ART AND IDEOLOGY IN ANNIE JOHN: THEORETICAL
ISSUES IN WEST INDIAN WOMEN'S FICTION

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This paper was originally intended as an overview of recent theories about a West Indian "female aesthetic" as it operates in fiction by women of the region. Such a project proved rather ambitious, particularly in light of the absence of consensus on theoretical terminology: this last due, in part, to general suspicion (if not hostility) among writers and regional critics toward what is perceived to be imported "international feminism" and "hegemonic" postmodernist theory. What I attempt to do here is to examine Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1984) in an effort to test the efficacy of such theory in explicating the West Indian and female experience; further, to demonstrate that ideology is encoded in all discourse, including the literary, and the perceived dichotomy between art and ideology is a false one. Kincaid's novel reflects both the "globalization" of hegemonic discourse and a post colonial/creole impulse that appropriates and adapts to its own ends.

Laura Niesen de Abruna (1992,275) notes that the majority of reviews of Kincaid's *Annie John* (1984) have failed to notice its anti-colonial sentiments, and her essay does much to draw attention to this feature of the writing. As such, we could consider *Annie John* as situated firmly within the growing body of post colonial literature: that is, as Slemon and Tiffin (1989, ix) explain, "writing that is grounded in the cultural realities of those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted at least in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism." Post colonial theory focuses on *power relations* between European colonizing centre and marginal
colony as they underlie the production of literature. Such literature is born out of resistance to the ideology of Western discourse which constructs Other as negation, lack, difference.

Post colonial writing then, foregrounds difference as a means of interrogating and subverting "the master's discourse." As Marlene Nourbese Philip (1990, 295) clarifies,

European thought has traditionally designated certain groups not only as inferior but also, paradoxically, as threats to their order, systems and traditions of knowledge. Women, Africans, Asians and aboriginals can be said to comprise these groups and together they constitute the threat of the Other -- that embodiment of everything which the white male perceived himself not to be.

Philip here links woman and, for want of a better word, "native" as similarly marginalised within patriarchal imperial thought. In considering Annie John, it is necessary to accept Davies and Fido's injunction (1990, 2) that "Caribbean women's writing... has to be understood first within the context of various imperialist discourses and then against them as a rewriting of these discourses;" but it is also necessary to consider such writing in a similar relation to patriarchal discourse as it operates both within and without the Caribbean.

Accordingly, we could read Kincaid's text within a context of post colonial feminism. Perhaps the term needs clarification. W.D. Ashcroft, in an article appropriately titled "Intersecting Marginalities" (1989, 33), attempts to specify areas of overlap between feminist and post colonial theory in the hope that "a greater
awareness of each other's strategies may lead to a fusion of energies.... [and] what has not yet been -- a genuine post-colonial feminism." I suspect Ashcroft's statement is now somewhat redundant, and a substantial amount of post colonial feminist scholarship is in existence; however, his focus on specific overlaps remains useful.

For Ashcroft, both discourses articulate from a position of resistance to dominant authoritarian and neo-authoritarian orthodoxy, and both speak from their position within hegemonic language to subvert and destabilize it. Both "woman" and "post colonial" exist to some extent outside representation itself, in that they are constituted by the dominant discourse simply as negation and lack. In addition, Ashcroft sees both post colonialism and feminism as concerned with writing out of a sense of place/body as colonized and wishing to revision, reconstruct place/body - - not in terms of a pre-existing "pure" original nation/femininity in opposition to imperial/patriarchal constructions, but through questioning the whole binary structurations by which they were marginalized in the first place.

Ashcroft does warn that both discourses are vulnerable to hegemonic reincorporation, by which the imperial/patriarchal centre draws subversive elements back into itself: by academic legitimization, by subsuming them into European theoretical movements like post-structuralism, and so on. Indeed, one of the most common criticisms of post colonial theory generally has to do with such appropriation. Ketu Katrak (1989, 158) for example, considers that in fact post
colonial theorists have succumbed "to the lure of engaging in a hegemonic discourse of Western theory given that it is ‘difficult’ or ‘challenging’" and so post colonial texts tend to become ‘case-studies’ for "the theory producers and consumers of Western academia." Personally, I see nothing wrong with engaging "hegemonic discourse" in a theoretical challenge; however, care must be taken not to simply appropriate the literature as a subsidiary to theoretical pontification -- an accusation that could be leveled at papers and conferences like this! However, if the primary focus -- of post colonial feminism -- remains centred on power relations with hegemonic discourse, such charges may be avoided.

