

JAMAICA KINCAID – A SUBVERSIVE FALLEN ANGEL

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ABSTRACT: Caribbean novelist Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* is an emblematic sample of the so-called post-colonial and/or diasporic literature. The markedly autobiographical narrative of *Lucy*, which was originally published in 1990, is based on its protagonist's account of her adapting to life in The United States after moving from The Caribbean. In The United States the protagonist deals with a series of difficulties when trying to settle down, while she faces questions of gender, ethnicity, class, and of her own identity. It is possible to argue that in *Lucy* Jamaica Kincaid has made a consciously subversive attempt to associate the protagonist's identity to that of English poet John Milton's Lucifer, from *Paradise Lost*. Narrative strategies used by Kincaid in order to associate the character Lucy with Miltonian Lucifer may serve as excellent examples of the subversive use post-colonial and/or diasporic literature makes of canonical literary texts in order to discuss identity questions.

KEYWORDS: Identity. Subversion. Post-Colonialism.

RESUMO: O romance *Lucy*, da autora caribenha Jamaica Kincaid, é um emblemático exemplar da chamada literatura pós-colonial e/ou diaspórica. *Lucy*, publicado em 1990, tem sua narrativa com forte cunho autobiográfico baseada no relato da protagonista sobre sua adaptação à vida nos Estados Unidos, após ter se mudado do Caribe. Nos Estados Unidos, a protagonista lida com uma série de dificuldades ao tentar se estabelecer, enquanto enfrenta questões relacionadas a gênero, etnia, classe e a sua própria identidade. É possível argumentar que, em *Lucy*, Jamaica Kincaid fez uma tentativa conscientemente subversiva

de associar a identidade da protagonista com a do personagem Lúcifer, de *Paraíso Perdido*, do poeta inglês John Milton. Estratégias narrativas usadas por Kincaid para associar a personagem Lucy com o Lúcifer miltoniano podem servir como excelentes exemplos do subversivo uso que a literatura pós-colonial e/ou diaspórica faz de textos literários canônicos a fim de discutir questões identitárias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade. Subversão. Pós-colonialismo.

English novelist Virginia Woolf once wrote in her 1918 diary about John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "I can conceive that this is the essence, of which almost all other poetry is the dilution" (WOOLF apud GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 190). Still according to the modernist novelist, in the figures portrayed in *Paradise Lost* "is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion" (WOOLF apud GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 190). Woolf's opinion on Milton's masterpiece might be associated to a long tradition which has canonized the figure and the works of the English poet since the XVIIth century. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state in "Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers", John Milton came to be regarded "as a figure of the true artist, God's emissary and defender on earth" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 190).

Much of what is associated to the canonized figure of John Milton might be due to the content of his most emblematic work itself. According to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem that "undertakes to encompass the whole life of mankind – war, love, religion, Hell, Heaven, the cosmos" (ABRAMS et al, 1986, p. 1402). It was Milton himself who claimed he intended to "justify the ways of God to men" (MILTON apud ABRAMS et al, 1986, p. 1442) with his poem.

The main narrative focus of *Paradise Lost* is the process through which Adam and Eve, two basilar figures in the Christian cosmology, were created and later expelled from Paradise. Another important part of the poem is the origin of Satan and his role in mankind's downfall. In short, Milton's epic narrative is basically the same story that may be read on the beginning of the biblical book of Genesis, however, enlarged by the poet into a detailed poem. In spite of that, the cosmology, the 'whole life of mankind' which is supposedly encompassed within Milton's poem is an extremely misogynist one. It is considered by Gilbert and Gubar to be "at the heart of Western literary patriarchy. [...] For whatever Milton is to the male imagination, to the female imagination Milton and the inhibiting Father – the Patriarch of patriarchs – are one." (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 191-192).

Nevertheless, Gilbert and Gubar (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984) call attention to another tradition, which is related to but essentially different from the patriarchal one, that has been set into motion at least since the XIXth century: that of the female 'misreadings' of Milton. These 'misreadings' are "revisionary critiques of *Paradise Lost*" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 189), i.e. "an effort to come to terms with the institutionalized and often elaborately metaphorical misogyny" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 189) of Milton's epic. This has been an important issue for many women writers for "it was only through patriarchal poetry that they learned 'their origins and their history' – learned, that is, to define themselves as misogynistic theology defined them" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 189). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Emily Bontë's *Wuthering Heights*, as well as Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* are all cited by the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* as examples of

works written by women in which references, ‘misreadings’ of elements from *Paradise Lost* might be found.

