

**Struggle for Independence:**  
**Postcolonialism Reflected in the Problematic**  
**Parent-Child Relationships in the Works of**  
**Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat**

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Jamaica Kincaid ja Edwidge Danticat ovat kotoisin Karibialta mutta asuvat Yhdysvalloissa. Käsittelen tutkimuksessani Danticatin romaania *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995) sekä kahta Kincaidin romaania *My Brother* (1997) ja *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Nämä teokset ovat enemmän tai vähemmän fiktionaalisia omaelämäkertoja, joiden avulla kirjailijat käsittelevät tärkeitä aiheita jälkikolonialistisessa kontekstissa. Se, että osa sisällöstä on fiktionaalista, mahdollistaa niiden tulkinnan yleisemmällä tasolla, ei vain tiettyjen yksilöiden elämien kuvauksina.

Argumentoin tässä tutkimuksessa, että Kincaidin ja Danticatin kuvaamat ongelmalliset suhteet äidin/isän ja tyttären välillä kuvaavat laajemmassa mitassa suhdetta kolonisoijan ja kolonisoidun välillä. Teoksien äidit ja isät edustavat siirtomaavaltioita, jotka kontrolloivat siirtomaita ja yrittävät juurruttaa paikallisiin asukkaisiin länsimaisia arvoja ja alemmuuden tunteita. Tutkimukseni romaaneissa vanhemmat kieltävät lapsiltaan autonomisen olemassaolon ja kontrolloivat tyttäriensä ruumista ja seksuaalisuutta. Tyttäret kuvataan teoksien alkuvaiheessa hylättyinä ja kukistettuina kuin siirtomaavallan alla elävät orjat. Tyttäret eivät kuitenkaan alistu heille määrättyyn objekti-asemaan, vaan taistelevat saavuttaakseen vallan omaan elämäänsä. He taistelevat niin suoranaista valtaa vastaan kuin myös vanhempiensa epäsuoraa vaikutusta vastaan – mitkä voidaan rinnastaa kolonialismiin ja neokolonialismiin. Tässä taistelussa tyttäret tukeutuvat asioihin ja ominaisuuksiin, jotka luontaisesti kuuluvat heille: heidän ruumiisiinsa, muistiinsa ja muihin älyllisiin voimanvaroihinsa. Se etäisyys, joka tyttärillä on vanhempiensa aiheuttaa myös kuilun heidän suhteessaan omaan kotimaahansa. Taistellessaan itsenäisyydestään niin tyttären kuin siirtomaidenkin täytyy juurruttaa itsensä kotimaahansa ja siihen perintöön, joka tulee heidän esi-isiltään – ei kolonisoijilta. Luodakseen vahvan jälkikolonialistisen identiteetin he eivät voi sivuuttaa historiaansa alistettuina, vaan heidän täytyy käsitellä ja kirjoittaa uudelleen tuo historia omalta näkökannaltaan ja tulla omien elämäkertojensa kertojiksi.

Tutkimukseni kannalta tärkeimmät kirjallisuudenteorian osa-alueet ovat jälkikolonialistinen teoria sekä kolmannen maailman feminismi. On tärkeää, että Kincaid ja Danticat kirjoittavat kolonialismin vaikutuksista nimenomaan naisen näkökulmasta. Kolmannen maailman naisia on kuvailtu viimeiseksi siirtomaaksi, joka elää kolonisoidun roolissa päivittäin, vaikka kolonialismi onkin lakkautettu. Romaaniensa tyttären välityksellä Kincaid ja Danticat antavat äänen ihmisryhmälle, joka on ollut kauan hiljennettyä.

Asiasanat: postcolonialism, third world feminism, parent-child relationship, Caribbean

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## 1. Introduction

I come from a place  
where breath, eyes, and memory are one,  
a place from which you carry your past  
like the hair on your head.  
(Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 234)

This quotation demonstrates the truth which is recurrent both in Danticat and Kincaid's works: one cannot escape the past. A person's identity is very much defined by the past and by his/her origins, although not restricted by them. Danticat and Kincaid are both immigrants to the United States and they have had to construct their postcolonial identities and learn to understand their relationship with their lands of origin in the Caribbean. The two important elements in this process are remembering the past and producing knowledge through autobiographical writing. What makes Danticat and Kincaid interesting authors is the fact that they belong simultaneously to two silenced groups: they are not only writing in the postcolonial context, but very specifically giving voice to women in the third world. It is not surprising that often they are read as representatives of their Caribbean nations, whether or not Kincaid and Danticat intend it. What they write as 'personal' is interpreted as 'national' and 'specific' as 'general'. This kind of reading has its strengths and its limitations. On one hand, it allows an in depth understanding of difficult and large postcolonial issues through personal narratives and allows the reader to see what it actually means for a postcolonial nation to struggle for its independence. But on the other hand, there is a danger of overgeneralization since individual problems do not always represent the problems faced on a national level. I acknowledge these strengths and limitations as I set to find out answers for my research questions.

My research material consists of three novels: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995) by Edwidge Danticat and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) and *My Brother* (1997) by Jamaica Kincaid. I will deal with one of the main themes in all the three novels: the

problematic parent-child relationship. I will demonstrate how the parent-child relationship is a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. Furthermore, I will discuss whether, and to what extent, these individual narratives about a child and a parent represent the larger relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, reflecting both colonialism as well as neo-colonialism. So I will concentrate on the struggle for independence at the personal as well as the national level. Since the books mainly deal with relationships between mothers and daughters, they will also be my main concern. But I will not ignore the father figures in the novels, even though they are less visible than the mothers, since they offer valuable insight into the relationship of power. Through the complicated problems and attitudes between the children and their parents in the novels, Danticat and Kincaid address stereotypically racist and imperialistic representations of the Caribbean and more specifically of the Caribbean women. They challenge patriarchal and Western values through strong female protagonists who do not remain victimized but instead fight for their rights as free individuals.

The literature of Caribbean postcolonial writers, especially female writers, has been marginalized in the academic world and has only recently started to gain academic attention and respect. I find that these postcolonial writers represent an important field of study since they encourage the readers to think critically about human society and redefine their ideas about history, race, language, gender and Eurocentric values in general. Today's societies are multicultural and questions about home and belonging develop into complex discussions. The possibilities of migration are increasing and an ever-growing population is living in countries where they, or their parents, were not born. Silvio Torres-Saillant predicts in *Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (2006) that "diasporic actions, ideas, and forms of utterance will shape the lives of societies in the century we have just entered" (2006, 243). It is thus important to study diasporic writers who deal with problems of identity and talk about the concepts of home and homelessness. The issues concerned become even more complex

when there is a background of conquest involved. Writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat are not afraid to talk about the cruel realities faced by people living in literal or metaphorical exile, or about the haunting images of colonial history which continue to shape their position in today's society.

My research deals with issues which touch upon many interrelated fields of literary theory. However, in my research I will concentrate on the two theoretical fields which I find are the most relevant ones, namely postcolonial theory and third world feminism. I will present these two theoretical fields in section 3 and further demonstrate their relevance to my topic. But even though the female perspective is important, my research will not fall under the category of feminist literary criticism. Rather, I will be emphasizing the postcolonial perspective throughout my thesis. My analysis is divided into two main sections: In the first one I will show how the relationship between a parent and a child is a relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the colonizer and the colonized. In the second section I will concentrate on the ways in which the daughters struggle for their independence and the degree to which they attain it. The results of this analysis will be discussed in the conclusion in which I will further compare the two levels of my study, the personal and the national. But before I go deeper into my research, in section 2 I will present the two authors of my research and Caribbean female writing in general.

There have been some previous studies about Kincaid and Danticat's works. To mention one which is related to my study, Nina Penttinen's M. A. thesis "'Who was I?' The Problem of Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*" (2001) deals with the problems of identity and the mother-daughter relationship in Kincaid's works. However, as the title already shows, she concentrates on the novels *Annie John* and *Lucy*. In her thesis Penttinen deals with the mother-daughter relationship from a psychological point of view and she also discusses quite thoroughly the autobiographical aspect of Kincaid's novels. I will

position my research specifically in the postcolonial context, and study the effects of colonialism on the parent-child relationship, also taking into consideration the father figures. Whereas *Annie John* and *Lucy* center on adolescence, the novels in my research expand the discussion of adolescence to issues that arise in adulthood and with motherhood. Together the three novels *Breath, Eyes, Memory (BEM)*, *The Autobiography of My Mother (AMM)* and *My Brother (MB)* offer versatile examples about different types of parent-child relationships and ways in which the daughters seek their autonomous identities.

## **2. Postcolonial writers in diaspora**

As Gay Wilentz points out, the term “diaspora” was originally “coined to reflect the scattered colonies of exiled Jews outside of Palestine” (1992, 385). Nowadays the term has been seen as apposite to the experiences of other minority groups as well, such as Muslims, African Americans and most recently postcolonial migrants (Israel, 2000, 3). However, it must be noted that when the concept of diaspora is used in the Caribbean context, it becomes complex and multidimensional. First of all, the roots of the Caribbean people can be traced back not only to the Island Caribs and Arawaks (who were of South American origin) but across the sea to Africa and Europe as well (Conzemius, 1928, 186). Thus a great number of Caribbean people can be said to live in diaspora, far from their ancestral lands of origin. Added to this already existing multidimensional background, yet another great number of Caribbean people have immigrated for example to the United States, thus adding another layer to their diasporic realities. Kincaid and Danticat, like many Caribbean authors who have attained international recognition, belong to the latter group.

### **2.1 Caribbean female writing as diasporic**

Caribbean women writers began to emerge as a recognizable group in the 1970s. That is not to say that there were no Caribbean female writers before the 1970s, only that the literary field was dominated by male writers. West Indian nationalist movements in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s focused on a masculine perspective (Hoving, 2001, 2, 3). The rise of Caribbean female writers coincides with the rise of “the African-American feminist/womanist novel in the United States” (Hoving, 2001, 5). The 1970s saw a rise in African-American women’s feminist struggles, evolving in connection to the second wave feminism. Many Caribbean writers were living in either the United States or the United Kingdom at that time and the



women's feminist struggles inspired these writers to develop Caribbean feminism (Hoving, 2001, 5).

The Caribbean women writers who began to attain visibility in the literary world were expressing themselves in one of the dominant languages: English, French or Spanish. In order to be published, these writers also saw the necessity of writing from the assumed centre (Europe and the United States). The Caribbean literature which began to emerge was therefore highly diasporic and remained as such for decades to come. Much of the literature which has attained international visibility and which has been translated into other languages comes from Caribbean writers who have succeeded as writers in Europe or in the USA. Considering their multidimensional stand point, Hoving justly states that “the multiplicity and hybridity of their writing is unparalleled” (2001, 6). Jamaica Kincaid and Edwidge Danticat are such writers. Others like them are the Dominican-descended Julia Alvarez , Pauline Melville who was born in Guyana and Jamaican-American Michelle Cliff. These authors have immigrated early on in their lives and created a career in writing in the United States and the Great Britain. But even though these writers have in many ways become westernized they still retain “their native lands as their existential ground and as the center of their political sphere” (Torres-Saillant, 2006, 251). In an interview conducted by Patrick Samway Edwidge Danticat says that even though she feels comfortable living in the United States she still considers Haiti both as her “country” and as her “home” (Samway, 2004, 2). To write about their home countries necessitates their diasporic existence, as Kincaid states in her autobiographical book *My Brother*: “I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best” (*MB*, 162). This should not lessen their contribution to Caribbean writing, rather their distance from the Caribbean allows these authors to reflect profoundly upon their Caribbean identities. Kincaid continues by asserting her attachment her Caribbean origin: “I - - knew them best because I was from them, of them, and so often felt I was them” (*MB*, 162).

One of the major features in postcolonial writing is the concern with place and displacement (Ashcroft et al, 1989, 8). Displacement can be literally a dislocation which has resulted for example from migration or enslavement, or it may be the result of “the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, 9). Either way, displacement is characterized by loss and alienation. However, in the construction of postcolonial identity this dislocation can be turned to advantage. Hoving describes displacement as an ambivalent concept: “it is a sign of loss, but also a potential for personal transformation, and thus an opportunity to choose new subject positions” (2001, 28). The term ‘diaspora’ has acquired a positive resonance as well, “bespeaking a sense of tenacity, resistance, and preservation of faith during the worst of circumstances” (Israel, 2000, 2). Postcolonial writers in literal or metaphorical diaspora need to find their roots and build a relationship between self and place.

## **2.2 Danticat, Kincaid and Autobiography**

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969 to André and Rose Danticat. Edwidge’s parents, however, immigrated to the United States when she was only four years old and she was therefore separated from her parents for eight years (Atanasoski, 2005, 1). Danticat was raised by her aunt and uncle and consequently she had no memories of her father and only a few strong memories about her mother abandoning her. The absence of a mother is a recurring theme in Danticat’s literary works. When interviewed by Bonnie Lyons Danticat talks about her mother leaving her: “I felt it was inconceivable that my mother and I wouldn’t always be together. It felt like a terrible abandonment” (Lyons, 2003, 196). At the age of twelve, in 1981, Danticat joined her parents in Brooklyn, New York City. When she first came to the United States she spoke little English, having spoken only Creole and French

in Haiti. She was at first teased at school for her Haitian accent and hairstyle. Danticat, however, was always proud of her origins and soon started writing about her motherland. Even though Danticat's parents wanted her to study medicine, she insisted on writing and eventually earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Brown University. An earlier version of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* served as her thesis at Brown University (Atanasoski, 2005, 1). In between writing books, Danticat has been teaching creative writing at the Universities of New York and Miami (Valbrun, 2004, 1).

