

CELEBRATION OF AN INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S ANNIE JOHN

Hina D. Dobariya
Research Scholar,
Pacific University,
Udaipur, Rajasthan
India

Abstract

The present paper highlights juxtaposition of two different cultures in Kincaid work Annie John. She portrays the cultural confrontation between Caribbean culture and Western European culture. This is one of the most powerful attributes of any postcolonial writings. Why Kincaid does so is because she wants to prove her own culture supreme and thus to celebrate it. She deliberately devotes enough space to talk about obeah, its importance in Caribbean life, its influence on the mind of native people and finally its magical power to cure and to protect person from evil gaze. She even minutely describes the bathing activity, its types and its importance. Bath is not just an act of cleaning body. It carries cultural importance in Caribbean which might be point of minor observation to western people.

Key words: indigenous, cultural confrontation, obeah, colonizer-colonized.

Annie John is a fictional work by Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid which tries to describe the process of maturation of its protagonist. This kind of novel is normally known as bildungsroman. The protagonist of this novel is a ten year old Girl who is an exceptionally brilliant and person with a sharp receptive mind. She has fine blending of the head and the heart. She is the only child of her parents and is brought up with utmost care. She is provided with all possible facilities and comforts. The parents, who have assimilated the colonizer's culture, aim at creating her as a model child so that she could firm the ideal of a noble lady

Evocation of indigenous cultural dimension and its juxtaposition with a culture of colonizer at several places in the text, points out how the former was a better one. Kincaid identifies small but significant element of the indigenous culture that shows its difference from the colonizer's one. One such is a matter of taking bath. Bath is undertaken to keep body clean. Annie John's mother is an expert in giving both the normal bath and special bath. The special baths are normally carried out in consultation of with obeah women. This bath is supposed to bring the person out of the evil gaze of another one. This may sound to be superstitious to the colonizers, but for Annie John's mother, it had great significance. She would give her daughter such bath occasionally to save her from the 'evil eye' of the people. The bath for the indigenous people of the Caribbean island is like ritual whereas the colonizers it has no such meaning. Annie's mother in one of her conversations with the daughter reveals to her dislike for the English people for not taking regular bath. She observes:

It was the only thing she didn't like about English People: they didn't wash often enough or properly...my mother had said "Have you ever noticed how they smell as if they had been bottled up in a fish?" (p.36)

Annie's mother is an example of hybridity as Bhabha describes it. Annie's mother has double standards. She is also on the hand steeped in her indigenous culture and on other hand she has a strong

liking for the colonizer's culture as well. She openly admits to her daughter how special bath for her was. Annie recalls one such ritual bath:

... it was a special bath in which the barks and flowers of many different tress, together with all sorts of oils, were boiled in the same large caldron. We would then sit in this bath in a darkened room with a strange-smelling candle burning away(p.14)

Even a routine activity like bath carries a special cultural meaning for the indigenous people. The following lines show how bath could become a matter of gender consciousness. The upbringing of the male child was expected to be different from that of the female one and accordingly bath in cold water or hot water was an accepted practice. We are allowed to see this thing from the point of view of Annie John:

If I had been a boy, I would have gotten the same treatment, but since I was a Girl and on top of that went to school only with other Girls, my mother would always add some hot water to my bathwater to take of the chill. (p.14)

A good space is devoted to describing the bathing activity. This means Kincaid wants to show the better elements of her culture. It indirectly brings out the cultural difference between that of the natives and of the colonizers.

Similarly Kincaid also describes in detail culinary art. There are occasional references to the art of cooking. One of the references is as follows.

My mother started to prepare our lunch (pumpkin soup with droppers, banana fritters with salt fish stewed in unrobed and tomatoes fungal with salt fish stewed in antroba...) As my mother went about from pot to pot, stirring one, adding something to the other, I was ever in her wake. She dipped into a pot of boiling something or other to taste for correct seasoning ...(p.17)

Kincaid also points out how culture has its do's and don'ts to deter people from certain undesirable activities. To prevent a child from sucking thumb the indigenous Caribbean culture suggests a remedy for it. The following excerpt shows the uniqueness of the indigenous culture.

