THE CARNIVALESQE AND CULTURAL DIALOGUES
IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnival theory to argue that Jamaica Kincaid makes distinctive deployment of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, in an attempt to destabilize and overturn the prevailing Western ideologies that claim to authoritatively explain human and social existence, and establish norms of behaviors in the colonial Caribbean. Two of Kincaid’s texts, At the Bottom of the River and Annie John, are analyzed in depth from this perspective.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BR   At the Bottom of the River
AJ   Annie John
DI   The Dialogic Imagination
PDP  Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics
RHW  Rabelais and His World
Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson, known as Jamaica Kincaid, was born in 1949 and spent her childhood and adolescence in the small Caribbean island of Antigua during the time of the British coloniz
ation. Leaving Antigua at the age of sixteen to work as an au pair in New York, she obtained higher education there and then started her writing career as a freelance writer before becoming a staff writer for the New Yorker. The rebellion against the destructive cultural impacts imposed by the Western colonialist rule upon the culture of Antiguans of African descent is clearly represented in At the Bottom of the River (1983), Annie John (1985), A Small Place (1988), Lucy (1990), The Autobiography of My Mother (1996), My Brother (1997), My Garden (Book) (1999), and Mr. Potter (2002).

The island of Antigua, whose history and culture have become a thematic preoccupation in most of Kincaid’s texts, is a small territory of 280 square kilometers, with a population of 69,000 people, most of whom are of African descent. Their ancestors were transported to Antigua mainly during the slave-trade days of the seventeenth century to work on sugar cane plantations. Antigua became a self-governing territory in 1967 and gained its political independence from the British Empire in 1981, but the local economy’s dependence on tourism could not exempt the country from poverty. With the remote African past disrupted by four centuries of slavery and colonialism, Antigua lies in a void between two cultures, between African and European heritages, between the motherland which is so far away and the fatherland which recognizes its Antiguan children as always the ‘Others’. Exploring that cultural void
becomes a major preoccupation in Kincaid’s texts.

Kincaid’s intriguing texts have been of great interest to literary scholarship, which explore Kincaid’s contributions through the overlapping lenses of postcolonial criticism, gender theory, and psychological orientation. These perspectives have brought forth a wide range of potentials of meaning generation.

Postcolonial approaches focus on the politics of resistance and metaphors of domination as found in Kincaid’s texts, especially the relationship between mother and motherland, between individual life and communal history. To postcolonial critics, Kincaid, as do many other Caribbean authors, acknowledge the complex issues of cultural and political domination and resistance in colonial and postcolonial societies, which defines social positions and political identities of their individuals. Moira Ferguson’s *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body* (1994), Justin Edwards’ *Understanding Jamaica Kincaid* (2007) and Sabrina Brancato’s *Mother and Motherland in Jamaica Kincaid* (2005) offer insights from this perspective. As an Antiguan American writer, Kincaid traces new terrains for examining the relation between personal and collective memories of conditions under the colonial systems, its postcolonial legacies and neocolonial capital forces. Ferguson focuses on how Kincaid conceptualizes the formation of the colonial self under British colonialism by constructing the mother figure as a metaphor of the dominating imperialistic power, arguing that “the relationships between Kincaid’s female protagonists and their biological mothers are crucially formative yet always mediated by intimations of life as colonized subjects” (Ferguson, 1). Edwards emphasizes Kincaid’s thematic concern of “the way an individual conducts her life in the face of social, familial, economic, political, and gendered hierarchies”
Similarly, Brancato reads the problematic mother-daughter relationship as an allegory of the conflict between the colonial self and the African and/or Western worlds. Investing in the colonizer-colonized relationship, identifying and discussing Kincaid’s recurring interests in familial relations, Caribbean culture, and the aftermath of colonialism and exploitation, they focus on the central theme of the conflictual relationship between mother and daughter as a metaphor for the dialectic of power and powerlessness governing colonial Caribbean history.

In contrast, psychological readings trace the path of Kincaid’s psychological development through her texts, given that they are highly autobiographical, from a poor and abused little girl in Antigua to a literary star in America. Applying shame and trauma theory to Kincaid’s semiautobiographical works, J. Brook Bouson’s *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother* (2005) provides an original account of the ongoing construction of Kincaid’s autobiographical and political identities by interpreting the “mother mystery” in Kincaid’s texts in terms of the author’s obsession with her biological mother. Bouson subtly explores Kincaid’s painful relationship with her deeply contemptuous and abusive mother Annie Drew, demonstrating how Kincaid “take[s] power and authority over her past as she talks and writes back to the contemptuous internalized mother, the mother who wrote her life and the mother with whom she carries on incessant conversations in her head in her adult life” (13) and how writing to Kincaid has become an action of self-rescue from traumatic memories.

Focusing on a more formalist aspect of Kincaid’s texts, Diane Simmons’ *Jamaica Kincaid* (1994) asserts that they are not about colonialism but “about loss, an all but unbearable fall from a paradise partially remembered, partially dreamed, a state of
wholeness, in which things are unchangeably themselves and division is unknown” (1). To Simmons, Kincaid transforms and re-inscribes the traditional account of the broken pre-Oedipal paradise of mother-daughter unity by utilizing motifs from Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost} throughout her texts. In the crisis of betrayal and loss, Kincaid’s protagonists achieve self-discovery by freeing themselves of the destructive legacy of the treacherous mother and the colonial system.

Brancato’s \textit{Mother and Motherland in Jamaica Kincaid} tries to develop this idea, providing close readings of Kincaid’s texts from the perspective of the politics of resistance and the metaphorical relationship between the mother and the motherland in Kincaid’s texts. Brancato argues that the two-faced mother represents the two conflicting worlds of Africa and Europe, which the daughter must negotiate in her quest for her mature self. In fact this is not a new discovery, since Simmons had already elucidated the mystery of the loved-hated mother with insights into her internalization of “the conflict between two worldviews” which has “a direct impact on the mother-daughter relationship” (Simmons 24). Simmons has also mentioned the process of a loved mother turning into a hated one which coincides with the process of the mother moving to and embracing the Western value system.

My thesis seeks to expand Simmons’ suggestive ideas by applying Bakhtin’s theory of carnival to Kincaid’s texts through the examination of how the texts depicts the inner tensions in Caribbean culture between relative strata of African and European cultural heritage, and how they reflect upon those tensions with the literary device that I call the Caribbean carnivalesque. I argue that the emotional rift between mother and daughter represents not only the cultural domination between the powerful and
powerless, but also the potential dialogue, resistance and subversion between the two worldviews, the two possibilities of cultural evolution in the Caribbean. I also suggest that the lost paradise of childhood described by Simmons reflects how the imagined paradise of African wholeness, primitiveness and mysteriousness has been lost in the colonial ‘enlightenment’ and ‘civilization’. What remains is only a world full of fragments and divisions, in which the postcolonial subject cannot simply move to one side but emerges as a hybrid identity in the complex intersection between cultural lineages.

This could also be considered an expansion of the postcolonial reading, which interprets the frequently discussed mother-daughter relationship as not only that between the colonizer and the colonized, or the powerful and the powerless, but also that between the cultural transmitter and receiver in the postcolonial Caribbean. In that relationship, the mother takes the role of a mediator to pass on the two heritages – African and European – which frustrates the adolescent daughter in her process of self-discovery. With this suggestion, I also deploy Bakhtin’s position about cultural dialogue in his discussion on carnival and the carnivalesque to elucidate how relative cultural spheres interact and create new forms in the marginal reaches of the postcolonial Caribbean society as embodied in Kincaid’s texts.

In my next chapter, I will provide an overall description of the Caribbean carnivalesque emerging in most of Kincaid’s texts, with materials drawn mostly from four texts: *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. I believe these works give solid grounds for discussing the carnivalesque as a fundamental strategy of meaning generation of Kincaid’s texts as a whole.
In the two following chapters, I will narrow down my discussion to two works (*At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*). I choose to analyze these texts because they provide the best ground – the tensional mother-daughter relationship which represents the tensional rift in Caribbean culture – for explicating what I call the Caribbean carnivalesque. Furthermore, not only would this division be developed into a primary theme in all of Kincaid’s later texts, but other major themes that emerge in those texts also can be interpreted as multi-dimensional expansions of this thematic concern: the failure of a post-colonial people’s quest for true independence in *A Small Place*, the painful negotiations of a cross-cultural subject between two worlds in *Lucy*, the desire to rewrite and reconstruct Caribbean history of the self devoid of history in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. In other words, as Kincaid’s first books, *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* mark the formation of her cultural and political identity and concerns, which would be developed in all of her subsequent texts, and represent them with a very peculiar deployment of literary carnivalization.
Chapter I

THE CARNIVALESQUE IN JAMAICA KINCAID’S NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Kincaid develops rich symbolic systems in her texts. Some of the most interesting and suggestive areas are about cultural otherness imposed by the Western official ideology upon the colonial Caribbean, and the complex, contradictory relationships between female figures representing relative cultural traditions of Europe and Africa. Right from her choice and treatment of these motifs, one can see Kincaid’s clear tendency toward carnivalization, which has to do with the struggle between “high” and “low” world-views, and with the undermined cultural myth that suggests the existence of an unchallengeable truth transcending relations of power and desire. Her protagonists, such as Annie in *Annie John*, Lucy in *Lucy*, Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and the ‘I’ in autobiographical texts, always try to make their way between two competing value systems with potential turmoil and chaos, subverting and liberating the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere imposed by the official ideology of Western culture.

It seems that no one has so far mentioned the carnivalesque as one of the major literary modes of meaning generation in Kincaid’s art. Most of Kincaid scholarship tends to focus on the political, psychological and cultural meanings that are supposed to be generated by Kincaid’s texts rather than the main sources from which they are generated. I suggest that the originality in Kincaid’s narrative strategy can be found in her metaphorical figures which are subtly constructed by the cultural binary oppositions between the Western official ideology and the African heritage of tribal festivals and beliefs. These binary oppositions generate meanings that, according to Bakhtin’s theory
of carnival and literary carnivalization, give emphasis on the importance of death and
destruction, change and renewal, and life in its state of ‘becoming’. Bakhtinian
carnivalesque and material principle are useful tools to shed new light on fundamental
thematic categories of Kincaid’s writings.

By “carnivalesque” I do not simply mean the typical bawdiness and the joyful
laughter of the medieval pageantry which, according to Bakhtin, temporarily transports
people from the prevailing society of civil and religious authority to a utopian democratic
world. Rather, I refer to the “carnival spirit”, which translates the resistance visible in
popular festive traditions to a universal promise of new growth, new “becoming, change,
and renewal” which is “hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (RHW, 10). When this spirit permeates literary language to make it “a language of artistic images that
has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature” (PDP, 12), Bakhtin calls
it “carnivalization of literature” which he defines as

an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle
making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things. By relativizing all that was
externally stable, set and ready-made, carnivalization with its pathos of change and renewal
permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate into the deepest layers of man and human relationships. (PDP,
166-7)

By literary carnivalization, Bakhtin refers to a literary form that destabilizes, de-
privileges and subverts assumptions of truths and rules that dominate human society and
literary creation, allowing literature to capture developing relationships, changing forms
of life, shaping thoughts, or in other words, to capture everything in its state of
“becoming”.

13
The conception of literary carnivalization was perhaps first introduced into the scholarship of Caribbean literature by Joyce E. Jonas in his article “Carnival strategies in Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*”. Jonas discusses Lamming’s novel in terms of “the technique of turning deprivation into plenitude”. The carnivalesque is most clearly at work in the way the novel incorporates the logic of carnival contact between opposites to bring forth potential of change and renewal:

Lamming’s fiction stands on the threshold between the two worlds facing both ways at once. For while one view of *Castle* shows a tragic mask of deprivation, failure, and exile, the other reveals a triumphant comic grin. [...] It is on this very margin between tragic sacrifice and comic reversal that Lamming’s first novel is situated (346).

Jonas’ article, however, still seems to be the only project so far to explore the relationship between carnival and the subversive strategy of Caribbean literature. Looking at Kincaid’s texts from this perspective, it becomes clear that the fundamental resistance created through her parodies, mockeries and ambivalent metaphors of social, moral and racial codes follows the logic of Bakhtin’s carnivalization of literature: Filled with “pathos of change and renewal”, those subversive moments are not only meant to express Kincaid’s attack toward the colonial Caribbean society but also allows her to explore the “deepest layers of man and human relationships” to discover “new and as yet unseen things”.

In this chapter, I argue that Kincaid’s main resource, her most basic attitude, has much to do with carnivalesque inversion. Kincaid’s narrations put into play artistic possibilities by which the suppressed, marginalized discourse of African culture is empowered to produce alternative meanings against the domination of European
discourse inimical to it. I will analyze this strategy through exploring its three fundamental aspects: carnivalization of the cultural otherness, the grotesque female body, and anger.

CARNIVALIZING THE CULTURAL OTHERNESS

Kincaid’s literary works show peculiar deployment of Bakhtinian carnival language, which allows a “new mode of interrelationship between individuals” in a “free and familiar contact on the carnival square” (RHW, 123), and a fluid relation between the official ideology and other perspectives, which is able to produce alternative meanings. But Kincaid’s texts are not a simplistic application of Bakhtin to the Caribbean circumstance. They do enrich what Bakhtin has said about carnival and the carnivalesque. What Kincaid did is to transpose some elements of Bakhtin’s cultural opposition between marginality and officialdom to the tension between African and European strata in a (post)slavery and (post)colonial culture, contributing to the creation of the unique Caribbean carnivalesque. She creates in her works a dialogue between the two strata, in which the real circumstances are transcended, the real conventional world is turned upside down, the Caribbean culture is provided with possibilities of evolution, change and development. Moreover, Kincaid’s carnivalesque is not a strategy of mere riot and destruction; it is a strategy of evolution in which no labeled pure ‘folk’ tradition is ideally restored, rather, it undermines any ideology that seeks to have the final word about the world, ‘low’ or ‘high’ traditions, and at the same time it sheds light upon the possibility of alternate, hybridized realities.
The carnivalesque has become a fundamental component in Kincaid’s strategy of reviving the cultural and historical collective memory, and re-defining the otherness imposed by the colonial system. With the tendency of politicization that characterizes this literature, the carnivalesque can be considered as a possible style for the marginalized to voice its ideas in a dialogue with the mainstream. Most protagonists in Kincaid’s novels, such as Annie, Lucy and Xuela, live and move forward in a universe of binaries: the official and the unofficial. They are pushed into and torn apart by a dual world, not able to simply choose to stand at one side but must negotiate the binaries. These moments of negotiation provide a dialogical space where the two cultural traditions intersect and interpret each other, and where a new structure of culture emerges from the questioned, mocked, reversed cultural traditions and canons. Kincaid’s protagonists, in questioning and mocking objects which the Western world considers ‘high’, ‘central’, ‘lofty’, ‘serious’, such as Columbus, whiteness, or New York, shake the objects away from their ‘familiar’ Eurocentric meanings, leaving only the ‘simple’, ‘bodily’, ‘profane’ meanings which are alarming.

Kincaid’s writings exhibit the “transposition of carnival into the language of literature” in a peculiar way. As a postcolonial writer, she writes as a means to rebel against the Eurocentric ideology’s efforts to interpret the world and write the world’s history in her own terms. Simultaneously, her writings reveal hidden and evoke new realities, new possibilities of meanings from the cultural Other’s perspective. Through dialogues with figures or objects representing the official ideology, Kincaid’s protagonists mockingly parody the authoritative perspective and version of history that Western colonialism imposed upon the Caribbean and shakes up the object’s ‘safe’,
usual, familiar meanings. This is the way Kincaid creates subversive power out of the stereotype of the European civilization as a theatre for the encounter and interface of European and African values.

Firstly, in many Kincaid texts, the tendency of rewriting and reinterpreting the ‘sacred’ texts of Western culture in a subversive and deconstructive manner to create carnivalesque structures is especially clear. Annie John and Lucy are two instances of this tendency. The protagonists’ reception of high, lofty texts, at some level, conforms to the carnivalesque pattern of switching meanings, reversing proper values, and creating hybrid structures with ambivalent significances. Erasing the meanings attached to the texts by European traditions, they force the reader and the ones speaking to them to move away from their ‘familiar’ Eurocentric cultural atmosphere and to face alternative meanings generated by alternative perspectives.

In Annie John, re-reading the story of ‘the great man’ Christopher Columbus in the light of her mother’s ironic remark upon her grandfather, Annie throws away the ‘serious’ significance of the picture of Columbus in chains, leaving only the profane, mundane, bodily meaning expressed by the ‘blasphemous’ phrase “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go”. Also significant is that Annie “had written this out with my fountain pen, and in Old English lettering – a script I had recently mastered” and then “traced the word with my pen over and over, so that the letter grew big” (78). She uses the very cultural means of the colonizers to degrade the greatest colonizer – Columbus, and reconstructs and rewrites his dominant narrative from another perspective, which claims itself as ‘serious’ as the official one.

Similarly, Lucy bursts into anger as Mariah introduces her to the ‘universal’
beauty of daffodils, hoping she will finally understand the ‘universal’ meaning of Wordsworth’s poem. To her, the daffodils’ meaning cannot be tied down to a single one imposed by that Western poem, “as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea” (29). Lucy comes to New York, the ‘centre’ of the world, with her voice and world-view as her only weapon, which she refuses to give up to submit to the ‘central’ value system. She shakes up the ‘official’ version of reality with her voice in equal dialogues. That carnivalization of cultural otherness empowers Kincaid’s text to enable readers’ awareness of the world’s relativity including all social hierarchies, all moral norms and all established truths.