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in 1949 in Saint John's, the capital of the Caribbean island of Antigua. Antigua achieved political independence from the Great Britain in 1981 but has remained part of the British Commonwealth. Kincaid's mother is Annie Richardson Drew and her stepfather David Drew was a carpenter. Kincaid never came to know well her real father who showed no interest in her and later on disinherited Kincaid. (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, 1, 2). Kincaid had a very close relationship with her mother for the nine years she was an only child. The births of Kincaid's three younger brothers drew her emotionally away from her mother and led the family into a state of greater poverty. Kincaid's education in Antigua imitated an English public-school education. But to her great disappointment, at the age of thirteen, she was taken away from school to help her mother take care of the boys. Kincaid's mother did not appreciate her daughter's love of books and this finally led to Kincaid's departure from Antigua to work as an au pair in New York (Seaman, 2001, 2). During her time as an au pair, Kincaid transformed herself into a fashionable, hip, and fearless American and secured a high school equivalency diploma. Ignoring her parents' wishes, Kincaid started pursuing a career in writing. In order to keep her literary pursuits secret works from her family, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid in 1973 (Seaman, 2001, 3). Kincaid's career as a writer really began when she started working for the *New Yorker*. She became a staff writer in 1976 and much of her work appeared first in

the pages of the *New Yorker* (Seaman, 2001, 3). With thirty years of personal experience in the field of literature, Kincaid is now recognized as a leading American writer. She continues to publish while also teaching creative writing at Bennington College and Harvard University (Paravisini-Gebert, 1999, 21, 22).

For both Danticat and Kincaid the world of literature really began to open up when they arrived in the United States. Before coming to the United States, Danticat read mostly in French and only books by male authors. She tells that back in Haiti “writing almost felt like it was a forbidden activity. Being poor and being female, it was unheard of to write books” (Lyons, 2003, 192). Similarly, when Kincaid first started writing she did not even know that there was such a thing as a West Indian writer, to say nothing of a West Indian literary tradition. During her childhood Kincaid actually thought that “writing was something no one did anymore” (Ferguson, 1994, 170). She did not know that writers still existed. Donna Seaman explains that Kincaid’s “schooling, and the public library collection she depended on to feed her unquenchable hunger for books, brought her no further than 1900, so it never occurred to her that great literature could be written in her lifetime” (Seaman, 2001, 2). It was only after they arrived in the United States that Kincaid and Danticat became familiar with modern female writers and began to realize the possibilities of fictional writing. Danticat recalls being influenced by African-American authors, especially Paule Marshall whom she has described as her “teacher and literary foremother” (Gadsby, 2006, 143).

Danticat and Kincaid have some differences when it comes to their style of writing. Kincaid’s style embodies in a more explicit way the characteristics of black female aesthetics. Scholars have argued that while men’s writing can be described in terms of rationality and linearity, there exists in contrast a specifically feminist way of writing. (Edmondson, 1992, 84). Belinda Edmondson lists the properties usually mentioned in relation to either feminist/feminine aesthetics or black aesthetics—which are often both described in

similar terms: the narrative is fragmented, circular, or otherwise antilinear, realist and free of “the ‘elitist’ stylistic innovations of the modernist and postmodernist schools” (1992, 76, 79, 80). Kincaid repeatedly relies on her use of first-person monologues in lyrical prose, filled with vivid characterization. Kincaid’s style is often described to be very simple, but it is deceptively so, since she succeeds in capturing complex emotions and in depicting difficult and diverse issues. And in the typical way of *l’écriture féminine* her narratives are nonlinear, often fluctuating between the past and the present. On the other hand, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat writes Sophie’s first person narrative in a chronological order, and a large part of the narrative is told via dialogue. Furthermore, Danticat’s style is even simpler than Kincaid’s who nevertheless has a stronger lyrical aspect in her writing. However, I will not be dealing with these aesthetic considerations in more detail since they are irrelevant to my research questions. In actual fact, it is arguable whether such categories as women’s writing and men’s writing serve a useful purpose. Especially in the postcolonial context where authors fight against limited perspectives and stereotypical categorization of people, the notion of specific black female aesthetics can be a barrier. Black female authors may feel that they need to submit to particular ways of thinking and expressing in order to be heard. This may hinder their abilities to describe the genuine black female experience in their own personal way. Thus I will not emphasize the differences in the writing styles between Danticat and Kincaid. Rather, the importance lies in the contents of their narratives.

Even though Kincaid and Danticat left their lands of origin when they were young, these homelands have had an enormous influence on their writing. Much of their work is autobiographical and their protagonists struggle with the same problems that Kincaid and Danticat have faced during their lives. Autobiographical writing has allowed Kincaid and Danticat to deal with complex postcolonial issues. In an interview conducted by Ferguson, Kincaid has commented on the autobiographical nature of her writing:

For me it was really an act of saving my life, so it had to be autobiographical. I am someone who had to make sense out of my past. It is turning out that it is much more complicated than that when I say my past, because for me I have to make sense of my ancestral past—where I am from, my historical past, my group historical past, my group ancestry. - - I had to write or I would have died. I can't think of anything else I could have done (Ferguson, 1994, 176).

Many postcolonial women authors write about the construction of their own identity and therefore it is not surprising that they choose the genre of autobiography. Mohanty notes that in the last two decades “numerous publishing houses in different countries have published autobiographical or life story-oriented texts by Third World feminists” (2003, 78). One of the strengths of this genre is that it allows the postcolonial writer to claim authority over her own life story and history, formerly controlled by the colonizer. The author is also at liberty to choose the degree of autobiography she wishes to use – she is at liberty to fictionalize her own life. For Jamaica Kincaid the two novels *My Brother* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* represent the opposite ends on the scale of autobiography. In *My Brother*, Kincaid writes as her own self about her own experiences, which makes the novel much like a traditional autobiography. Contrarily to the implications of the title, *The Autobiography of My Mother* is only very loosely autobiographical. Rather than talking about her actual life, Kincaid creates a fictional story about what her life might have been had she been living without a mother. Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* settles in between these two and could be described as a fictional autobiography. The main difference between autobiography and fictional autobiography lies in the degree of assumed factuality. As Penttinen notes in her thesis,

the reader of an autobiography assumes that the events recorded in the autobiography are true. A fictional autobiography, part fictional and part autobiographical, changes all that, since the reader cannot be sure which parts of the autobiography are fiction and which are true (2001, 36).

But why would a writer decide to fictionalize parts of her narrative? One reason is that it allows the writer to deal with a larger variety of issues without losing the authoritative voice

inherent in autobiography. In this way he/she can talk about events or problems which might not have been that relevant in their personal lives but are important in the autobiography of their nation. Another reason for fictionalizing parts is that it allows the writer to take distance of their personal experiences to look at the big picture and critically observe their lives.

What needs to be remembered is that an autobiography, no matter how “pure”, is always fictional and untruthful to a degree. An autobiography is always a reinterpretation of the past and relies on personal memory. Paul Jay has therefore argued that it is in fact pointless to distinguish autobiography from autobiographical fiction since autobiography is always “made up, created or imagined - - not real” (as quoted in Smith, Watson, 2001, 186). Autobiography is always subjective and remembering the past is not a passive process. As Daniel L. Schacter has suggested, “memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves” (as quoted in Smith, Watson, 2001, 16). The fact that the writer is not simply recording his/her past, but a personal interpretation of that past, adds complexity to reading autobiographical writing. It also brings us back to the limitations mentioned in section 1: can we make generalizations about the nation’s narrative based on personal narratives? Since autobiographical narratives record personal interpretations of the past, it cannot be assumed that the same events would be interpreted in a similar manner on a more general level. Gertrude Stein captures well the problematic behind autobiography:

[Y]ou are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself - - it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself (as quoted in Smith, Watson, 2001, 15).

This is why third wave autobiography critics have challenged old notions of autobiographical truthfulness and factuality (Rodriguez, 1999, 3). Autobiography studies is a complex field of criticism which is related to many other theoretical and psychological fields. What is relevant to my study, however, is mostly how autobiographical writing is used in the narrative

construction of identity, taking into consideration its limitations as a means of truthful representation of reality.



### 3. Postcolonialism and third world feminism

And so everywhere they went  
they turned it into England;  
and everybody they met they turned English.  
But no place could ever really be England,  
and nobody who did not look exactly like them  
would ever be English  
(Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988, 24)

Both postcolonial writers and third world feminists speak back to the assumed centre. They are giving voice to people who for centuries have been represented as ‘other’ in comparison to the superiority of Europeans, or women as the ‘other’ of men. As the quotation above shows, during the colonial period, English values and ways of living were considered the norm and the colonizers saw it as their duty to civilize the colonized people – trying to impose their ideology and their language. The colonized people were represented “as lesser: less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass” (Boehmer, 1995, 79). Colonized people had been deprived of their sense of humanity and their pride; they had no place to call their own, nor did they have the ability to narrate their own history. In short, they were not in control of their lives. In this section I will map out the main concerns in postcolonial and third world feminist writing.

#### 3.1 Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism is about regaining power not only in the present time but also power over one’s own history. One cannot go back in time but one can rewrite history from another point of view. In Boehmer’s words the “postcolonial quest was to establish control over the past and to give it form” (1995, 199). Colonized people had to turn to history to find out who they were and to describe themselves in ways that did not reflect the colonizer’s voice. Boehmer

further adds: “The need was for roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national foremothers and –fathers: in short, for a restorative history” (1995, 186). In order to build a nation’s identity on a firm ground, the roots needed to go to a time prior to the colonizers’ presence. Postcolonial theorist Amílcar Cabral has written about the struggle for national independence and the role of history in this struggle and I will use some of his ideas in the analysis later on. Much of this ancestral history has survived through the practice of story-telling as well as in songs. Mohanty quotes Sistren and Ford-Smith on the importance of tales as carriers of history:

The tales are one of the places where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged, for over the years the tale tellers convert fact into images which are funny, vulgar, amazing or magically real. These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is. - - They bring to the surface factors which would otherwise disappear or at least go very far underground (Sistren with Ford-Smith 1987 as quoted in Mohanty, 2003, 79).

It is thus only natural that many postcolonial writers are inspired by these stories which allow them to reconnect with the past uncontrolled by colonizers. Edwidge Danticat has also recognized the influence of story-telling to her writing. In an interview conducted by Bonnie Lyons Danticat has described herself as a writer: “I am a wearer of tales. I tell stories” (Lyons, 2003, 192). Postcolonial writers plant the roots of their writing into the ancestral tales in order to give voice to new postcolonial stories which have remained untold.

Boehmer recognizes “the post 1945 moment of anticolonial and (usually) nationalist upsurge” (1995, 184) as the unambiguous starting point for what is known as postcolonial literature. At first, postcolonial literature was closely related to nationalist movements. The anti-imperialist nationalists took the task of rediscovering their people’s identity which they believed would be “recoverable intact, unadulterated by the depredations of colonialism” (Boehmer, 1995, 100). But as I will show in my analysis, the colonial past cannot simply be erased and one cannot successfully build an identity separate from the facts

of the past. The legacy of colonialism has to be acknowledged and, as Boehmer puts it, “reinterpreted” (1995, 115). This is why postcolonial writers face a dilemma: How can they gain power over their own selves and their history while also accommodating their colonial inheritance? Postcolonial writers answer this question by adopting the writing forms inherited from the colonizers and manipulating them to suit their own purposes. They turn the colonizer’s language and literary traditions against them by taking control of their use. The colonizers “lost the sole charge of the pen that colonial privilege had for years guaranteed as theirs” (Boehmer, 1995, 101). By using the English language and English literary genres the colonized people can express their pride as the other.

The colonized began to celebrate what the colonizers had considered inferior and cherished everything that was native to them and their lands – not imposed by others. As Ashcroft et al. point out, “[m]arginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy” (1989, 12). This feature will be clearly seen also in Kincaid and Danticat’s works. The ancestral past, the human body and the land were sources of inspiration. Furthermore, the fictional narrative provided “a rich medium - - with its potential to compose alternative realities” (Boehmer, 1995, 185). Before a colonized nation could reconstruct its identity in reality, it had to imagine it. Fictional writing was an important stage in the struggle for independence since it allowed a reconstruction of identity in the collective imagination. When a colonial nation could articulate its autonomy, it was one big step closer to achieving it. Important literature in the history of early postcolonial writing include Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Importantly, C. L. R. James’s book *The Black Jacobins* was published already in 1938. C. L. R. James wrote much ahead of his time and has had a crucial role in unfolding the Caribbean history from the perspective of the colonized. In his introduction to *The Black Jacobins*, James Walvin remarks: “Thus, at a stroke, the whole

focus of attention was shifted onto the history of the slaves themselves. Effectively for the first time, James gave slaves an agency” (2001, viii). The important historical episode which James depicts in his book—that is the slave revolt of St Dominique/Haiti in 1791—is a crucial event in the history of the Caribbean since it was “the only successful slave revolt in the Americas” and contributed to the forthcoming emancipations (Walvin, 2001, xii).

The question of language has always been a difficult problem among postcolonial writers. Choosing to write about the postcolonial experience in English does not occur without difficulty. Fanon, for example, has made the argument that using a language means assuming a culture (Fanon, 1952, 38). Thus, in an effort to come closer to one’s culture of origin, one might actually end up quite far from it. One cannot forget the fact that “[o]ne of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language”. Language is a medium through which the colonizers established power and conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ (Ashcroft et al, 1989, 7). Can one really rebuild a fragmented identity by yielding to the colonizer’s language? Even Jamaica Kincaid, who writes in English, says in *A Small Place* that the “language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me” (1988, 32). However, despite these limitations, Kincaid does choose to write about her postcolonial experience in English. There is a gap between language and the actual postcolonial reality, which the writer has to reduce in his/her own way. Some writers do this by borrowing words and expressions from their native languages into their English writing and they might also manipulate the English grammar in order to express the structure of their own language in English. Ashcroft et al. talk about two important strategies in post-colonial writing in English: abrogation and appropriation. Abrogation is described as

a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words (1989, 38).