Another female author whose works also present clear references to Milton’s epic poem and whose figure should also be placed alongside with those associated to the tradition of female ‘misreadings’ of Milton is Jamaica Kincaid. However, differently from the other four female novelists previously mentioned in this text, Woolf, Shelley, Brontë and Elliot, Kincaid is not an Englishwoman. Nonetheless, this fact does not mean she was not exposed to the British patriarchal ideology to which *Paradise Lost* is intrinsically related.

Kincaid was born in 1949 in Antigua, which was a British colony from 1667 to 1981. While she was a child at school, she was exposed to many books, works that not only portrayed but also were used to propagate Western patriarchal culture and values. It is possible to know all that by the reading of her works themselves, some of which have strong autobiographical elements. In her two first novels *Annie John* and *Lucy* the reader can find samples of both elements from her own biography and ‘misreadings’ of Western patriarchy, including those related to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Annie John is Kincaid’s first novel and, according to its author, “it’s completely autobiographical” (KINCAID apud BOUSON, 2005, p. 37). According to Justin D. Edward (EDWARD, 2007), author of *Understanding Jamaica Kincaid*, the novel might be seen as a full-length analysis of the process of growing up undergone by a girl, Annie John, in Antigua. Still according to Edward, “By the end of the novel, Annie has passed through the stages of schooling, puberty, adolescence, and she has emerged as a young adult” (EDWARD, 2007, p. 42). The reader also comes to know that, after becoming an adult, Annie decides to leave Antigua.

It is in this very novel, more specifically in one of its passages entitled “Columbus in Chains” by the organizers of *Stories from Blue Latitudes: Caribbean Women Writers at Home and Abroad*, Elizabeth Nunez and Jennifer Sparrow, that a clear reference to Milton and to his *Paradise Lost* is made. In this passage, Annie is punished by her teacher after having written “The Great Man Can no Longer Just Get Up and Go” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 165) under a picture of a chained Christopher Columbus which was present in one of her schoolbooks.

Columbus is described by Miss Edward, Annie’s teacher, as “one of the great men in history” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 168), as the discoverer of what the teacher considers to be Annie’s home, the Caribbean island where she lived. Annie, on the other hand, did not share her teacher’s appreciation for Columbus, quite on the contrary: “I did not like Columbus. How I loved this picture – to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low, seated at the bottom of a boat” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 164).

Annie’s opinions on Columbus and on the picture that shows him in a defeated, conquered manner are very much different from the ones expected by her teacher. She was supposed to respect that figure, to admire him. Miss Edward saw in the inscriptions Annie had made under the picture reason enough to punish her. It is Annie that let us know: “That I should write under the picture of Columbus ‘The Great Man...’ etc. was just too much. I had gone too far this time” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 168). The punishment: she “was ordered to copy Books I and II of *Paradise Lost*” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 168). The explicit mentions of Milton, his most important work, and of its two first books in particular are quite symbolic for several reasons.

First, to copy, to write the words of *Paradise Lost* is understood by Miss Edward as an exemplary punishment for a rebellious student. Milton’s epic poem is portrayed as a

work whose content is morally edifying, whose words should not only be read but copied by those who break the rules. This perspective is completely in tune with the conception of Milton “as a figure of the true artist, God’s emissary and defender on earth” (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 190). *Paradise Lost* is portrayed in “Columbus on Chains” as something associated with oppression, punishment, rules and moral both from a patriarchal and a colonial point of view.

Another important reason why the mentioning of the two first books of Milton’s epic poem is relevant is the fact that it is in these two particular parts of *Paradise Lost* that the character Satan is the main focus. This character of Milton’s has traditionally been associated with rebellion, with those who confront power. The two first books of *Paradise Lost* are also traditionally regarded as its most interesting and engaging parts, as *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* informs us: “Carried along by the impetus of Satan’s tremendous adventures, readers are apt to forget there is any other part to the poem. Indeed [...] there is no reason to hold back our sympathy with Satan, our admiration for his heroic energy” (ABRAMS et al, 1986, p. 1445).