Secondly, the search for cultural identity always includes the discussion and inversion of binary oppositions invented by colonialism in its attempt to define the exotic and inferior ‘Other’. Here we see most clearly how Kincaid as a Caribbean writer shifts Bakhtin’s emphasis of carnivalization upon literary genres to the realm of culture, carnivalizing the cultural otherness imposed by the colonial order. Coming into contact with a world dominated by Western versions of values, Kincaid’s protagonists create and enter a utopian space of carnival in their everyday conversation and everyday chore. Each brings with them a different voice, a different way of seeing the world, which undermines the authoritative centre of meaning generation and makes room for a multiplicity of voices and meanings.

In Kincaid’s Lucy, the black au pair who comes to the ‘centre’ of the world from the ‘margin’ (the Caribbean) restlessly rebels against all cultural prejudices by reversing them, turning them back to the people who have imposed them upon her. As Lucy is introduced to her master’s best friend, Dinah asks her, “So you are from the islands?”
which makes “a fury rise up” in Lucy as she senses the imposition of otherness upon her, the stereotyping of people from margins of the world as all alike and all culturally and socially inferior. In a defensive reaction, Lucy is about to reverse the humiliation by respond[ing] to her in this way: “Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?” And I was going to say it in a voice that I hoped could make her feel like a piece of nothing, which was the way she had made me feel in the first place (56)

Replying this way, Lucy does not only mean to return to Dinah her shame and fury. Rather, she means to claim her descent as something unique, not a common ‘Otherness’ as defined by the ‘central’ world of the West. She urges that her Caribbean homeland must be called with its own name, which implies its right to exist equally beside the world called America that Dinah is living in. And thus Lucy is inverting the cultural myth that only the West has right to name and define the others.

In another episode, Mariah takes Lucy to the museum and introduces her to the paintings of Paul Gauguin, who “went to the opposite part of the world, where he was happier”. Lucy “immediately identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven” (95). She also senses some irony in this identification, for though the two do meet each other in their restless search for the sense of belonging, Gauguin stands at the position of a superior discoverer, a “hero”, to explore the exotic lands, while Lucy’s approach to New York is weight down by “the mantle of a servant”, the position of an inferior ‘visitor’ (95). But by identifying herself with Gauguin, Lucy already blurs the boundary between the One and
the exotic Other, eradicating the order of superior subject - inferior object. And toward the end of the novel, this is how she ultimately expresses that identification: The day Lucy returns home seeing Mariah sitting beside Lewis with her eyes “red from tears”, knowing “the end was here, the ruin was in front of me”, she is suddenly motivated by some ‘unknown’ reason to turn this painful moment of her master into a photograph: “For a reason that will never be known to me, I said, ‘Say “cheese”’ and took a picture” (118). This unknown reason might be her unconscious desire to be a Caribbean Gauguin discovering the Western world as something ‘exotic’ enough to be captured. In this moment, Lucy turns her masters’ defeat into her object of discovery, successfully reversing the discoverer-discovered relationship.

In *A Small Place*, Kincaid’s only polemic work, from the beginning she establishes a new order by disrupting the racist categories of black and white, subject and object of discovery and ridicule, inverting the politics of naming by turning back the adjectives ‘strange’, ‘bad’ or ‘silly’ upon the once-colonizers:

> An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that […] We thought that they were un-Christian-like; we thought they were small-minded; we thought they were like animals, a bit below human standards as we understood those standards to be. We felt superior to all these people (29).

This moment not only calls into question the categories and standards of civilized and uncivilized, human and subhuman defined by the imperial culture, deconstructing the colonial myth of white superiority. It also reflects the uneasy path constructing an identity for the Caribbean: while making “the degradation and humiliation of their daily lives into their own tourist attraction” (69) and unable to establish an autonomous identity outside
that neocolonial industry of tourism, Antiguans themselves are no longer docile objects of that discourse. In that sense, Kincaid sees in Antigua both the continuity and discontinuity of slavery, the long-standing, difficult struggle to get rid of the burden of their past, which is, in Bakhtin’s word, “a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things” (PDP, 166).

THE GROTESQUE FEMALE BODY AND THE EVERGROWING SOCIAL BODY

One of the major elements that carnivalized literature absorbs from the popular tradition of carnival is the ‘grotesque’, which is, in Bakhtin’s theory, the logic and the aesthetics opposed to all forms of ‘high’ discourse. Grotesque bodies and presentations are fantastically transformed ones, characterized by striking distortions or incongruities in their appearance, shape or manner. Through the body, the community and society are reborn and renewed, as the division and mutual transformation between higher and lower bodily strata would suggest an equivalent pattern in social life, between higher and lower classes, races, and ethnic groups. The grotesque thus not only suggests the overcoming of limits, the suspension of principles and norms, but also functions as the intersection between the individual human body and the total social body.

As a logic, the grotesque functions serve to distort and reverse the dominant ideology which seeks to designate what is ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’, ‘central’ and ‘marginal’, ‘high’ and ‘low’. It mimics, mocks, and parodies all established standards, “bring[ing] down to earth” all authoritarian norms to exalt inverted positions.
As an aesthetics, the grotesque implies deviance from the normative beauty toward “exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness” (RHW, 303). By mockery, distortion, it suggests free excess and unleash of the rigid definitions established for the norm system of classical beauty of the body. And rather than giving prominence to the idealized and frozen beauty that denies its contact to the world, the aesthetics of grotesque celebrates the body in its process of becoming, its cycle of life, its potential to self-decay and give birth to another body. As Bakhtin says, “the grotesque body […] is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, treated, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (317). The grotesque body is this constituted entirely of openings, with emphasis put on orifices, where the body trespasses itself toward the world, and convexities, where the world exceeds itself toward the body: mouth, nose, bowel, phallus, belly, etc. That opening and contacting body calls attention to the blurring of boundaries between the body and the outside world.

In this section I examine how Kincaid constructs her ‘great’, ‘powerful’ female characters and her women-focused world with this politics of grotesque female bodies. In her art, the grotesque functions as a distorted version of Western gender relations in favor of an African one. According to I. Amadiume, African tribal societies were originally matriarchal and mother-focused, until colonialism, together with European patriarchy, stormed this continent, ‘masculinizing’ African rituals and cultural practices and depriving African women of their rights and positions as autonomous individuals. Traditionally, African women’s power and independence are represented in all social levels, from self-government to control of religion and subsistence economy, which are
based upon their natural motherhood and which make them so different from the subservient, oppressed European women:

This issue of the structural status of motherhood is the main difference between the historical experiences of African women and those of European women. This is directly linked to the histories of family in these different systems. Frederick Engels (1972) argues that the European patriarchal family has been both the root and seat of women’s oppression. I believe that it also explains why European women never achieved women’s organization and self-government as African women did. (Amadiume, 112)

Kincaid successfully incorporates the neocolonial struggle between original African matriarchy and European patriarchy to her carnivalesque strategy. The logic of excess and reversal in Kincaid’s grotesque serves to undermine the patriarchal family model and liberate the female body, returning it to the greater space where it belongs – the nature and the universe. The female body is no longer the sexual property of any male presence, but rather, it acknowledges its power and even superiority and control over men in all sexual, family and social relations.

“The grotesque image,” noted Bakhtin, “[...] is noncanonical by its very nature” (RHW, 30). This noncanonicality allows Kincaid’s strategy to span a long amplitude in creating grotesque characters and images, incorporating elements from neo-colonial feminist struggles to enrich the world of carnivalesque symbols. Kincaid’s writing gives strong emphasis upon the Afro-Caribbean grotesque female body, through which the development from childhood to womanhood represents the Caribbean culture’s struggle for a self-definition beyond the limits of Western colonialism. Through the construction of the grotesque female body and the carnivalesque juxtaposition of relative cultural phenomena (homosexuality - heterosexuality, Englishness - indigenousness, the Obeah -
Western beliefs) the canonized and official are degraded and denigrated in favor of the uncanonized, the unofficial, the profane. Kincaid’s texts transform the traditionally marginalized figure of the black woman into a powerful figure that defuses binaries of death and rebirth, expiration and renewal, nutrition and destruction.

The first character of the grotesque is mentioned in Bakhtin’s discussion on the exaggerated dimension of Rabelais’ characters as rendering the cosmic features:

The giants and their legends are closely related to the grotesque conception of the body. […] Most local legends connect such natural phenomena as mountains, rivers, rocks, and islands with the bodies of giants or with their different organs; these bodies are, therefore, not separated from the world or from nature.” (RHW, 328-9)

Within the world of carnival where everything conforms to the logic of excess, inexhaustibility, and ever-renewal, greatness in body stature acts as a metaphor of greatness in spiritual life; Gargantua and Pantagruel are literally giants with immense potential of appetite and bravery. Their sizes and courage has to do with the strength of nature and its power of destruction, renewal and fertility. In Kincaid’s texts, the female characters tend to be described with exaggerated height and largeness. They are giants in their world, larger than their social life in bodily size, spirit and deed. It seems to be truly natural to Kincaid and her protagonists that women are taller than not only their children but also their husbands, which is certainly something unnatural to Western eyes.

In Lucy, the protagonist once remarks when she sees Lewis embrace Mariah from behind: “She was a little shorter than he, and that looked so wrong; it looks better when a woman is a little taller than her husband” (47). In the logic of grotesque, forces of excess, growing and renewal are at work through the individual; and in Lucy the fact that Mariah
is shorter than her husband implies, to Lucy, her weakness and certain lack of feminine power of regeneration in this family. Kincaid herself says in an interview: “The strange thing is that the Americans, the women from the center of the world, lack that sense of self-invention or renewal, self-discovery” (Ferguson 1994, 177). By contrast, Kincaid’s female characters, women from the margin of the world, possess the strong power of self-rebirth and renewal that is embodied by their excessive height in comparison to their husbands. That is why the feeling of seeing something wrong in the height of the couple contributes to Lucy’s impression of “an air of untruth”, “that it was a show and not something to be trusted”. From the seemingly insignificant remark (it is put in brackets), there emerges a significant clash between two value systems: something ‘normal’ in Mariah’s world becomes ‘abnormal’ in Lucy’s eyes. Although at first she admires her masters’ life, she does notice something unnatural, which foreshadows the later ruin of that artificial happiness.

In the logic of excess, women’s growth in their size reflects their maturation in spirit and resistive power in many ways. In Annie John, Annie’s grandmother is taller than her mother, while her mother is a tall woman, even taller than her father; and it is Ma Chess who is able to cure Annie of her illness despite all her parents’ efforts to use both Western medicine and Obeah healing. More significantly, after the long illness, Annie suddenly discovers herself much taller than before: “During my sickness, I had grown to a considerable height – almost equal to my grandmother’s” (128) and towers over her mother, and this new height comes together with her totally new conception of existence. At this moment, Annie has outgrown her own self and becomes a ‘giant’, who is too tall to fit into the narrow, confined reality of her home and of the colonial Antigua.
That is why she is urged by the need to leave, to move to another space, which is large enough for her to articulate her new, ‘big’ self.

Another remarkable characteristic of the grotesque female body is its “cosmic and universal” dimension. “It stresses elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air […] It can fill the entire universe” (RHW 318). This is particularly true with Kincaid’s female characters, who have close bonds to Caribbean nature and the mystic reality governing the universe in Obeah belief. Almost all desirable women in Kincaid’s works are notably linked in some ways to the supernatural world of Obeah, or the Caribbean nature in its mythical aspects: In Annie John, the Red Girl’s face is compared to a red moon, and she herself is connected with fire: “For as she passed, in my mind’s eye I could see her surrounded by flames, the house she lived in on fire, and she could not escape” (56-57). With this simile, the Red Girl seems to belong to another world, where the power of nature reaches its extreme in transformation and destruction. Ma Chess arrives and leaves Antigua in two days when the ferry does not run, which alludes to how she crosses the sea without the ferry – something that separates her with the sea, and this mythical implication suggests her mysterious identification with the Caribbean sea.

Simmons remarks, “Jamaica Kincaid writes about the practice of obeah or conjure in a world where magical transformation is a commonly perceived reality. Kincaid also uses conjure magic as a metaphor for life’s transformations, particularly the transformation from childhood to womanhood” (39). I would like to add that the adolescent characters’ period of puberty, which marks their transformation from childhood to womanhood and from infant bodies to grotesque bodies, coincides with the process of coming into contact with the universe through Obeah practices. Through
Obeah practices, they realize their being as part of the universe and their power comes from the spiritual power that dominates the visible reality, and this spiritual maturation which “fills the entire universe” is metaphorically linked to their grotesque bodily development.

In Caribbean life and Caribbean carnival, the dominant belief is the Obeah, the worldview that focuses on the invisible spiritual reality behind the visible one, and the practice of harnessing supernatural forces from the cosmos, which was introduced to the Caribbean together with imported African slaves. So it becomes clear that the Obeah practiced by most of Kincaid’s female characters represents more than a mere indigenous belief. In their mastery of Obeah magic, they come into contact with the whole universe and its spiritual energy and secrets, and grow up empowered by that cosmic connection. In *Annie John*, Annie’s mother bathes her with obeah ceremonies to cast away the angry spells of the women with whom her father has had children but never marries, and her grandmother cures her mysterious illness with obeah medicine and rituals. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Xuela’s stepmother tries to kill her with a necklace poisoned with obeah spells, but she casts the stepmother’s spell upon her dog and kills it instead. Through Kincaid’s pages, the African obeah creates a magical and exclusively female world where women heal one another, protect one another, and take revenge on one another. Indeed, the protagonists’ process of maturation includes the process of learning to practice Obeah to protect themselves as Xuela learns to practice abortion with Obeah medicine and then helps her half-sister with her abortion.

Thirdly, the grotesque body is characterized partly by its familiarity with abusive words and insults. In the light of Bakhtin’s theory, these words have a remarkable
significance of symbolic pregnancy and rebirth: “Oaths, curses, and various abusive
expressions are a source of considerable importance for the grotesque concept of the
body” (RHW 352). Most of Kincaid’s texts contain the daughters’ obsession with their
mothers’ abusive words. In her psychological approach to Kincaid’s texts, Bouson asserts
that Kincaid’s abusive mother Annie Drew is described in her texts in a reduced way:
“The secret of Kincaid’s childhood physical abuse at the hands of her mother does find
veiled expression in Annie John, particularly in the aspect of the novel that critics find so
enigmatic: Annie John’s intense love for and murderous hatred of her mother” (40).
However, it is hard to find any of the mother’s serious abusive behavior toward Annie
except the word “slut” that she uses to reprimand her for her unladylike behaviors toward
the boys whom she meets on the street. Let us leave aside real facts of the author’s life
and focus instead on her art: Kincaid never mentions her mother’s beating, rather, she
devotes many pages to how the mother figure’s abusive words become an obsession for
her and how they contribute to the formation of the daughter’s traumatic memories of the
past. Annie “felt as if I were drowning in a well but instead of the well being filled with
water it was filled with the word “slut,” and it was pouring in through my eyes, my
nostrils, my ears, my mouth” (102). Here Annie describes not how the mother attacks her
with the assaultive word but rather the negative effects that the word has on her, filling
her, making her an absolute stranger in her own house. She does not feel devastated by
the word “slut” but rather feel herself being transformed and redefined by it. This
conforms to the transformative effect of abusive words in the logic of the grotesque body.

Similarly, Lucy is hurt and obsessed by her mother’s warning of her becoming a
“slut”, but the unbearable insult to her is not the word itself but her mother’s humiliating
attitude that comes with that word. She ultimately writes her mother a condemning letter, reminding her mother of all she has done to prevent Lucy from becoming a “slut” and then declaring that she is finding her current life as a slut “quite enjoyable” (128). Lucy turns back the humiliation toward her mother by invalidating her attitude to the word. And living as a “slut,” an evil version of her mother’s “good” self, she makes possible a symbolic rebirth – the rebirth of her “god-like” mother in her grotesque self.

The nineteen-year-old girl whose mother has forbidden her to use “bad words” admires Mariah and Lewis for letting their children be unruly at the table and even “spill the food, or not eat any of it at all, or make up rhymes about it that would end with the words “smelt bad”” (13). She recalls “how they made me laugh, and I wonder what sort of parents I must have had, for even to think of such words in their presence I would have been scolded severely, and I vowed that if I ever had children I would make sure that the first words out of their mouths were bad ones”. The appearance of “bad words” to Lucy not only becomes the signifier of “a healthier version of family life” (Bouson, 73) but it also provokes her thoughts of her own family and children, a form of revival and renewal for her own self. It is also significant that this is the only time one of Kincaid’s adolescent characters thinks about a family of her own, something the others such as Annie John would call “how absurd” (AJ, 136). As she imagines herself having children, she gives herself a symbolic renewal, and that renewal comes from the carnivalesque power of those “bad words”.