The next stage, appropriation, is a process by which "the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience - - capturing and remolding the language to new usages" (1989, 38). This is not a simple process and does not solve all the problems but nevertheless one cannot dismiss the great advantages that come from using English: in brief getting your voice heard. The reality still is that the chances of getting your work published and read by a large audience are enormously better when you write in one of the dominant languages.

The actual term *postcolonialism* still needs further clarification. Literally speaking 'post' means 'after' and thus the term seems to imply that colonialism has ended. But, as Hoving states, "colonialism has by no means disappeared; it has merely taken on a new shape" (2001, 22). Imperialism did not simply end when European empires relinquished their colonies. The effects of colonialism can still be seen in the excolonized countries and, to a certain extent, the imperial powers still remain in control. The forms of control are less direct than in the imperial era, and are manifest for example in economic and cultural dependence (Katrak, 2006, 12). When I talk about the postcolonial context in this thesis, I will use the term in its larger sense, including these indirect forms of control which continue to exist. The term *neocolonialism* has been coined in order to emphasize the various ways in which colonialism still exists, often hidden behind a discussion about globalization.

One important area in which the Europeans still exercise their power is the academic world. As Shanili Puri says, "Latin America and the Caribbean - - have been marginalized from the canon of Postcolonial Studies still dominated by the English Crown and still often conceived in terms of East/ West binaries" (Puri, 2004, 2). This is one of the reasons I find it important to study the literature of Caribbean female writers. As the

following section will demonstrate, if Caribbean writers have been marginalized, *female* Caribbean writers have been doubly marginalized. When we study these writers the theories of postcolonialism and third world feminism go hand in hand.

### **3.2 Third world feminism**

The theories of postcolonialism and third world feminism are very much interrelated since both are concerned with opposing forms of power and domination. However, while third world feminists often write from a postcolonial perspective, postcolonial male writers only rarely take on the perspective of third world women. bell hooks has criticised such progressive third world intellectuals as Fanon and Memmi for constructing “a phallogentric paradigm of liberation” (1994, 49). Third world feminists must challenge this view which links freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood as though they were one and the same (hooks, 1994, 49). Gayle Green, however, gives an important reminder in saying that one should not group all women writers under a feminist heading. To write about women’s issues does not automatically imply a feminist perspective. She defines a “feminist” novel as an “analysis of gender as socially constructed and capable of being reconstructed” which recognizes the narrative as an important medium for change (1991, 291). It is in this sense that I define Danticat and Kincaid as feminist writers, more specifically third world feminists. They use writing as a means of demystifying the traditional roles of women and depict women as capable of resisting domination. At the same time they are clearly addressing the issues from a postcolonial perspective.

Just like the term *postcolonialism* is problematic, so are the terms *third world women* and *third world feminism*. First of all, these terms try to group an enormous variety of people under a single heading. As Mohanty shows in *Third World Women and the Politics of*

*Feminism* (1991), in geographical terms alone, “the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa South and Southeast Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania” are all part of the Third World (Mohanty, 1991, 5). However, in today’s world the third world cannot be defined only geographically and thus Mohanty adds to the list also “black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the U.S., Europe and Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third world” (1991, 5). In light of this variety we can understand the problems that such general terms as *third world women* and *postcolonialism* pose. Mohanty demonstrates one problem:

[T]he application of the notion of women as a homogenous category to women in the Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political agency (2003, 39).

So the term *third world women* might actually be seen as controlling and naming third world women—colonizing rather than speaking for the colonized. Furthermore, even though third world women share similar histories of “slavery, enforced migration, plantation and indentured labor, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide” (Mohanty, 1991, 10), they should not be considered as a homogenous category of “the oppressed”. Named as such they are deprived of their possibilities of gaining “subject” status. Rather than describing third world women as victims, they should be defined in terms of their struggles against domination and subjection. In my study I will use the terms *third world women* and *third world feminism* like Mohanty does, as describing “women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic” (2003, 46, 47). These terms emphasize the common context of struggle for third world women without ignoring the diversity of their histories and circumstances. In addition it is important to notice that third world feminism is not only concerned with issues of gender, but emphasizes that being a woman has very much to do with

race, class and sexuality. This is why Boehmer, in discussing colonized women, can claim that these women are “doubly or triply marginalized”, they are “disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste” (1995, 224). Furthermore, third world women are marginalized in relation to men of their own nation. I will discuss this aspect later on.

Third world women’s literature began to emerge in the 1970s. It is significant that writing was a medium which these women used to resist forms of domination. Memory and writing are central in the creation of oppositional agency for third world feminists (Mohanty, 1991, 10). During the imperial era, written texts had been the colonizers’ tool for exercising power and domination. As Helen Callaway argues, the imperial culture had a strong cognitive dimension—“it’s comprehensive symbolic order which constituted permissible thinking and action, and prevented other worlds from emerging” (1987, as quoted in Mohanty, 2003, 57). In order to create a strong identity and redefine both history and the present, alternative realities had to be imagined. This was especially important for those third world women who found themselves in a powerless position even after the nation had gained its flag-independence. Third world feminists write about specific day-to-day struggles of women. For them, writing is a means to demonstrate an autonomous being, not simply a process of correcting gaps and misunderstandings of a hegemonic and masculinist history (Mohanty, 1991, 34). For a woman to tell her own story is to claim a right to control her own life. As I will show in my analysis, it is thus significant that Kincaid’s and Danticat’s heroines have exceptional memories and inclinations to articulate their experiences through fiction and autobiography.

While masculinist national liberation movements claimed agency and celebrated their new subject status, women experienced new forms of neo-colonialism. The new independent nation did not allow women the kind of freedom and citizenship it granted for



men. In fact, women had to struggle against a new form of domination which resembled the former imperial power in many ways. Boehmer describes this new situation:

The feminization of the male colonized under Empire had produced, as a kind of reflex, an aggressive masculinity in the men who opposed colonialism. Nationalist movements encouraged their members, who were mostly male, to assert themselves as agents of their own history, as self-fashioning and in control. Women were not so encouraged - - they were marginalized both by nationalist political activity and by the rhetoric of nationalist address. (Boehmer, 1995, 224)

Women found themselves being defined in terms of a patriarchal society. The new nations adopted the colonizer's view of men as naturally born to rule and women as incapable of self-government, as "legal appendages of men" (Mohanty, 2003, 69). As Mohanty shows, new laws were being constructed "around a racist, classist ideology of a patriarchal nuclear family, where women are never accorded subject status" (2003, 69). This can be seen for example in the facts that women were not granted property rights and 80-90% of people employed by the state were male. Women who were employed worked primarily in the human services and could not take part in political, military or judiciary sectors (Mohanty, 1991, 22). Women who dared to voice their political opinions often paid a high price for it. This can be seen in the Haitian society which Danticat pictures. During the Duvalierist state (1957-1986) women were considered as "enemies of the state":

[W]hen women voiced their political opinions in support of women's rights or the oppositional party, they were defined as subversive, unpatriotic and unnatural. As such they were deserving of punishment, which often took the form of sexual torture. - - Duvalier instated tonton macoutes, a rural militia group - - and their own brand of *politically motivated rape* was a notorious method of maintaining their power (Donette, 2004, 3).

The patriarchal control of the postcolonial state is often exercised on the female body. Sometimes it takes such visible forms as rape but often it is evident in other, less direct forms. Third world feminist Ketu Katrak (2006) explores sexuality as the arena in which patriarchal control is exerted and I will use some of her ideas in my analysis. Kincaid and Danticat both

demonstrate how the female body is a site of domination but also how the female body can be used as a site of resistance to control and a symbol for female autonomy.

## **4. Relationship of power**

In this section I will examine in detail the different parent-child relationships in the three novels of my research. To begin my analysis I will first, in section 4.1, study how the roles of the powerful and the powerless become apparent through abandonment. In section 4.2 I will argue in more detail why, and how, it can be said that the parents in the novels represent the mother country—thus representing the colonizers. Furthermore, in section 4.3 I will demonstrate how the parent-child relationships in the novels reflect on the daughters' view of their motherland.

### **4.1 Abandonment at the root of problematic relationships**

The problematic parent-child relationships in Kincaid and Danticat's works are all based on the same initial problem: abandonment. As Simone Alexander aptly points out, "abandonment of children by parents translates into a *power relationship*" (2001, 62, emphasis added). It is through this abandonment that the roles of the powerful and the powerless become visible. In *My Brother*, Kincaid states that "being a child is one of the definitions of vulnerability and powerlessness" (*MB*, 32). The fact that children are either literally or metaphorically abandoned by people they rely on for love and protection, only further enhances their powerlessness and vulnerability. It is no wonder that the feelings of love towards the parents turn into feelings of hatred and mistrust. In this section I will demonstrate how the roles of the powerful and the powerless are formed in the works of Kincaid and Danticat.

The most traditional type of abandonment occurs in the mother-daughter relationship in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Unable to take care of her small daughter, who is a living reminder of her rape, Sophie's mother, Martine, leaves her behind and immigrates to the United States. During Sophie's youth, her mother is inaccessible to her and she knows her

only from photographs. Although Sophie has not been told about the rape, it is interesting that in her dreams she likens her mother to a powerful figure much similar to a rapist. Sophie does not see her mother as a loving and caring person but as a figure of power and dominance—someone trying to hurt her. Again and again Sophie has nightmares about her mother chasing her through a field of wildflowers, trying to catch her. The mother has “arms like two long hooks” and when she finally catches Sophie by the hem of her dress, she wrestles her to the ground (*BEM*, 28). Sophie would scream when her mother tries to “squeeze [her] into the small frame so [she] could be in the picture with her” (*BEM*, 8). So early on, Sophie considers her mother to be a suffocating person who, like her mother’s rapist, is grabbing her and pulling her to the ground and hurting her, while Sophie is unable to do anything else but scream.

Kincaid experiences another kind of abandonment – a metaphorical one. She had a good relationship with her mother until the age of twelve. She had admired her mother for her intelligence, her beauty, her excellent cooking and her devotion to her children. Later on Kincaid would reminisce about her mother who used to “read biographies of Florence Nightingale and Louis Pasteur, who knew all the symptoms of all the known tropical diseases, who knew about vitamin deficiencies and what foods could alleviate them” (*MB*, 78). However, when Kincaid’s youngest stepbrother was born – despite her mother’s attempts to abort the child – something changed for good between Kincaid and her mother. Kincaid’s loving and caring mother became “bitter, sharp; she and I quarreled all the time” (*MB*, 71). A long distance grew between them and Kincaid felt abandoned, she felt she lost the mother she had had before. Kincaid’s mother saw in her only daughter a life she could now never have and it released in her a fury towards Kincaid. Kincaid felt her mother blamed her for “not taking care on her [mother’s] mistakes”, for not being able to “help her out of it” (*MB*, 132,

133). Kincaid felt powerless in relation to her powerful mother, which is evident in how she describes her feelings during that period of her life:

I remember this passage of my life as being filled with *fear*, and I remember feeling already disappointed and already *defeated*, already hopeless - - I felt I hated my mother, and even worse, I felt she hated me, too (*MB*, 140, 141, emphasis added).

The feelings of love and appreciation towards the mother are transformed into feelings of fear, defeat and hate as the child realizes her subordinate position in relation to the controlling mother.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela experiences the ultimate abandonment by her mother: she dies at the moment Xuela is born. This loss becomes a defining factor in everything that Xuela does and in how she experiences the world and herself. Like Kincaid and Sophie, she, too, feels that her mother abandoned her: she died, “leaving me a small child vulnerable to all the world” (*AMM*, 4). This feeling of helplessness leaves Xuela overwhelmed by her loss: “How to explain this abandonment, what child can understand it - - so profound an abandonment?” (*AMM*, 199). Xuela dreams about her mother constantly but she never sees her mother’s face, only her heels – which once again suggest rejection and abandonment. Even though her mother is dead, Xuela is not free from her influence and control. Everything Xuela does is influenced by the fact that she was born without a mother and thus her mother is present in all the decisions in Xuela’s life. In her analysis, Alexander points out this fact:

Never entirely revealing herself, Xuela’s mother exerts power over all those who cannot see her, especially Xuela. Her presence is omnipotent. - - Everything and everyone are contrasted against her. Everything is defined through and by her. *Her palpable absence speaks for her powerful presence* (2001, 103, emphasis added).

Although Xuela is not in the presence of her mother, she cannot live an autonomous life.

Xuela herself recognizes her dependence on her dead mother, her strong impact on Xuela’s

identity. She asks, “Who was I? My mother died at the moment I was born - - This fact of my mother dying at the moment I was born became a central motif of my life” (*AMM*, 225).

Her mother’s powerful position in her daughter’s life is also evident in the fact that Xuela carries her mother’s name: “My own name is her name, Xuela Claudette” (*AMM*, 79). Xuela inherits a sad history of people she knew nothing about and in school she realizes that ancestry is written on her face: “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” (*AMM*, 15, 16). Although Xuela knows very little about her Carib origins, which is evident in her remark that she did not know what language her mother spoke (*AMM*, 198), she nevertheless inherits from her mother the object status associated with the Caribs. The Carib genocide committed by the colonizers (mainly the French and the British) led to an almost complete extermination of the Carib population in the Caribbean. By early twentieth century, the number of Caribs still remaining on the islands of St. Vincent and Dominica was only a few hundred. The original language of the Caribs has become practically extinct and only a few old customs and habits can be observed among the descendants of the Caribs (Conzemius, 1928, 189). Xuela’s mother had been one of the last survivors, whom Xuela describes as “living fossils, [who] belonged in a museum” (*AMM*, 197). The fact that Xuela carries the name and features of this defeated nation speaks of her mother’s powerful position in her daughter’s life. Xuela had inherited a powerless, conquered position from her mother—something that she would have to fight in order to gain independence.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the father figure is more immanent than in the other two novels, which is understandable since the mother is dead. Since Xuela literally does not have a mother, to her it is her father that potentially could fill the role of the absent mother – in this sense the father becomes one of Xuela’s surrogate mothers. But in stead of taking care of her daughter, Xuela’s father only further enhances Xuela’s feelings of

abandonment. He places her in the care of the same woman who washes his clothes, treating her daughter in the same manner as his laundry. In doing so, her father places her into yet another relationship of power: under the domination of another surrogate mother, Ma Eunice. Xuela recognizes early on the role which she was being forced into—the role of the defeated. She says that her relationship with Ma Eunice was

redolent - - in every way of the relationship between *captor* and *captive*, *master* and *slave*, with its motif of the big and the small, the *powerful* and the *powerless*, the strong and the weak (*AMM*, 10, emphasis added).

