

“My mother died at the moment I was born”

Mother and Daughter in Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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1. Introduction

Jamaica Kincaid's novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* is about a woman named Xuela Claudette Richardson. She is the narrator of the novel and is 70 years old when she starts telling the story of her life. However, the title indicates that the novel is an autobiography of Xuela's mother; the mother who died giving birth to Xuela. This is the very first sign in the novel of the complexity and importance of the relationship between Xuela and her mother. First of all, this is a paradox, since an autobiography cannot and should not be written or told by anyone else but the protagonist him- or herself. In addition, the fact that Xuela is trying to write an autobiography of a person that she has never met or known, makes the title even more complex and paradoxical. This indicates a very complicated but profound relationship between Xuela and her mother. I agree with Veronica Gregg when suggesting that it is Xuela herself who is her mother's biography: "the one who describes becomes the one who is described" (935). In a similar way, Shannon Seanor states that the autobiography is a result of the very strong bond between Xuela and her mother. She creates the autobiography and imagines her mother's life as it might have been, and thus also her own life (30).

Xuela grows up in Dominica, a small African island, at the time colonised by the British. She is of mixed race; her father is part African and part British, and her mother was of the Carib people, a race almost extinct and very much looked down on by the Africans. This part of her mother's history is a crucial aspect when it comes to Xuela's life and the way she decides to live her life. Since Xuela's mother died giving birth to her, the father left her in the care of his laundress. For seven years, she only saw her father every fortnight when he came to pick up his laundry. Throughout the novel, the loss of Xuela's mother is evident and persistent. There always seems to be something that is missing in her life and something that she is longing for. This absence of love during her childhood is another aspect worth

discussing regarding Xuela's future decisions in life. Her loveless childhood and the absence of a mother result in an antisocial, but independent-minded and powerful woman.

The author of *The Autobiography of My Mother* is Jamaica Kincaid. Just like Xuela, she grew up on a small island in the Caribbean, and just like Xuela, her relationship with her mother is complex and profound. In her early childhood, Kincaid was very close to her mother. However, when she was nine years old her mother gave birth to three sons. This changed their relationship forever. Kincaid started feeling betrayed and neglected by her mother ("Jamaica Kincaid"). These events in Kincaid's life seem to have made a deep impact on her life and consequently also her authorship. Kincaid's relationship with her mother is a recurring theme in her novels, and thus in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Still, Kincaid herself claims that she has "moved away from its apparently personal aspect and is more concerned with questions of history, colonialism, power and powerlessness" (Gregg 928). I agree with Kincaid when she claims that the novel is concerned with history, colonialism and power. There are many aspects of these issues in the novel. However, I would say that Kincaid's personal relationship with her own mother clearly emerges in the text and becomes the all-embracing theme that symbolizes the others.

Hence, in this essay I will argue that the relationship, or rather lack of relationship with her mother, is what defines Xuela and makes her into an independent, antisocial and by sexuality a very powerful woman. I will also discuss and argue that the mother-daughter relationship is a symbol of history and colonialism in the West Indies. The main question I am concerned with in this essay is thus the relationship between mother and daughter. In this case, the relationship between Xuela and her mother does not really exist, since she has never even seen her mother's face. Nevertheless, it has put a heavy mark on her life.

My argumentation is divided into four parts. First, I will discuss Xuela's loss and longing and her inability to love. The second part involves her sexuality and power and how this affects people around her. Then I will go on analyzing the mother and daughter relationship among other characters in the novel, and finally the aspect of history, colonialism and language will be discussed.

2. Loss, Longing and the Inability of Loving

The opening lines of the novel are very important and, in my opinion, even set the tone of the entire novel: “My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind” (3). Not only does Xuela let the reader know that her mother died at the moment she was born, which is a recurrent statement, but in addition, she gives us an indication about her future as well as her past. The bleak black wind at Xuela’s back is a metaphor of the uncertainty of Xuela’s ancestry; she knows nothing about her own mother, since she died at the moment she gave birth to Xuela. She knows that her mother is a Carib woman, but this makes her history even darker, due to the very dark history of the Carib people. This aspect will be discussed more explicitly later in the essay.