Last but not least, one of the most important contributions of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque body is his meditation upon “the lower bodily stratum”, which is the catchphrase for food, genitals, copulation, conception, pregnancy, birth, defecation, and the
grave. Through the parts of “convexities” and “orifices” which lead the body out of its confined space or into its own depths, such as the bowels, the phallus, the mouth, the nose, the breasts, “the confines between bodies and between bodies and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and inter-orientation” (RHW, 317). The grotesque body disregards all blocked, smooth and impenetrable surface which the classically beautiful body embraces, since it limits the body in “a separate and completed phenomenon” (318). In its connection with the world and with other bodies, the grotesque body consciously frees itself from its own limits, symbolically resists against the dominant power that seeks to cage themselves inside the norms of “proper” colonial femininity. Kincaid’s female characters are especially grotesque in their tendency to possess immense capability to come into contact with the world through their sexuality.

This is probably most evident in The Autobiography of My Mother. Sexuality becomes Xuela’s only source of pleasure, a weapon to protect herself and conquer others in a grim and oppressed life. Xuela’s sexual experience is constructed as a site of resistance against the phallocentric patterns of the West. She comes into contact with, conquers and ‘invades’ the world in many ways, one being a sexualized special weapon: the erotic, powerful scent of her own body, which she loves with a narcissistic and somewhat fetishistic love:

I love the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that come from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arms, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offence, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not moral failing – those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted. (32-33)

Through that smell, Xuela enjoys her contact between her body and the world in terms of
the subjective desire for the others and for herself. She defines her womanhood in terms
of its natural grotesque sexuality, pointing out that the main difference between her and
Moira is that whereas Moira is a lady, “a combination of elaborate fabrications, a
collection of external, facial arrangements, and body parts, distortions, lies, and empty
effort”, Xuela is a woman who “had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening
between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place”
(159).

This is not something exclusive for Xuela. In *Lucy*, one thing that the idealized
Mariah lacks is the strong smell that, in Lucy’s eyes, makes women *real women*. Lucy
once remarks: “The smell of Mariah was pleasant. Just that – pleasant. And I thought, But
that’s the trouble with Mariah – she smells pleasant. By then I already knew that I wanted
to have a powerful odor and would not care if it gave offense” (27). In the logic of
carnival and the grotesque body, that strong smell of the female body, formed at the
intersecting point between the body and the world, reflects the ability of the female self to
assert her own female existence, her natural sexual power that resists being hidden under
layers of clothes, and her sexual conquest over the world.

During the course of the novel, the power of female sexuality is radically
practiced by Xuela to assert her autonomy in relation to, and even superiority over, men.
Traditionally within the sexual intercourse men enact power relation over women as
object of men’s desire; it becomes a physical and symbolic representation of male
domination and female submission. However, Xuela inverts this hierarchical relationship,
from a passive victim of Monsieur LaBatte and his wife to an active subject to
demonstrate her own desire, by taking the superior position and dominant control. Rather
than submitting herself to Monsieur LaBatte’s sexual desire, she actively makes him the object of her own sexual desire by refusing his child and enjoying her absolute control over her own body and his body as well: “He could feel the time that I was fertile, and yet each month I express confidence at its arrival and departure, and always I was overjoyed at the accuracy of my prediction” (176).

Regarding Xuela and Philip’s affair, M. Adjarian argues: “Xuela is able to enact and reverse historically produced roles so that she ultimately comes to have mastery over a son [Philip] of the British mother country” (77). Xuela does not only subvert that sexual and social hierarchy but also awakens the spirit of the Caribbean mother, the spirit of Nature that is particularly feminine in a peculiar carnivalesque manner. She does not rebel just to rebel, but rather to give rebirth to the long-oppressed, long-dead tradition of indigenous culture in the heart of the colonial Caribbean, a way to ‘rebear’ her deceased Carib mother.

As observed by Xuela, Philip has an “obsessive interest in rearranging the landscape” – “the growing of flowering plants,” and he does it for the “pleasure of it and making these plants do exactly what he wanted them to do” (143). In an original carnivalesque moment, Xuela degrades and inverts that ‘colonial’ interest of changing the world:

I made him stand behind me. I made him lie on top of me, my face beneath his; I made him lie on top of me, my back beneath his chest; I made him lie in back of me and place his hand in my mouth. […] I made him kiss my entire body, starting with my feet and ending with the top of my head. (154-55):

Here it is Xuela who acts as the active and dominant one during the sexual intercourse by
placing Philip in the submissive role and making him do exactly what her body wants and desires. She not only reverses the ‘official’ relationship between men and women in sexuality by taking the controlling role, but also successfully destroys the ‘official’ position of the colonizer who comes to reform and rearrange the colonized country by ‘rearranging’ his body through sexual intercourse.

Another question emerges: If the logic of grotesque lies in the body’s excess of its limits to engage the world, to contact with other bodies and give birth to new bodies, then is Xuela’s harsh refusal of motherhood a deviation of that logic? She declares her maternal tendency in most decisive and merciless manner:

I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs; I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. (97-98)

From the start, Xuela’s abortion of her first child and decision to be barren reflect her desire to be her own body’s only master, not submissive to any reproduction of patriarchal line. However, with this declaration, Xuela simultaneously announces her motherhood as a natural instinct and refuses that very motherhood as a social role in a phallocentric world. Kincaid has extended Bakhtin’s grotesque realism to a new extreme: The female body signifies for its own natural existence, not for its social function of reproduction. It opens to and invades the natural world but closes to and resists against being invaded by the social world.

In “Girl”, the first piece in *At the Bottom of the River*, the mother’s instructions are often interpreted as “astonish[ing] her daughter to be the good, dutiful daughter and to
follow the mother’s – and society’s – rules of proper behavior” (Bouson, 25). However, while the mother repeatedly warns her against becoming “a slut”, she paradoxically also teaches her daughter how to enjoy the pleasure her own body brings by showing her “this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even become a child”, “this is how to love a man, and if this doesn’t work there are other ways, and if they don’t work don’t feel too bad about giving up” (BR, 5). In fact, despite her assaultive repeat of the abusive word “slut”, she does not really try to teach the girl not to be that so-called “slut” but just attempts to teach her to “prevent yourself from looking like the slut” or for people not to “recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming” (3-4). A contradiction becomes clear: the mother does not intend to oppress her daughter’s sexuality, but to make it go unrecognized by others, as in their own African heritage, loose sexual behavior is not something to be condemned, but just inappropriate to colonial norms of femininity. And it is this self-contradiction that perplexes her daughter.

Here let us just look at the logic of the grotesque body contained in the African heritage that the mother tries to pass on to her daughter: female sexuality itself also contains a power of nurturing and subversion, and the mother teaches the girl to use that feminine power for her own sake, to “bully a man”, to “love a man”, or in other words, to stand above men and make them depend on her.

In Annie John, together with the process of trespassing its own limits to ‘invade’ the world as a grotesque body, Annie’s body undermines and unsettles all given normative standards of femininity and ladylikeness taught by the colonial school and the Christian church. The same British church that erases indigenous culture by providing mandatory Bible classes also functions as an institution that erases female sexuality and
controls the female body by prohibiting “unladylike” behaviors. But right in and after those classes we see Annie and her friends rebel against those colonial norms, exploring sensual and erotic parts of their bodies:

Oh, how it would have pleased us to press and rub our knees together as we sat in our pew while pretending to pay close attention to Mr. Simmons, our choirmaster, as he waves his baton up and down and across, and how it would have pleased us even more to walk home together, alone in the “early dusk” (the way Gwen had phrased it, a ready phrased always on her tongue), stopping, if there was a full moon, to lie down in a pasture and expose our bosoms in the moonlight. We had heard that full moonlight would make our breasts grow to a size we would like. (74)

The scene of the schoolgirls exposing their bosoms hoping they will grow fast alludes not only to a subversion of ‘proper’ feminine conduct, but more importantly, the body’s refusal to be closed and self-contained, its tendency to change and be renewed, to cross the boundaries dividing itself with the world and other bodies, and the rebel of indigenous values of female sexuality against Western values.

**FROM LAUGHTER TO ANGER**

One might suspect that Kincaid’s works are essentially carnivalesque, because of the absence of the most typical expression for carnivalization of literature: a particular type of laughter – “carnivalistic laughter”, which is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders.

Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter) (PDP, 127).
However, literary traces of that “carnivalistic laughter” could be found in Kincaid’s ambivalent forms of mockery, irony, sarcasm, and anger, which seek to destroy certainties and hierarchies “to force them to renew themselves” (127). Kincaid’s texts do not really belong to the tradition of comedy and laughter. They are halfway between the tragic and comic effects. This section is devoted to revealing the carnivalesque, liberating aspect in the motif of anger, which is closely connected to the protagonists’ uneasy way between two cultural traditions and frames.

The reason why true joyful laughter of medieval popular festivities cannot be applied thoroughly to the case of Kincaid could be interpreted by Bakhtin’s own limits: the “carnivalistic laughter” that Bakhtin originally describes can only exist outside the official discourse, in a conceptually pure space of lower cultural stratum, which does not really exist in the case of the Caribbean where the ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural traditions constantly intersect and generate alternative meanings. It can only persist in the reduced form of an “in-between”, an interstitial and relativising relationship between truths, meanings and identities, but it remains truly carnivalesque in the sense that it “embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with crisis itself” (127). Anger is the last step of the process of reducing forms of laughter, an alternative response to the prevailing reality of civil and religious authority. It does not come from an ideally ‘pure’ lower sphere of folk culture. It is brought forth by something new to the logic of Bakhtinian carnival: a hybrid cultural identity, to use Homi Bhabha’s words.

From another perspective, the motif of anger in Kincaid’s writings could be seen as a reduced form of humor which

does not pretend, like carnival, to lead us beyond our own limits. It gives us the feeling, or better,
the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from inside. It does not fish for an impossible freedom, yet it is a true movement of freedom. Humor does not promise us liberation: on the contrary, it warns us about the impossibility of global liberation, reminding us of the presence of law that we no longer have reason to obey. It doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under a law – any law. (Eco, 8)

With that tragic effect of the anger motif, Kincaid’s carnivalesque is no longer the brutal one that radically destroys and reconstructs laws and rules. We could talk about a benign carnivalesque in Kincaid’s texts that acknowledges the tension between the self and the cultural and political frame it no longer can adapt to but cannot escape either. With anger, the protagonists realize their inability to break the law they are meant to break in the brutal logic of carnival, but they also realize their ability to conceive an alternative truth other than the ‘official’ one imposed upon them. And in doing so they “undermine limits from inside” as “a true movement to freedom.”

The tragic effect Eco mentioned could be found in a recurrent pattern emerging in Kincaid’s novels: as the ‘inferior’ subject attempts to rebel and to reject the ‘superior’, it unconsciously repeats all the ways the latter has used to articulate itself, even patterns of resistance. Caught in a complicated net of cultural and psychological domination, the rebellious subject presents its surrender even in subversion. The result is the formation of a hybrid structure which is, while fundamentally structured by the ‘unofficial’ cultural stratum, in the same time in some way overshadowed by the ‘official’. The denied ‘official’ cannot be totally destroyed and buried in favor of a new and pure ‘unofficial’. On the contrary, it becomes a fundamental component of the newly reborn current of culture. The desired symbolic rebirth turns out to be only a too long-standing transformation which cannot thoroughly wash away the colonial past and recover the
indigenous stratum. And the deep anger is a natural response, which “gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of our own limits” (Eco, 8). In Lucy, when Mariah pitifully asks her “You are a very angry person, aren’t you?” she replies, “Of course I am. What do you expect?” (96).

Kincaid’s Lucy provides us a perfect example of how the postcolonial subject is structured by intersecting cultural lineages, and has to negotiate between the two value systems, rekindling broken connections. It is possible to read this text as a conscious attempt to construct a Caribbean cultural discourse, which has almost exclusively limited itself within the process of deconstructing canonical binary opposites: white/ black, master/ slave, official/ unofficial, high/ low, civilized/ primitive. The path to self-definition begins with subversion and relativization of the official or high discourse, but that process will lead to the formation of a hybrid subject, which cannot be defined from either discourse, just as Lucy is suspended between two worlds, denying both but being influenced by both. Her rebellion against the colonial discourse follows exactly the patterns used by that discourse upon her, and results in Lucy’s bitter anger over realizing her limits and impotence. This ending does not promise radical liberation; it contains ‘a sense of superiority, but with a shade of tenderness” (Eco, 8). This is the logic of Kincaid’s benign carnivalesque.

I mentioned earlier Simmons’ suggestive remark about the double identity of the mother in Kincaid’s texts, her tendency to internalize “two world-views, that of British imperialism and that of African tribal custom and folk magic” (30). It is not difficult to elucidate this contradiction if we explore from the perspective of carnival practice of masking, in which people are supposed to contemporarily be something different from
themselves, or to make it more exact, to be themselves and something larger and eternal at the same time. Wearing masks, in some other systems of meaning generation, may bear negative implications such as cancelling oneself, losing one’s own identity, or being untruthful. But in African traditions, wearing masks suggests the positive ability of being oneself, unifying with the immense and eternal world of nature, communicating with one’s ancestors, origin and root. Those masks allow people to inhabit a dual realm of existence: the official self lives in the colonial reality, characterized by the authority of the patriarchal and colonial systems, and the unofficial in the spiritual reality, characterized by the ‘obeah’, free sexuality, and communication with the world of spirits. To some extent, when someone outgrows and transforms himself by wearing a mask, he denies the identity imposed upon him by the colonial political system to act as active heirs of their African cultural heritage. The mother’s way to lead her life represents the two sites of life in Caribbean: the official life dominated by the imperial value system and the unofficial life in which African traditional values are revived and people are reborn with purely human relationships. Accommodating to the duality of Antiguan culture but consciously preferring the ‘official’ part, the mother trains her daughter to take after the latter, while the daughter grows up with immense love, admiration and even a certain desire toward the ‘unofficial’ self of the mother. That hidden ‘great’ self of the mother is also the great African femininity embodied by the immense sexuality and ability to control the world as well as men. From this perspective, the daughter’s struggle can be interpreted as a way to “re-bear” her mother by trying to be exactly that hidden ‘great’ mother, the half of herself that she always tries to suppress and deny but her daughter adores and considers “god-like”. Consciously taking after that self but never able to be a
perfect copy of it, the girl is trapped in a complex psychological dilemma of both love and hatred, both hope and despair, both the needs of separation and unification that she cannot negotiate. That is also the traumatic position of the hybrid subject between intersecting cultural lineages. When Annie John falls ill, the mother consults both an obeah woman and the British-trained doctor, and gives the girl the medicines prescribed by both. Though only the indigenous ‘obeah’ healing practiced by her grandmother is able to cure her, the recovered Annie decides to move to England, where she will not be able to find any obeah woman to cure her. The mother in “Girl” does not prohibit her daughter from singing benna, but from singing it in Sunday school, which just aims to prevent the daughter from discounting the Western practice of Christianity. At the same time, the mother still intends to pass on African heritage by cautioning the daughter of the mysterious spirits inhabiting the supernatural world. And while she attempts to limits the girl’s female body within the confines of ‘ladylike’ behaviors, she also teaches her to express her bodily freedom by “spit[ting] up in the air” (5). The girl is finally left frustrated, not knowing who she should be, a powerless woman in servitude to men or a powerful woman able to catch and impose her will upon men. The final question reflects that dilemma: “But what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” (5) This frustration develops to deep anger in Kincaid’s later texts.

Many critics including Simmons have noted that in Annie John, the plot is driven by the tensional mother-daughter relationship which stems from Annie’s struggle to separate herself from the mother, step by step denying the mother’s influence and affirming her own independent identity by leaving Antigua: “Annie emerges from her
breakdown with the clear sense that she must leave the world as she knows it to save her sanity and her soul” (Simmons 103). However, I hardly find a total new and ‘sane’ Annie emerging “from her breakdown” when she leaves Antigua. She is still the frustrated Annie, who will always be overshadowed by her mother. Annie and her mother are never wholly separate subjects: they are part of each other, they repeats each other in every action including the final decision of leaving their homes, which is most obviously visible in Annie’s words: “Like father like son, like mother like daughter” (102). The motif of anger found in many of Kincaid’s texts derives from that dilemma: much as the girl desires true independence from her mother, she always ends up finding herself unable to escape the mother’s shadow, as no matter where she goes, the mother is still living in her, making a part of her.

This could be seen in the failure of Annie’s efforts to get beyond her mother’s shadow: over and over she performs exactly what her mother has done. I have mentioned the classroom episode in which Annie John defaces a picture of Christopher Columbus in her textbook with the phrase “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go” as a ‘blasphemous’ moment, but it is also significant that this phrase is exactly what she heard when her mother mocked her grandfather about his illness. And as she leaves Antigua, Annie repeats her mother’s journey over the Caribbean sea leaving her home in Dominica many years ago, and brings exactly the thing her mother brought with her (though she insists that her father makes her another trunk, it is still a trunk that she depends upon to articulate her autonomous self). Step by step, she grows up to be the ‘unofficial’ self of the mother by repeating her own rebellious actions against the dominance of her father. Her desire to see her mother dead, which is inseparable from fear as it simultaneously
threatens her own existence, reflects the depth of this troubled relationship: “But I couldn't wish my mother dead. If my mother died, what would become of me? I couldn't imagine my life without her. Worse than that, if my mother died, I would have to die too, and even less than I could imagine my mother dead could I imagine myself dead” (88).