More difficult to counter are some reservations about post colonial theory raised by scholars such as Mukherjee (1991, 28) who considers that the categories of this theory

perform several homogenizing functions which produce an essentialized "native" who is devoid of race, gender, class, caste, ethnic and religious markers... further... that post colonial theory's exclusive concern with this essentialized native's "resistance" to "the colonizer," another essentialized construction, is politically retrogressive insofar as it occludes, on the one hand, this resisting native's own ideological agendas and, on the other, the heterogeneity of voices in postcolonial societies.

Mukherjee's argument is most convincing considered specifically from the perspective of the Indian colonial experience he refers to. At the same time, his unease with a post colonial "essence," which makes it difficult "to speak of fundamental differences within particular national formations -- differences, let us say, of class, or of gender formation" (30), can certainly be shared by feminist thinkers.
With the above reservations and qualifications firmly in mind, I would like now to suggest a putatively "post colonial feminist" reading of Kincaid’s *Annie John*.

One example of the way that imperial and patriarchal ideologies overlap, is in the mythical representation of New World lands in terms of the female body: the fabulous, unspoilt "virgin" territory awaiting discovery by the male is a trope that has gained literary currency at least since John Donne’s "To His Mistress Going to Bed": "Oh my America, my new found lande/My kingdom, safliest when with one man man’d,/My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,/How blest am I in this discovering thee." El Dorado was imaged by the conquistadores partly in terms of a virgin awaiting ravishment, a princess expectant of the male’s awakening touch; of course, like the female body, land was also considered in terms of commodity, a source of riches to be appropriated by the most determined new "owner."

In West Indian fiction, the trope continues. Wilson Harris associates the "dark continent" of the Guyanese interior with a transcendental female principle: woman as "Spirit of Place," as Joyce Stewart (1990) terms it. Lemuel Johnson (1990, 128ff) discusses Michelle Cliff’s fiction as calling woman’s body into question within and against such "conquest of America" paradigms noted above. Indeed, Cliff (1990, 266) herself understands the Jamaican landscape in female terms, but explains this is because "the land is redolent of my grandmother and mother"; Elaine Fido (1992, 347) cites Kristeva’s explanation of such an association (of (lost) country with image
of the Mother) in the female unconscious. Marlene Nourbese Philip too (1991, 61),
exploits for her own purposes the familiar metaphor of voyage into the heart of
Africa as sexual penetration of the female. And Caroline Rooney's (1992, 99)
consideration of the term "motherland" suggests that "Mother" functions as a
substitute for "native" and a trope for "of origin."

In *Annie John*, Kincaid draws together these multiple associations: native
land/female body/Mother/paradisal Eden. Annie recalls her childhood in colonial
Antigua in terms of sensual and emotional oneness with her mother and the world:
"It was in such a paradise that I lived" (25). But with puberty, this closeness is
abruptly terminated by the mother and the rest of the narrative details the girl's
horror of and resentment at her expulsion from Eden.

But within imperial and patriarchal myth, the loss of paradise is an *inevitable*
consequence of "civilization." The "dark continent" actively seduces Livingstone; El
Dorado lures the conquistador. Such Edens must enter the "real world" and cannot
do so without colonial penetration of the darkness of savagery and superstition: the
benefits of reason, enlightenment and the "true" faith self-evidently justify the
defloration. By analogy, woman cannot *become* female without a man; without
"graduating," in Lacanian terms, into the Symbolic Order and accommodating herself
to the Law of the Father.

Certainly, myths of conquest acknowledge some tears at the loss of innocence,
the fall from grace in Eden (which Milton explicitly links with America before Columbus, in *Paradise Lost* 9: 1115-8). Sacrifice of the unspoilt, virgin state (of land/body) inevitably opens the way to corruption; regretfully, sin and mortality enter the world. So, it would seem, imperial and patriarchal discourse should manfully accept the blame: the phallic serpent in the garden, the whiteman speaking with forked tongue. To some extent, this indictment is reflected in *Annie John*. The mother's refusal of the tyrannical authority of her own father parallels Annie's rejection of inferior colonial status: patriarch is linked with Columbus, the colonizing prototype, and Annie rejoices in the humiliation of both in the section of the text entitled "Columbus in Chains."