The Girl who sat at the desk next to mine suddenly stopped sucking her thumb because her mother had washed it in water in which a dead person had been given a bath.(p.8)

There are instance where in the indigenous culture and practices are highlighted, one of them is bathing in the sea without wearing swimming costumes. Annie's mother took her to red Islands on Sunday for taking a bath in order to strengthen kidneys. During such activities she would switch over to singing. The songs would be in French patois. The natural environment would push the mother to the indigenous culture which she was part of:

Since this bathing in the sea was a medicine and not a picnic, we had to bathe without wearing swimming costumes. (p.42)

Kincaid introduces the elements of obeah the black magic which is one of the significant aspects of the Caribbean culture. The Caribbeans have faith in the prescription of the obeah to get rid of the evil eye or the evil influence of some people. Obeah is in a ways something which is in direct conflict with the western scientific discourse of the medical science. By introducing obeah, Kincaid deliberately highlights native people's belief in ancient system of cure. There are two instances interwoven into the narrative in which Annie John's maternal grand mother Ma Chess plays an important role. The system of obeah is juxtaposed with the modern medical science in curing the ill-person. One of the incident is related to Ma-chess's son or Annie John's maternal uncle at the age of thirteen encountered a serious illness and good doctors was consulted just because John's father Pa chess had great faith in the

western medical science. The doctor treated him for two long years and John suddenly died one day. Ma chess was extremely angry with Pa chess because he had ignored her advice and had acted against her wish to consult an obeah. The death of John brought about a psychological separation between the husband and wife. The confrontation between them is articulated as follows:

Ma chess was sure that a doctor was the last thing he needed. Pa chess was sure that doctor was the one thing he needed and Pa chess got his way ... Then one day he died ... Ma chess did not attend the funeral, though she visited the grave on special occasions ... (p.125)

This attitude is a powerful proof how natives rooted in their culture would not like to budge at any cost. A similar incident is incorporated in the text towards the closure of the novel. It is connected with the mysterious illness of Annie John. Both the parents are worried about her illness. Annie John's father first consults a doctor because he has complete faith in the western discourse of the medical science. With all attempts to cure her however do not yield favorable result. Annie John's mother thinks of consulting the obeah woman. In this instance there is conflict between the mother and the father whether to consult an Obeah or not. Father makes it clear only in one sentence. The dogmatic assertion would have said 'very well, but count me out; have her come when I am not here.' (P-110) As said earlier Annie John's mother had a fascination for the culture of the colonial master and had accepted it a model. Hers is in an ambivalent attitude. Despite her intellectual reluctance she listens to the call of the heart and allows Ma chess to carry out the obeah ritual. She relents during her crisis. Kincaid in this instance shows how the indigenous treatment succeeded. In both these instances it becomes clear that obeah is the part of something unconscious which is difficult to explain in terms of the rational mind. There is a long description of the obeah ritual which cures Annie John. Kincaid makes the readers see the scene through Annie John's eyes;

Ma John came ... she burned some incense in one corner of my room... In the basin with the candles she had placed scraps of paper on which were written the names of people who had wanted to harm me ... (p.116,117)

After that, she was cured slowly under the influence of obeah. There are two simultaneous activities occurred together- falling of the rain and complete cure of Annie who was otherwise the victim of prolonged illness.

To this what Ferguson declares is that:

Through her grandmother, Annie John accepts the intervention and aboriginal world, part of the identity, she has fought for. Ma chess's success affirms the old ways and denies the validity of paternal disapproval of obeah. After this illness mysteriously vanishes. (p.10)

Annie John's mother relents in matters of obeah. The obeah woman's services are also deployed in making her daughter's journey safe. To ward off the evils spirit, the obeah woman prescribes certain remedies. Once again it is Annie John who describes the situation;

My underclothes had been sent to my mother's obeah woman and whatever she had done to my jewelry and underclothes would help to protect me from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune ... (p.134)

One of the major institutions that shape the psyche of the colonial subject is the Christian church. The presence of the church discovers the common Caribbean docile obedient and God-fearing. The masses fail to rebel or revolt. There is hardly any instance where in the masses register a sense of resistance or dissidence against their covert and overt exploitation. However, there are exceptions like Annie

John who have tendency to defy the imposing influence of the colonial culture. However, the colonial process of socialization has its impact on the natives but it is not hundred percent successful. There are stray instances wherein the protest against the institutional hegemony is registered. Kincaid also points out that the psyche of the average Caribbean is pro-colonial and he is indoctrinated in the colonial discourse but the process of indoctrination is not complete. The average Antiguan in times of crisis shows the tendency to seek help from the indigenous culture to which he is rooted. This ambivalence is visible in the character of Annie John's mother who is bent upon making her daughter a lady according to western culture. But she too embraces indigenous culture at the time of crisis and problem. It clearly indicates how Caribbean natives are deeply rooted in their own culture although there are waves of modern western culture.

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