Toward the end of the novel, the angry Annie leaves Antigua and her mother, overwhelmed by the feeling of “how much I never wanted to see my mother bent over a pot cooking me something [...] how much I never wanted to feel her long, bony fingers against my cheek again, how much I never wanted to hear her voice in my ear again” (127). But when they bid each other goodbye, the mother’s voice still “raked across my skin”: “It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home” (147). This moment symbolically lengthens the novel: Annie will never be freed from her anger, since although she will not see her mother anymore, she will never escape the mother in her.

The mother-haunted Lucy, who once believed that her life would change when she left Antigua, discovers instead that “I have spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother” (90). Her angry denial of her mother only drives her to deeper anger toward herself, as she cannot prevent herself from being a copy of the mother. When Lucy stands speechless and paralyzed in front of Maude Quick and the latter, laughing at that sight, comments that Lucy reminds her of “Miss Annie”, Lucy undergoes a sense of being “saved” by that seemingly anger-provoking remark:

She could not have known that in one careless sentence she said the only thing that could keep me alive. I said, ‘I am not like my mother. She and I are not alike. She should not have married my
father. She should not have had children. She should not have thrown away her intelligence. She should not have paid so little attention to mine. She should have ignored someone like you. I am not like her at all. (123)

“The only thing that could keep me alive” is naturally Lucy’s resemblance to her mother, but not in the sense that Maude means it. Lucy is “saved” by Maude’s remark, but bitterly protests that remark: she does not want to be like the mother that has “married my father”, “had children”, “thrown away her intelligence”. She wants to be like another mother that Maude does not know and will never know, because Maude is just a ‘good’ example of the official order and will never be able to understand the hidden great self of Lucy’s mother that Lucy embraces.

As Lucy asks her mother why she was named Lucy, her mother replies, “I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, sort of Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived”. This answer turns Lucy “from feeling burdened and old and tired to feeling light, new, clean” (153). This is not only the embrace of knowing who she is, but the embrace of truly being the great self of her mother that she adores and admires: She was born from what her mother considers “a botheration”, perhaps a ‘sinful’ sexual intercourse of a ‘sinless’ mother defined by the colonial order. Furthermore, she was born out of the “devil” part of her Janus-faced mother, as “I often thought of her as god-like, and are not the children of god evil?” (153). In that question, Lucy affirms her pride in both her resemblance to her mother, and her difference from her. She has succeeded in being the very self of her mother that her mother despises and denies. That is why Lucy insists that the fact that her mother named her after Satan marks her transformation “from failure to triumph” (152)
But after all, what is left to Lucy is not a triumph at all, but rather, more and more bitterness and anger. Unable to overcome her mother’s shadow to affirm a radically independent personality, always angry at herself, she is unable to love and be loved for her own self. At the end of the novel we find Lucy, after attempting to articulate herself by writing her full name “Lucy Josephine Potter”, bitterly weeping on the page with her own sentence “I wish I could love someone so much that I could die from it” (164). Her inability to love derives from the fact that, while she tries to live as an ‘evil’ Lucy her mother disapproves, a negative version of the ‘god-like’ Mrs. Potter, she loses a part of herself – the capability to establish true human connections. And this lack foreshadows her failure in the future journey toward true independence: her tears blur her own name, suggesting that she will never be able to be herself as she is consumed with that traumatic obsession of having to be an ‘evil’ Lucy Josephine Potter.
Chapter II

“AREN’T THINGS FUNNY HERE?”:
CARNIVALIZED CHRONOTOPE IN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE RIVER

The collection of short stories entitled At the Bottom of the River marks the successful start of Kincaid’s artistic journey. Heralded by critics as “highly poetic and heavy with symbolism” (Edwards 16), the ten stories that make up the collection corrupt normative formal boundaries. Yet they tend to puzzle readers with unidentifiable speakers and undecipherable collages of images and impressions taken from Caribbean nature and Kincaid’s own family history. The effect “is somewhat surreal and sometimes confusing” (Edwards 16).

Many critics have proposed that this collection of short stories is successful in creating a dreamlike state, which blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, adulthood and childhood, with bizarre hallucinations, strange juxtapositions of objects, and surreal transformation of one form into other forms. Simmons argues that it also creates a “prelapsarian world” characterized by the “perfect love and harmony” forever lost when the girl grows up: “The ten pieces trace an emotional journey, a journey of mourning. What is mourned is the loss of a prelapsarian world, a childhood paradise of perfect love and harmony in which time stands still and in which betrayal – including the great betrayal of death – is unknown” (Simmons 73).

Simmons presents this as painful personal loss. Yet when examined in larger social conditions, it reflects Caribbean culture’s fundamental inner tensions and contradictions. While striving for the institutionalization of newly established official
colonial values through encouraging individuals to adapt themselves ‘properly’,
Caribbean society still contains a marginalized sphere of unofficial values which remains
as cultural traces of the African past and constantly seeks to intrude into the ‘central’
sphere. When the ideal ‘childhood’ of that society has forever gone to make way for the
‘modern’ colonial system, a complete reconciliation between the two strata becomes
impossible.

In this chapter, I suggest that the surreal, dreamlike landscapes in *At the Bottom of
the River* can be read as a carnivalized chronotope of ever-reshaping space and ever-
returning time, in which life is “shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (RHW 7).
The logic of dream dominating the text has to do with not only striking collages of
dislocated voices and fragmentary images, but also that of time and space. The
carnivalesque chronotope, which is constructed by constant shifts between two
competing spatio-temporal structures representing the Caribbean and European worlds,
makes the protagonist’s journey’s oscillating and negotiating between the two become a
journey of both loss, defiance and inner maturation. The protagonist appears in the first
story as a little awkward girl whose timid reactions go unrecognized by her mother, until
the last moment of the last story as a grown up girl, “solid and complete,” whose name
“filling up my mouth” (82).

This journey of maturation through the mysterically ever-changing space and time
necessitates a closer look at Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope, which describes the spatio-
temporal structure in which literary characters function, where “the knots of narrative are
tied and untied”, “where the place where encounters occur [...] the webs of intrigue are
spun, denouements occur and finally – this is where dialogues happen, something that
acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, “ideas” and “passions” of the heroes” (DI 246). With this observation, he returns to the case of Rabelais and the tradition of folk-festive culture, suggesting that “the category of growth is one of the most basic categories in Rabelaisian world” (DI 168). Rabelais is successful in generating an agricultural and cyclical chronotope which is imimical to official, linear conceptions of time and space.

The chronotope of At the Bottom of the River is characterized by constant changes and vicissitudes between images and moments drawn from two spatio-temporal systems, representing two relative cultural strata. Those are what I. Amadumie calls African matriarchy and European patriarchy, which still exist and compete in neocolonial African and Caribbean societies. One of those two competing spatial-temporal systems is the world of every day time, constructed by the colonial school, women’s chores of cooking, clothes washing, and table setting, men and their patriarchal dominance, the linear time, Western rationalism, and the overwhelming light. The other, the world of carnival time, comprises of the loving and nurturing Caribbean sea, obeah rituals and healing, the invisible reality behind everything one can see, women and their feminine power that can destroy and change everything, the agricultural cyclical time, and the mystic darkness or night. Obeah, an African religion which assumes the existence of spiritual energy behind fluid visible forms and attributes supreme powers to priestesses, plays the most important role in constructing this world, making it particularly African. While the everyday world is concerned with order and structure and the clock-time, the carnival world represents the strange, unsteady warping of time which occurs in imagination and dreams. Growing up in the constant shifts between two worlds, the ‘I’, an adolescent girl, seems always to
be on the threshold between possible courses of thoughts, which brings forth curious mixtures of real and surreal symbols. The space in which she finds herself is ambiguous, both by the confusion of viewpoints which belong to the girl as a little child and to herself as a mature woman, and by the mixture of realities which characterizes carnival time. The integration and interweaving of carnival time and every day time, of domestic and cosmic spaces allow the protagonist to make her journey straddling between two worlds and to end up with the formation of a hybridized identity.

In the Caribbean reality that the ‘childhood paradise’ forever lost in modern, civilized, ‘matured’ Caribbean society, Kincaid’s protagonist always moves to the margin and seeks to plunge herself in the fluid, constantly transformed reality permeated by the Obeah conjure. The marginalized, carnivalized sphere is where the suppressed traces of African culture tenaciously live on against all attempts to erase or control them. That sphere carves out a “second reality” of the primitive Caribbean within the womb of the ‘first reality’ of ‘enlightened’ Caribbean. In this collection of surreal stories, the colonial reality is dissolved into a carnivalesque space in which all are absorbed into a fundamental relativism: everything is not what they are supposed to be, binary oppositions are annihilated, and the world is born anew. At the Bottom of the River creates that second reality through the protagonist’s dreams and hallucinations, which functions with its own mystical logic.

The strategy of interweaving two spatial-temporal systems into one chronotope is made clear upfront on the title of the collection: the bottom of the river is a dynamic space of both silence and sound, both stillness and movement. Like the stable and silent riverbed, every image in the collection appears and reappears as a constantly haunting
impression in the protagonist’s forever traumatic memory. But like the river, an image that implies constant passing, every image has a particular temporal quality, which contributes to its overall surrealism. Every episode, every image represents more than one temporal moment: it transforms itself from one to another reality, which constitutes an artistic chronotope of ever-changing shapes and states. The intersection of spatial ambiguity and temporal transition produces a certain vision of the Caribbean reality shaped by two different worlds weaving into each other. The conflict between spatial and temporal dimensions also reflects the protagonist’s crisis of the turning point in her life.

Among a lot of binary oppositions that build up the carnivalesque world of At the Bottom of the River, I would focus on two motifs which are by essence carnivalesque and penetrate most of the other ones: the mother who simultaneously inhabits two worlds and the endless cycle of Caribbean nature.

**ONE MOTHER – TWO WORLDS**

The major features of carnival incorporated into this text fall under some fundamental headings, the most important of which is the simultaneously loved and hated mother, which has become an obsession in all Kincaid’s texts. The Janus-faced mother could be read as an analogous expression of Caribbean culture with its inner tensions between contradictory values. She represents two lines of culture that run parallel in Caribbean life: As a social figure, the mother conforms to social rules and designates her daughter as her official self’s superior successor. But as a carnival figure, the mother also ensures a special kind of bodily openness and freedom. Absorbing both traditions of Eurocentric
and African values, the mother is a carnival masked personality who mixes high with low values, the serious with the bawdy, infertility with fertility, and the world she functions in and leads her daughter into is also a carnivalesque chronotope which acknowledges the interplay between two competing spatio-temporal systems. The ten pieces of the collection seem to follow the girl’s process of maturation, from a shy, timid daughter toward an independent self, and her changed reactions to the world the latter introduces her to.

“Girl”, the first piece in *At the Bottom of the River*, opens the collection with the image of a little girl perplexed and paralyzed by her mother’s words. Spoken almost entirely by the mother, with only two meek, timid interruptions by the daughter that nearly go ignored by the mother, “Girl” offers a list of maternal instructions and admonitions preparing for the daughter’s growing up into ‘proper’ Caribbean womanhood and wifehood. The mother’s speech mostly comprises of practically homemaking matters, such as how to select and prepare certain foods, how to choose fabrics for clothes, how to perform various domestic chores, and how to behave herself. Essentially, the mother gives the girl her lessons and experience of how to be a supporting wife to her future husband in a patriarchal society:

This is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease; this is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so that they don’t have a crease; […] this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard […] This is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it is fresh. (4-5)

I mentioned earlier the dilemma between African original matriarchy, which grants women self-government and independence, and European patriarchy, which limits
women in their family life. It is clear that the mother’s primary goal is to teach her daughter the expected behavior for a woman in a patriarchal culture with its standards of Western ‘proper’ womanhood. Most importantly, to be a good Caribbean woman means to walk, to talk, and to behave “like a lady”, to pay respect to European religion by not singing benna in Sunday school, which means to adapt oneself well to a Eurocentric colonial culture. However, at the same time, the mother also introduces the girl to the first conceptions of Obeah belief, according to which nothing is what it appears to be, and cosmos magic is everywhere:

Don’t pick people’s flowers – you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all […] this is how to throw back a fish you don’t like, and that way something bad won’t fall on you. (5)

The mother warns the girl of the existence of an incorporeal world behind the world of visible appearance and performance, one with its own authority able to do harm to people who are unaware of or have no respect for it. Thus the mother takes the girl into a journey oscillating between two cultural extremes: the Eurocentric one with strict norms of ladylike behaviours and rational concerns, in which the most important thing to a woman is how her moral quality is commented upon by the public, and the indigenous one with absolute bodily freedom, in which the only thing to be afraid of is the existence of larger, spiritual existences. Being aware of that second reality is also a way to immerse oneself in it, unite with it and draw from it a new power and energy to impose one’s will onto others.

Another story in the collection, called “In the Night,” marks the girl’s first reaction to the controlling mother through her wild imagination, the dynamics of which is
formed by the chronotope of night, a dimension dominated by the unknown laws of obeah rather than the rationality of daylight. This story presents a kind of ideal cohabitation – the marriage between a mother-like figure and the girl – together with the creation of a permanently carnivalized upside-down world of femininity. The woman “who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them,” who “knows many things” and who tells “a story that begins, ‘Before you were born’”, lives with the girl as a loving mother, but at the same time, a mischievous girlfriend:

Every day this red-skin woman and I will eat bread and milk for breakfast, hide in bushes and throw hardened cow dung at people we don’t like, climb coconut trees, pick coconuts, eat and drink the food and water from the coconuts we have picked, throw stones in the sea, put on John Bull masks and frighten defenseless little children on their way home from school, go fishing and catch only our favorite fishes to roast and have for dinner, steal green figs to eat for dinner with the roast fish. Every day we would do this. (12)

Weak and helpless in “Girl” but now the girl has begun to actively acquire a new power: that of imagination and fantasy, a way to break out of the realistic, daylight world we saw in “Girl”. While in the Eurocentric world, the woman is expected to be a subservient subject to male authority, in this mystical world all forms of masculine authority are eliminated in favor of permanent, powerful feminine existences. Just like in “Girl” where the mother insists that the girl must grow up a meek and obedient housewife but at the same time become a self-governing woman able to catch and bully any man she wants, in “In the Night” the domestic life the girl creates with the woman she marries is constructed by a series of positions: it is also a normal domestic space with chairs and tables and pots, with housewifery to perform, but it is also a space of domestic principles subverted, of women breaking out of their family life and plunging themselves to the
boundless world of the sea and the sky. They will perform jobs known as men’s such as “climb[ing] coconut trees, pick[ing] coconuts”, “go[ing] fishing and catch[ing] only our favourite fishes to roast and have for dinner”. With this vision of marrying a red-skinned woman, the girl creates an African matriarchal world dominated by women’s power and energy, in which the quasi-lesbian marriage becomes a carnivalesque combination, a perfect harmony between the girl and the feminine universe.

A later story in *At Bottom of the River*, “At Last” comprises a series of questions the girl casts on her mother about their harmonious unity when she has not been born and their increasing alienation from each other. Here we see how the girl acquires another, more sufficient power than in the two previous pieces: that of voice and question. The first time in this collection, the girl is no longer the one who listens passively and obediently, but the one who raises her voice in an equal dialogue with her mother. The mother is thus no longer the controlling voice as in “Girl”, nor a mere product of infant imagination as in “In the Night”, but rather, now she becomes the object of questioning and challenging.

The story introduces us to the normally buried reality of carnival life characterized by haunting darkness, feminine powers, and an irrational order. The story opens with the girl’s description of the house that she used to share with her mother, the domestic space with things faded, slipped, forgotten, changed, destroyed: “I lived in this house with you: the wood shingles, unpainted, weather-beaten, fraying; the piano, a piece of furniture now, collecting dust; the bed in which all the children are born; a bowl of flowers, alive, then dead; a bowl of fruit, but then all eaten” (13). The girl does not see things in a single moment, but in its constant course of existence, change and then
disappearance; the bed with the children used to be born in it, the bowls with flowers and fruits used to be kept in it. That device of capturing the whole process of metamorphosis into one image and one glance is an example of Kincaid’s strategy to merge different moments and different forms into a single unit in this collection. This spatio-temporal matrix, a peculiar chronotope of ever-changing shapes and states, also constitutes the structure of meaning generation of Kincaid’s art: the transformation in the surroundings reflects inner maturation and self-discovery.

In that process of metamorphosis, the girl restlessly sheds the light of rationality onto the ‘irrational’ darkness by “light[ing] the lamp” (13), bringing sense of clock-time into the immense, undividable world of the past. Facing the interrupted course of time in the old, decayed house, she starts to look for continuity by reversing the flow of time, once again seeing her mother “a young woman” (13) with her lips “soft and parted” (14). As time returns, she once again finds her mother so near but yet unreachable, a figure with a too great power yet caged in a too narrow space of the domesticated house: “You are a woman. Stand over near the dead flowers. I can see your reflection in the glass bowl. You are soft and curved like an arch. Your limps are large and unknotted, your feet unsnared” (15). Bringing the sense of Western rationality into the world of irrationality, she satisfies her desire for being ‘enlightened’ yet paradoxically ends up losing her way, embarrassed by not knowing the way to real salvation: “We prayed. But what did we pray for? We prayed to be saved. We prayed to be blessed. We prayed for long and happy lives for our children. And always we prayed to see the morning light. Were we saved? I don’t know. To this day I don’t know” (15). By praying, they depend on an external power and make themselves passive objects waiting “to be saved”, failing to see that the
real source of power is in themselves. In the mother’s house, the girl finds no other way to define herself except taking after her mother who is so large and powerful but has to be “soft and curved like an arch” (15) to fit into the domesticated world. Thus the girl finally finds herself being shaped in the shadow casted by her mother’s contradictory figure, finding herself also “soft and curved like an arch” (17) as being ‘fed’ on her mother’s body:

Was it like a carcass? Did you feed on it?
Yes.