However, incorporating the Judeo-Christian myth of the fall into the story of virgin territory ravished for the good of the soul, somehow shifts the blame back on to the woman: Paradise, after all, was lost because of Eve's sin. The phallic serpent may have been the catalyst but the fall from grace is the woman's fault. And, it seems to me, Kincaid's narrative shares this concern with the fall from grace -- according to Leslie Garis (1990, 70), this theme haunts all her writing -- with Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. Where Milton blames Eve, Annie blames her mother.

It is obvious that *Annie John* is informed on several levels by Milton's poem: ironically, for her irreverent commentary on imperial history (defacing a picture of Columbus), Annie is punished by having to copy out Books I and 2 of *Paradise Lost*. 
Post colonial resistance is treated with large doses of a canonical text that universalizes a hierarchy of authority as divinely sanctioned and portrays woman as essentially narcissistic (Book 4; 460-68), greedy (9; 791-3), weak and credulous (9; 733-4), cunning and ambitious (9; 815-825), deceitful (9; 877-8), and above all inferior to man (4; 440-448). Clearly, this incident calls out for a post colonial feminist interrogation!

And in a sense, Annie John may be read as a localized version of Paradise Lost, but one which subtly reworks Milton’s classic and related myths that devalue women. Annie, copying out the cautionary tale of disobedience punished, learns what befalls those (colonials/women) who do not know their place. Yet she chooses to identify with Lucifer, whose exile from Heaven and unrepentant plotting against "the dominant discourse" form the subject of Books I and 2 of Paradise Lost. Seeing her black, female body reflected in a shop window, Annie recognizes similarities with a picture of "The Young Lucifer": "Satan just recently cast out of heaven for all his bad deeds... standing on a black rock all alone and naked" (49). Like Cathy in Wuthering Heights, Annie prefers Hell to a Heaven where her only role as "native"/woman is one of obsequious subservience.

But why the vilification of her mother/Eve? In a sense, Annie's mother is linked with Eve because of her collusion with the serpent's poison (imperial and patriarchal ideology) which she carries unwittingly in her head. The snake in the
bananas carried on her mother's head (68-69) is symbolic of both the colonial ethos she has internalized and determines to pass on to her daughter, and the "young lady business" (training in female decorum, domesticity and subservience) to which she subjects Annie. Abruna (1992, 281ff) goes into some detail on this doubly colonizing education into inferiority. As post colonial feminist project, Annie John rejects the mother as serpent (52) and servant of both Mother Country and patriarchy, much as Antoinette's husband in Rhy's Wide Sargasso Sea is both imperial and patriarchal agent. It is significant then, that in the throes of her breakdown (Hell), Annie washes family photographs, erasing all that is white: except for a pair of shoes she previously insisted on wearing, in defiance of her mother's disapproval as "not fit for a young lady and not fit for wearing or being received into church" (119).

Post colonial feminism attempts to deconstruct imperial and patriarchal mythology that writes "native"/woman as lack; it does so by exposing ideologies which underpin such inscriptions as ideology, not common-sense truths. It seems to me that Annie John can be read in this light. However, remembering Mukherjee's reservations, it should be noted that Annie John's focus on the mother/daughter relationship prevents a simplistic reading as us/them polemic, for imperial and patriarchal discourse are shown to be enshrined in the heart of the "native" family and community, causing fundamental conflicts regarding class and gender formation within this group. For example, as Donna Perry (1990) demonstrates, Annie can and
does utilize indigenous resources associated with women (story-telling, obeah) to counteract her mother's version of colonial femininity. As in other post colonial texts, *Annie John* thus destabilizes the "rightness" of the centre/margin paradigm by questioning the utility of received (colonial) truths.