Early on, Xuela is made aware of the dichotomy of power seated deeply into the Caribbean psyche—and it is made clear what side of this division she is on. Xuela receives no parental care and love from her surrogate mothers who only mistreat her. In an attempt to find some solution to her desperate situation Xuela addresses her father in letters, saying: “My dear Papa, you are the only person I have left in the world, no one loves me, only you can - - only you can save me” (*AMM*, 19). Even though Xuela wishes that her father would fill the role of her mother, at the same time she recognizes the pointlessness of her wish. The wish that she addresses for her father is not actually meant for him at all, for he cannot fill the void in Xuela’s life: “These words were not meant for my father at all but for the person of whom I could see only her heels” (*AMM*, 19). Xuela’s mother is able to maintain a relationship of power through this insuperable distance. In the same way Xuela’s father remains inaccessible to her even though he is alive. This is evident in the fact that Xuela cannot see either one of her parents’ true face: Xuela cannot see her mother’s face in her dreams and her father wears a metaphorical mask to hide his true self from her daughter. Revealing one’s true self would suggest vulnerability and diminish the parent’s powerful position. Xuela’s father is present in her life but yet absent, contrary to a mother who is absent but still present. In this sense, Xuela feels a double abandonment, unable to connect with either one of her parents.

The abandonment by the *mother* mirrors the abandonment by the *mother country* experienced by the Caribbean islands. It is important to notice here the difference between the terms *mother country* and *motherland*. *Mother country* refers to the dominant colonial powers such as England and France, whereas *motherland* refers to the mother's land—the Caribbean. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* Danticat refers to the Caribbean as the motherland in saying that “we were all daughters of this land” (*BEM*, 230). Alexander further argues that the Caribbean is actually an extension of the true motherland for Caribbean people—Africa (2001, 16). One should not, however, forget the important role of the Carib in the history of the Caribbean: the motherland represents not only the African, but all the multidimensional roots of its people. Xuela is a good example of this diverse past: her mother was a Carib and from her father's side her grandfather was a Scots-man and her grandmother African (*AMM*, 181). All these histories are rooted in the Caribbean motherland. The motherland experiences abandonment in the sense that it is exploited and subjugated by the mother country. Furthermore, the motherland is unable to draw strength from its ancestral roots since the Africans are enslaved and abused and the Carib genocide has led to an extermination of the Caribs. The motherland is left in a powerless position in relation to the powerful mother country.

The power relationship between the parent and the child in the novels is therefore an allegory of the relationship between the mother country and the motherland. In a similar way as the daughters feel abandoned by their mothers who fail to love and protect them, the motherland is being repressed and devastated by the powerful mother country which fails to be a nurturing parent. The mother country's need to control turns it into a distant, suffocating other whereas the motherland is left vulnerable, betrayed and powerless. In the following section I will further demonstrate how the mothers, and occasionally also the fathers, in the three novels are transformed into representatives of the mother country.



## 4.2 Parents representing the mother country

The daughters in the novels come to see their parents as representatives of the colonial mother country when the parents adopt colonial values and try to transfer them into their daughters. The parents exercise power over their daughters mainly in two areas: First, by exercising power over the female body and sexuality and second, by denying their daughters' autonomous existence.

The Imperial powers like Britain and France saw it as their duty to civilize the savage indigenous population of the colonies. They brought with them Western values of morality. This also meant that the colonizers imported with them the patriarchal view on women. The native women were put in high contrast with Western women who lived by civilized standards. Respectable, virtuous young women were taught to fulfil their roles as good wives and especially as good mothers. As Johnson shows, to the colonisers, "British women were expected to pursue the ideals of motherhood" (2003, 128). In her analysis of colonial women, Rutherford also acknowledges the important role women had as mothers:

Christianity, motherhood, and morality were inextricably linked. - - Implicit in the motherhood image was the understanding that women were guardians of morality (2003, 97, 98).

In contrast to these women who were seen as the embodiment of Christian womanhood, "it was generally agreed that native women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy" (Rutherford, 2003, 122). Burnard further shows how the native women were criticized by the colonizers as having "poor abilities as mothers" (2007, 83). Since the native people's sexual mores differed from those of the colonizers, the natives—especially women—were considered sexually loose and "having relentless ambition and amazing sexual skills" (Burnard, 2007, 82). In contrast, Western ideals of womanhood and motherhood were considered the norm and the only respectable and acceptable behaviour. Both Kincaid and

Danticat show how the parents carry these ideals adopted from the mother country and try to pass them on to their daughters. This is why the daughters came to regard their parents as representatives of the colonizers.

The mothers in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and in *My Brother* both try to oppress their daughters' arising sexuality. The distance which exists between the mothers and the daughters only widens when the daughters start to show interest towards boys. The mothers view their daughters' burgeoning sexuality as sinful and threatening and something that will lead to shame and ruin, unless oppressed. The mothers believe they are acting in their daughters' best interest in protecting them from the dangers of sexuality. In doing so they are unaware of the long-lasting damage they are causing on their daughters' self image as women. Alexander notes that the daughters are forced to "view female sexuality as a woman's worst enemy because of the stigma likened to it" (2001, 64). Very early on, the mothers try to install in their daughters the Western view of a chaste, pure woman. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, daughters are taught to be "virgins and have their ten fingers". Each finger has a purpose, and together they encompass the notion of a Western ideal woman/mother: "Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing" (*BEM*, 151). These demands demonstrate the traditional domestic role of women. Sophie also describes how the importance of virginity was evident during her youth:

My mother always listened to the echo of my urine in the toilet, for if it was too loud it meant that I had been deflowered. I learned very early in life that virgins always took small steps when they walked. They never did acrobatic splits, never rode horses or bicycles. They always covered themselves well and, even if their lives depended on it, never parted with their panties (*BEM*, 154).

The daughters are raised ignorant of what sex and sexuality mean. Without really understanding why, they are taught to fear the shame attached to losing your virginity. When Sophie, supposedly at the age of 12, asks her mother how she was born, her mother's answer well demonstrates her willingness to keep her daughter ignorant about sex: "She told me the

story of a little girl who was born out of the petals of roses, water from the stream, and a chunk of the sky. That little girl, she said was me” (*BEM*, 47). This kind of upbringing leaves the daughters isolated from their bodies and consequently also isolated from their mothers.

Kincaid’s mother justifies her strictness when it comes to the upbringing of her daughter by stating that otherwise Kincaid “would have ended up with ten children by ten different men” (*MB*, 28). In her mother’s eyes, Kincaid should only be grateful to her for saving her from such a fate and thus making it possible for Kincaid to have the life she now has. Kincaid, however, does not see her mother’s actions in such a light. She explains: “I grew up alienated from my own sexuality and, as far as I can tell, am still, to this day, not at all comfortable with the idea of myself and sex” (*MB*, 69). I believe it is partly in response to her mother’s claims that Kincaid chose to write the fictional story about Xuela. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Kincaid explores the possibility of a life without a mother. She imagines in Xuela a person who, unlike herself, grows very comfortable with her own sexuality and is free to act upon her sexual desires. Although Xuela does not end up having a perfect and happy life, Kincaid shows that Xuela does not end up with ten children by ten different men. In fact, Xuela remains childless by her own choice.

Kincaid’s mother’s actions in oppressing her daughter’s sexuality are limited to verbal abuse and the fact that she restricts Kincaid’s dealings with the opposite sex. Sophie’s mother, however, goes a lot further in maintaining control over Sophie’s body. In Haitian tradition, “[f]rom the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity” (*BEM*, 156). In order to preserve the family honour Haitian mothers regularly test their daughters’ virginity by inserting their finger into their daughter’s vagina. Sophie feels sexually violated each time her mother tests her. When the tests begin, Sophie’s mother grows more distant from her daughter, leaving her to experience yet another abandonment by her mother. Sophie describes the transformation in

her mother: “My mother rarely spoke to me since she began the tests - - I was feeling alone and lost, like there was no longer any reason for me to live” (*BEM*, 87). To deal with the repeated horror that Sophie experiences during these tests she creates the mechanism of *doubling*. It is her way of separating her mind from her body and imagining being somewhere else. “I had learned to *double* while being *tested*. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” (*BEM*, 155). This coping mechanism sticks with Sophie even after she is married. The tests leave Sophie horrified by everything related to sex and she hates her body: “When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again” (*BEM*, 156). To endure having sex with her husband, Sophie uses the same mechanism as before, *doubling*.

Sophie’s mother has another kind of strong hold over her daughter’s sexuality. Martine has taught her daughter that a mother and a daughter are “twins, in spirit. *Marassas*” (*BEM*, 200). They are one and they can feel each other’s suffering. Martine’s rape has left her an emotional wreck and she relives the rape in her dreams every night. During the time Sophie lives with her mother she has to witness these nightmares. She stays awake just waiting for her mother to start screaming in her sleep so that she can wake her up. By witnessing her mother’s horrors every night Sophie begins to connect sexuality to sexual abuse. She begins to see the female body as a subject of male domination. These nightmares of Martine have such a strong impact on Sophie that she, too, begins to have similar nightmares:

After Joseph and I got married, all through the first year I had suicidal thoughts. Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother’s anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had “caught” from living with her. *Her nightmares had somehow become my own*, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl (*BEM*, 193, emphasis added).

Sophie inherits from her mother the image of men as sexual violators and she begins to associate her husband with the rapist. When Sophie describes having sex with her husband, she depicts herself as the victim of sexual abuse: “He reached over and pulled my body towards his. I closed my eyes and thought of the *Marassa*, the doubling. I was lying there on that bed and my clothes were being peeled off my body, but really I was somewhere else” (*BEM*, 200). During sex, Sophie imagines her mother’s rape, taking part in her mother’s suffering: “I was lying in bed with my mother. I was holding her and fighting off that man” (*BEM*, 200). Martine controls her daughter’s sexuality in an active and conscious way—in the form of the tests—but also more passively—by passing to her daughter the experience of sexual abuse.

The language of ‘rape’ is often present when talking about colonialism. Not only were the native women repeatedly the objects of sexual violence by the colonizers, the colonization of land in general is associated with rape. The colonized land is deprived of its autonomous existence, history and identity and stripped off its natural resources. Its inhabitants are enslaved by the masculine imperial power. The colonized land is left naked under the control of its abusers. Rape is an appropriate metaphor for the colonizers’ violation of the land and of the very spirit of the colonized culture. The British themselves brought out this imagery of exploiting the female other in the colonized writing. Exploration of the unknown world was associated with gender violence. McClintock explains this imagery: “the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration” (1995, 23). The feminized land was considered as “virgin territory” (1995, 24) and its exploration was associated with “the male penetration and exposure of a veiled, female interior” (1995, 23). The colonized land was a passive body receptive to the male. As Boehmer notes, this imagery was not only used in relation to the land, but also about the colonized people who were depicted “as secondary, abject, weak, *feminine*, and other to Europe” (1995, 80, emphasis added). It is thus significant

that when the mothers in Kincaid's and Danticat's works bring forth ideas of a submissive female body and try to control their daughters' sexuality they clearly demonstrate the characteristics of the colonial mother country.

As was mentioned in the beginning of this section, another way in which the parents exercise power over their daughters is by denying their daughters' autonomous existence. By this I mean that the parents make decisions for their daughters without considering what they want and control the daughters' lives. Like the colonizers, the parents consider their daughters incapable of "self-governing" and discourage or forbid individual thinking. This was a characteristic feature in the slave society. Stinchcombe states that the important factor for the colonizers in maintaining a relationship of power was "to keep the others (slaves) from deciding or being able to decide" (1995, 3). In *My Brother and Breath, Eyes, Memory* Kincaid's and Sophie's mothers are alive and they can thus have more direct control over their daughters' lives as in Xuela's case. But all the three daughters do experience this type of control, as I will demonstrate next.

In Kincaid's case, her mother's control becomes most evident during adolescence, when Kincaid starts to show keen interest in books and studying. Kincaid's mother saw reading books as an opposite to the idea of an industrious house-wife which she was trying to impose on her daughter. When she saw Kincaid reading books, it would drive her to "fits of anger, for she was sure it meant I was doomed to a life of slothfulness" (*MB*, 44). Interestingly, the idea of slothfulness is something the colonizers associated with the natives. Alatas explains that

the colonial ideology utilized the idea of the *lazy native* to justify compulsion and unjust practices in the mobilization of labour in the colonies. It portrayed a negative image of the natives and their society to justify and rationalize European conquest and domination" (1977, 2, emphasis added).

Similarly to the colonizer, Kincaid's mother is justifying the domination of her daughter with the idea of saving her from a life of laziness. When Kincaid forgot to change her brother's

diapers because she was absorbed in reading a book, it was too much for her mother to bear. In her eyes, Kincaid preferred reading to motherhood. This “released in her a fury toward me, a fury so fierce that I believed - - that she wanted me dead” (*MB*, 131). In her fit of anger she burned all of her daughter’s books. This act is significant since the books were “the only thing [Kincaid] owned” (*MB*, 134). By burning these books, Kincaid’s mother showed that she can control everything Kincaid has and in a very violent manner she invaded Kincaid’s most independent space and took it away from her. To further enhance her dominant position in controlling her daughter’s life course, she took her out of school just before the important exams which would have made Kincaid’s university education possible. Her justification was that she needed Kincaid at home to take care of her other children. Like the colonized, Kincaid was deprived of everything she owned and her future was crushed, all so that she could be harnessed to work for the good of the colonizer, in this case her mother.