Or was it like a skeleton? Did you live in it?
Yes, that too. (15)

But toward the end of the story, the girl step by step moves from the house toward the natural world, the night, and the sea, which contain the power of destruction and renewal, the power that belongs to carnivalesque femininity and to the great mother of African cultural sources. She changes herself to a man, then a hoofed animal, which implies the ability to break out of the domesticated space that imprisons her mother. Every moment when the domestic space melts into the sea or the immense darkness, she constantly attempts to connect herself to the eternal power of nature and the great part of the mother that she adores: “I crossed the open sea alone at night on a steamer. What was my name – I mean the name my mother gave to me – and where did I come from?” (17) After this part, we can see the girl depart to the outside world to articulate her new self.

The fourth piece in the collection, “Wingless” describes the process of the girl moving out from her mother’s domestic environment and into a greater one, which is represented by the colonial school. With “Wingless” the girl physically begins her quest
for a place beyond her mother’s stronghold, but is still overshadowed by the mother: something in the mother still pulls her back, which she cannot resist – the ‘great’ mother she adores. The story reflects her struggle to articulate her identity between two gravitational forces, the school and the mother. Squarely facing the crisis of loss brought about by her inability to integrate into neither of them, desiring the sense of belonging to the great world of darkness and femininity, yet being denied once she left it to absorb the world of light, the girl ends up feeling herself having been culturally eradicated and numbled.

In the whole collection, Kincaid always juxtaposes the girl’s insistent questions against the flux of her surroundings, yet now that flux is no longer the change of shapes and movements of time like in “In the Night” and “At Last” but rather the integration and interweaving of light and darkness, which brings forth self-discovery.

In the first episode, the colonial school where the children learn to read, write and calculate blends directly into the playground where they “singsong here and tumble there, tearing skirts with swift movements” (21), and the protagonist’s experience of rebellion against colonial norms of sexuality and femininity paradoxically blends into her experience of identification with those norms themselves (through her identification with Columbus). All of those contribute to the formation of her personality in her “pupa stage”:

I myself have been kissed by many rude boys with small, damp lips, on their way to boy’s drill. I myself have humped girls under my mother’s house. But I swim in a shaft of light, upside down, and I can see myself clearly, through and through, from every angle. Perhaps I stand on the brink of a great discovery, and perhaps after I have made my great discovery I will be sent home in chains. Then again, perhaps my life is as predictable as an insect’s and I am in my pupa stage (21)
The “great discovery” here obviously has something to do with Columbus’ discovery of the Caribbean as much as the girl being “sent home in chains” recalls the moment when Annie John defaces the picture of Columbus being sent back to Europe in chains. The symbolism she employs reflects the impact that European rationality had on the colonized self: while allowing the chance for the colonized self to critically look at itself, it also brings about a confused and unstable psyche questioning who it is and where it fits in.

Not only do we find here the chronotope of two intermingled realities and blurred distinctions, but also a juxtaposition of two logics: the carnivalesque upside down state of the rebellious self and the light of rationalism that allows that self to realize itself as “upside down”. In the “shaft of light” of rationalism that allows her to see herself clearly and makes possible her self-recovery, she paradoxically ends up “defenseless and small” (23), losing her way to the world where she desires to belong.

In the next episode, the distinction between powerless childhood and powerful womanhood continues to be developed in a partly objective perspective. Trying to follow “the woman I love when she walked on a carpet of pond lilies” but carefully “keeping a safe distance”, the girl seems to find herself now too small and too weak to get near to the source of feminine power that she admires. The woman, whom she does not give a name or a description except her great size, could be understood as both her biological mother and the ‘great’ mother of Caribbean nature and African culture. In this unique episode, we find a confrontation between two worlds – that between the woman she loves and a strange man:

As she walked, she ate some black nuts, pond-lily black nuts. She walked for a long time, saying what must be wonderful things to herself. Then in the middle of the pond she stopped, because a
man had stood up suddenly in front of her. I could see that he wore clothes made of tree bark and
sticks in his ears. He said things to her and I couldn’t make them out, but he said them so
forcefully that drops of brown water sprang from his mouth. The woman I love put her hands over
her ears, shielding herself from the things he said. Then he put wind in his cheeks and blew
himself up until in the bright sun he looked like a boil, and the woman I love put her hands over
her eyes, shielding herself from the way he looked. Then, instead of removing her cutlass from the
folds of her big and beautiful skirt and cutting the man in two at the waist, she only smiled – a red,
red smile – and like a fly he dropped dead” (25)

This is also a confrontation between aggressive masculinity and gentle femininity, silence
and sound (the woman says nothing and the man says “so forcefully”), blackness and
light (the woman eats “pond-lily black nuts” and the man “looked like a boil” in the
bright sun), water and air (the woman walks on the pond and the man rises up to the sky),
and most significantly, that between eternal natural world and sudden, brutal intervention
of humans (the woman had walked “for a long time” and would continue to walk forever
after the accident; the man stood up “suddenly in front of her” and then died after only a
short while).

Another important detail in this passage is the color of red, which seems to be a
motif of wildness and subversion of female bodies in many of Kincaid’s texts. In “In the
Night” the girl dreams of marrying and living happily with a “red-skin woman” (11),
refusing all normative principles of marriage in the colonial society. In the last story in
this collection, the girl finally develops to womanhood and autonomy, discovering the
mystery of her red skin which is “the red of flames when a fire is properly fed, the red of
flames when a fire burns alone in a darkened place, and not the red of flames when a fire
is burning in a cozy room” (BR 79). In Annie John, the girl most adored by Annie is the
Red Girl with her big, round, dirty face “like a moon – a red moon” (AJ 57). The woman’s “red, red smile” that kills the man thus reflects the wild, subversive, destructive power of femininity and nature, which the girl paradoxically fears and desires at the same time. She follows the woman but never gets near her, aware that the feminine, destructive power is partly passed onto her female body, but she will never successfully grasp and control it. Unwilling to accept the bounded, steady world of normative femininity imposed upon her by the colonial school and society, yet no longer able to entirely immerse into the ever-changing, ever-renewed world brought upon her by the second reality behind everything she sees, the protagonist finds herself at the permanent threshold of identity, a fundamentally hybrid one.

Still another story in Bottom of the River, in the form of a letter, “The Letter from Home” lists mundane daily chores and what a woman does in her domestic life. Supposing that we can read it as a letter the girl receives from her mother after leaving home, the girl no longer appears in this piece, but we see the mother coming back as the dominant voice. However, she is not the powerful and attacking voice we saw in “Girl”; rather, she narrates things in her life at home in a much less confident way. In re-writing the mother’s words, the girl now ‘re-writes’ the mother with her own voice, making her the mother she desires. This way she is not absent from the story; on the contrary, she is present in the most confident, manipulative manner. She not only physically separates herself from her mother as she did in “Wingless”, but also symbolically ‘deconstructs’ and ‘reconstructs’ her mother, which could be read as the girl’s new power in her struggle for independence.

In this story the mother appears as a doubled identity – one defined by domestic
chores and one by cosmic dimensions, and throughout the story she restlessly finds her way moving to the latter. She firstly relates her everyday chores, what she has instructed her daughter to do in “Girl”: “I milk the cows, I churned the butter, I store the cheese, I baked the bread, I brewed the tea, I washed the clothes, I dressed the children” (37). The woman’s job taking care of her home is suddenly interrupted by a strange polyphony of all things’ voices: “the cat meowed, the dog barked, the horse neighed, the mouse squeaked, the fly buzzed, the goldfish living in a bowl stretch his jaws; the door banged shut, the stairs creaked, the fridge hummed, the curtains billowed up, the pot boiled, the gas hissed through the stove, the tree branches heavy with snow crashed against the roof”. All of these actions signal a tumultuous process of everything breaking out from its normal space. The second scene of the story emphasizes the fluidity of the mother’s existence between two worlds: her daily jobs, by the regularity of their movement, seem to be immobile; but the sudden chaos of everything around her wakes her up and takes her away to another world. The shifting and melting spatio-temporal pattern now becomes dramatically chaotic, which foreshadows the destruction and reconstruction of the surroundings and, through which, the rebirth of the self.

In carnival, new lives are always begun with chaos. The curious chaos in which the mother finds herself implies the carnivalesque transformation of her existence. That chaotic polyphony of the house pulls the mother out from her daily chores and leads her into a surreal rebirth: “my heart beats loudly thud! thud!, tiny beads of water gathered on my nose, my hair went limp, my waist grew folds, I shed my skin; lips have trembled, tears have flowed, cheeks have puffed, stomachs have twisted with pain” (37). The motif of shedding one’s skin in At the Bottom of the River is often used to describe women’s
power to break out of her normal appearance and position, and reach another, incorporeal existence beyond the corporeal world, such as the woman who removes her skin, leaving it “in a corner of a house made out of wood” (7) and turn herself into “a bird walking in trees” in the hallucinatory world of “In the Night”, or the mother removes her clothes and her hair and turn into a serpent, overwhelming her daughter with her omnipotent power in “My Mother”. Here after shedding her skin, the mother finds herself in another, larger space permeated by non-teleological deviations and riots: “I went to the country, the car broke down, I walked back; the boat sailed, the waves broke, the horizon tipped, the jetty grew small, the air stung, some heads bobbed, some handkerchiefs fluttered” (37-8). The riot of everything which carries the mother away from her house also creates a curious mixture of inside and outside worlds, bringing the chaotic outside into the house, estranging it and pushing it into disorder. Even her old home now is no longer a quiet place, “the drawers didn’t close, the faucets dripped, the paint peeled, the walls cracked, the books tilted over, the rug no longer lay out flat” (38). After the chaos of the surroundings leads to the metamorphosis of the mother, she is now another one, different from the woman who milked the cow and clothed the children. She is now a rebellious presence in a riotous space.

She looks back at the colonial reality which denies changes and transformation to “stand still” in its permanent state, in which everything is supposed to be in an established ideal: “in the peninsula some ancient ships are still anchored, in the field the ox stand still, in the village the leopard stalks its prey; the buildings are to be tall, the structures are to be sound, the stairs are to be winding, in the room sometimes there is to be a glow; the hats remain on the hat stands, the coats hang dead from the pegs, the
The ancient ships recall Columbus’ ships that came to begin the colonial era on the isle and destroyed the Caribbean primitive harmony between human beings and Mother Nature, which is a familiar motif in Kincaid’s texts. But that ‘ideal’ stillness and linearity do not overwhelm her. She reflects the whole universe with the cyclical nature that dominates everything and denies that stagnancy: “the earth spins on its axis, the axis is imaginary, the valleys correspond to the mountains, the mountains correspond to the sea, the sea correspond to the dry land, the dry land correspond to the snake whose limbs are now reduced”. Finally, she articulates herself by immersing into the space of the mystic sea and nature, ignoring the call of her old domestic life dominated by men and commands: “I saw a man, He was in a shroud, I sat in a rowboat, He whistles sweetly to me, I narrowed my eyes, He beckoned to me, Come now; I turned and rowed away, as if I didn’t know what I was doing” (39). The mother rows away in a boat, supposedly returning to the natural world where she really belongs. She ends up disappearing in the sea, becoming one with the eternal Caribbean nature, leaving her suffocating domestic life behind. As pointed out earlier, the “I” in this piece, the one that ultimately returns to where she really belongs, is the mother ‘rewritten’ by the girl, reflecting the latter’s power to conquer her, changing her back to the one the girl once adored.

In one of the most powerful pieces in the collection, “My Mother”, the protagonist reflects on her process of growing up in the shadow of her omnipotent mother. After ‘rewriting’ the mother in “The Letter from Home”, now she comes to rewrites herself through her life with the mother, absorbing her power of both destruction and regeneration.
Rebirth is implied in the mother’s shaking the girl out of her bosom and standing her under a tree, making possible her revival, “breathing again”. Images of death and decay are illustrated not only by the suffocating embrace of the mother that kills her but also the repentant tears of the daughter over wishing her mother dead, which is “poisonous”: “Between my mother and me now were the tears I had cried, and I gathered up some stones and banked them in so that they formed a small pond. The water in the pond was thick and black and poisonous, so that only unnameable invertebrates could live in it” (54). As a carnival figure, it is the mother that kills the girl but it is also she who has revived the girl. She is a powerful figure able to destroy but also able to regenerate. And under the mother’s influence, the girl not only is threatened of being suffocated but also, paradoxically, grows her own enormous energy, her own bosom “where, if necessary, I could rest my own head”.

Then she departs on a symbolic journey following her powerful mother, only to find out that the omnipotent power she desires always remains something beyond her reach, something she strives for but at the same time is frightened. She takes after her mother turning herself to a serpent, to heap “beautiful sighs,” only to find “I had grown big, but my mother was bigger, and that would always be so” (56). The reason of her trauma might be while the girl tries to define herself as a perfect but detached copy of her powerful mother, she fails to receive the source of feminine power that the mother manipulates. Only when she connects herself with the mother, when “as we walked along, our steps become one, and as we talked, our voices become one, and we were in complete union in every other way” (60) can she come into contact with the carnivalesque world of the mother and establish her autonomy.
Some critics have interpreted the second mother whom the girl finds after her trip away from her first mother as Kincaid’s grandmother: Rather than suffocating the girl, this grandmother - second mother is the one who nurtures her and gives a sense of identity. I think the girl’s acknowledgement of this woman as still her mother, not grandmother, is very significant: That is still her mother who she loves and fears, not another one. But that is the mother after the magical transformation of carnival, when the last thing left is to designate a successor figure – “the final stage of our evolution” (60). The mother is no longer in her struggle for renewal; she now has completely transformed herself to be a new carnival queen, and as a carnival queen at the end of carnival time she needs to crown another queen. The girl does not actively go away from her mother; rather, the mother actively pushes her away. The childhood house and the mother is then rediscovered, but in a new transformed dimension: it is the house of radical death and destruction, where “here, an apparently healthy young man suddenly dropped death; here a young woman defied her father and, while riding her bicycle to the forbidden lovers’ meeting place, fell down a precipice, remaining a cripple for the rest of a very long life” (60). As Bakhtin puts it, carnival turns life inside out as a way to exempt culture from “one-sided rhetorical seriousness, rationality, singleness of meaning and dogmatism” (RHW 143), and it also prevents its own reversed logic from becoming another dogmatism. Transformation begins with chaotic subversion but has to come to an end with the rebirth of a new identity. That is why the powerful mother’s initial embrace threatens the girl’s life but at last the girl finds herself with sudden inner growth “sitting in my mother’s enormous lap” (61).
THE GREAT CYCLE OF NATURE AND HUMAN EXISTENCE

Carnival subversion, as Bakhtin describes it, is directed against all official discourses that ignore or despise the natural grotesque body, restoring and celebrating the endless cycle of destruction and regeneration of Mother Nature that dominates the world and human existence. The crisis stirred in carnival time is obviously not really permanent, but it implies and accentuates the endless renascence of life. Many of Bakhtin’s images that describe the sense of renewal and becoming, such as ‘bad’ songs sung in ‘serious’ places and times, enormous and powerful female bodies, the phases of sun and moon, cycles of day and night, are incorporated into At the Bottom of the River’s set of canivalesque imagery.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of this anthology is the rhythm of Kincaid’s prose. The clearest and dominant sound in that space of silence is the African drum rhythm that penetrates the prose. Caribbean carnival music is mostly characterized by the incorporation of the African drum, which is featured by the pervasive pattern of call-and-response, interactions and participations, and which was considered by white slave-owners as “sacriligious”, “symbolized not only ‘uncivilised’ Africa, but also violent disorder and the work of the devil” (Cowley 6). In its particular carnival spirit, it disrupts the understanding and expectation of an universal aesthetic standard of musical harmony and melody (which is often identified with European one), and it revives the oral tradition of African music which reflects the rhythm of nature. From this perspective, the drum-like rhythm in Kincaid’s At the Bottom of the River means much more than “the rhythm of obeah magic” (Brancato, 27). The percussive rhythm which derives from African drum playing was translated into the rhythmic prose that incorporates the cyclical
nature of the world and human existence.

In many stories in this collection, we find the female protagonist depart into a mystic space constructed by dreamlike landscapes, a carnivalized world of suspended rules and principles, especially that of Western linear development. Every time she manages to move forward or make some progress, she finds herself returning to the first state: whenever she tries to separate herself from her mother, she finally ends up coming back to her side; whenever she tries to cast a question, she receives not an answer, but another question. The carnivalesque of night-time, dreams, and African spirituality attracts and repels all Western concepts of progress and linearity, common sense and rationality, to make possible symbolic contours. Through the collection, we find the girl moving from passively witnessing that great cycle to taking an active part in it, and more significantly, becoming the controlling element in that cycle.

