

## A Study of the Metamorphosis of Jamaica Kincaid's "Annie John"

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### Abstract

"To the conquering race it appeared so nature that the conquered should obey and it is unnatural to think of the inferior class claiming equality." – The subjection of Women.

The prime concern of Jamaica Kincaid's canon is the struggle of her female protagonist to achieve selfhood amidst the various oppressive forces. Her thematic concerns were always the liberation of the feminine. She has designed her protagonists with shimmering brilliance and indomitable spirit which take them towards strong selfhood. This paper attempts to study the dependent self of the protagonist, the shared identity of the mother and daughter, the protagonist's renunciation of her dependency and her way towards selfhood.

**Keywords:** shared identity, mother, metamorphosis, liberation and selfhood

### Introduction

**Annie John** is a semi-autobiographical novel which revolves around the mother daughter theme, one of the strongest obsessions of Kincaid. The reader should never fail to decode the rich metaphor which Kincaid has used. The mother figure in the Kincaid's works are very powerful, oppressive and she haunts her daughter throughout her life. In *Annie John*, the protagonist Annie is her mother's pet, her "Little Miss". The mother and daughter share a beautiful harmonious bond. Annie finds herself as a narcissistic extension of her mother and enjoys perfect sense of security. She always pairs herself with her mamie and observes all that her mother does with awe and love. She delights in her mother's skill at growing certain herbs at home, her skill at the market to cull out the best product for the family. The domestic sphere is shared by the two in complete harmony. Annie, a studious child performs very well at school. She brings academic laurels but exhibits defiance to authority and with unique bravado. Annie John experiences the pleasure of bathing together with her mother. She always follows her mother like her shadow and prefers constantly to be in her presence. Her presence provides

her with abundant sense of security and value. The elder Annie teaches Annie John various domestic chores. Annie John feels

Annie John is almost the duplicate of her mother Annie. The mother conditions the daughter into a socially accepted model, protects the daughter from curses and bad elements.. One day when Annie John returns from school she finds her parents making love in the bed. She loathes the sight of her mother embracing her father. Annie feels neglected and deprived of the special love her mother shared with her father. To announce her presence at home she noisily arranges the table. But nothing disturbs her parents. This point of her life becomes very important as she starts developing a different feel for her mother - hatred. She says, "All that was finished" (AJ, 32) The mother who looked beautiful and powerful now seemed to be small and funny. She now transmuted her love and adoration with hatred and suspicion. The sense of abandonment got magnified with her and that made her look for a replacement. Annie John was torn between her newly developed hatred and her longing for the original intimacy. She befriends Gweneth her classmate and develops a deep love for her instantly. She says, "Gwen and I were in love." (AJ, 33)

Annie starts creating a secret world for herself and she skillfully keeps her mother away from it. Annie resorted to stealing and hoarding her stolen treasures. She kept her mother completely

unaware of the recent changes in her. "I was always successful because, casting suspicion away from me and pulling on an innocent face had become a specialty of mine." (AJ, 55)

Annie receives two marbles from her mother as a gift. This became a symbol of her first step towards autonomy. Her mother, who gifts Annie marbles, wants Annie not to play marbles for it is unlikely for a girl to squat on the streets and play marble like a boy. Annie acquires expertise in playing marbles and she won so many marbles which she hid in an old box under her house. Annie meets the Red Girl, a symbol of rebelliousness and anti-social conditioning. The Red Girl is an exact opposite of what Annie's mother desired for Annie to become, a socially approved and accepted lady. She is dirty, slip- sod, unruly and wanders aimlessly in the streets. She finds the Red Girl extremely attractive and develops devotion for her. She cheats her mother and in the name of academic projects, she leaves the house to meet the Red Girl. She regularly meets the Annie develops expertise in both lying and stealing. And for Annie, it was pleasure to see that her parents don't know anything. Annie John did everything she was not supposed to do. She acted and developed her into a self which her mother could never imagine. When her mother suspects of playing marbles and searches for her secret world Annie forget the Red Girl temporarily.

Annie was also at trouble at school for her rebellion against the colonial dominance that prevailed in the British educational system. Annie refuses to become a mere mimicry of the colonizers. She was always at contradictions with the history of the Caribbean islands which was an account of the colonizers about the colonized. The biased record of the history made her question the accountability of the recorded details.

The breach between the mother and daughter remained private. They were one way in the presence of Annie's father they were "happiness and kindness and love and laughter", in his absence, when they were all by themselves "My mother would kill me if she get the chance, I would kill my mother if I had the courage" (AJ, 89)

Annie found Gwen lacking maturity to comfort her out of her anguish. Gwen, who was not a match to Annie's intelligence, lost her attention. In the process of her maturing into adolescence, Annie did not have a compassionate friend who would share the pain. Gweneth was a typically conditioned product of the patriarchy she is nothing less than another agent of the androcentric norms.

