

Diasporic Crisis of Acculturation in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*

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Abstract

The diasporic writing includes elements such as cultural conflicts, dual identity, isolation, acculturation, living in-between conditions and so on. This research paper attempts to bring out the Diasporic crisis of acculturation and to substantiate the protagonist as a symbol of independent young woman in the novel *LUCY*, written by Caribbean author Jamaica Kincaid who now lives in the United States. The term “acculturation” describes the cultural modification of an individual or group of people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture and also a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. The protagonist in the novel, though an African, she stoops herself to adopt the culture of America and stands as a symbol of an independent young woman.

Keywords

Caribbean, gender identification, acculturation, cultural specificity

Introduction

Being a writer from the Caribbean society, Jamaica Kincaid portrayed her childhood in a semi-autobiographical novel, *Lucy*. Many critics have called our attention to the issue of mother-daughter relationship in this novel. The role of maternal figure, that it is often argued, is due to gender inequality marked by the sexual privilege of men in this region. *Lucy* appropriates the setting of the West Indies when the narrator recalls her experiences in Antigua and a Western locus in present. The term “acculturation” describes the cultural modification of an individual or group of people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture and also a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. The protagonist in the novel, though an African, she stoops herself to adopt the culture of America and stands as a symbol of an independent young woman. This research paper attempts to bring out the Diasporic crisis of acculturation and to substantiate the protagonist as a symbol of independent young woman.

Diasporic Crisis of Acculturation

The term “diaspora” had traditionally been used exclusively to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people following their expulsion from the Holy Land. Associated with loss, exile, and persecution, for many years the word ‘diaspora’ connoted ‘tragedy’. Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define “diaspora” as “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new

regions...” (Ashcroft 68). Many critics spoke about the problem of adjusting and adapting of the people who leave their homeland which is a prime and prominent problem. Schwartz opines:

Acculturation refers to changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences. Acculturation research generally focuses on immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, who are assumed to be permanently settled in their new home-land—although these three groups may be quite different from one another. As a result, we use the terms *migrants* or *international migrants* to refer to these three groups collectively, but where applicable, we discuss ways in which our hypotheses or propositions differ by type of migrant. (238)

The novel *Lucy* is semi-autobiography of Jamaica Kincaid. The protagonist of the novel *Lucy* moves from British- ruled Caribbean homeland to America to work for a wealthy family. Being a young woman, she longs for love, education and individual freedom but these are denied to her because of acculturation. *Lucy* is a true representative of the majority of women immigrants who are willing to change or adapt to the culture of the host country for the betterment of their lives. Though *Lucy* assimilates two different cultures, she remains as a typical example of an independent woman.

In the words of Jeff Lewis, “Culture is an assemblage of imaginings and meanings that are generated by a given social group” (Lewis 18). The novel *Lucy* puts forth two different cultures that of Caribbean culture from where *Lucy* grew up in and the American culture where she had gone as an immigrant woman. Though she has double identity she struggles with taking on the identity of a Black woman once she has arrived in America. *Lucy*’s identity is defined by her employers who see her only as a black woman. They call her “Poor visitor, poor visitor” (14) which made her feel alienated. She comes to work in America as an au pair, a foreign girl employed to look after children and help with housework, for Lewis and Mariah and their four children. They mark her identity as a black woman.

According to Amado M. Padilla and William Perez,

Acculturation is a social process that occurs in a context in which a new comer and the members of the host culture are in dynamic contact with each other.” (25)

For instance, *Lucy* who is a newcomer to the white culture and Lewis, Mariah and their four children who belong to the host culture mingle together. Especially, Mariah often reminds *Lucy* more and more about her own mother. *Lucy* lists the similarities Mariah has with her mother. She says, “Mariah reminded me more and more of the parts of my mother that I loved” and she recalls, “their hands looked like instruments for arranging things beautifully” (59). This social process of mingling shows the amalgamation of two different cultures which is termed as acculturation.