The action of these two first books of *Paradise Lost* is almost entirely set in Hell, where Satan recovers after having been “by the command of God, driven out of Heaven [...] into the great deep” (MILTON, 1986, p. 1446). In there, Satan organizes all the other demons in order to regain Heaven. After having debated about what course of action to take, Satan undertakes the mission of traveling alone to search the truth of a prophecy known in Heaven concerning the emergence of a new kind of creature, Man.

In the two first books of *Paradise Lost* Satan is portrayed by Milton as an epic hero who claims for justice after being defeated by his own creator, the Christian God, and who also rejoices the freedom he now possesses. He states the following about his condition in

Hell: “Here at least / We shall be free [...] / Here we may reign secure; and in my choice / To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell: / Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven” (MILTON, 1986, p. 1454).

Right at the beginning of “Columbus in Chains”, Annie says: “For taking first place over all the other girls, I had been given a prize [...] and I was made prefect of my class” (KINCAID, 2006, p. 160). Taking into consideration what Annie John says about her intellectual skills at school, i.e. she was considered an intelligent girl who has been given prizes and made prefect of her class, it is possible to infer that she might have grasped some of what is narrated in the parts of the epic poem she had to copy.

Annie’s punishment was to read and copy the two first books of *Paradise Lost*, exactly the two most engaging ones, as well as the ones most commonly associated with the rebellious figure of Satan. Being a clever girl, Annie might have understood and grasped some of what is narrated in the passages she was forced to copy: the feeling of revenge and rebellion expressed by one of the most relevant characters of one of the most canonical works ever written in English. Also taking into account the fact that *Annie John* is a strongly autobiographical work, it is possible to infer that *Paradise Lost* had also a great influence on Jamaica Kincaid herself.

In terms of narrative strategies, Kincaid’s option for making an explicit mention of what exactly Annie was supposed to copy as a punishment leaves room for the establishment of connections between the figures of Satan, that of Annie John and Kincaid herself. Satan, as well as Annie/Kincaid had to deal with the fact they lived in an oppressive environment against their will, Satan in Hell, Annie/Kincaid in a patriarchal British colony; The three of them decided to undertake a lonely voyage in order to change their oppressive

conditions; Annie/Kincaid and Satan were punished for having questioned the system in which they were inserted.

Another striking similarity between the figures of Annie John and Satan is that concerning their relationships with their progenitors. Milton's Satan is described as the "traitor angel / [...] Who first broke peace in Heaven / [...] and in proud rebellious arms / [...] Conjured against the Highest" (MILTON, 1986, p. 1485). Annie John sees her mother as "the powerfully shaming and scornful mother as well as an abject shamed object of contempt" (BOUSON, 2005, p. 50-51). If we take into consideration the last two quotations, it is possible to infer that both characters have similar attitudes toward their progenitors: an attitude that mixes contempt and rebellion.

The connection between Milton's Satan and a female character created by Jamaica Kincaid is even clearer and stronger in her second novel, *Lucy*. Kincaid's second novel, according to Justin D. Edward is "among other things, a continuation of *Annie John*" (EDWARD, 2007, p. 58). Although Jamaica Kincaid has already stated that the characters Annie John and Lucy are not "meant to be the same person" (KINCAID apud BOUSON, 2005, p. 67), it is Kincaid herself who also said that *Lucy* is a continuation of *Annie John* "in the sense that it's about my life and it's the same life I'm writing about" (KINCAID apud BOUSON, 2005, p. 67). If in *Annie John* its protagonist decides to leave her country of origin, it is in *Lucy* that Kincaid explores the life of a young African-Caribbean woman who begins new life in the USA. It is also in *Lucy* that Kincaid makes even more explicit the connections between the Satan-God and the mother-daughter relations.

When Kincaid makes the protagonist of *Lucy* states that "When I was quite young and just being taught to read, the books I was taught to read from were the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, and some plays by William Shakespeare" (KINCAID, 2002, p. 152), she makes it

even more possible for the reader of her two first novels to connect them, as well as to associate both novels to Milton's epic poem. Moreover, it is relevant to notice that *Paradise Lost* in the only literary work whose title is mentioned by Lucy in the passage where she comments on the books from which she was taught how to read.