There is another sense in which Kincaid's text engages with *Paradise Lost*, particularly in the mother/Eve identification, which has to do with female sexuality, a central subject of feminism but one treated with great reticence by most West Indian women writers. In Milton's poem, Eve's sin (and her involvement of Adam in that sin) results almost immediately in "carnal knowledge" of a most lust-inflamed kind (9; 1013-6). This is followed by guilt and shame concerning bodily sexuality (9; 1058). Eve is made to bear the responsibility for this development, by God (10; 192-208) and by Adam (9; 1182-84): "Thus it shall befall/Him who, to worth in women over trusting,/Lets her will rule") and for the entry of death into the garden. Eve becomes synonymous with shameful sexuality and mortality.

Sylvia Wynter (1990) has pointed out that several creation myths tend to mark women with negative symbols: for example, association of the downward flow of menstrual blood with the sublunary world, the province of mortality, marks woman as a symbol of sin and death. As Wynter also notes, blacks too were associated with the degraded earth in imperial discourse; her larger point being, that *all* knowledge encodes race and gender constructs for ideological reasons. So, within
Judeo-Christian discourse, woman is linked with mutable nature and death (while man is associated with culture and life), thus justifying as normative female inferiority. As the code is secularized, it also justifies their economic and social inequality.

Annie, in *Annie John*, and Nellie in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, can be considered as victims of the woman/sexuality/death construct. At puberty, Nellie (like Annie) becomes aware of bodily changes as shameful, marks of sin: "I have the devil in me" (122), she admits. We have seen that Annie's reflection on her maturing body also leads to identification with Satan. To be female is to be fallen from grace. Hence, Nellie accepts that she must be "shipped out" of the paradisal garden of childhood to "be cleansed," and subsequently "preserved like pepper in a kilner jar" (122) by Aunt Becca: that is, to deny her female sexuality by adopting the facade of "good girl" and later, the dry, cracked intellectual doll. Annie too, learns -- from her mother -- that maturing women are potentially sluts, and that she (Annie) is well on the way to this fallen, dirty, shameful state (102).

By contrast, in the relatively ungendered world of childhood, to be woman is to be like her mother, perfection. Helen Pyne Timothy (1990) sees the early mother/daughter relationship in *Annie John* in terms of Nancy Chodorow's description of the ultimately fulfilling pre-Oedipal dyad, to which the father is at best
Puberty coincides with alienation from the body ("when I perspired the smell was strange, as if I had turned into a strange animal" [25]) and from the mother's body. Maternal rejection signals that "it" (female sexuality) completely redefines female identity: now, one is seen as body, but body inscribed as fallen, shameful, inherently sinful. In Kincaid's and Brodber's narratives, the effect is devastating: "What a weight!" sighs Nellie, "Slowly it adds up" (24). Expelled from the paradise of her mother's love, Annie is now distrustfully watched at all times by her mother, "the corners of her mouth turned down in disapproval of me" (28). Instead of the symbiosis of childhood, Annie is marginalized by her mother, while the father becomes a controlling force in her mother's life.

A crucial episode is Annie's return home (significantly from Sunday School) to witness her parents making love. She is struck most by her mother's hand on her father's naked back: "It was white and bony, as if it had long been dead and had been left out in the elements" (30). Again, the woman/sexuality/death complex is reinforced.

Pyne Timothy (1990, 238) points out that like many West Indian mothers, Annie's seems ashamed of the whole issue of female sexuality1 and "has suppressed this aspect of herself in her role-modeling although she does at one point recommend marriage and motherhood to Annie," a recommendation Annie categorically rejects as absurd. Her beloved mother's apparently willing participation
in the woman/sexuality/death role is a hideous betrayal for Annie; so too is her best friend's desire that Annie will marry her brother (93). The female dyad is sundered, its closeness corrupted by the male intruder. From here on, adult sexuality -- particularly as embodied in her parents -- is viewed with utter disgust: in the cleansing of the family snapshots, Annie erases pictures of her parents "from the waist down" (120).

Her mother, then, is Eve: fallen into sexuality. When confronted with the maternal accusation of being a slut Annie replies accurately, "like mother like daughter" (102). The mother is also fallen into wifely subservience, Eve's punishment in Paradise Lost (10; 195-6): "to they husband's will,Thine shall submit; he over thee shall rule"). From refusing the tyranny of paternal rule, Annie's mother now appears to enjoy the servile state vis a vis her husband; and has the nerve to recommend it to Annie!