“In the Night” opens with a peculiar description of night-time, which takes the girl to the second world behind the façade of daylight and rationality, the quietest and calmest moment of the night, where dreams become a seemingly eternal state:

In the night, way into the night, when the night isn’t divided like a sweet drink into little sips, when there is no just before midnight, midnight, or just after midnight, when the night is round in some places, flat in some places, and in some places like a deep hole, blue at the edge, black inside, the night-soil men come. (6)

Here the immeasurable night refuses the clock of the Western civilized world which rationally divides it into potions, “just before midnight, midnight, or just after midnight”. The failure of clock-time mechanism brings us back to the natural time of Caribbean natural surroundings. More than that, official time here is not to be escaped but to be
condensed, and space here is not to be exceeded but to be melted to make a solid chronotope without boundaries, where the sources of feminine powers come into control.

The world dominated by darkness is introduced to the girl by a particularly carnivalesque figure: the night-soil man, who is, in carnival repertoire of symbols, has much to do with the great cycle of nature and agricultural mythology. Let us now return to one of Bakhtin’s observations of carnival’s bodily expression in culture, the “ambivalent image of excrement”:

Excrement is […] linked to the generating force and to fertility, […] conceived as something intermediate between earth and body, as something relating the one to the other. It is also an intermediate between the living body and the dead disintegrating matter that is being transformed into earth, into manure” (RHW 175).

Excrement thus has a special significance in the process of carnivalization of official reality: it takes the so-called high, serious and ‘clean’ cultural expressions back to the endless cycle of decay and renewal, ending and re-beginning. It takes everything back to the enormous cyclical renascence of nature’s grotesque female body: it fertilizes the earth, allowing new things to grow. In this light, we can read Kincaid’s night-soil man as a masculine presence that has denied the normative male authority of human society to be absorbed into the feminine world of nature and its endless cycle. He attends to the cosmic movement of decomposition and re-procreation “as something intermediate between earth and body, as something relating the one to the other”. That is what makes the night-soil man so intimate and close to the powerful women and darkness in the story: he comes when the night “isn’t divided like a sweet drink into little sips” (6), he is able to see “a bird walking in trees” which is in fact a woman seeking revenge. In the girl’s
dreamy imagination about a night-soil man who is someone’s handsome, nice, kind and loving father, she describes him as a gentle and partly feminine one who “gives a pat and not a kick” whenever he passes by a dog, who “would like to wear pink shirts and pink pants but knows that this color isn’t very becoming to a man, so instead he wears navy blue and brown, colors he does not like at all” (9). His break of normative masculinity turns into a pride. He wins the affection of many women, implying that he immerses himself into the feminine world dominated by women: “I love my father the night-soil man. My mother loves my father the night-soil man. Everybody loves him and waves to him whenever they see him. He is very handsome, you know, and I have seen women look at him twice” (10). All of those visions, paradoxically, are constructed in the girl’s dreamlike state, as she relates “no one has ever said to me” (9), which means they are in fact nonexistent. Here we find a visible clash between two realities: the blurred official, rational one described by only seven words in a negative sentence (“no one has ever said to me”), and a detailed unofficial, irrational one with a lot of images and affections. The boundary between what is real and what is not real has been erased, allowing intrusions from the sphere of the unregulated to that of the regulated, from the sphere of fantasy into that of society.

The carnivalesque power of the silent nighttime world is thus not a passive negation of the logic dominating the sounding daytime world. By containing all movements and activities that take place in daytime but in an estranged order, it undermines the daytime world by mocking it and re-connecting it to the lively cycle of life and female body, the carnivalesque upside down. In that space dominated by feminine darkness, silence and infinitude, whereas all sounds made by men are real ones,
made by real actions, (“the sound of a radio in the distance – a fisherman listening to merengue music”, “the sound of a man groaning in his sleep”, “the sound of the man stabbing the woman”, “the sound of Mr. Straffee, the undertaker, taking her body away”), all sounds made by women are unreal ones that could be heard only with imagination (“the sound of a woman disgusting at the man groaning”, “the sound of her blood as it hits the floor”, “the sound of her spirit back from the dead, looking at the man who used to groan”, “the sound of a woman writing a letter”, “the sound of her head aching” (7)).

Just like female bodies, the second reality created by women is permeated by endless cyclical movements, returning and renewal: the bird walking in trees turns itself to a woman, and the woman removes her skin to renew herself; another woman, stabbed by a man, manages to return after death to look at the man. But all male figures are at a standstill and stagnancy, as if their appearance is denied by the endless cycle of night. The man who has stabbed the woman, rather than putting an end to her life, makes his own life metaphorically end as she turns back from death looking at his permanent immobility, “running a fever forever”. Mr. Gishard, rather than being able to remove his skin to renew himself like the woman in trees, still wears “the nice white suit, which is as fresh as the day he was buried in it” (7) and still holds “a glass full of rum in his hand shortly before he died” (8).

So entering the dreamlike world of nighttime visions and hallucinations, the reader witnesses a strange switch from the official reality dominated by male authority and linear time, to the unofficial reality permeated by female magical powers and cyclical time. That is a Bakhtinian carnivalized world in which “conventional notions of time and space – notions associated with modernity – have given way to a darkness that has
engulfed enlightenment” (Edward 20). While male figures are weak and impotent even when they try to be in control (except the night-soil man who lends himself to the destructive and regenerative feminine power of darkness), female figures possess magical strength to renew and turn back everything. While the men function in linear time and end up static, standstill, unable to take part in the great transformative cycle of nature, the destructive and regenerative power that derives from that transformative cycle of nature belongs to the women – the one who removes her skin and “is on her way to drink the blood of her secret enemy” (6), the one who returns from death looking at the man who has killed her, the one who “removes my wet nightgown, removes my wet sheets from my bed” (8). The girl’s mother in that world of darkness owns a magical ability to transform everything, changing not only herself but also the whole world. She becomes a part of that mystic world of night, a “jablesse” that comes from “the lights in the mountains” (8).

Facing that immense, mystic world, the girl with her yet weak, awkward feminine power desires to penetrate the night but finds herself impotent. Thus she desires the guidance of a ‘great’ woman to lead her to that world. She projects that desire into the dream of marrying a “red-skin woman with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes, who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them” (11). That woman will lead her into the carnivalesque boundless space where there are only them with the sea, and the carnivalesque boundless time with stories that begin “Before you were born”. With that woman as the connection between herself and the mystic night chronotope, the girl finds perfect happiness of permanent childhood: “I will marry a woman like this, and every night, every night, I will be completely happy” (12)
Later in *At the Bottom of the River*, we find the girl turning from a passive witness into an active element in the great cycle of nature. “What I Have Been Doing Lately” offers the adventures of a young female narrator walking through an ever-changing and dreamlike landscape in endless renascences. Following the call of the dream world through the sound of the doorbell, the girl leaves her safe and closed domestic domain, immersing herself into the Caribbean landscapes which are represented as an overwhelmingly powerful and constantly transformative existence. It acts as a substitute for her old social existence represented by her closed house. The structure of the story reinforces the girl’s cyclical journey, starting, repeating and ending with the door bell ringing.

I suggest that this unique story could be read as the adolescent self’s journey into the female body of Mother Nature, experiencing her endless powerful renascences. At first, she tries to make her way straight by “walking north” and “set[ting] out on a path that stretched out straight ahead” (40-1), but the more she goes on, the more she finds herself absorbed into the endless cycle of natural surroundings where everything always moves on and comes back, everything that used to be straight and masculine suddenly forms feminine shapes, colors, and lines: “I turned around to see what I had left behind me but nothing was familiar. Instead of straight path, I saw hills. Instead of the boy with his ball, I saw tall flowering trees” (41). At first she tries to measure the natural time by sense of clock-time, saying “If the sun went out, it would be eight minutes before I would know it” (43), but then she loses that sense of time, walking “for I don’t know how long” (44). The monkey which at first she just passively sees and which gives no responses to her glance, turns to be an active element of that cyclical nature: it throws stones back at
the girl. In that world of cyclical movements, the only course of time is the natural time of day and night: “I only knew that I passed through days and nights, I only knew that I passed through rain and shine, light and darkness” (42).

The body of water that the girl tries to go across and the deep dark hole into which the girl plunges herself could be read as symbols of female sexuality that she is exploring. Together with the process of immersing herself into Mother Nature’s great body, she discovers her own female body, and simultaneously finds in it an inexhaustible feminine power of returning and regenerating everything: she actively reverses her way down into the hole, she effectively returns to her old bed when she wants to come back. Vacillating between the sky and the mud, between desires of authority and passive submission, between closeness and distance, the girl experiences analogous cycles to that of Mother Nature’s destruction and rebirth, and comes to unify herself with that great mother.

Seeing a figure coming toward her, the girl “wasn’t frightened because I was sure it was my mother”, and then, recognizing that it is not her mother, she still “wasn’t frightened because I could see that it was a woman” (42). One of Bakhtin’s remarks upon medieval carnival is that it diminishes the concept of individuality in favor of the species, asserting the power of the communal body and the endless life cycle that transcends the individual body. So the protagonist neither remembers, nor gives the woman she meets a name. She is simply a representative of natural femininity, not an individual, and to that feminine existence the girl relates “what I have been doing lately”, making possible her symbolic rebirth.

In her reading of At the Bottom of the River, D. Simmons remarks that this story
reflects the departure leaving childhood into adulthood of the adolescent self: “You cannot really go home again however powerfully you may be drawn back” (88).

Supposing that this represents the departure from home, I would suggest that the adolescent self also leaves her old home behind to discover a totally new home – that is, a true home that makes her old home only a fake one. Thus the journey leaving that old home is in fact the journey returning to her true home. In contrast with European notions of linear progress, the girl’s journey shows a more complex reality. Her journey through Mother Nature’s body and womb becomes the journey of destruction and revival: she is reborn after every cycle; the new self of hers seems to be a simple reflection of the old, but it is a transformed one. She no longer sees or experiences things as she used to. She is a new identity born in a new world of subversion and regeneration.
Chapter III
“A HOUSE? WHY LIVE IN A HOUSE?”:
THE POLITICS OF SPACE IN ANNIE JOHN

A universal process of psychological development which may occur with every girl in her puberty, Annie John’s struggle for genuine independence as an autonomous individual is also an allegory, implying a larger struggle for the re-emergence of lower cultural strata and the formation of a distinct culture in the context of the colonial Antigua.

Annie John, a native girl in Antigua, spends her blissful childhood worshipping her wise and beautiful mother; but then that adoration sours when she enters puberty and her mother tries to make her a ‘good’ colonial lady. When Annie starts school, she becomes the brightest student in the class and the most rambunctious one when she is with her friends. She befriends a classmate named Gwen and a dirty tomboy called the Red Girl. After the harmony with her mother is finally broken, Annie suffers a mental breakdown, which eventually is cured with African obeah by her grandmother, Ma Chess. And the end, she decides to leave all she has known and loved in Antigua for a nursing school in England.

Much has been written about the central themes in Annie John, either in psychological or postcolonial terms: the broken unity between mother and daughter and the formation of a postcolonial self in the once-colonized Caribbean. Ferguson (1994) investigates the protagonist’s struggle for self-determination under the colonial oppression represented by the mother’s authority. Edwards (2007), with some insights
concerning Kincaid’s innovation of traditional bildungsroman, similarly reads the mother-daughter power struggle as a metaphor of the connection between the imperialist mother country and “the infantilized state of the colonized nation” (51). Simmons (1994) focuses on the sense of loss and betrayal, seeing the mother’s internalization of two world-views and preference toward European tradition as leading to the rupture of the mother-daughter harmony. Some later scholarship holds similar view that the contradictory mother is where the two traditions intertwine: Brancato (2004) sees in the mother the intersection between African and Western worlds, which perplexes her daughter in her search for self-discovery in the mother’s shadow.

I argue that the mother’s internalization of both European and African heritages, as remarked by Simmons, could be read in larger background of the inner cultural tensions in the postcolonial Caribbean. The postcolonial negotiation between two internalized traditions is reflected in Annie’s long and bitter struggles through adolescence as she confronts maternal expectations that she grows up to be a “young lady” by colonial standards, and at the same time, she also breaks those standards in favour of another aesthetics that she also learns from her mother.

This chapter explores Kincaid’s spatial metaphors in Annie John, which are centralized upon the strategic confrontation between the two value systems, the two aesthetics established by colonialism and African traditions. Her carnivalesque politics of space is manifested by literary representations of the symbolic Home and Yard. It shows how notions of boundedness and boundlessness are central to Kincaid’s spatial configuration of her Caribbean region. More specifically, I argue that during her struggles for autonomy Annie fluctuates between two spaces: one closed, isolated, confined within
The four walls of Home; and one open, linked to the universe, Caribbean nature and the
Caribbean sea. These two spaces symbolize the two selves that contribute to the
Caribbean subject’s fragmented identity: the social self, defined by colonial relationships
and the spiritual self, defined by African cultural heritage.

The four-walls-confined Home, to a woman, presents family life with her husband
and children, which is to the colonial order the ‘proper’ place that a woman is supposed
to be in as a voluntary subaltern subject to a protective husband. In the story, Annie and
her mother live in a house that her father “built with his own hands” (3). Contrastively,
the most significant meaning of Yard is that it opens into the immense, immortal world of
the sea and the sky as well as into ongoing history, in contrast with the temporally and
spatially bounded world of Home. It gives women alternative existence, as part of the
natural and spiritual world where the dominating and controlling power belongs to them.
Annie John’s childhood and adolescence is the process of breaking the Home to reach
larger and larger spaces, breaking the colonial models to restore Caribbean resistive ones.

THE MOTHER’S SPACES OF HOME AND YARD

One of Bakhtin’s most important notes on medieval carnival is that it reflects the
unfinalizedness of society and human life. To the logic of carnival and the grotesque
body, death is not a fearful destruction but a generative one, able to give birth to a new
body; people in carnival time and carnivalesque literature thus celebrate the “cheerful
death” of individuals in favor of the revival of the species. That death “not only coincides
with a high value placed on life and with a responsibility to fight to the end for this life –
but it is in itself an expression of this high evaluation, an expression of the life force that eternally triumphs over any death” (DI 198). Death is thus central to the logic of carnival – the festival celebrating life.

The opening lines of the first chapter “Figures in the Distance” introduce the protagonist’s concern of death: “For a short while during the year I was ten, I thought only people I did not know died” (3). A remarkable detail is that Annie discovers this mystic world of death from the yard of the suburban house her family is temporarily living in, while waiting for their house in town being repaired.

From our yard, I could see the cemetery. I did not know it was the cemetery until one day when I said to my mother that sometimes in the evening, while feeding the pig, I could see various small, sticklike figures, some dressed in black, some dressed in white, bobbing up and down in the distance. I noticed, too, that sometimes the black and white sticklike figures appeared in the morning. My mother said it was probably a child being buried, since children were always buried in the morning. Until then, I had not known that children died (4).

Whereas the ritual is hold in the open space (“in the distance”), the Home is closed to the ongoing history of death and rebirth. Inside the house is a space permeated with sense of loss and fear, and outside space (which is linked to the yard) is the ceremonies held to advert the fear. The Home functions as an isolated, separated and closed space from the outside, mysterious world of death:

Sometimes they [the dead] 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 join them. (4)

Annie comes to simultaneously fear and admire her mother with her seemingly
omnipotent power to penetrate the world of death, a wise goddess who understands all the mysteries of the cosmos. She tells us about her mother’s knowledge and in the same time about how that knowledge is passed from her mother to herself: “My mother said that it was probably a child being buried”, “my mother knew of many people who had died in such a way” (4). She always talks about her mother in immense adoration, as the mother is the source of all her knowledge about the outside world. Much more than a knowledge transmitter, the mother also takes an active part in the rituals for the dead, which is indicative of the ultimate connection between women and the supernatural forces, of which dead people’s spirits act as an active component.

Thus Annie’s being haunted by death does not only derive from the fact that it foreshadows “the death of childhood and the death of spirit” (Edwards, 44). Annie’s traumatic experience of receiving her mother’s knowledge of death comes at two levels: Firstly, the mother and her knowledge introduce her to another world of supernatural forces, where nothing is stable, where “we never could tell when they [dead people] might show up again” (4), a world which she has not known since it is totally strange to her closed world of Home, and which she both fears and is attracted to at the same time. Therefore while she decides not to let her mother caress her after her hands have touched a dead girl, Annie grows more and more obsessively longing to see a dead person. Afraid as she is of the dead, she patiently waits for the funerals to come by her yard every day, and even becomes disappointed when there is no funeral at all or it comes late:

After I found out about the cemetery, I would stand in my yard and wait for a funeral to come. Some days, there were no funerals. “No one died,” I would say to my mother. Some days, just as I was about to give up and go inside, I would see the small specks appear. “What made them so late?” I would ask my mother. (5)
The mother becomes a carnivalesque figure in the sense that she is highly ambivalent in her daughter’s eyes: both a nurturing and life-affirming mother, and a bridge leading her to the world of death. The carnivalesque in her soon permeates her daughter’s experience of social connection with her friends at school. Telling each other about deaths they know becomes a pleasure, and one’s connection with a dead person becomes a pride. Annie opens the door connecting two worlds, bringing eternity to children’s everyday conversation and bringing the unbounded space of death and spiritual rituals to the bounded space of her home and school. She secretly attends funerals behind her parents’ backs, which to Brancato indicates her first step to independence: “She begins to go to funerals, though without her parents’ permission, behavior that indicates her pull toward autonomy, and constitutes the first expression of the loss of childhood innocence to be replaced by adult duplicity” (61). It also indicates Annie’s first step following her mother to attend to the world of spirits, escaping the safe and stable world of the Home to contact with the mysteries of the spatially and temporally unbounded space. This contradiction reflects Annie’s second level of traumatic experience: to follow her mother into the world of death, Annie has to escape her own shadow.