If we consider *Lucy* to be a continuation of *Annie John*, the explicit mentions to Milton's masterpiece in both novels might be understood to be even more intrinsically connected: in "Columbus in Chains" Annie is forced to copy *Paradise Lost* when she was still a child at school; in *Lucy* the poem is mentioned as one of the books from which the protagonist learned how to read when she was a child. In both passages *Paradise Lost* is associated to education, that is, to the transmission of values, of knowledge, of ideology.

Nevertheless, it is relevant to mention when and why exactly Lucy mentions Milton's work. The protagonist of Kincaid's second novel mentions Milton's poem right after disclosing the reason why her mother named her Lucy. After being questioned several times by her daughter, Lucy's mother finally tells her why she had given her child that name: "I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer" (KINCAID, 2002, p. 152).

By making Lucy's mother acknowledge that she named her daughter after Lucifer, Jamaica Kincaid associates the two characters' figures in such a way that their very names are almost the same: "Lucy, a girl's name for Lucifer" (KINCAID, 2002, p. 153). Due to the markedly autobiographical characteristic of *Lucy*, by doing so Kincaid also associates her own figure, her own identity to that of Satan.

One might ask why Jamaica Kincaid has made such an effort to make it explicit that she wants to associate the image of the main characters of her two first novels, as well as her own image to that of Milton's Satan. The works of several theorists may be useful in

providing possible answers to this question. Their works also cast light upon the fact that, although Kincaid's narrative strategies might be associated to the female tradition of 'misreadings' of Milton, the procedures adopted by the author of *Lucy* go even beyond this tradition.

By making explicit mentions to *Paradise Lost* in her markedly autobiographical novels, Jamaica Kincaid installs in her own works a whole set of concepts and ideas related to Milton's poem via intertextuality. However, if she installs concepts and ideas related to the most important work of "the Patriarch of patriarchs" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 191-192), she does so in order to make a subversive use of one of its main figures, the Miltonic Satan. The way Kincaid makes explicit the association between Satan and herself via her characters exposes a completely postmodern way to deal with canonic authors and works: that which "installs and then subverts" (HUTCHEON, 1997, p. 243).

It is clear through the reading of both "Columbus in Chains" and *Lucy* that the contact their main characters had with the work of John Milton was one in which patriarchal and colonial values were trying to be imposed upon them. In spite of that, the characters, in a "contradictory relationship to what we usually label the dominant [...] culture" (HUTCHEON, 1997, p. 246), managed not only to grasp a particular element present in the poem, the one related to Satan's sense of rebellion, but they also were able to use it in favor of their movement toward personal emancipation. By doing so, it is possible to say that they contested the dominant culture "from within its own assumptions" (HUTCHEON, 1997, p. 247).

Even the connections established between God and the characters' mothers, as well as Satan and the daughters, are all conceived in such a manner that Annie/Lucy/Kincaid, who once "felt like Lucifer, doomed to build wrong upon wrong" (KINCAID, 2002, p.

139), in the end, feels “transformed from failure to triumph” (KINCAID, 2002, p. 152). It is on the very moment in which Lucy discovers that her mother named her after Lucifer, that she states “It was the moment I knew who I was” (KINCAID, 2002, p. 152). And this coming to know who she was has no negative meanings attached to it, quite on the contrary: “I went from feeling burdened and old and tired to feeling light, new, clean” (KINCAID, 2002, p. 152). A discovery that could have been seen as a negative one, due to a traditional negativity normally attached to the figure of Lucifer in Christian societies, is also subversively used by Kincaid as another moment of personal improvement. The connection between Lucy and Lucifer is explicitly installed, only to be subverted immediately after.

Besides installing and subverting concepts from *Paradise Lost* in a typical postmodern procedure, the narrative strategies used by Jamaica Kincaid go even further. It is what Ann Brooks states in her “The ‘Landscape of Postfeminism’” that might help to make this point clearer. *Annie John* and *Lucy*, due to their contents, can be said to be both feminist and post-colonial novels. According to Brooks, “Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant” (BROOKS, 1997, p. 95). What Kincaid does in her two first novels might serve as samples of what Brooks states concerning both feminist and post-colonial discourses.