It is also important to note that Kincaid’s mother shows motherly affection towards her children only when they are in situations of total dependence on her. This demonstrates that she depicts the relationship between a mother and a child to be a relationship of power and that she can only be a mother when she has complete control. Kincaid describes how deeply her mother loves her children when they are sick, dying or in jail: “She loves and understands us when we are weak and helpless and need her” (*MB*, 16). But when her children want to control their own lives this love of hers towards her children turns “into a weapon for their destruction” (*MB*, 53). Kincaid’s mother can only love her children when it suits her best, when she can feel superior and powerful. When Kincaid starts to show that she has a will of her own and a desire to be independent and strong, the close relationship she had with her mother is inevitably lost.

The father-daughter relationship in *The Autobiography of My Mother* resembles the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. This is apparent for example in the

prison-imagery that Xuela uses when she describes her father. Xuela's father is a policeman and Xuela repeatedly points out that he wears his jailer's uniform when he comes to see his daughter—not wearing “the clothes of a father” but instead the clothes of a “jailer” (*AMM*, 90). Like the colonizer, who believes that he acts in the best interest of the colonized people, Xuela's father “believed himself to be a man of freedom, honest and brave” (*AMM*, 54). But the reality is that he was “a thief, he was a jailer, he spoke falsehoods, he took advantage of the weak” (*AMM*, 54), and whose very skin “was the color of corruption” (*AMM*, 181). All his actions cause suffering to those who are weaker than him. His actions towards his daughter are no exception. Their relationship is one between the captive and the captor, which can be seen in how Xuela describes the one time his father touches her: “My father placed an arm around me - - His clasp was at first gentle; then it grew till it had the strength of an iron band” (*AMM*, 26, 27). Xuela compares his father's hold of her with iron chains used by the captor.

Furthermore, Xuela uses imagery from the Bible in relation to her father. For example, at one point Xuela describes her father's house as “the false paradise” (*AMM*, 32). The use of Biblical imagery is not surprising since Xuela has received a British, Christian schooling. What is interesting, however, is that Xuela describes her father's actions similarly to the way Satan is described in the Bible. She describes how his father was eager to show her the new land he had just acquired. He took Xuela with him to a place from which he could show “it all to [her] with a wide sweep of his hand—a gesture more appropriate to a richer man than he was, *a gesture of all-encompassing ownership*” (*AMM*, 102, emphasis added). Xuela must have been familiar with how Jesus was being tempted by the Devil for forty days in the wilderness. On one occasion, the Devil took Jesus to a high mountain where he could show him all the land and all the kingdoms of the inhabited earth. In an attempt to lure Jesus into worshipping the Devil, Satan says: “I will give you all this authority and the glory of them, because it has been delivered to me, and to whomever I wish to give it” (Luke 4:6, *New*



*World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, 1950). I believe that Xuela associated his father's actions to those of the Devil who, appropriately, is described in the Bible as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). Xuela's father who is obsessed with material gain at any cost and, like the colonizer—and Satan in the Bible—would wish to be the ruler of his universe. As Xuela's father becomes richer and richer, she describes him as a "bird of prey - - a ruler of the plain" (*AMM*, 118). Xuela, however, does not admire his father's riches, knowing the price attached to them and—similarly to Jesus in the Bible—she refuses the temptation: "I held my young self away from my inheritance" (*AMM*, 102).

Xuela's father does put her daughter to school and, unlike Kincaid's mother, he encourages her daughter to study—during a time when female education was not usual. Is this contradictory to the claim that the father acts like the colonizer? When we consider this issue it is important to note what kind of education was in question. The education system which Xuela goes through is one installed by the colonial British government. Ketu Katrak describes this education as a means to "purchase [the colonized] souls" (2006, 95), or "mental colonization" (2006, 92). The goal of this education was not to improve the daily lives of the people but to further the colonizer's interest (2006, 95). The students were being taught information about "the colonizers' world, their history, geography, and value-systems in their language" (2006, 93). The idea was to accentuate the superiority of the English language and culture while also emphasising the inferiority of the indigenous cultures. In the case of female students it was also essential to root in them the Western ideology of "gender hierarchies" (2006, 93). According to Ketu, the legacies of the actual colonial education systems persist long in postcolonial education systems (2006, 93). So when Xuela's father insisted that she go to school, he was insisting that her daughter receive the colonial education. It is no coincidence that the first words Xuela learns to read in school were "The British Empire" (*AMM*, 14). Xuela describes this education: "it only filled me with questions that were not

answered, it only filled me with anger. I could not like what it would lead to: a humiliation so permanent that it would replace your own skin” (AMM, 79). When we consider the education in this light, we can also understand the implications in her father’s wish that her daughter would “someday become a schoolteacher” (AMM, 62, 63). In school Xuela also learns the English language, since everything is taught in English, the French patois “was not considered proper at all” (AMM, 16). The fact that Xuela’s father wants to impose the colonial values on her daughter is also apparent in the fact that he speaks English to her daughter. Xuela notes this repeatedly: “I spoke to him only in English, *proper English*” (AMM, 195, emphasis added). In Xuela’s eyes, her father is the embodiment of the mother country, England.

Sophie’s mother, Martine, also insists that Sophie should learn the colonial languages: English and French. She puts Sophie to a French school and wants her to study English as well. She teaches Sophie that she should learn to speak so that her language would never enable people to detect where she is from. When Sophie listens to her mother, she can hear that she lives as she teaches: “Impeccable French and English, both painfully mastered, so that her voice would never betray the fact that she - - was merely a peasant” (BEM, 223). Martine had also decided early on that Sophie would study to become a doctor, no question about it. And once again, she believes she is acting in her daughter’s best interest. She does not want patriarchal views on women’s professions to restrict her daughter in becoming a doctor. But what is important here is the fact that she never asks what Sophie wants. And when Sophie announces that she wants to become a secretary, her mother only replies: “She is too young to know - - You are going to be a doctor, she told me” (BEM, 56). The reality is that being a doctor had been Martine’s dream when she was young. When she could not achieve that dream she now attempted to live it through her daughter: “You have a chance to become the kind of woman Tante Atie [Martine’s sister] and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads*” (BEM,

44). In a similar manner Xuela's father had decided her daughter's future for her, having his own interests in mind: "*he wanted to say that his daughter was a teacher in school. That I might have aspirations of my own would not have occurred to him*" (*AMM*, 62, 63). Martine also wanted for her daughter to become a doctor so that she can walk head held up and know that her sacrifices had paid off. For six years Sophie ignored all her own wishes and lived a life that was not her own: "My great responsibility was to study hard. I spent six years doing nothing but that. School, home, and prayer" (*BEM*, 67). Sophie had no control over her life but was forced to live a life assigned to her by her mother.

The absent parents in *The Autobiography of My Mother* and in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, namely Xuela's mother and Sophie's father, can be considered in terms of neo-colonialism. Even though Xuela and Sophie are free from the direct influence of these figures of control, they cannot escape their persistent, indirect influence. In a similar manner, after a colony has gained its independence from the colonial power, the influence of colonization persists for a long time. The theoretician Amílcar Cabral has insisted on the two phases of the national liberation struggle, the latter being often the more important one: the national phase and the social phase. By the national phase he means the actual gaining of independence. But after independence is gained, the crucial role of the social phase is often given too little attention. The social phase is about gaining genuine liberation, not only the so called flag independence. It is important to be honest in asking: "Is the new nation truly free to determine its own destiny?" (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1984, 46). Cabral's distinction of the two phases allows us to "differentiate genuine national liberation from simple decolonization" (1984, 48). Using this reasoning we can say that losing a mother/father who represents the mother country does not imply gaining actual liberation, just like political independence alone is not a sign of genuine national liberation.

Earlier, I made the argument that Xuela's mother has control in her daughter's life even though she is dead. Her mother is so much present in Xuela's very existence that she states:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life as much as it has been an account of mine - - In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from (*AMM*, 227, 228).

We can see this kind of dependence also in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Even though Sophie has never seen her rapist father, and knows very little about him, he has an enormous influence in Sophie's life. For one thing, Sophie does not look at all like her mother, and she therefore carries the characteristics of her father on her face. Sophie experiences her father's influence indirectly as she witnesses the hold her father has over her mother. Martine cannot return to her home country because of this strong hold the rapist still has over her: "There are *ghosts* there that I can't face, things that are still very painful for me" (*BEM*, 78, emphasis added). For twenty-five years Martine experiences the rape every night. When she gets pregnant again, she starts seeing the rapist in every man she encounters. The child in her womb talks to her in the voice of the rapist, calling her "a filthy whore" (*BEM*, 216). Clearly, Martine has not been liberated even though she lives in another country from the rapist. And as has been demonstrated before, Martine transfers these images of horror to Sophie, who inherits her father's control over her through her mother.

Thus we can conclude that for the daughters in *My Brother, The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, their parents are the embodiment of the mother country. They carry the colonial values and try to impose them on their daughters, either consciously or unconsciously in two main areas: by controlling their daughters' female body and sexuality and by denying their daughters' autonomous existence. The relationship of power which the daughters have to their parents also influences how the daughters view their

relationship to the *motherland*. In the next subsection I will demonstrate how the parents contribute to this relationship with the motherland.

### **4.3 Exile from the motherland**

Since the daughters in Kincaid's and Danticat's novels experience a disconnection with their mothers/fathers, it is only natural that they feel disconnected also with the motherland. When the daughter is unable to bond with her biological parents, it reflects upon her ability to form a connection with her place of origin. The mother and father become "the other" – representing the mother country and thus the motherland also becomes the other's land which makes it strange and alien, not trustworthy. In search for connectedness with land the daughters distance themselves from the motherland—living in either literal or metaphorical exile. The literal exile can be a voluntary one, or one the daughters are forced to experience. Nico Israel notes that the word 'exile' contains these two possibilities. On one hand, "'exile' denotes banishment from a particular place in an - - act of force". On the other hand "it also expresses a sense of 'leaping out' toward something or somewhere, implying a matter of will" (2000, 1). In this section I will demonstrate how exile from the motherland can be seen in the three novels, either as metaphorical, voluntary or forced exile. I will come back to this theme also in section 5.3 to show how the daughters reunite with the motherland, if indeed it can be said that they do.

When Xuela observes her place of origin, her motherland, she only finds that it bears the burdens of a desperate history. This history of defeat has made a lasting mark on the land: "In a place like this, brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given" (*AMM*, 5). Alexander comments the way Xuela sees her motherland:

Transformed and defaced by colonialism, Dominica is defined by its cruelty and brutality. It is a paradise lost. It is not a place for positive self-definition and

selfaffirmation, but is figured as a prison, a place that suffocates and inhibits subjecthood (2001, 94).

Xuela does not want to be suffocated and controlled by anyone, and that is why she cannot connect with the motherland either: “I did not - - belong anywhere”(AMM, 107). She describes her country as “a false country” (AMM, 172) and its capital as “the capital of nothing but despair” (AMM, 61). We can see that Xuela is in search of some place with which she could connect when we consider her excitement in seeing new, unfamiliar places: “I could not explain this feeling of gladness at the sight of the new and strange, the unfamiliar. - - I would yearn for it, to feel it again” (AMM, 62). She knows the importance of feeling that she can belong to a place: “You are a child and you find the world big and round and you have to find a place in it” (AMM, 202). The inability for Xuela to connect with her motherland derives from her inability to connect with her Carib roots—in the absence of her mother—as well as her exile from her ancestral motherland, Africa. She has been taught by representatives of the mother country who had derogated her ancestry and kept her in ignorance about both the Caribs and the African. Xuela’s knowledge of Africa is limited to the fact that it is a “place on the map which was a configuration of shapes and shades of yellow” (AMM, 49, 50). The disconnectedness with the motherland and with the mother country leaves Xuela confused and makes her turn into a metaphorical exile from the motherland. In this state of not belonging to any land, Xuela turns her admiration and longing to “the sky, the moon and stars and sun”, nature that she finds is not “under the spell of history - - not anybody’s” (AMM, 218). When Xuela cannot find the answers she is looking for, she turns to look at the sky which “looked like heaven, the place to go when you don’t want to think too much” (AMM, 148).

Xuela’s feelings about Dominica are very similar to Kincaid’s feelings about Antigua. Kincaid, also, sees Antigua as a place moulded by its colonial history. Instead of being able to draw strength from her land of origin, she describes Antigua as a place “leaving in its wake humiliation and inferiority” (MB, 186). This paradise island “had been made

vulgar and ugly” (*MB*, 101) and is led by a corrupt government (*MB*, 50). Kincaid’s disappointment with her motherland coincides with the disruption in her relationship with her mother. The abandonment on the part of her mother reflects on her feelings towards Antigua. She begins to feel “that only people in Antigua die, that people living in other places did not die” (*MB*, 27). In an attempt to rid herself from her mother’s influence Kincaid decides to leave both her mother and her motherland and she moves to the United States. To Kincaid this exile is due to her own decision, being thus a voluntary exile. Kincaid herself, however, feels that it was the only possible solution at the time. If she had stayed in Antigua, Kincaid believes she “would have died” or “would have gone insane” (*MB*, 90). Kincaid was wrong, however, in thinking that removing herself from the motherland would enable her to remove herself also from the influence of her mother. She lives an apparently independent life but still remains dependent on her mother, just like flag independence does not guarantee actual independence from the mother country. Kincaid thinks about her mother every day and remains very vulnerable to her. She describes how “the taste of this awfulness, this bitterness, is in [her] mouth every day” (*MB*, 62).

