me with my bath. I especially couldn't bear the sight of her hands lying still in her lap".

Compounded by Annie's mother's involvement in all of the deaths, Annie believes death is not a random act of fate but is closely associated with betrayal and abandonment obscurely related to mother love and custodian of cultural astronomy. She has been instructed by her mother on how to behave and she has been prepared by her mother's (*obeah* cultural healing women) to be protected, (Kincaid,1983, p.134), "from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune". Kincaid depicts that Annie knows that a sense of self-worth cannot come from her mother alone but from her too.

In Caribbean women's literature, when the biological mother, nearly crazed with her desire to control, manipulate, and dominate, fails on her daughter, the girl requires a magical other-mother who can help her create a new selfhood. As soon as new medicines from an English physician fail to revive Annie from her prolonged illness, her mother sends for Ma Chess, a knowledgeable (*Obeah* cultural healing woman) whose powers derive from her knowledge of the pre-colonial past, one where the influence of the coloniser was rejected and despised. With the knowledge and belief in Caribbean culture, Ma Chess rejects the British traditions that have informed Annie's mature identity: her school lessons, her mother's strict moral code of behaviour, her isolation from certain girls, her style of dress, and her language. Ma Chess feeds and bathes Annie, comforts her in warm and inviting silence, and sleeps with her during Annie's long periods of delirium. As a result of Ma Chess's care, Annie begins to depend on her as an unborn child might. (Kincaid, 1983, p.123-124), we read:

Soon, I began to count on her smells and the sound her breath made as it went in and out of her body. Sometimes at night, when I would feel that I was all locked up in the warm falling soot and could not find my way out, Ma Chess would come into my bed with me and stay until I was myself--whatever that had come to be by then--again. I would lie on my side, curled up like a little comma, and Ma Chess would lie next to me, curled up like a bigger comma, into which I fit.

The fetus-like comma is indicative of Annie's fetal position with Ma Chess, who, as the bigger comma, becomes Annie's other-mother. On the verge of death, she is brought back from the land of the dead by her other-mother and leaves the influence of her mother, who can only

lay the dead to rest. As imperceptibly as Ma Chess arrives at Annie's bedside, she disappears at the signs of Annie's recovery of her supernatural, realistic self.

### **Identity Formation: Resistance as a Thematic Metaphor in *Annie John***

Annie's introspection reveals her struggle to assert her individuality. Her experiences at school and her friendships further complicate her sense of self, as she seeks validation while also yearning for independence. Resistance in *Annie John* manifests through Annie's defiance against maternal authority and societal norms. This theme is closely linked to her quest for identity as she challenges the roles imposed on her. The mother-daughter dynamic is central to Annie's resistance. Initially, Annie idolises her mother but gradually becomes aware of the constraints her mother's expectations impose on her. This realisation prompts acts of rebellion, such as withdrawing affection and rejecting maternal guidance.

Kincaid illustrates how Annie's resistance extends beyond familial boundaries to encompass broader societal issues. Her experiences at school highlight the rigid structures that govern behaviour and identity, prompting Annie to question and resist these norms.

Annie's internal conflicts reflect her struggle against imposed identities. Her thoughts reveal a desire for autonomy that clashes with the expectations placed upon her by both her mother and society. The relationship between Annie and her mother serves as a microcosm for exploring themes of identity and resistance. Their bond is characterised by love, conflict, and ultimately estrangement.

In the early chapters, Annie's admiration for her mother is palpable. This idealisation reflects a common developmental stage where children look up to their parents as figures of authority and knowledge. As Annie matures, she begins to see her mother not just as an authority figure but as an individual with flaws and limitations. This shift marks the beginning of resistance; Annie's attempts to assert herself lead to conflict with her mother's expectations. The culmination of their conflict results in emotional distance. Kincaid poignantly captures this estrangement, illustrating how it signifies not only personal growth for Annie but also a painful severing of ties that once defined her identity.

The colonial backdrop of Antigua adds another layer to the exploration of identity and resistance in *Annie John*. Kincaid critiques colonialism's impact on personal and cultural identities, emphasising how colonial legacies shape individual experiences.

**Colonial Influence on Identity:** The presence of colonial values permeates Annie's life, influencing how she perceives herself and others. The education system reflects colonial ideologies that prioritise Western ideals over local culture, leading to internalised conflicts within Annie. Annie's journey can also be seen as a metaphorical resistance against colonial oppression. Her struggle for self-definition parallels the broader fight for cultural authenticity in post-colonial societies.

In *Annie John*, Jamaica Kincaid intricately weaves themes of identity and resistance through the lens of a complex mother-daughter relationship set against a colonial backdrop. The narrative serves as a poignant exploration of how personal struggles intersect with cultural legacies, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals in their quest for self-discovery. Through Annie's journey, Kincaid invites readers to reflect on their own identities and the forces that shape them, making *Annie John* a timeless exploration of human experience.

## CONCLUSION

Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* offers profound insights into indigenous depictions of identity within Caribbean literature. Through discourse analysis, this study reveals how Kincaid employs female characters as metaphors for primordial selfhood, navigating the intersections of colonialism, gender, and cultural heritage. By centering women's experiences, Kincaid not only critiques colonial narratives but also reclaims indigenous identities within contemporary discourse. This exploration underscores the importance of recognising women's voices in shaping Caribbean literary landscapes and fostering a deeper understanding of postcolonial identities. This analysis contributes to ongoing discussions about representation in Caribbean literature and highlights the significance of women's narratives in reclaiming cultural identities amidst historical erasure.

Admissibly, the issues about the position of contemporary Caribbean fiction in relation to the emergence of postcolonial ecofeminist literary tradition, according to Maglin (1980, p.15) "It belongs to a "literature of matrilineage," written by women who consecrate their intergenerational female bonding for the preservation of culture and the conservation of nature. The different generations represent women as the custodians of Indigenous traditions who chaperon Angel during her rite of passage from a "rootless teenager". Jamaica Kincaid's novel is equally an expression of sustainable resistance against the quincentenaries and the oppression of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean environment.

The thesis I posit in this paper is that Kincaid, in writing this novel makes her readers to be aware of the extent of the embeddedness of women's cultural spice and environmental belongingness that characterize women as not only protagonists but as active and pulsating custodians of culture and tradition in Caribbean setting. This will as well extend discourse in the field of postcolonial ecology and ecofeminism.

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### Glossary

Obeah (cultural healing women)

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