When Kincaid associates the images of her characters to that of Milton’s Satan, she is exactly reinstating marginalized figures in the face of the dominant ideology. The protagonists of *Annie John* and *Lucy* are African-Caribbean female figures who would not normally have their voices heard due to the several forms of oppression they are forced to endure: “Women are among those whose representations are denied legitimacy” (BROOKS, 1997, p. 96). And yet, according to what Carole Boyce Davies states in her

Black Women, Writing and Identity – Migrations of the Subject, while commenting on Gayatri Spivak's seminal text "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in a patriarchal society, like the one Annie/Lucy/Kincaid found herself inserted into, a woman "is already positioned, represented, spoken for or constructed as absent or silent or not listened to in a variety of discourses. Her speech is already represented as non-speech" (DAVIES, 1994, p. 21).

If *Paradise Lost* was intended to make Annie/Lucy/Kincaid absorb the British patriarchal ideology, one of its most emblematic elements, Milton's Satan, served her as a channel through which her once silenced, absent voice could be heard. By making such use of an element of a literary work traditionally associated with the propagation of the Western patriarchal ideology, Kincaid effectively reinstates the marginalized figures of her characters, as well as her own in the face of the oppressive misogynist dominant culture.

Taking into consideration Craig Owens's words, the use Jamaica Kincaid does of Milton's Satan might also be seen as a political and epistemological one, "political in that it challenges the order of patriarchal society, epistemological in that it questions the structure of its representations" (OWENS apud BROOKS, 1997, p. 96). Kincaid's narrative strategies challenge 'the order of patriarchal society' in the sense that they turn the oppressive use made of a canonical misogynist literary work into a source for female emancipation. They also question the structures of the representations of patriarchal society for they subvert a literary work in whose content is supposedly "summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion" (WOOLF apud GILBERT; GUBAR, 1984, p. 190).

By accepting that her identity is intrinsically connected to an element of a canonical patriarchal literary work, by ultimately making the name her mother gave her part of her full name, Lucy Josephine Pooter, the protagonist of Kincaid's second novel

incorporates to her own identity the tradition which had previously oppressed her. As Homi Bhabha states, “The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2).

However, this partial identification is carried about in a very subversive manner. By entitling her second major strongly autobiographical work in prose *Lucy*, Kincaid at the same time installs and subverts the British literary tradition in the creation of her own identity. In Bhabha words, “In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of a tradition” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2), i.e. the title of Jamaica Kincaid’s strongly autobiographical second novel is a statement about the fact that the British literary tradition, that might be understood as the responsible for ‘restaging the past’ in Bhabha’s quotation, is a fundamental part of Kincaid’s identity. It restages the past for it brings connected to its possible meanings a whole set of practices associated to past experiences of oppression.

Nonetheless, it does not mean that Jamaica Kincaid’s use of that tradition is an uncritical one, quite on the contrary. The way she makes use of the British literary tradition through the work of John Milton is an extremely subversive one: she uses it as another form of achieving her emancipation, as well as of understanding and (re)creating her own identity. In this process, she alters the role and the structures of representation of this tradition themselves. In a sense, she becomes part of that same tradition she subverts, she “introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2), her own, into the very tradition which now she is also part of, the very tradition she also (re)invents when she becomes part of it.

As a consequence, “This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2). That is, in this process of

becoming part of and at the same time reinventing a tradition, Kincaid alters the very essence of this tradition. By being part of a tradition which was supposed to dominate her, Kincaid makes it no longer a 'received tradition', on the contrary, she in fact contests it "from within its own assumptions" (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 247). Concomitantly, she "estranges any immediate access to an originary identity" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 2) of her own and of anything else related to all this process.

She puts in evidence the idea that any identity, be it a person's, like Kincaid's itself, a character's, like her characters', as well as that of the Miltonic Satan, and even the identity of a tradition, are productions, creations which are never complete, but "always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (HALL, 2003, p. 234). By doing so, Jamaica Kincaid exposes the manner in which one may not only understand the forces which oppress him or her, but also how this process might ultimately lead to a more profound and effective interference in the (re)invention of both traditions and identities.

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Recebido em: 16/03/2016

Aceito em: 27/03/2016