In Annie’s eyes, the mother of her old days owns a powerful energy to penetrate and dominate all spaces: “I would sit in a corner of our yard and watch her. She never stood still. Her powerful legs carried her from one part of the yard to the other, and in and out of the house […] It was in such a paradise that I lived” (25). Those spaces also include the spaces of natural landscapes and supernatural forces. Over time, Annie’s childhood paradise where her mother dominates all spaces is lost with her mother’s gradually limiting herself in the domestic space of Home, and the formation of Annie’s
‘secret’ spaces that her mother fails to penetrate.

In their days of harmony, Annie and her mother bathe together with obeah ceremonies by which the mother protects her from the evil spells of the women with whom her father has had illegitimate children. Bathing has a magical power of transformation in *Annie John*, because, I suggest, it is a reduced image of the sea. To bathe is to temporarily return to the sea, the unbounded space dominated by feminine powers.

I mentioned in a previous chapter the sacred connection between Caribbean women with the power of nature and especially with the sea. This is clearly represented in Annie’s first essay at school in which Annie recalls how she and her mother used to bathe in the sea, naked like “sea mammals”. Both their nakedness and the comparison of Annie and her mother to “sea mammals” suggest their close contact and unification with the sea. Here on the Rat Island the mother entirely escapes the domestic space built by her husband to return to where she really belongs to: “When she plunged into the sea water, it was as if she had always lived there” (42). Unable to swim despite her mother’s efforts to get her swimming, Annie goes into the sea on her mother’s back, her arms clasping around her mother’s neck. At this position she feels the source of her mother’s power and energy – the magical power of the sea contained in her – which Annie desires to absorb and to be part of: “I would place my ear against her neck, and it was as if I were listening to a giant shell, for all the sounds around me – the sea, the wind, the birds screeching – would seem as if they came from inside her, the way the sounds of the sea are in a seashell” (43). It is through her mother that Annie comes into contact with the sea and finds her ‘great’ feminine power in the boundless space of Caribbean nature. And
thus, the mother is a protective presence not only in the sense that she makes her daughter safe, but also in the sense that she acts as her daughter’s conduit to the inexhaustible source of nature’s feminine power. As D. Simmons remarks, “By the end of Annie John, we come to understand that the magical, transformative, and curative powers attributed to the obeah woman only serve as a metaphor for the power of a woman who knows herself to be a part of the natural world and the vessel of its fertility, who keeps that connection by continually immersing herself in the natural element, and who is able to use her power bath and restore one whose own connection has been broken” (39).

As Annie lies watching her mother swimming from the shore, the blissful moment is disrupted by “three ships going by”, causing her to lose sight of her mother, and when she finds herself all alone “a huge black space then opened up in front of me and I fell inside it” (43). This naturally implies colonial intrusion that comes with Columbus’ ships and destroys the peace and bliss of the pre-colonial Caribbean, but it also foreshadows the break of the holy unity between the female self and the sea caused by the invasion of colonialism. Losing her ‘great’ mother, the only connection that links her with the Caribbean sea, Annie falls into “a huge black space” of no longer knowing where she is, which devastates her. When Annie wakes up, she finds herself in the reality of her bounded space of Home and greeted by her mother’s concern of her “eating certain kinds of fruit in an unripe state just before going to bed” (45). But in her essay she tries to lengthen the logic of her dream into that reality by leaving her ‘normal’ mother’s domestic concern out and fancying her ‘great’, beneficent mother – the incarnation of the sea – embracing her and saying she will never leave her.

Annie loves to listen to her mother’s stories of her past, because through those
stories and through objects in her mother’s trunk she gets a sense of who she will become and desires to become. Though kept in Annie’s house, the trunk contains stories that happened outside the house, the stories about a ‘great’ mother who has broken out of the bounded space of her father’s Home to escape to the sea. Annie’s rebellious self grows up in the shadow of that rebellious self of the mother: as a embryo she kicks so much that her mother’s hand is not steady enough to embroider her first chemise properly, as a young girl she bites another child of her age, and all keepsakes of that ‘improper’ self are kept lovingly by her mother in her trunk.

When the mother, to Annie’s fright, suddenly refuses her daughter’s requests for matching dresses (“It’s time you have your own dresses. You just cannot go around the rest of your life looking like a little me” (26)) and especially for the ritual-like storytelling of her past (“You and I don’t have time for that any more” (27)), Annie is devastated by losing the only norm for her identity formation. Over time, the mother develops a Janus face: a ‘great’ self that Annie worships and a ‘bad’ self that she disdains and hates. Until this moment, Annie’s life perfectly takes after her mother’s ‘unofficial’ life. Now by rejecting Annie, she is rejecting that ‘unofficial’ self in favor of a foreign ideal womanhood, which is confined within four walls of the Home. More than that, she tries to direct her daughter to a conventional future limited in a similar Home, which is unimaginable to the little Annie:

She took to pointing out that one day I would have my own house and I might want it to be a different house from the one she kept. Once, when showing me a way to store linen, she patted the folded sheets in place and said, “Of course, in your own house you might choose another way” (29)
Although the mother suggests that Annie might want to decorate her own house or store her own linen differently from her way, she indirectly expresses her hope that her daughter will grow up and live in a normal house built by her husband, just like the mother herself now – in other words, to be limited in a Home, a conventionally bounded space for colonial womanhood. What frightens Annie thus is not only losing her beloved mother, but also being aware of the vision of losing herself by replicating her mother’s life. In one of her interviews, Kincaid expresses her regret over the decline of the ‘great’ civilization her mother used to represent but failed to maintain:

My mother is a very, very great woman, but her position, history, success, plus her own limitations conspired to keep her where you see her now. Within all of that is a person who is an empire unto herself. I often think of her as a civilization in its decline. […] She had never done anything other than have me and three other children. (“From Antigua”, 143)

What Kincaid regrets, I suggest, is the great mother representing the larger world of African traditions dominated by female powers where she is free to be herself, rather than the domestic space with “me and three other children”. Annie John is the novel that manifests most clearly that painful regret.

When Annie’s mother refuses to let her wear clothes made from the same fabric as hers, saying, “You cannot spend your whole life looking like a little me” (26), a question emerges: why Annie cannot be a little copy of her mother, the thing every mother in the world naturally desires. One possibility is that, leaving her home in Dominica to enter a greater space but ending up a docile wife within the four walls of another home, Annie’s mother must have been aware that a youth like hers is not appropriate for her daughter’s imitation, especially when she begins her puberty. That is
why the mother, rather than keeping Annie at her side and teaching Annie her manners on her own, instead sends her to manner classes with the hope that she will grow up a ‘proper’ colonial middle-class woman, who will lead her life from the start within the closed Home like the mother herself at the present.

As Annie rushes home from Sunday school to show her mother a certificate of merit, hoping to “reconquer my mother – a chance for her to smile on me again”, she catches her parents in bed together, and her mother’s hand making small circles on her father’s back:

It went around and around in the same circular motion, and I looked at it as if I would never see anything else in my life again. If I were to forget everything else in the world, I could not forget her hands as it looked then. (30-1)

The thing that dazzles Annie is, I think, the vision of her mother together with her father, in the life caged in the domestic space of Home. Annie’s intense reaction naturally derives from jealousy as she finds her mother no longer belongs to her exclusively, but it also derives from the fact that Annie, for the first time, discovers that her mother is only a mediocre family woman. Her great mother, who should have belonged to another, larger world – the spiritual world of supernatural forces or the boundless world of the Caribbean sea – is found to be a wholly normal woman who is a wife and lover to a normal man in a normal household. And that is what Annie calls betrayal. From that moment, the mother is to Annie no longer a great, perfect figure to stare at with admiration and adoration, now she looks “small and funny” (31).

And also from that moment the mother detaches herself from her old world and becomes a loose combination of two totally different selves, a figure full of
contradictions. She prohibits Annie from playing marbles but is the one to give Annie her first marbles; she urges Annie to be a docile “Little Miss” but all of Annie’s patterns of rebellion are learnt from her attitudes: her disgusting face with “the corner of her mouth turned down in disapproval” (28) is repeated by her daughter in disapproval of her (51). Her ironic remark upon her own father’s sickness “The Great Man No Longer Can Just Get Up And Go” is repeated by her daughter against the picture of Columbus in chains. Her “warm and soft and treacherous” (70) voice which she uses to seduce Annie to reveal where she hides her marbles is repeated by her daughter to deceive her. And above all, her decision to leave Dominica, placing the sea between her family and herself is repeated by her daughter to leave Antigua. As I mentioned earlier, this is the evidence of how Annie is constructed as a culturally hybrid subject, exposing the underlying cultural tensions and contradictions. However, there also exists a fundamental principle in Annie’s choice in replicating her mother’s voice and actions: The mother’s rebellious actions against the suffocating order of patriarchal system are repeated by Annie against the larger order of colonial system and culture. But the mother’s ‘proper’ maternal behaviors according to the colonial value system are repeated by Annie against herself. In other words, as the ‘great’ spiritual self of African traditions, the mother is replicated to be lengthened, but as the ‘mediocre’ social self of the colonial system, she is replicated to be mocked and disapproved. Though Annie can only rebel against her mother by repeating what she has done, she consciously chooses what to replicate and to replicate against what.

The carnivalesque politics of space is clearly at work here: Whereas grotesque bodies free themselves from limitations and confinements to contact with the outer world
and other bodies, the mother, step by step, canonizes and de-carnivalizes herself by internalizing the closed space of Home. While the mother moves from the closed, stable space of Home to the open, unbound space of Sea, but ends up returning to another Home, Annie breaks that new Home, plunges herself to the outside world as a symbolic way to ‘rebear’ and ‘renew’ her mother.

Bakhtin once remarks that in carnival time, the “lower stratum” of the social body is released and comes into contact with the world. Of all the features of the human face and human body, those which allow openings and contacts with the outside world, such as the nose, the mouth, the bowel and the genital organs, will play the leading role in the grotesque, carnivalesque image of the body. While her mother tries to limit Annie’s body within the ‘high’ British standards of decency by sending her to manners and piano classes, she “could not resist making farting-like noises each time I have to practice a curtsy” and is “unable to resist eating from the bowl of plums she had placed on the piano purely for decoration” (28). In the logic of the grotesque, rather than surrender her bodily functions of farting and eating and let her body be confined within standard curtsies or piano playing position, Annie invades the ‘high’ space of manner and piano classes with her ‘low’ bodily functions, but insists on telling her mother that those rebellious manners of hers “need no improvement” (28).

Thus Annie John can be read as Annie’s process of breaking out of the closed space of Home to immerse into the outside space where there is no wall defining the limitations of the self. Annie’s troubled relationship with her mother results from the latter’s intention to cage Annie in another Home like the one she herself is defined in, rather than letting the girl’s self grow beyond those walls, breaking them to attain broader
space. Thus Annie’s desire of living in Belgium, which simply means escaping Home, would mean the desire of survival.

Annie’s illness begins in the season of drought and ends with the changed, stretched shape of the sea after the long rain. In her dream, she goes to the sea in a terrible thirst and drinks the whole sea, making herself grow so big:

I dreamed then that I was walking through warm air filled with soot, heading toward the sea. When I got there, I started to drink in the sea in huge great gulps, because I was so thirsty. I drank and drank until all that was left was the bare dry seabed. All the water from the sea filled me up, from my toes to my head, and I swelled up very big. But then little cracks began to appear in me and the water started to leak out – first in just little seeps and trickles coming out of my seams, then with a loud roar as I burst open. The water ran back and made up the sea again, and again I was walking through the warm soot – only this time wet and in tatters and not going anywhere in particular (112).

Annie heads to the open, boundless space of the Caribbean sea in her subconscious desires to make herself a part of it and define herself in its inexhaustible energy of love and nurture, but fails to find herself in an absolute unity with it – the harmony she has experienced with the presence of her omnipotent mother who carries Annie on her back, arms clasped around her neck. Instead, Annie desperately drinks the sea to make it a part of her, but she is not big enough for it. Without her mother, the sea refuses Annie, leaving her alone with the falling warm soot with no way out.

Annie finally recovers from her illness with another omnipotent mother’s leading to the sea. Her maternal grandmother, Ma Chess, re-mothering her with loving care, “bathed me and changed my clothes and sheets and did all the other things that my mother used to do” (126), reawakes the maternal harmony Annie had with her mother.
And more importantly, she brings the eternal outside world into Annie’s home, so that Annie “grew to count on her smells and the sound her breath made as it went in and out of her body” (125). Those smells she gets from “[taking] a bath, once a month or so, in water in which things animals and vegetable had been boiled for a long time. Before she took this bath, she first swam in the sea” (123-4). Bringing back to life the pre-oedipal and pre-colonial world, Ma Chess opens Annie’s space to the boundless world of obeah and the sea. An incarnation of the eternal world outside, Ma Chess rejects the normative confinement of the bounded Home, questioning her son-in-law about his job of building houses: “A house? Why live in a house? All you need is a nice hole in the ground, so you can come and go as you please” (126).

After her illness, Annie changes into a totally new subject. Together with her new height which towers over her tall mother, she acquires a new sense of self that no longer fits into the narrow reality she is now living in. Annie comes to realize that her house is too small for her now, acknowledging the suffocating presence of her own home that leaves no room for her new identity as an autonomous adult:

The house we live in my father built with his own hands. The bed I am lying in my father built with his own hands. […] 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. When I look at things in a certain way, I suppose I should say that the two of them made me with their own hands (132-133)

She now feels the need to break the house in order get enough space to articulate her new, ‘big’ self. That is why leaving is the only way to survive. At the end of *At the Bottom of the River*, we have seen Kincaid’s protagonist come to self-recovery as she recognizes that the big new-born self of her cannot be defined in any bounded space: “I saw my skin,
and it was red. It was the red of flames when a fire is properly fed, the red of flames when a fire burns alone in a darkened place, and not the red of flames when a fire is burning in a cozy room” (BR 79). However, in *Annie John*, the last words of farewell of Annie’s mother come as an obsession: “It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home” (147). This might be a threat to Annie’s hard-earned freedom and independence: she might never be able to escape the Home.

**YOUNG GIRLS AND MODELS OF LIVING SPACE**

Many critics consider Annie’s love for Gwen as deriving from the fact that she finds in Gwen everything her mother has and approves. However, a more close reading will reveal that Annie has never loved Gwen only for her neatness, orderliness, or in other words, for her colonial femininity, but rather, the ‘Africanness’, the grotesque femininity in her. The first time meeting Gwen, she stares “at the back of a shrubby-haired girl seated in the front row” (37) who is Gwen. And when their relationship grows closer, she worships her “small, flattish nose; lips the shape of a saucer broken evenly in two; wide, high cheekbones, ears pinned back closed against her head” (47). Whereas adoring Gwen’s ‘grotesqueness’, Annie despises Hilarene, “a disgusting model of good behavior and keen attention to scholarship” (73), which is exactly what her mother will approve. After a while befriending Gwen, Annie grows more and more bored with “the fresh pressedness of her uniform, the cleanness of her neck, the neatness of her just combed plaits” (59). The love between Annie and Gwen is soon broken when Annie realizes
Gwen’s ‘disguise’ as a good example of colonial femininity and denial of what she has as a Caribbean ‘primitive’ girl. Annie’s love with the Red Girl is exactly a superior substitute for that loss: in the Red Girl, that grotesque ‘Africanness’ is freely expressed without any disguise.

Annie and Gwen’s relationship is often read as a compensation Annie wants to gain for her loss of maternal love and a possible return to her pre-Oedipal bliss, which has fallen apart. That is true at the level that Gwen takes the role of sharing with Annie all of her secrets and dreams, what Annie used to tell her mother: “As we walked together, we told each other things we had judged most private and secret” (48). But just because Annie’s fantasy of eternal union with Gwen is constructed as a substitute for her maternal harmony, a prolonged version of the Home the mother shares with her, Annie soon becomes disappointed with that ‘mediocre’ Gwen: “I said that I could not wait for us to grow up so that we could live in a house of our own. I had already picked out the house. It was a gray one, with many rooms, and it was in the lane where all the houses had high, well-trimmed hedges” (51). That is an ordered domestic space, with high and well-trimmed hedges limiting the female subject within the life of a colonial ‘good’ wife and mother.

I have remarked earlier that whenever Annie repeats her mother’s ‘proper’ attitude according to colonial social standards, it becomes a mockery and parody permeated by pain and disdain. This episode is not an exception: Annie’s vision of her future with Gwen in a bounded, tidy Home, though its aspires to many aspects of the conventional Home her mother advocates, is ironically a Home she shares with another girl rather than a man. Even more significant is that Annie takes the role of the husband,
the one who “picks out the house” just like her father, who has built the house
imprisoning her mother in her domestic life. Turning upside down her mother's
expectation of an ordered domestic space in which Annie will be a docile wife, Annie
successfully creates another ordered domestic space in which she makes another woman
her ‘docile wife’.