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie experiences an involuntary exile from her motherland, one imposed on her by her mother. Martine had left Haiti shortly after having given birth to her daughter. Later on she insists that Sophie move with her to the United States and Sophie has to move against her own will. Sophie’s life in exile with her mother resembles living in prison. Sophie has to live according to her mother’s rules and cannot return to Haiti even though she longs for her life there. Martine clearly states this fact to Sophie: “I will never let you go again” (*BEM*, 49). When Sophie realises that she has been deprived of her happy childhood in her motherland, she feels as though she “had aged in one day” (*BEM*, 49). As Sophie observes her mother’s life in America she learns that Martine does not wish to show her Haitian origins. She masters French and English perfectly and keeps on applying

light facial cream in an effort to hide her dark skin. It cannot be helped that this kind of attitude towards the motherland affects Sophie's attitudes as well, at least to some extent. After seven years in America Sophie herself says: "I wanted to sound completely American" (*BEM*, 69). Furthermore, it is not only Martine who has ghosts she cannot face in Haiti. As Sophie's psychiatrist tells Sophie, she, too, needs to face the ghosts of her father in Haiti: "I'll have to ask you to confront your feelings about him in some way, give him a face" (*BEM*, 209). We can thus see that both of Sophie's parents have contributed to Sophie's exile from her motherland. Sophie's disconnectedness with her mother and her father creates a disconnectedness with land.

I have now showed in section 4 why it can be said that the relationship between the daughters and their parents is a relationship of colonial power. The roles of the powerful and the powerless become evident early on through the abandonment experienced by the daughters, which in turn mirrors the abandonment of the motherland by the mother country. Similarly to the colonizers, the parents control their daughters and impose colonial values on them. They deny their daughters' autonomous existence and control their sexuality. The parents impose their own superiority, thus oppressing their children. In a similar way the colonizers try to root feelings of inferiority into the minds of the colonized. This relationship of power also affects the way the daughters see their motherlands and leads to the daughters' exile from the motherland. Having depicted this problematic relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the colonizer and the colonized, I now turn to analyse the struggle for independence in section 5.



## **5. Struggle for Independence**

How, and to what extent, do the daughters attain agency in their lives? In this section I will explore the various ways in which the daughters struggle for their independence, starting with the use of the female body in resisting control in section 5.1. The daughters find ways to escape the traditional roles imposed on them by their parents and ways in which they can express themselves as individuals. In section 5.2 I will demonstrate how other postcolonial concerns can be seen in the daughters' struggle for independence, namely the importance of memory and writing. And in section 5.3 I will explore the significance of the motherland in the daughters' quest for a balanced postcolonial identity. Especially in the conclusion I will bring this discussion of personal independence to a national level and discuss why, and how, the daughters' struggle for independence is significant to the nation's struggle against neo-colonialism.

### **5.1 The female body as a site of resistance**

Ketu Katrak emphasizes the importance of the female body as a site of women's resistance in third world feminist writing. Too much attention has been given to the female body as the site of oppression and male domination, while ignoring the significant ways in which women use their bodies to resist patriarchal control. She notes that one possible reason for the avoidance of this topic lays in the fact these forms of resistance might often have "tragic conclusions", such as "madness, death [and] suicide" (2006, 35). But despite these sad outcomes, the use of the female body in resisting domination is extremely important since it is often "the only available avenue for resistance" (2006, 35). Katrak's ideas are in line with Mohanty who underlines the importance of seeing women as authors of their own lives and not assume that

women are “a homogenous group or category (“the oppressed”)” (2003, 39). With this in mind, I will now analyse the use of the female body in the daughters’ struggle for independence.

In a very desperate moment in her life, Sophie feels that her body is the only way for her to protest against her mother who is repeatedly violating Sophie in the form of the tests. At this stage, Sophie cannot find language or voice to talk back and speak about her trauma. Thus she recognizes the power she has over her own body as the means to fight her violator. In order to stop the violence performed on her body, Sophie resorts to self-inflicted violence: she uses a pestle to rip apart her flesh in order to break her hymen. With this act she ascertains that the following test will be the last test she will ever have to go through. This was done in an effort to break free, which becomes evident in Sophie’s thoughts just before this act. She thinks about a woman who had suffered from a horrible illness all her life, until she was given a chance to be free. She had to pay a price for her freedom: she could no longer be a woman but she could obtain her freedom living as a butterfly. With this story in mind, Sophie, also, decided to pay a price for her freedom. Later, she describes that it was “like breaking manacles, *an act of freedom*” (*BEM*, 130, emphasis added). But the outcome of this bodily resistance is a traumatic one, since it will also have a negative effect on Sophie’s sexuality and affect the sexual life she has with her husband. The price Sophie has to pay, affects her womanhood, just like it did for the woman in the story. This act alone does not bring Sophie the freedom she seeks; she is left psychologically damaged. It is significant that she continues to fight this traumatized existence through her body. Since Sophie has no control over her body during sexual intercourse, an act which she equals with rape, she attempts to control her body *after* sex: “I waited for him to fall asleep, then went to the kitchen. I ate every scrap of the dinner leftovers, then went to the bathroom, locked the door, and purged all the food out of my body” (*BEM*, 200). We can see the “tragic conclusions”

Katrak talks about: Sophie's acts of resistance via her female body leave her sexually traumatized and bulimic. We can see that this resistance has its limitations since it is self-destructive as well as liberating. In Martine's case her bodily resistance leads to her death as she is trying to get rid of the child in her, a child which she equates with her rapist. But even though these women do not obtain ideal results, they do succeed to an extent in transmuting "the controls of their female bodily spaces from patriarchal hands into their own hands" (Katrak, 2006, 43). These may seem like small steps on a personal level, but they all work toward broader changes in society. By narrating these forms of bodily resistance in the biographies of Sophie and Martine, Danticat is writing in order to change the course of the biography of the nation as a whole. By writing about Sophie and Martine's resistance she is rewriting the outcomes of other women's forms of resistance.

But even though Sophie and Martine's experiences demonstrate the difficulty of voicing oppression, Danticat also shows that it is possible, and important, to find ways of actually communicating traumas. Sophie finds that she can talk about her experiences with her psychiatrist and in her sex therapy group. Sophie learns that she can rise from her suffering as a stronger woman, drawing strength from her experiences: "Since I have survived this, I can survive anything" (*BEM*, 202). Within her therapy group Sophie takes steps towards accepting her body and sexuality. The mottos of the group are: "God grant us the courage to chance those things we can, the serenity to accept the things we can't, and the wisdom to know the difference" and "We are beautiful women with strong bodies" (*BEM*, 202). It is only after Sophie can voice aloud her experiences that she can begin to reconnect with her female body. We can see here the importance which postcolonial literature gives to finding a voice of one's own and talking back to the centre. In this group, Sophie is finally able to name her mother as her sexual abuser. After writing Martine's name on a piece of paper Sophie "raised it over a candle, and watched as the flames consumed it" (*BEM*, 203). In

this way Sophie is able to break free from her mother's influence and she can say that she now feels "a little closer to being *free*" (*BEM*, 203, emphasis added). The act of speaking becomes an important means in her struggle for independence.

One important form of female bodily resistance which is present in all the three novels has to do with motherhood. Postcolonial female writers are writing against patriarchal traditions which define women as obedient wives and self-sacrificing mothers. In doing so, postcolonial women are not trying to condemn the idea of motherhood or diminish the roles of wives and mothers. Rather, they attack the idealized ways in which womanhood is equated with motherhood. Mohanty reminds us that the notions of "motherhood" and "domesticity" are not *natural* constructs but rather they are historical and ideological constructs (2003, 74). According to Mohanty, one of the important tasks of third world feminists is to show that women have the freedom "to choose whom they love, and whom they set up house with, and *whether they want to have or not have children*" (2003, 3, emphasis added). It is especially the latter which is present in the three novels. In the following paragraphs I will concentrate on the ways women in the novels use abortion as means to resist domination through their bodies.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Xuela experiences in a very literal way how her womb is the site of oppression. One of Xuela's surrogate mothers, Madame LaBatte, has not had children of her own and wants Xuela to give birth to her husband's children for her: "She wants to make a gift of me to her husband - - she wanted a child I might have" (*AMM*, 68, 77). Once again in her life, Xuela experiences patriarchal control coming from a mother-figure, now as a direct domination of her body. But when Xuela gets pregnant she refuses to bear the child and regains control over her own body. She goes to a woman called "Sange-Sange" to get an abortion. Not only does she get rid of the child in her, Xuela is also transformed into a stronger, more independent being: "I had carried my own life in my own

hands” (*AMM*, 83). She experiences in a very concrete way the power she can have over her body—“the only thing I had that was my own” (*AMM*, 159). Xuela makes a decision never to have children and she becomes an expert in “freeing [her] womb from burdens [she] did not want to bear” (*AMM*, 207). The initial powerless condition into which she had been born is altered since Xuela now has power, at least in this one regard. The significance of this bodily control is evident in the way Xuela now describes herself: “I had become - - ruler of my own life” (*AMM*, 115). There are, however, limitations to Xuela’s act of freedom. Not only does Xuela never experience a mother’s love, she now also refuses to never express it herself. It does seem as though Xuela refuses to become a mother from a fear of having to deal with the initial problem in her life: the abandonment by her mother. Xuela suffers from “matrophobia”, “the fear of becoming one’s mother” (Alexander, 2001, 59). She fears that she would abandon her children just like her mother abandoned her. Xuela describes what she would be like as a mother: “I would destroy them - - I would condemn them to live in an empty space frozen in the same posture in which they had been born” (*AMM*, 97). She becomes horrified at the thought that she would display the very qualities she associates with her own powerful mother, and thus turn into a similar embodiment of colonialism. Xuela’s solution for avoiding this inheritance is to refuse motherhood altogether.

Freedom to decide whether or not to have children is connected with the daughters’ struggle for independence. In contrast, the mothers in the novels fail to carry out a successful abortion. The mothers represent the mother country and they are depended on colonial and patriarchal values. It is thus appropriate that in the novels they do not have freedom when it comes to bearing children. Martine tried to abort Sophie after the rape, but failed. She drank “all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons”. She describes: “I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn’t go away” (*BEM*, 190). Kincaid’s mother had also failed in her efforts to abort a

child: she “tried and tried and failed and failed to abort the third and last of her three male children” (*MB*, 174). The mothers are still very much bound by the traditional view of women as bearers of children and they are unable to change this reality. This is apparent also in the fact that Martine’s attempt to abort her second child leads to her own death.

It is questionable, however, whether or not all the daughters in the three novels have control over their bodies with respect to bearing children. It seems to be clear that Xuela has total control in this respect. She is at liberty to choose not to have any children. It can be interpreted, however, that she is bound by her past so that she cannot have children even if she wanted to. The lack of a proper mother-figure makes it impossible for her to become one herself. Thus her decision not to have children could also be seen as her submission to control, not as an act of freedom. She lets her mother’s abandonment control her so that she will never be able to experience motherhood. Xuela reveals near the end of the novel her thoughts about never having had children: “I had allowed no one to come from me. A new feeling of loneliness overcame me then” (*AMM*, 213). Would it not have been an act of freedom if Xuela had actually mothered a child? It can be argued that in Xuela’s case the process of becoming a mother would have shown her independence from the burdens of her past, freedom from her mother’s inheritance. This interpretation is supported also by Xuela’s comment about her menstruation: “For years and years, each month my body would swell up slightly, mimicking the state of maternity, *longing to conceive, mourning* my heart’s and mind’s decision never to bring forth a child” (*AMM*, 225, 226, emphasis added). Instead of demonstrating her body’s freedom, Xuela can thus be seen to restrict her body’s deepest desires. One has to be careful when interpreting the daughters’ struggle for freedom. Xuela’s decision not to have children can in fact be interpreted as an act of freedom, but on the other hand also as a way of submitting to her mother’s control.

The novels do not tell us clearly why Kincaid and Sophie, unlike Xuela, decided to have children. But when we consider the way they bring up their children, we can see that they are trying hard to differentiate themselves from their mothers. They take the challenge of breaking the chain of history and try not to reflect the mother country like their parents and grandparents did. Sophie realizes this burden of history: "I knew my hurt and hers [Martine's] were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too" (*BEM*, 203). Sophie, however, is determined to break free from the chains of history: "I had a greater need to understand, so that I would never repeat it myself" (*BEM*, 170). In this way we can see that her mothering is a demonstration of her struggle for freedom. If she can prove herself to be a better mother she has gained freedom from the suffering caused by her own mother. Similarly Kincaid tries to avoid her mother's mistakes. Kincaid's mother has never apologized for anything she has done to her daughter and Kincaid's counter-reaction can be seen in her comment: "I spend a good part of my day on my knees in apology to my own children" (*MB*, 27). Kincaid repeats many times how much she loves her children, in contrast to her own mother's hatred towards her. But despite her efforts, it can be seen that Kincaid is unconsciously showing qualities similar to her mother's. Kincaid's daughter likes to sing, but Kincaid discourages her daughter's passion and instead wants her to study mathematics. Without realizing it herself, Kincaid is actually discouraging her daughter's singing just like her mother once discouraged Kincaid's reading. This demonstrates the difficulty of changing the course of history. The daughters cannot fully escape the fact that a part of their mothers' personalities live in them. Thus, in order for them to understand themselves, they must understand also their mothers. In this sense Sophie is more advanced in her struggle for independence than Kincaid or Xuela. She has been able to move beyond her anger towards her mother and has begun to have a deeper understanding of her mother's behaviour. Rather

than seeing her mother's actions in isolation, Sophie is able to place them in the larger context of history.

As was mentioned in section 3.1 marginality has become a source of energy for postcolonial writers. In order to reconstitute a fragmented identity, the postcolonial woman has to escape the assumptions which the colonizers placed on the native female body and thus disprove of the center's domination over the margin. This becomes apparent in *The Autobiography of My Mother* through the celebration of the marginalized female body. Xuela had been taught to feel ashamed of her body and all the characteristics which revealed her Carib origin. One of Xuela's surrogate mothers clearly expresses her disgust towards Xuela's body: "My human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on me" (*AMM*, 32). But instead of resigning herself to this contempt, Xuela responds by taking an opposite stand:

whatever I was told to hate I loved the most. - - Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing—those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted (*AMM*, 32, 33).