The novel is dense with Xuela’s loss and longing for her mother. Even as an infant, her loss affects her to a great extent. When the mother dies, her father leaves her in the care of his laundress, Ma Eunice. Xuela spends the first nine years of her life with this woman and her children. However, Xuela is never able to feel any love for her. In a similar way, Ma Eunice does not feel love for Xuela. Seanor claims that this is because Ma Eunice has so many children of her own, and as a consequence of this, she has no love left to offer Xuela (21). I would rather argue that the reason for their loveless relationship is Xuela’s actions and behavior towards Ma Eunice. She refuses to drink Ma Eunice’s milk, probably because she does not want anyone to replace her own mother, and also because of the fact that breastfeeding is an act that strongly represents motherhood. My view is thus in accordance with Alexandra Schulteis, who states that Xuela refuses the milk from Ma Eunice since she identifies it with the maternal role (4). Furthermore, Schulteis suggests that Xuela desires compensation for the loss of her mother at birth, but rejects to satisfy this desire with either

substitute or symbolic objects (4). One may think that this is a very strange act of a baby, whose needs ought to be more fundamental such as food and sleep. In my opinion, however, it is as if she right from the beginning of her life wants to make it clear that this is the way in which she has decided to live her life. She yearns for her mother, but she is never going to have a mother. She knows that her desires cannot be satisfied by someone else, and as a consequence, she decides not to depend on anyone but herself. Towards the end of the novel she even expresses that she has made a conscious decision when she says that “some people choose high mountains, some people choose wide seas, and some people choose husbands; I chose to possess myself” (174). Xuela’s independence is another aspect that is recurrent in the novel, and which is very important when it comes to her future relationships.

Despite this early choice in her life, Xuela constantly seeks her own mother as if she expects her to suddenly return into her life, at least in her early years:

I missed the face I had never seen; I looked over my shoulder to see if someone was coming, as if I were expecting someone to come, and Ma Eunice would ask me what I was looking for at first as a joke, but when, after a time, I did not stop doing it, she thought it meant I could see spirits. I could not see spirits at all, I was just looking for that face, the face I would never see, even if I lived forever. (5)

In the entire novel, Xuela’s mother is an ever present absence (Gregg 928). That is, she is never present in person, but the absence of her haunts Xuela throughout her whole life. The mother’s singing voice appears at night-time. The songs, however, are not lullabies and offer no solace (Gregg 928). Furthermore, she experiences dreams in which her mother appears, but she is always denied to see her mother’s face. The only part of her mother she can clearly see is the heels of her feet as she is climbing down a ladder:

I saw my mother come down a ladder. She wore a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels, and that was all of her that was exposed, just her heels; she came down and down, but no more of her was ever revealed. Only her heels, and the hem of her gown. (18)

Gregg argues that this writing is made to mark the presence of her mother as a haunted and haunting absence in the novel (928).

After some time, however, Xuela seems to accept the fact that she will never be able to see her mother's face. Elizabeth West claims that this acceptance is not a resolution for Xuela, but is more a resignation (6). In this way, the novel continues as a contemplation of Xuela's loss:

At first I longed to see more, and then I became satisfied just to see her heels coming down toward me. When I awoke, I was not the same child I had been before I fell asleep. I longed to see my father and to be in his presence constantly. (18)

Schulteis, however, is of a different opinion and writes that Xuela refuses to become trapped in loss (8). In my opinion, this is probably one of the reasons why Xuela wants to see her father and be in his presence. She wants to move on with her life, and one way to do this is to learn about her mother's life. This is only possible in the presence of her father, since he is the only one who knows her mother's story. So, instead of longing for a mother she will never meet, she decides to create an autobiography of her mother and, in a way, continue living her mother's life.

Nevertheless, as a consequence of Xuela's loss she is mostly unable to feel certain emotions such as affection and love. Throughout the novel, her mother is the only person she

really loves: “I had never known my mother and yet my love for her followed her into eternity. My mother had died when I was born, unable to protect herself in a world cruel beyond ordinary imagining, unable to protect me” (210). Furthermore, Xuela has never been loved by anyone, since she regards her mother as the only one that could have loved her, and she died at the moment Xuela was born. Therefore her loss does not include love: “in my loss column was my mother; love was not yet in my loss column. I had not yet been loved. . . . I had not had love yet, it was not in my column of gain, so it could not be in my column of loss” (76). As a consequence of a lack of mother love from the beginning of her life, her feelings are numbed and thus her ability to love anyone or anything. As Seanor points out: “this betrayal, this lack of familial attachment, causes. . . . to decide against allowing herself to feel love for anyone else. Perhaps the risk is just too high” (19).