Finally, mother/Eve comes to represent death: in her fallen state, she is 'dead' to Annie and, in that she has cast her daughter out of her ungendered, undifferentiated childhood heaven, she brings about the 'death' of the child, Annie. Forced by her mother into awareness of her sexuality and her gender -- with its sentence of subjection -- Annie has lost the freedom and power of the edenic state, which she yet dreams of and longs for. Indeed, Bryant Magnum (1986, 259) considers much of Kincaid's fiction to be imbued with this desire for "the wholeness
and completeness that characterizes the harmonious prelapsarian world."

Annie John, then, is a powerful indictment of the role of older West Indian women in socializing girl children into ideologies of patriarchy and imperialism. In addition, the potential for class fragmentation and snobbery within the kind of "young lady business" they advocate, suggests further conflicts within the "native" community -- conflicts that Merle Hodge's Crick Crack Monkey makes explicit.

Giovanna Covi (1990, 353) correctly claims that Kincaid's writing resists single interpretative stances and emphasizes multiplicity. However, Covi (346-7) also asserts that the

main theme of her writings is the inquiry into the feminine role and racial difference. Kincaid criticizes the very existence of sexual and racial difference, rather than the modes of their existence....

Her fiction, then, demonstrates how colonial woman is constructed within patriarchal imperial discourse and disrupts the hegemony of such discourse by questioning its assumptions. One strategy, as discussed above, is textual engagement with Western mythical constitution of the woman as negativity. In dramatizing Annie's indictment of her mother (Eve) for the loss of Eden, Annie John calls into question the flawed reasoning not only of the wounded child, but of the Genesis myth, enshrined in Paradise Lost, which "justifies" this subjection of woman. By interrogating the innately sinful nature of the Miltonic woman, demonstrated in her shameful sexuality and mortality, Kincaid's text suggests that it is rather the necessity of entering patriarchy, accepting the Law of the Father (becoming gendered for women is
becoming inferior Other), that in effect constitutes a "death sentence" for female subjectivity and agency. In addition, *Annie John* parallels female "Othering" with colonial "Othering", again exposing and questioning assumptions that celebrate the "discovery" of the New World at the expense of pre-Columbian innocence/integrity.

Appropriating myths that construct woman/"native" empowers the post colonial feminist writer to regain *some* measure of control over them; deconstructing them helps to undermine the underlying centre/margin paradigms that marginalize her, her literature and her culture. Finally, by locating narrative in the material reality of West Indian society, such writing demonstrates how contending discourses within this community -- those of the two grandmothers in Olive Senior's eponymous story (1989) for example -- problematize female socialization in the region. This last *alone*, is a vital political contribution to women's lives and should more than compensate for any dilettante dabbling in theory.

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ENDNOTES

1. Hazel Carby’s comments (1989, 174) apropos of Nella Larson may suggest one reason for this: "the repression of passion and the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire" as a defensive reaction "to the long history of the exploitation of black sexuality...." Certainly, in *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* the wish to protect girl children from the exploitation of their sexuality by unprincipled men -- leading to entrapment by unwanted pregnancy and dependence on a parade of men -- is seen to be a black woman’s problem, necessitating harsh penalties for ‘loose’ behaviour in young women. Female characters in Joan Riley’s fiction, according to Suarez (1992, 297), see their bodies through men’s eyes: as objects of violation and so (like Annie and Nellie) don’t want to grow to womanhood for fear of the vulnerability implicit in "the female sexual/social role."

In addition, Laura Niesen de Abruna’s observation (1992, 282) that Annie’s mother believes "in the necessity of guarding one’s sexual virtue if one is to be an unspoiled commodity on the marriage market," needs to be taken into consideration. The subject could bear further study for, as several of the testimonies in Sistren’s *Lionheart Gal* (1986) demonstrate, lack of female guidance on the subject of sexuality can have devastating consequences.

2. Note Annie’s awareness (113) of her father’s maleness, and her sexual arousal while sitting on his lap: again, daughter cannot help but identify with mother even in the shameful role of "slut."
WORKS CITED