This admiration becomes central when Xuela goes through one of the most trying periods in her life: the abortion and the following depression. At that time in her life, Xuela says: "My life was beyond empty" (*AMM*, 96). She lives in a death-like existence, which is apparent in her wearing "the clothes of a dead man" (*AMM*, 98). What ultimately gives her a new will to live is her admiration of her female body: "It was seeing my own face that comforted me. I began to worship myself - - my own body was a comfort to me" (*AMM*, 100). The fact that Xuela can now clearly see her own face and draw strength from it, shows her independence from her mother. Xuela is not defined by the face which she cannot see. When she looks at her reflection she can see her own self. The same kind of step towards selfappreciation can be seen in Sophie's assertion that she is a beautiful woman with a strong body (*BEM*, 202).

As I have shown in this section, postcolonial women use their bodies in their struggle for independence. They thus draw their strength from something that is most



profoundly theirs, native to them. By decolonizing the female body, Danticat and Kincaid are writing back to the centre. Instead of depicting women as weak, dominated and oppressed, Danticat and Kincaid depict their protagonists as women who gain control over their bodies and use them to fight domination and to create their own autonomous existence. The female body is not, however, the only way these women struggle for their independence. I will look at various other means in the following section 5.2.

## **5.2 The importance of memory and writing**

As I mentioned earlier, memory and writing are significant for both postcolonial writers and third world feminists. Greene points out that remembering serves as the opposite of “repetition” (1991, 291). In order for there to be change or progress one must go through the process of remembering. The unsettling events of the past need to be actively processed in order to move beyond them in the future. Mohanty emphasizes that “resistance is encoded in the practices of remembering and writing” (2003, 83). Third world women’s histories have been written mainly by the colonizers or by male nationalists. Women need to remember and rewrite the past from their perspective and show that they have the right to produce knowledge for themselves (Mohanty, 2003, 52). In this section I will study the ways in which the protagonists of the three novels rely on memory and writing in their struggle for independence.

All the three protagonists in the novels are described as having excellent memories contrary to their parents who would rather forget the past. Xuela describes her memory: “My memory, my ability to retain information, to retrieve the tiniest detail, to recall who said what and when, was regarded as unusual” (*AMM*, 16). Xuela acknowledges that the past is something that one cannot, and should not, forget: “But who can really forget the past?”

Not the victor, not the vanquished” (*AMM*, 221). Since this colonial past cannot be erased, it will affect the present and the future. But Xuela recognizes the possibility of change through memory: “the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lays the seed of my great victory” (*AMM*, 215, 216).

History is not only a story about the conquerors and the conquered, the powerful and the powerless. Instead, we look at history from the perspective of the present and in history lies the potential for a different future: “much of the experience of the past is determined by the experience of the present” (*AMM*, 205). We can thus perceive that even though Xuela’s life had to a great extent been determined by the loss of her mother, it does not determine her destiny altogether. The past can in fact give strength in the struggle for independence.

Xuela’s thoughts about remembering are nearly identical to those expressed by Kincaid in *My Brother*: “each moment of [life’s] present shapes its past and each moment of its present will shape its future” (*MB*, 167). We can see how important memory is to Kincaid since she repeats this same idea in both of these novels. In *My Brother*, she also poses an important question: “without memory what would be left? Nothing?” (*MB*, 163). Kincaid herself tried to live without memory of her past for several years after she moved to the United States. She describes how during that time her “old family was dead” to her (*MB*, 118). She even says that she understands why someone “would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole” (*MB*, 13). With knowledge comes responsibility even though denying the past might seem attractive, even liberating. But Kincaid learnt that such a state of false ignorance meant “emptiness and meaninglessness” (*MB*, 103). In order for life to have a meaning, one must live in a balanced state acknowledging both the past and the present and their effects on the future. Kincaid’s mother, who repeats the colonial history and represents the mother country, does not value her daughter’s memory: “As I grew up, my mother came to hate this about me, because I would

remember things that she wanted everybody to forget” (*MB*, 75). Kincaid’s memory of all the injustices her mother had done to her makes her resist her mother’s domination over her. Kincaid’s mother would rather want her children drifting off to amnesia so that she could remain in control. She would want her children to remember only her version of the past in which she has made everything possible for her children and always sacrificed herself for the sake of her children.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie comes to understand how important memory is in defining her identity: “I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head” (*BEM*, 234). Sophie’s past is as in-built in her as her eyes and as essential to her as the air she breathes. Furthermore, the fact that Sophie compares memory with her eyes shows how much memory affects the way she perceives the world. Sophie has witnessed closely how her mother had tried to escape her past and she has seen how devastating the results can be. Martine had decided not to confront her past and in the process had also separated Sophie from her past in Haiti. In her struggle for independence Sophie must reconnect with the past her mother had taken away from her. When she returns to Haiti, Sophie states: “I need to remember” (*BEM*, 95). She also says how important it is for her that her daughter, Brigitte, will also learn about her origins. She says to her grandmother: “I want Brigitte to know you when she gets older - - I want her to know how much of each of us is in her” (*BEM*, 129). In a similar way Kincaid decides to take her children with her to Antigua. Despite her personal problems with her mother, she realizes how important it is for her children to understand their roots.

Writing is closely linked with memory and writers have to depend on their memory in order to narrate the past. Smith argues that memory and writing can be very politically charged (2001, 18). This is especially true in colonial contexts where there are “struggles over who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember”

(2001, 18). Postcolonial writers need to regain authority and struggle for that past which has been forgotten or ignored. Language is an important tool in accessing history and creating authority over one's own life story. When women use their bodies in resisting, they are relying on something that is inherently their own. The same applies to memory and writing: our experiences and memories are our personal possessions. Language is a means of mediating this personal knowledge and interpreting the past in a subjective manner. We can understand why third world feminists and postcolonial writers find writing so important in creating oppositional agency. Identities can be constructed by employing the full resources of memory and by articulating that memory in writing.

Writing as a means of resistance is more strikingly present in Kincaid's works than it is for the characters in Danticat's novel. In *My Brother* Kincaid clearly demonstrates how writing is "the act of saving [herself]" (*MB*, 196). For Kincaid, writing is the only way in which she can make sense of her past and understand it. So when her brother died, Kincaid knew instinctively the importance of writing about this past event: "to understand it, or to make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not die with him, I would write about it" (*MB*, 196). If she did not process her brother's death, she would be so imprisoned by it that she could actually say she would die with him—thus repeating the past. Similarly, in order to break free from her mother's grasp she would have to write about her. One of the most significant events in the relationship between the powerful and powerless—Kincaid's mother and Kincaid herself—had been the burning of Kincaid's books. This event gave life to the writer Kincaid was to become. She would not let her mother control her life's course and, consequently, she needs to rewrite the past in her present life, so that she can bring back what was once deprived of her: "it would not be strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again until they were perfect,

unscathed by fire of any kind” (*MB*, 197, 198). Kincaid is not trying to deny or forget this past, rather she draws strength from it and claims control of the way the past affects her.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela’s use of memory and writing in her struggle for independence can be seen as ambiguous. She does consider writing to be an act of saving her life (*AMM*, 22), just like Kincaid in *My Brother*. But it is the controversial title of the novel “*The Autobiography of My Mother*” (emphasis added) which causes problems in interpreting the novel. As Alexander argues, Kincaid’s choice of title is “logically impracticable”. She goes on to claim that

Kincaid’s adoption of this title is probably her attempt to establish the impossibility - - of a colonized subject achieving “wholeness”. Fragmentation seems to be inherently linked to the colonized subject (2001, 91).

Alexander thus argues that Xuela remains “fractured and incomplete” (2001, 105) throughout the novel, and fails to gain independence from her mother. Thus her attempt to write about her autonomous self ends up being an account of her mother’s control and presence in her life, as suggested by the title. I, however, disagree that this would be the only interpretation and want to suggest another one. Xuela’s mother was able to control her daughter’s life because of her absence and abandonment. With the death of her mother, Xuela was denied her connection with her past and she was only given the colonizer’s version of history. The fact that Xuela is recreating her mother’s past as she is writing her autobiography is proof of her reclaiming authority over the past. It does not demonstrate her insuperable fragmentation. Xuela is able to reconnect with her dead mother through her own being and she realizes how much of her mother lives in her. Xuela finds that she can recreate the past which was denied from her by listening carefully to her own self. “In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from” (*AMM*, 227). This does not imply that Xuela gives in to her mother’s control and metaphorically becomes her mother, thus repeating the past without subjectivity. On the contrary, when Xuela learns about her mother’s life, she realizes how much more

freedom and authority she has in her own. Xuela learns that her mother had been raised by representatives of the colonizers (French nuns). She had given in to the colonial education she received: she had become “a Christian, - - quiet, shy, long-suffering, unquestioning, modest, wishing-to-die-soon person” (*AMM*, 199). Xuela had not been so weak in her life, but she has been able to resist colonial control. By acknowledging that the account of her life has also been the account of her mother’s life (*AMM*, 227), Xuela has liberated not only herself, but also her mother from colonial control. With part of her mother in her, Xuela has been able to recreate the past and gain freedom from colonial control, thus claiming wholeness.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie does not rely on writing in the way Kincaid and Xuela do. Her rewriting of the past and talking back to the colonizers takes a more concrete form. The novel ends with a scene in which Sophie runs to the cane fields and violently attacks the cane stalks. Metaphorically she is confronting her mother’s rapist and, going further back in history, the very site in which colonialism was practiced. I agree with Donette who compares this final scene to the act of rewriting history: “this scene in the cane fields suggests a confrontation with cultural history and social practices as she uses her body as the vehicle to rewrite dominant narratives” (2004, 11). Sophie is willfully remembering the past traumas and fighting for her freedom to control her own life narrative. She had been linked to the long chain of Haitian women whose bodies had been controlled by parties more powerful than themselves. In this final scene, however, Sophie is able to break free from that control and use her body in resisting control. Importantly, and Donette notes this as well, Sophie is able to direct her opposition towards the cane fields and not produce any more violence on her own body (Donette, 2004, 11). She has found a way to talk back and use her body effectively in the process. Through this confrontation with the past Sophie acquires wholeness. As her grandmother says, Sophie will now know how to answer to the question: “*Ou libéré?* Are you free, my daughter?” (*BEM*, 234).

### 5.3 Return to the motherland

It is crucial in the daughters' struggle for independence that they reconnect with the motherland. Because of the strong link between mother and mother's land, mothers play a significant role in the daughters' quest for a home. The daughters can only succeed in constructing their autonomous identities after they have reunited with their ancestral past and their place of origin. In this section I will show how the daughters try to unite with their motherlands and how it contributes to their struggle for independence.

Before returning to Haiti, Sophie had not felt a sense of belonging to any place, she had been a wanderer. It is during her visit to her place of origin that she finds a home. Her husband notes this change in her wife when she returns from Haiti: "You have never called [Haiti home] since we've been together. Home has always been your mother's house, that you could never go back to" (*BEM*, 195). This new sense of belonging to a place is connected also with Sophie's realization of her independent existence: "It suddenly occurred to me that I was surrounded by my own life, my own four walls, my own husband and child" (*BEM*, 196). She no longer felt that she was in exile, but she had rooted herself to Haiti and also her own home in America. Importantly, all of this happens at the same time Sophie begins to reconnect with her mother as well. Sophie's independence comes from an understanding of her connection with her mother: "It would be easy to hate you, but I can't because you are part of me. You are me" (*BEM*, 203). "My mother line is always with me - - [b]lood made us one" (*BEM*, 208). This does not imply submission to the mother's control but rather an understanding that independence cannot exist without recognition of one's history. Through this consciousness Sophie is also able to connect with a long line of women in her family, thus reconnecting with the past. She feels the presence of her ancestresses: "we had such kinship to - - our dead relatives - - as though they were our restless spirits, shadows wandering in the darkness as our

bodies slipped into bed” (*BEM*, 205). It is the motherland which connects all these women from different generations together: “we were all daughters of this land” (*BEM*, 230). The relationship of power is effaced in relation to the motherland: mothers just like daughters were actually children of the motherland and all carried the same cultural inheritance. The balanced understanding of her relationship with the motherland allows Sophie to build her own identity. This also implies a shift in her attitude towards her mother: before Sophie had connected her mother with the mother country, but now she realizes that it is just as much connected with the motherland as Sophie herself: “She too was from this place. - - Yes, my mother was like me” (*BEM*, 234).

Neither Kincaid nor Xuela can be said to achieve the same level of wholeness and connection with the motherland as Sophie. In *My Brother*, one explanation could lie in the causes which bring Kincaid back to Antigua. Unlike Sophie, Kincaid’s return does not come from her own initiative, she returns because her brother is dying. These circumstances are not favorable for a reconnection with the motherland. One of the reasons Kincaid had left Antigua was that she associated her motherland with death. Now she would return only to confirm her fears. When she visits her brother in the hospital she realizes that “people with his own complexion - - did not care whether he or other people like him lived or died” (*MB*, 50). Rather than connecting again with her motherland Antigua, Kincaid repeats on several occasions her wish to return to her home in America: “What am I doing here, I want to go home. I missed my children and my husband. I missed the life I had come to know” (*MB*, 23). Kincaid does not have a sense of belonging to Antigua. She has been away for so long that she no longer speaks the kind of English as her family and cannot easily understand them. Despite this disconnectedness that Kincaid continues to experience, there is still something that draws her to the motherland and to her family. She still calls Antigua ‘home’. Even though she describes how content she is about her new life in America, she cannot help



returning time and again to help her family in Antigua. In America, after speaking with her mother on the phone she confesses:

I missed the warm sun and I missed my brother, being with him, being in the presence of his suffering and the feeling that somewhere in it was the possibility of redemption of some kind, though what form it could take I did not know and did not care, only that redemption of some kind would be possible and that we would all emerge from it better in some way and would love each other more (*MB*, 50).