However, there is an exception to this argument. After numerous love affairs, Xuela meets Roland, a sailor from the islands. In many ways, he is of the same kind as she is. He is a man with many sexual relationships with other women. Furthermore, he is from a small island and “a small island is not a country. And he did not have a history” (167). The fact that she considers him not having a history is very important regarding her identification with him. As will be discussed later in this essay, Xuela considers herself without a country and without history. Eventually, however, she decides to end her relationship with Roland when he wants her to bear his children. Since Xuela wants no commitments and does not want to belong to anyone, she cannot stay with Roland. Regarding this, Xuela is persistent in her early choice in life to stay independent, even though love is finally in her column of gain.

Instead, Xuela marries a European man, Philip, but she does not love him. However, she spends the rest of her life together with him. In Xuela’s own words she says that Philip was “the man I worked for but did not hate and who at the same time was a man I slept with but

did not love and whom I would eventually marry but still not love” (139). In this way Xuela will never become dependent on him or on anyone else. This is a choice she makes early in her life, and above all, when her father wants her to regard her stepmother’s children as her brother and sister:

He wrote that: my brother, my sister, my stepmother; but I substituted these words: your son, your daughter, your wife. They were his; they were not mine. He wanted to tell me that we were all his; it was at that moment that I felt I did not want to belong to anyone, that since the person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want anyone to belong to me. (104)

Earlier in the novel, she expresses her attitude towards love when she says that “love might give someone else the advantage” (48). This view follows Xuela throughout her life.

In a similar way, Xuela’s difficulties regarding loving men also reflects on her relationships with other women. In my opinion, Xuela does not want to make friends with other women. She is determined not to depend on anyone but herself, and this decision affects her relationships with women. The first woman Xuela meets is Ma Eunice. Since Xuela’s loss makes her emotionally stunted, she is unable to feel maternal affection for Ma Eunice. She says that: ”I never grew to like this woman. . . . I did not know how” (5). Together with Seanor, I find this statement interesting because it suggests that love is something that you “learn”, as if it is taught by someone else, perhaps a parent (21). The fact that Xuela grew up without parents or parental love means that she had no role model to follow.

The second woman in Xuela’s acquaintance is her father’s new wife. The stepmother makes it clear to Xuela that she will never love her as her own daughter. The reason is that

she is afraid that her husband would think of Xuela's mother more than he would think of her. Xuela is relieved when she learns this, meaning that she now "could live in a place like this. . . . Love would have defeated me" (29). Xuela does not want her step-mother's love or affection; she wants no maternal substitute.

However, the very first relationship with another woman that in some way looks like friendship is the relationship with Madame LaBatte. Xuela's father puts her to live with the LaBattes, probably because he becomes aware of the situation between his wife and Xuela. For the first time in Xuela's life a woman is nice to her and treats her in a good way. Madame Labatte tells her:

to regard her as if she were my own mother, to feel safe whenever she was near. She could not know what such words meant to me, to hear a woman say them to me. Of course I did not believe her I did not fool myself, but I knew she meant them when she was saying those things to me, she really meant to say them. I liked her so very much. . . . (66)

It is clear that Madame Labatte cares for Xuela, but eventually it turns out that she has an agenda. Since Madame LaBatte is desperate to have children, and since she is not able to bear any of her own, she wants Xuela to bear the children for her. Xuela becomes pregnant, but is determined not to give birth, and goes through an abortion. Of course, this affects their relationship, and Xuela relocates once more.

3. Sexuality and Power

Xuela's sexuality is very powerful and it makes her into a powerful woman. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly important as the novel develops and is the reason for many of Xuela's relationships and most of her relocations. Seanor focuses on Xuela's sexuality in her development into an adult woman. She declares that Xuela is exploring her own sexuality at the same time as she is trying to find her place in the world. Moreover, her sexuality is neither about mutual pleasure nor an expression of love (40). I agree with Seanor when she suggests that it is rather about her own physical pleasure. But, Seanor goes on to assert that Xuela's sexuality is almost out of control and also powerful and frightening; she therefore acts against the social standards regarding women's sexuality (40). In my opinion, however, Xuela's sexuality is not at all out of control. Instead she is the owner of her sexuality as well as the owner of herself. That is also why she refuses to pursue the standards of the patriarchy.

A consequence of Xuela's sexual power is that other women are threatened by her and thus afraid of her. This makes her relationships with other women even more difficult. Moreover, Seanor claims that Xuela's sexual power begins after she starts having her menstrual periods and after she is sexually initiated (40). These are thus passages she has to go through before she becomes a real woman, because this is when she starts owning her sexuality. To her step mother, Xuela appears such a big threat that she tries to kill her several times. Seanor argues that the threat is based on a rival competition for a mate (40). I find this somewhat peculiar, since the mate in question is Xuela's father, and should therefore not be a target of competition when it comes to a sexual relationship. However, as I suggested earlier, the step mother fears that her husband will identify Xuela with his former wife and hence think more about her than of his present wife.