Berry developed a model of acculturation in which receiving-culture acquisition and heritage-culture retention are cast as independent dimensions. Within Berry's model, these two dimensions intersect to create four acculturation categories – *assimilation* – adopts the receiving culture and discards the heritage culture, *separation* – rejects the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture, *integration* – adopts the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture, and *marginalization* – rejects both the heritage and receiving cultures. (Schwartz 239)

The protagonist Lucy is analyzed by two categories among the four that are assimilation and marginalization. On the basis of the first category of assimilation, Lucy accepts the new culture and rejects her own culture. She does not want to go back to her homeland which gives importance only to the male children. That post-colonized island gives definition for woman as, “a sense of duty to parents; obedience to the law and worship of convention” (133). Her mother or motherland named her as “Lucy, short for Lucifer” (154), Satan. She dislikes her mother for insisting her to live as her mother wants her to, whereas the new culture accepts the woman as she is. Lewis and Mariah are happy to have four daughters. Lucy tries to belong to the white culture rather than to be a part of black culture. For instance, on the journey to Mariah's childhood home, Lucy observes a few physical differences between herself and the passengers on the train. She thinks “the other people sitting down to eat dinner all looked like Mariah's relatives; the people waiting on them all looked like mine” (32). Geographically, the Caribbean island always has summer season whereas the other parts of the world have all the four seasons by which Lucy is impressed.

Secondly, on the basis of Berry's another category of marginalization, rejecting both the heritage and receiving cultures. Lucy is portrayed as the marginalized. She rejects both her native and host cultures and wishes to be free from the cultural bonds. She detaches herself from her own black mother and Mariah, the white mother. She says, “I am not like my mother. She and I are not alike” (123). She dislikes both the cultures where men consider women as sexual objects like her father and Lewis. This novel also has the elements of epistolary novel in which her mother keeps on sending her letters which are unread and burnt. Lucy's behavior shows her will to live against the acculturation and marginalization of both her native and receiving cultures. Almost all diasporic writers express the manner in which they have adopted to their environment and how they have experienced both identification with and alienation from their old and new homelands through their writings. Some of well-known diasporic writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerji, all mainly focus on the struggles and loss of identity in their new culture whereas Jamaica Kincaid sheds light on the ability of an independent immigrant woman through her character Lucy.

Byerman argues that Lucy's anger towards Antigua comes from the uncompromising relationship she has with her mother. Because her mother plays such an influential role in her life, "Female identity within Antiguan culture can only be defined in terms of the mother, and since, the mother passes down the culture, she is the source of national identity" (Byerman 91). For this reason, Lucy's entire upbringing as she believes "was devoted to preventing her from becoming a slut" (127). Lucy reacts against her mother, by engaging in many sexual relationships. She exposes herself, without inhibition, for men she encounters in her life, defying her mother's conventions, and proving her mother's conceptions that Lucy should remain "clean, virginal and beyond reproach" (97), an image of woman, "Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female-this word is sufficient to define her" (132), that Lucy rejects for herself as a young woman. Lucy always raises the questions against her mother's belief, and to prove this, she shares an incident:

When I was about five years old or so, I had read to me for the first time the story of Jesus Christ feeding the multitudes with seven loaves and a few fishes. After my mother had finished reading this to me, I said to her, "But how did Jesus serve the fish? boiled or fried?" This made my mother look at me in amazement and shake her hand. She then told everybody she met what I had said, and they would shake their heads and say, "What a child!" It wasn't really such an unusual question. (38)

From the beginning of the novel, Lucy stands for her freedom both in the native and foreign cultures. For instance, Lucy vacates from Lewis and Mariah's apartment and gets a new job and buys a new apartment. She proudly utters the following sentence with a sense of belonging, satisfaction and self-determination. "The next day I woke up in a new bed, and it was my own. I had bought it with my money. The roof over my head was my own" (144).

Conclusion

This paper has thus, examines the Diasporic crisis of acculturation and concludes the protagonist as a symbol of independent young woman in the novel *Lucy*. 'Will to Live' is a state of mind which enables people to move on further ignoring the hurdles of the life. As long as one exists in the world, whatever may be the situation or whoever may be the person, one must possess originality. Originality in people is possible only when they have the 'will to live' as they want. Being an immigrant, Lucy acculturates the twin culture-Caribbean and American cultures. Being a black woman, she wears the mask of dual identity-black and white identities. Being a woman, she tolerates double pain given by her gender and her color. But, having the spirit of living independently, she becomes the heroine of immigrants and the novel too.

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