To avoid Gwen, Annie takes a different road through market-street. She saw the shops which had glass doors on which she saw her reflection. She had shame and discomfort in her developing sexuality. Her own image was a source of pain and shame. She felt that the image

she saw on the glass door was at its height of imperfection. Annie was burdened with a sense of shame during this transformation. The absence of the maternal love once showered on her in abundance intensified her misery.

At a very vulnerable moment, Annie noticed a group of boys standing across the road. They made a show of mockery at her. Annie already filled with despair found it very unfair of them to behave like that towards her. "Even though nothing like these had ever happened to me before, I knew instantly that it was malicious and that I had done nothing to deserve it other than standing there all alone." (AJ, 95) Annie unable to withstand the humiliation identifies one of those four boys to be the son of her mother's once friend and her playmate Mineu. She approached him in a casual way to ease the situation. She exchanged customary greetings with him which again becomes an element of mockery to the boys. They left the place whispering comments unable to control the burst of laughter. Annie was humiliated and bullied by the boys who were not very older than her. This incident speaks more about the position of a girl in a andocentric society. She comes back home, tired and weak from the burden of the happenings. The former self of Annie's searches comfort in the mother's arms. But something completely unexpected happens to Annie. Her mother accuses her for being late from school for which Annie replies in her usual way with reasons like extra classes.

Now Annie's mother straight away accuses her for making herself a spectacle before four boys, and calls her a slut.

In the Caribbean culture it is very common for a man to have number of sexual encounters and to have numerous children through them. They indulge in free sex. Annie's father has also fathered many children whose mother he did not marry. In a society like this, Annie was called a slut by her own mother for just indulging in a casual conversation with the boys who tried to humiliate her on the grounds of gender.

This incident brought an irrevocable change in their relationship. The divide between them widened. The mother who has become an authoritative agent of the phallogocentric becomes 'the master' who can never become 'the friend' again.

Annie, the daughter who had the name of her mother, now wanted to create an independent self. She has grown equal to her mother. She and her mother can look "eye to eye" (AJ, 104) when they talk. She has become equally powerful to her mother. She now wanted to have her own trunk. Previously, they were sharing a trunk when they were in complete harmony. The trunk was then a symbol of their love, bondage. Now, when Annie is out of her heaven, the once Paradise relationship she wants to establish, her own dynasty which can be even hell – but she wants her own. She says,

...when my father  
asked what he could

make for me... "A trunk" I said. "But you have a trunk already. You have your mother's trunk," he said to me. "Yes, but I want my own trunk" I said back. (AJ, 106)

Annie wanted to attain self-autonomy. And it was not a desire she developed in due course of her growing. It was something she was forced into. She did not find any other choice, than separating herself from her once very loving and caring mother, which is almost 'death'. So to gain self-autonomy or an independent self would be a rebirth.

Annie John becomes severely ill. Feeling deprived of maternal care she forgoes all sustenance, akin to stressing self-sufficiency and denial. Yet her refusal affirms her impotence, keeps sexual growth at bay, and attracts hyper attentiveness as she becomes temporarily anorexic. (Harold Bloom, 1998)

In this episode of her mystic illness water becomes a symbol. There is a heavy continuous downpour. This downpour suggests rebirth. The water becomes the amniotic fluid in the womb. Annie again goes to the pre-Oedipal stage immersed in the amniotic fluid in her

mother's womb. The illness has become a metamorphosis in the life of Annie John. She has become sublimated from her former fragile, dependent self to a powerful independent self. At the age of seventeen, she walks to the jetty with her parents and leaves for London to work and continue her nursing education.

### Conclusion

As critics generally comment this novel *Annie John* as the record of the protagonist Annie John's coming of age story from age ten to seventeen. What makes the novel special is it is not just the maturing of a girl into adolescence; it is an accord of girl who struggled under an oppressive at time tyrannical mother, and the oppressive colonial powers. The mother wanted the daughter to become a lady like whom the society would accept and appreciate. She imposed all andocentric norms on her daughter. When she wanted her daughter to become an independent self and stop being a duplicate of her, she is not very clear about it, and she herself did not understand what she said. Had she wanted her daughter to be different from her, she should have allowed her to develop into a more firm person free from the gender and colonial fetters. The mother held the colonial culture superior to the native culture. She forgot the fact that her husband himself is a sexually promiscuous person and she called Annie John a 'slut' for indulging in a defensive conversation with the boys. The word 'slut' cramped the growth of a girl in multiple dimensions. It affected the

process of Annie John's building of her identity. But Annie did not succumb to these oppressions instead, she confronts this double oppression in her own defiant style and achieves autonomy and thereby achieves agency and affirms validation.

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