Due to her expressive sexuality, Xuela becomes pregnant many times. Each time, however, she wills out her children through abortions. Initially, it is hard to understand Xuela's actions and her decision not to have children:

I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. . . . I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. (96-97)

An interesting aspect is the fact that Xuela compares herself with a god when she wills out the children. West asserts that Xuela has discovered her power to will out life that is unwanted (9). To this I would add that the power she is awakened to is another aspect of her decision to own herself and therefore also her own body. Furthermore, her decision not to have children is a consequence of her decision to stay independent. She will not allow herself to depend on anyone and thus she will not allow anyone to depend on her.

4. Mother and Daughter Relationships among Other Characters

The mother and daughter theme is also evident among other women in the novel. As mentioned above, Xuela's father marries another woman, and together, they have two children; a son and a daughter. In spite of the son's weakness and bad health, the mother favours him above the daughter: "That she did not think very much of the person who was most like her, a daughter, a female, was as normal that it would have been noticed only if it had been otherwise" (52) .

What is interesting about this statement is that the fact that a mother loves her son more than her daughter seems to be conventional in this respect. This is very peculiar as, just like Xuela mentions, a daughter is the person who is most like the mother. In the article *Mothers and Daughters: Jamaica Kincaid's Pre-Oedipal Narrative*, Roni Natov quotes Adrienne Rich claiming that:

there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. (1)

According to this, Xuela's step mother's feelings for her daughter seems unthinkable and distorted.

Xuela, however, lives her life, always conscious of the loss of her mother and the absence of her father. She is unable to love, and to trust anyone but herself. Still, she feels that her step sister's fate is worse than hers: "Her tragedy was greater than mine; her mother did not love her, but her mother was alive, and every day she saw her mother and every day her mother let her know she was not loved" (53) . The relationship between the step mother and her daughter is in a way, the very opposite of Xuela's relationship with her mother. First of

all, both members of the relationship are alive, and thus both active participants. Regarding Xuela and her mother's relationship, the mother is not only dead but not even existing in Xuela's memory. The mother is nevertheless active in their relationship through her absence, since it affects Xuela to a great extent. Secondly, while Xuela and her mother's relationship is dense with love and affection, though never in a concrete way, her step mother's relationship with her daughter is marked by disappointment and neglect. Having a mother who does not love you is therefore worse than not having a mother at all. A life without a mother is nothing compared to a life constantly knowing that you are not good enough and not loved by your own mother.

Xuela does not feel love or affection for either her step mother or her step sister. In a similar way, they do not love Xuela, but in contrast to Xuela, they keep showing her their dislike. However, the tragedy of her step sister appears to interest Xuela and she actually seems to feel sympathy for her.

5. Language, History and Colonialism

The first years of Xuela's life, she never speaks a word. In this way her mute childhood is a consequence of the absence of her parents and thus an absence of love. However, when she finally speaks, her words are prompted by loss (Gregg 929). At the age of four, she speaks the words: "Where is my father?" (7).

What is even more peculiar is the fact that her words are in English, a language she has never heard, since people around her all speak Creole. Furthermore, English is the language of the oppressor. At this time, Dominica was colonised by Britain and thus the Englishmen were the people of power. As Gregg asserts Xuela's statement in English is another symbol of the absence of her mother and thus also the absence of a mother tongue: "the lost mother and pervasive, invisible mother tongue – provide the historical, ideological, and phantasmic coordinates that make possible Xuela's speech; and the very source of her being and her pain" (929).

It is also interesting to consider the way Xuela manages to move back to her father after living seven years in the house of his laundress, Ma Eunice. In school, she learns to read and write and later on she also learns the power of the written word. She starts writing letters which she addresses to her father, where she exclaims how miserable she is and how she yearns for her father to come and save her.

"My dear Papa, you are the only person I have left in the world, no one loves me, only you can, I am beaten with words, I am beaten with sticks, I am beaten with stones, I love you more than anything, only you can save me." These words were not meant for my father at all but for the person of whom I could see only her heels. (19)

She never intends to send the letters since they are actually meant for her mother. Despite this, they are sent to her father by her teacher, and shortly afterwards, her father comes to take her with him back home. This act opens up Xuela's eyes for the power of words and thus language.