However, the Home with Gwen is still a Home, and that is why this love is soon
broken. Gwen’s suggestion that Annie marries her brother marks the breaking point of
their friendship:

Suddenly I heard these words come out of Gwen's mouth: “I think it would be so nice if you
married Rowan. Then, you see, that way we could be together always”.

I was brought back to the present, and I stopped and stood still for a moment; then my mouth fell
open and my whole self started to tremble. [...] I felt so alone; the last person left on earth couldn’t
feel more alone than I. I looked at Gwen. Could this really be Gwen? It was Gwen. The same
person I had always known. Everything was in place. But at the same time something terrible had
happened, and I couldn’t tell what it was. (92-93)

Marrying Gwen’s brother naturally suggests a normal Home, similar to the one Annie’s
mother is sharing with her father. Gwen turns out to be mediocre, just as any other girl,
just because she thinks of Annie as the kind of girl who will make a docile wife to a
normal man. Annie is most alone at this moment, when the friend who shares with her the
secret rebellious future betrays her with that normative and conventional vision of family
life. That is why “how small she now looked in my eyes: a bundle of who said what and
who did what” (92). On leaving Antigua and learning about Gwen’s pending marriage,
Annie thinks “it was as if she was showing me a high point from which she was going to
jump and hoped to land in one piece on her feet” (137). It has become clear that Annie’s
scornful reaction does not derive from jealousy, but from disappointment since she used to believe that Gwen shares with her the disdain toward normative domestic life. Now she foresees her once beloved Gwen’s death in marriage, just like how the ‘great’ part of her mother has died in her bounded space of Home.

Whereas with Gwen, Annie constructs a relationship based upon mimicry and mockery of the normative Home, Annie’s relationship with the Red Girl lies beyond all conventions dominating that domestic space: the Red Girl climbs trees and plays marbles, which suggests her denial of all colonial norms of femininity; she wears dirty clothes and does not bathe or brush her teeth regularly, which makes clear her denial of ordinary norms of hygiene; she does not go to Sunday school, which manifests her refusal to conform to colonial belief and religion; and above all, she does not even have a proper name, which implies her existence outside all colonial documents and records. She lives with a mother who never minds her dirtiness, smelliness and untidiness, which is squarely opposed to the order and discipline of the household which Annie’s mother lives in and wants her daughter to take after. Annie previously describes her childhood as a paradise: “It was in such a paradise that I lived” (25); and now she finds the Red Girl’s world also a paradise: “What a heaven she lives in!” (58) The similarity between the two ‘paradises’ might be the suspense and break of all colonial regulations, principles and limitations. To use Bakhtin’s words, the Red Girl is a grotesque presence with its poetics of excess. The glue that connects the two girls is their common desire to break all suffocating rules and principles that seek to define themselves. Occupying a marginalized space and denying all ‘central’ social conventions, the Red Girl offers Annie a possible path leading her back to the mysterious space beyond the bounded one of her school and
household, the space she once knew with her mother’s wisdom and power in their days of harmony. In Lucy, Lucy’s close friendship with the street girl Peggy derives from Lucy’s not only seeing her as a good friend but also better than any boy she meets; similarly, Annie finds the Red Girl “better than any boy” (56). Annie’s relationship with the Red Girl and Lucy’s with Peggy are thus not compensation for their lost Homes, but the female self’s symbolic return to the lost harmony with the ‘unruly’, unbounded nature/street.

With the Red Girl’s company, Annie never thinks of living in a bounded Home. It is not by accident that Annie and Gwen develop their friendship on their daily walk to the colonial school or back to their ordered homes, while Annie and the Red Girl, upon their first meeting, walk to the old lighthouse on top of a hill where they are forbidden to play and “stood on the balcony and looked out toward the sea” (59). Just like Annie, arms around her mother’s neck, used to be taken into the sea and turned into “sea mammals”, now Annie “marched boldly up behind the Red Girl as if at the top were my own room, with all my familiar comforts waiting for me”. They return to the space where they belong; and, in that familiar unbounded space between the sky and the sea, they metaphorically turn themselves into “giants”: “We could see some boats coming and going; we could see some children our own age coming home from games; we could see some sheep being driven home from pasture; we could see my father coming home from work” (59). While everyone going home, back to their ordered and confined space, the “giant” Annie and the Red Girl successfully break out of that space to attain to a much larger one, from which that Home becomes something so small and indifferent. The night after Annie hears about the Red Girl’s leaving to Anguilla, she dreams of rescuing her
from a shipwreck and, echoing a fantasy in *At the Bottom of the River*, she imagines living with her forever on an island, without a proper Home:

> I took her to an island, where we lived together forever, I suppose, and fed on wild pigs and sea grapes. At night, we would sit on the sand and watch ships filled with people on a cruise steam by. We sent confusing signals to the ships, causing them to crash on some nearby rocks. How we laughed as their cries of joy turned to cries of sorrow (71).

As I mentioned elsewhere, the holy linkage between women and the sea and its resistance to conform to colonial norms of femininity provides women their true and ultimate identities. In her dream, Annie returns to the Caribbean sea which her mother introduced her to, sending confusing signals causing the ships to crash (these crashed ships naturally recall the ships that came to colonize the Caribbean and the ships that intervened in Annie’s dreamy moment watching her mother swim and caused Annie to lose sight of her mother, thus Annie’s dream could also be read as the dream of revenge).

With her doubled relationship to the neat Gwen and the unruly Red Girl, Annie develops her hybrid identity. Even when the Red Girl replaces Gwen as her closest friend, Annie still maintains her friendship with Gwen in a double life:

> The Little Lovebirds, our friends called us. Who could have guessed at that moment about the new claim on my heart? Certainly not Gwen. For, of course, in bringing her up to date I never mentioned the Red Girl. (AJ, 59-60)

“The Little Lovebirds” recall the two lovebirds on two sides of the flower bowl Annie’s mother has embroidered in the center of her bedspread and she insists on placing in a lopsided way so that it is not in the center of her bed, “the way it should have been” (28-30). Annie’s putting the embroidery of the two lovebirds at one side of the bed partly reflects her disdain to the conventionally happy family and the domestic space of Home.
The mentioning of “the little lovebirds” here may be read as a larger metaphor: Annie and Gwen is an ‘official’ couple of lovebirds – though a mockingly and parodically ‘official’ one – at the center of the world, while Annie and the Red Girl make an “unofficial” couple at the side, or the margin where she desires to be.

Toward the end of the novel, after a lot of mocking and breaking the colonial model of Home, Annie acknowledges a Home space that fits her expectations of what a family life should be:

Mr. Nigel and Mr. Earl shared everything. At sea, they shared the same boat, the same catch. At home, they shared the same house […] The house had a door inside that connected their two parts, but the door was never locked. They shared the same wife, a woman named Miss Catherine, and though she did not live with them completely, her own house was just a few doors away, and she visited them quite regularly, sometimes entering from the street, sometimes entering through the yard. […] I liked Miss Catherine, because she used snuff, and it made her spit, and her way of spitting seemed as if it was the best way such a thing could be done. (122)

The fishermen naturally suggest the linkage with the Caribbean sea, and Miss Catherine’s habit of spitting indicates her grotesque bodily freedom against principles of colonial gender norms, both of which Annie embraces. And also significant in their family life is that the woman does not live in the house as a docile wife to them but comes from the street or from the yard, which suggests that she, as a part of the outside world, brings that world to the confined space of Home and breaks the confines of that space (the door connecting two parts of the house is never locked). Annie John is a strong attack against colonial conventions of marriage in favor of a Caribbean resistive model. To Annie, that model of marriage is the most desirable one, “the best way such a thing could be done”.
AT THE PORCH BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Porches, thresholds, and yards are omnipresent in Annie John, dividing a closed space where hierarchies and norms are inevitable and ultimate, with an open and boundless space of absolute bodily and spiritual freedom. Craving to integrate into the school community where she hopes to compensate for her loss of maternal love, Annie is disillusioned as finding school only another “home”, with the same suffocating rules and principles. Therefore, just as at home she always tries to move to the yard to come into contact with the outside world, now at school she tries to move to the nook of old tombstones, “near the back of the churchyard” (80) to entertain her friends with tips for making their breasts grow, the game of showing body parts, or her experience of menstruation.

The whole story is constructed around the protagonist’s problematic stance at the threshold between two worlds. Release and freedom are found only in the outside space of the sky or the sea while disciplines and docility belong to the closed one of Home. Most of Annie’s subversive actions occur in the intersecting space between the two worlds – the Yard. Yard is the space of identity questioned, boundaries blurred, hierarchies abolished, standards ridiculed. It provides a dialogical space where the cultural centre is questioned and displaced to let the actively hybrid subjectivity emerge.

Annie was born at the intersectional point between night and day, darkness and light, when “the moon was going down at one end of the sky and the sun was going up at the other” (132). This is also a symbolic moment of carnival, containing both ending and re-beginning, death and rebirth. So it seems that she is sent to life to deny and mortify and, at the same time, to revive and renew.
Many times we can find the invasion of boundaries into the closed space, together with which comes the “carnivalesque” attitude which allows an articulation of suppressed sides of the colonial reality. Annie begins her carnival riots right in her class. All that the system considers noble, she views as showy and ridiculous. All that the system venerates and worships, she slights and derides. In her eyes, English people have such a bad smell that it seems they do not “wash often enough” or do not “wash properly” enough (36); the picture of Queen Elizabeth turns to “a picture of a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armfuls of diamonds and pearls” (40). But most significantly and most vigorously, she tries to carnivalize the rigid cultural norms of femininity, articulating her cultural insubordination. Colonial education functions upon individuals with attempts to suppress any possible free bodily expression and African cultural reminiscences. For this reason Annie and her classmates are supposed to take “ladylike recreation – walks, chats about the novels and poems we were reading, showing each other the embroidery stitches we had learned to master in home class, or something just as seemly” and are forbidden to play “band”, the folk game consisting of dancing in rows, “arms around each other’s waist or shoulders, forming lines of ten or so girls” (79) and singing popular calypso songs “which usually had lots of unladylike words”. Annie and her friends’ dancing calypso and singing “unladylike” songs against the disapproval of their teachers and parents can be seen as a resistance against the colonial society’s rules and laws and against their teachers and parents’ firm ideas about who they should become within the framework of the English culture. In spite of having to dress in formal British style and study a kind of ‘polished’ British literature and history, Annie still keeps up her feisty indigenous spirit by being rambunctious outside the classroom, fostering her
friend’s fondness of folk culture and expressions of bodily freedom. The politics of space is clearly at work at the way the girls always “go to the far end of the school grounds and play band”, dancing “from one end of the school grounds to the other” (80).

Up and down the schoolyard, away from our teachers, we would dance and sing. At the end of recess – forty-five minutes – we were missing ribbons and other ornaments from our hair, the pleats of our linen tunics became unset, the collars of our blouses were pulled out, and we were soaking wet all the way down to our bloomers. When the school bell rang, we would make a whooping sound, as if in a great panic, and then we would throw ourselves on top of each other as we laughed and shrieked. We would then run back to our classes, where we prepared to file into the auditorium for evening prayers (80).

The schoolyard lies at the intersectional space between the inside and the outside world, and the time is the schoolgirls’ break, when rules and principles of ladylikeness and propriety are temporarily suspended between ‘official time’ of colonial classes and Christian prayers. This spatio-temporal structure brings about true carnival moments of absolute bodily freedom for the girls.

The scene of Annie John and the schoolgirls playing on the tombstones of the English masters is probably one of the most impressive episodes in the novel, which vigorously manifests that desire of independence. Another remarkable thing is that the tombstone is also a kind of threshold – that between life and death.

Through Bakhtin’s theory of “the carnivalesque,” the scene is filled with the so-called “carnival spirit”, burying the old values and making way for new ones in a general tone of laughter which burns out the old world and gives birth to a new world. This episode works to distort and destroy the hierarchical authority of the system of colonial standards in a particularly subversive spirit of carnival. Whereas the colonial social order
functioning in the “closed” space of school seeks to define Annie by its system of norms and standards, Annie seeks to define herself by step by step performing the very opposite in the yard leading to the open space outside. This is reflected on her report card: “She is well behaved in class, at least in the presence of her masters and mistresses, but behind their backs and outside the classroom quite the opposite is true” (79). Now right after a “serious” time of evening prayers in the auditorium, right at a “serious” place at the back of the churchyard and on the tombstones “of people who had been buried there way before slavery was abolished, in 1833” (80), Annie and her friends perform the most rebellious act of all. They talk and do many ‘forbidden’ things about their breasts which keep on refusing to budge out of their chests and enjoy a great feeling of delight and triumph:

On hearing somewhere that if a boy rubbed your breasts they would quickly swell up, I passed along this news. Since in the world we occupied and hoped forever to occupy boys were banished, we had to make do with ourselves. What perfection we found in each other, sitting on these tombstones of long-dead people who had been the masters of our ancestors” (50);

And they sing forbidden songs, showing forbidden body parts:

We would sit and sing bad songs, use forbidden words, and, of course, show each other various parts of our bodies. While some of us watched, the others would walk up and down on the large tombstones showing off their legs. (81)

It also could be seen here an especially benign account of carnival rituals, in which normally dominant constraints and hierarchies are temporarily eradicated. The subversive and anti-authoritarian aspects of carnival are here particularly emphasised – authority figures are mocked, the joyless routines of everyday life are abrogated both to degrade and to regenerate those conceptions of the world which seek to exclude them.
At a higher level, this resistance not only serves as an evidence of native disaffection against colonial oppression, but also as the crystallization of anarchic and nihilistic energy of the “carnival spirit” in Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism, with its strategy of degradation and destruction:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. […] Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving. (RHW 21)

Together with the presence of the Obeah, the only treatment that can heal Annie’s sickness despite all Western treatments, Annie’s scene of playing on the tombstones potentially brings a degradation and subversion in order to engender new possibilities of cultural restoration. Just like the upside down carnival world in Rabelais’s novels interpreted by Bakhtin, in which mediocrities are crowned kings and the sacred churches are mocked in the laughter of “carnivalesque,” here the colonized and the colonizer, the master and the slave here change places in a particular atmosphere of “grotesque.” By juxtaposing the old British masters and the young descendants of their slaves, Kincaid depicts a tendency of death and rebirth, destruction and reconstruction in Antiguan culture, in which the seemingly opposing factors constantly reflect and influence each other. The old British colonizers in the graves, with their colonial cultural values, are buried again by the steps of the girls. So Annie and her friends’ singing “bad songs,” using “forbidden words,” showing “various parts of [their] bodies,” and “walking up and down on the large tombstones showing of [their] legs” (80-1) serve as a symbol of regeneration and reproduction of the indigenous culture on the ashes of the colonial past. Here we have a dynamic potential of a dialogue between the old and the new, the
powerful and the powerless, chaos and hierarchy, tragedy and comedy.

As Bakhtin says, “in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (RHW 24), the image of Annie and the schoolgirls on the tombstones foreshadows the indispensable replacement of the old, senile, decaying, and deformed value system represented by the English masters in the graves with the new, “conceived but as yet unformed” (RHW 26) value system embodied by the young feisty girls, full of vitality. The scene contains a series of vigorous binary contrasts: old and young, colonizer and colonized, Englishness and indigenousness, death and vitality, seriousness and playfulness, and, most important of all, destruction and reconstruction. And through those contrasts, it represents a dialogue amongst relative strata in a culture which itself is in a process of transformation, struggling to get rid of the cultural burdens of the colonial past and recover the indigenous stratum, bringing it a new vitality. Here with the tombstone scene in *Annie John* we find a “carnival moment”, a moment pregnant with cultural subversion and rebirth in postcolonial Antigua.
CONCLUSION

In Kincaid’s polemical work *A Small Place*, the damaged colonial library carrying the sign “REPAIRS ARE PENDING” for years (9) provides us with a metaphor of the post-colonial Antiguan culture where the European dominance nearly died out in “the famous earthquake” (42) but local traditions were not formed solidly enough to be the foundation for a new and distinct identity. Preoccupied by the negative impacts of colonialism, which is still lengthened in the present Antigua, Kincaid’s carnivalized literary works reflect her restless efforts to fill the void of culture and history caused by Antiguan people’s failure to restore their indigenous culture despite their political independence. Her carnival strategy serves to dialogicalize and overturn the Western colonial ideology and hegemonies commonly held as the ‘center’ of Antiguan society, in favor of alternative, normally marginalized voices, and the intermingling of relative ‘high’ and ‘low’ strata in the structure of social life.

The two main objects examined in depth of this study represent the same two-faced mother figure embodying the clash between two cultures, which finds its roots in the complexity and incompleteness of the postcolonial Caribbean that is still looking for its position in the world’s cultural map. The two texts include different ingredients of the same carnivalesque discourse: Whereas Kincaid’s first book, *At the Bottom of the River*, takes a skeptical approach to the prevailing truths in postcolonial Caribbean society by describing the protagonist’s explorations of life with alternative understanding of existence, in *Annie John*, parody plays the central role in the protagonist’s inner maturation, as most of her adventures begin with imitations and end with subversion. The
two works follow the courses of Kincaid’s two semi-autobiographical characters
detaching themselves from the domination of any colonial principle that claims itself as
the only authoritative ‘centre’ of meaning generation upon their understanding of life.
The texts may be seen as two different explorations of paths to the same carnivalesque
utopia of African heritage in the everyday Caribbean society, shaking it from the shadows
of colonialism, filling the cultural void that characterizes the postcolonial era.
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