The word “redemption” suggests the importance of Kincaid’s motherland and family in her struggle for independence. It shows that Kincaid does long to be reunited with her past and the people she comes from—and she connects them with the idea of freedom. Her feelings towards her family are very ambiguous, and remain as such even as the novel ends. Even though Kincaid implies that she wishes to reunite with her family and thus also with her motherland, she is unable to do it. She is unable to clarify her feelings which are divided into two opposite directions. Kincaid says about her family: “they mean everything to me and they mean nothing, and even so, I do not really know what I mean when I say this” (*MB*, 194). Thus Kincaid is not able to reach the same kind of closure in the end of the novel as Sophie does.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela cannot voyage back in the same sense as Kincaid and Sophie, seeing that she never left her motherland. Her exile from the motherland had been a metaphorical one, as was shown in section 4.3. Since Alexander argues that Xuela is never able to claim her mother, consequently she can never claim the motherland. This inconnectedness with the motherland supports her argument that Xuela “remains fractured and incomplete” (Alexander, 2001, 105). However, by drawing this conclusion Alexander ignores the fact that Xuela does voyage back in one sense. When Xuela settles down at the age of seventy, she moves “far away into the mountains, into the *land where my mother and the people she was of were born*” (*AMM*, 206, emphasis added). I would argue that this is proof of Xuela’s reconnection with the land, at least to an extent. In

this place she comes to understand herself and her relationship with history. And specifically she can now connect with her Carib roots. She describes that at this moment in her life she could experience “a feeling of peace, a resolve” (*AMM*, 223). Living in her mother’s land she “was living at the brink of eternity” (*AMM*, 213). She could feel close to her mother whom she had never seen: “I had never known my mother and yet my love for her followed her into eternity” (*AMM*, 210). But this reconnection with her dead mother and her motherland is limited compared with the one Sophie experiences. This is apparent in the fact that she wears “the color black, the color of the mourners” (*AMM*, 218). Xuela associates her mother and her past with the color black. This is in high contrast with the color red which Sophie associates with her dead mother (*BEM*, 227). Red is a color of power, passion and courage and Sophie is able to draw strength from her past and turn the trials of the past into a triumph of freedom in the present. In contrast, Xuela’s reconnection with her mother and motherland is associated with darkness and immobility. However, Xuela’s colour of mourning is also proof of the fact that she actively remembers and thinks about her Carib origins, not wanting to forget the nation lost as a result of genocide.

As I have shown, the daughters use their bodies and their memory in their struggle for independence. Through a profound understanding of their relationship with the past the daughters are able to rewrite the past and find freedom in their present lives—some more than others. The difficulties they face demonstrate the difficulty of constructing their identities in relation to their parents. An apparent independence from their parents—who are associated with the colonizers—can actually reflect forms of neo-colonialism, dependencies which only take other forms as before. The struggle for independence is an ongoing process which cannot be taken for granted. The daughters need to process their past continually in light of their present lives and find their autonomous spaces. The concept of independence is

thus an ambiguous one for one can never escape dependence with the past. This ambiguity is clearly present in the daughters' struggles for independence.

## 6. Conclusion

Both Danticat and Kincaid emphasize that independence from parental control is not achieved through a mere separation from the parents. The daughters can be controlled by their parents regardless of the concrete presence of the parents in their everyday lives. In my opinion Danticat and Kincaid are discussing the larger issue of national independence through the discussion of personal independence of the characters. More precisely, both authors are raising questions about colonialism and neo-colonialism. Most of the Caribbean islands have gained flag independence from the colonizers but still suffer from various forms of neo-colonialism. Amílcar Cabral argues that a nation cannot be said to have gained actual independence if there has simply been a transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1984, 48). Kincaid and Danticat are discussing the gaining of genuine national liberation through the struggle for independence of the daughters from their parents.

There are serious problems of neo-colonialism throughout the Caribbean. David Lowenthal depicts the harsh reality of the state of independence in the Caribbean:

[F]ormal independence and equality have scarcely altered West Indian social structure. The men in political power now are black or brown but are commonly held to think white. To inherit the place and prerogatives of colonial overlords and local white deputies has often been their chief goal. By training and taste they distance themselves from folk backgrounds and treat the masses as recalcitrant subjects or ignorant children. - - Most West Indian governments are “black”, therefore, only in a superficial or symbolic sense (1972, 117).

The attitudes among the politicians of the new independent nations show that they have adopted their values from the white colonizers—similarly to the mothers in the novels.

Instead of creating their own standards, they follow Western standards. This means that they view the white man as a superior being, thus furthering the colour hierarchy of the colonizer.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Franz Fanon discusses this problem and strongly criticizes those black people who see whiteness as their objective. He states, for example, that “the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites”

(1952, 8, 9). Carter further notes about this problem which hinders the development of a strong national identity: “it is not only the white and brown man, but the black man as well, who regards the black man as being inferior being, hence meriting his status” (Lowenthal, 1972, 117). These attitudes, which are rooted deep within the colonized psyche, render the nations vulnerable to further exploitation through the forms of neo-colonialism. The most visible form is the continuing economic dependency. As Lowenthal points out, the “Caribbean territories are firmly bound to a system of producing and marketing raw materials, - - agricultural commodities, and tourist facilities controlled by and for the benefit of metropolitan powers” (1972, 117). When a nation is thus bound with the former colonial power and driven by the colonizer’s standards, genuine independence has not been attained. Similarly, after the daughters’ separation from their parents in the novels, they still continued to be under the control of their parents—despite their apparent independence.

Danticat and Kincaid do not attempt to belittle the problems faced in the struggle for independence. Despite their efforts, the daughters find it very difficult to attain a balanced relationship with their former colonizers—their parents. Even in the end of the novels, the degree of independence which the daughters attain is arguable. However, it is clear that the personal struggles of the daughters are significant of a national level. Consider, for example what Xuela says in *The Autobiography of My Mother*: “I am not a people, I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time *to make my actions to be the actions of a people, to make my actions be the actions of a nation*” (AMM, 216, emphasis added). This suggests that the way the daughters fight for their independence has something to tell to their nations who are also struggling for their independence from neo-colonialism. There are two main elements which are apparent in the daughters’ struggles: 1) the use of memory and writing and 2) the use of body.

Kincaid and Danticat suggest that the past must be processed and understood profoundly so that one does not end up repeating past mistakes. Colonial past does not have to be a burden if one draws strength from the past trials and is empowered by them. The common colonial past is a unifying factor to the people who experience its effects in their daily lives. In his definition of a nation, Ernest Renan emphasizes the importance of past:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is a present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. - - *The nation like the individual, is the culmination of a long past* of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion (as quoted in Rajan, 1995, 3, emphasis added).

Kincaid and Danticat demonstrate the importance of past through their characters who have a strong need to remember. The act of remembering is not passive, but rather it involves a process in which one reconstructs the past from one's own perspective. This is extremely important in postcolonial contexts. Under the colonial rule the colonizers created the past for the colonized and restricted their right to remember. The postcolonial nation cannot be built on the colonizer's past—the past must be reinterpreted and rewritten.

In the same way as the daughters use their bodies, experiences and memory in their struggle for independence, the postcolonial nations need to use resources which are inherently theirs—not inherited from the colonizer. This process can be seen in modern research into the history of the Caribbean before Christopher Columbus. By trying to reconstruct the identity of the indigenous, pre-colonial individual, the Caribbean nations are searching for a firm ground on which they can build the foundation of independent nations. The task is not an easy one since little process has been made in rewriting the past, as Sued-Badillo argues:

The naked truth is that in general, after five centuries of insertion in the history of the "modern World," Caribbean historiography is just as poor, neglected, dependent, ideologized, and irrelevant, in other words, colonial, as it manifested itself centuries ago (1992, 600).

It is true that a great deal still needs to be done in this area. However, in saying that the Caribbean historiography is as colonial as it was centuries ago, Sued-Badillo is ignoring all the work recently done to improve this situation, and the ground work going as far back as C. L. R. James' important novel *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Danticat and Kincaid emphasize that in order to create agency and self-respect, the postcolonial people must correct the colonizers misinterpretations of their indigenous ancestors. As was mentioned in section 3, the colonizers represented the colonized peoples as ignorant, uncivilized and less human (Boehmer, 1995, 79). These representations of inferior indigenous peoples make it seem like the colonizers were only doing a favour to the weak and savage natives. However, as Sejourne argues, research into the pre-colonial past shows that

the members of Precolumbian societies enjoyed physical health, individual independence, security, some leisure, which implies a distribution of resources and an integration to the collectivity that in our days would seem a utopia (as quoted in Sued-Badillo, 1992, 605).

Findings of this kind allow the postcolonial nations to lift up their heads as strong independent nations. Amílcar Cabral states that “[t]he national liberation of a people is the regaining of the *historical personality* of that people, it is their return to history” (as quoted in Boehmer, 1995, 194). By proving the falsehoods in colonial myths, postcolonial people can revalue their human worth and recreate their identities.

It must be remembered though that Danticat and Kincaid are writing about the struggle for independence specifically from a female perspective. If third world nations today suffer from neo-colonialism, it can be argued that women in these countries are additionally still experiencing colonialism. The system of oppression experienced by third world women is very complex and multilayered. Third world feminists have gone as far as to state that postcolonial women are “the last colony” and “the slaves of slaves” in colonial and neo-colonial societies (Acosta-Belén, Bose, 1990, 310, 316). Acosta-Belén and Bose argue that

the subordination experienced by third world women “is in many ways comparable to that of any colonial subject (male or female)” and thus “gender represents a compounding factor of their oppression” (1990. 317). Third world women suffer from the traditional roles imposed on them by patriarchal societies, from being low-wage—or often non-wage—labourers and from sexism. Men control women’s sexuality, isolate them in the domestic sphere and devalue any work they do. Just like the colonizers regarded the subordination of the natives as being an integral part of the natural order, so do men in postcolonial nations regard the subordination of women.

Danticat and Kincaid are writing about the day-to-day struggles of third world women but instead of representing these women as a homogenous group of oppressed women, they are giving women subject status, agency. They demonstrate that the liberation of women should be an integral part in the struggle for national independence. They are striving towards a decolonization of women. This liberation has been marginalized until very recently in the discussion about national liberation which has been the higher cause. Through the characters in the novels, Kincaid and Danticat are showing how third world women face oppression similar to that experienced by the colonized during the period of colonization. They are not merely calling for an annihilation of the dichotomy colonizer-colonized but, in Acosta-Belén and Bose’s terms, “for profound reformulations and restructuring of the power relations between women and men at the domestic and societal levels, free of all hierarchies” (1990. 317). This gender decolonization is for them a fundamental part in the struggle for independence.

It is especially Kincaid and Danticat’s blending of fiction and autobiography which allows for the general interpretation I have done in this thesis. The fictional aspect is more self-explanatory in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and in *The Autobiography of My Mother* than it is in *My Brother*. But the reason why *My Brother* should not be regarded as a pure



autobiography which objectively represents Kincaid's life, is that all autobiography is fictional to an extent. Kincaid herself reveals in *My Brother* that she talks about her relationship with her mother "as a great love affair, *something that was partly imaginary, something that was partly a fact*" (MB, 118, 119, emphasis added). What Kincaid tells about her life is not to be read as the absolute truth, but as her interpretation. This fictional aspect, which is more apparent in the other two novels, allows the reader to interpret the characters, not as flesh-and-blood people but more generally as representatives of larger groups of people. Through the individuals in the novels these authors are giving a voice to communities which suffer from the effects of colonialism. And, as I have shown, they are specifically giving a voice to the oppressed third world women and granting them agency through fiction. In this sense, Kincaid and Danticat are not writing personal autobiographies but rather the autobiographies of the Caribbean nations. The fictional standpoint also allows them to deal with issues that they consider important on a national level even though they might not have experienced them personally, while still maintaining the authoritative voice inherent in autobiography.

But although this interpretation of the mothers as representatives of the mother country and the daughters as the colonized people allows for an important discussion of national independence, one must also acknowledge its limitations. By drawing such general conclusions as I have done in this theses there is a danger of categorizing people and nations into homogenous, black-and-white groups. All the Caribbean islands have different histories of colonization and gaining of independence. Naturally, they experience diverging forms of neo-colonialism and have different relationships with their former colonial powers. Furthermore, even though people from various Caribbean nations share a collective history, there exist just as many interpretations of that history as there exist individuals. Consequently, even though it would seem easy and tempting to state that the daughters in the novels speak

collectively of the experiences of black women in the third world, it would be an overgeneralization. Even though Danticat and Kincaid are expressing black female consciousness, it is the result of their personal imaginative powers.

Through their works *Breath, Eyes, Memory, My Brother* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* Danticat and Kincaid talk back to the centre. They depict daughters who at first occupy an object status but who fight for their independence from their parents. In the beginning of the novels their situation resembles that of the colonized nations—they are abandoned, defeated and do not have control of the course of their lives. However, by using those resources which are inherently their own they are able to fight back: by using their memories, bodies, courage and intellectual powers. Thus they are able to imagine alternative narratives for their lives and rewrite not only the present but the way they perceive the past and the future as well. The parents represent the mother country, the colonizers, and they try to control their daughters and impose Western values on them. However, through the daughters, Kincaid and Danticat explore ways of fighting for independence from direct colonialism and the more indirect forms of neo-colonialism. True independence can only be attained when the nations, and the daughters, have acquired a balanced relationship with their former colonizers, created strong roots into their ancestral past and feel at home in their motherland. The colonial past cannot be ignored, it must be processed, faced and seen as a resource for a strong, united national identity. It is in this sense that Kincaid and Danticat can be said to talk about postcolonial issues on a national level: they encourage postcolonial nations, and especially third world women, to talk back to the assumed centres, to remember and to rewrite their own personal and national autobiographies.

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