The power of words is illustrated once again when Xuela's father's wife tries to devalue her by using language. When the father is present she speaks in English, since this is his language. Otherwise, however, the step mother only speaks with her in French Patois. By using the language of the defeated, she tries to define Xuela as a woman of the defeated and thus a woman without power.

These aspects of language also involve historical components. As mentioned earlier, Xuela's mother was a Carib woman. The Carib people:

were no more, they were extinct. . . . That these people, my mother's people, were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness, was without doubt, but the most bitter part of it was through no fault of their own that they had lost, and lost in the most extreme way; they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves. (197-198)

The fact that her mother was a Carib woman is of great importance to Xuela and affects her life and the way she chooses to live her life, since she identifies herself with her mother rather than with her father. Gregg points out that the mother's people is a people outside history and thus Xuela considers herself as having inherited this piece of history. Since, her life begins with the death of her mother, and as a consequence of her mother's history, this death also contains the death of her people, Xuela's life is supposed to be lived as death (928). In my

opinion, Gregg's statement is confirmed by the very last lines in the novel: "Death is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things" (228). However, even though Xuela's life is marked by death, she chooses not to become trapped in it. Thus, she refuses to have children since she wants to break the spiral of death.

Xuela can also be seen as a symbol of the Carib people's sufferings, as Schulteis claims, and the most evident sign of this is the loss of her mother (7). In a similar way, West suggests that Xuela is quite aware of her inheritance and as a result, she isolates herself and becomes self-serving and independent (3).

I was of the African people, but not exclusively. My mother was a Carib woman, and when they looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but had survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the Carib people. (15)

In addition to Xuela being a symbol of her people's defeat, Xuela's choice not to have children and her abortions stand as a figure of the problems of West Indian language and history. As Xuela prevents her children from life, the language and history in the West Indies are prevented in a similar way (Gregg 929).

The colonisation is never directly visible in the text; however, we learn that Dominica is colonised by the British and thus the Englishmen are the people in power. The first link to the colonised world is when Xuela breaks Ma Eunice's china plate with the English countryside painted on it, describing it as *Heaven*. Ma Eunice curses her and tries to force her to say sorry, but Xuela refuses. All day long, she has to kneel on a pile of stones, with her hands full of stones, lifted above her head. Still, she refuses to say that she is sorry: "It was beyond my own

will; those words could not pass my lips” (10). In this way, Xuela establishes a sort of power and demonstrates her attitude against the British. This attitude is recurrent in the novel, for instance when she claims that: “The people we should naturally have mistrusted were beyond our influence completely; what we needed to defeat them, to rid ourselves of them, was far more powerful than mistrust” (Kincaid 48).

Due to the aspects mentioned above, it is fascinating to consider the fact that Xuela eventually marries an Englishman, a man of the conquering class. It is clear, however, that Xuela never loves him. Instead, she demonstrates her power over him. In this way, she puts herself above the people in power.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to argue that Xuela's relationship with her mother is what defines her and makes into an independent, powerful and antisocial woman. The fact that Xuela's mother died when giving birth to her has made a great impact on Xuela's life. Because of this, Xuela chooses to live in solitude and independence and thus a life without love. She decides not to depend on anyone but herself. Although mother figures become available, she refuses any kind of substitutes. The only person she would depend on is her mother, and since she never will have a mother, she decides to depend on only herself; to be her own mother.

Xuela's independence and sexual power is a threat to other women, for instance her step mother and step sister. The fact that Xuela is almost unable to feel affection or love makes it impossible for Xuela to develop deeper commitments and relationships. During the entire novel, Xuela never loves another woman. In addition, her relationships with men are not based on love, but rather based on sexual pleasure alone. The only man she allows herself to love is Roland, a man that is much like herself. But when he wants her to bear his children, she leaves him. Again, her choice to possess herself affects her decision. Eventually she marries a man she does not love to secure her power and independency. The fact that he is an Englishman confirms her power and thus her attitude towards the oppressing people.

Xuela's most radical choice is the decision not to give birth to any children at all. She goes through multiple abortions, and the ability to will out her children makes her even more powerful. She does not want to depend on anyone and thus she does not want anyone to depend on her. Furthermore, the decision not to become a mother herself, can be interpreted as a symbol of the oppressed, almost extinct Carib people. In addition, her abortions, as well as the broken china plate, can stand as figures of the history of colonialism in the West Indies.

The British colonisation is thus a recurrent motif in the novel. However, I claim that this theme is subordinate to the mother and daughter theme. The choices Xuela makes in her life are, in my opinion, a result of the fact that her mother died giving birth to her. Xuela is therefore as affected as defined by her mother's death.

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