

**BEAUTIFUL BLACK: COUNTER RHETORIC OF SHAME AND ANGER**

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ABSTRACT

The epitome of ideal beauty from a long time has been largely depicted as a woman with light complexion and blue eyes mostly. It wasn't possible for women of colour to be classified as ideal beauty while white women hardly struggled to achieve this ideal. Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* is a profound inspection of the creation of racialised and gendered identities in fictional texts. In the novel, Kincaid confronts Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. The major themes of a postcolonial nature like multicultural diversity, ethnic medicinal practices edging on superstition, racism, colonial hangovers, cultural domination by way of education system of Christian missionaries etc are dealt with in the novel.

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According to Naomi Wolf, beauty is an indispensable factor for many women and is a very prevailing myth. The epitome of ideal beauty from long time ago has been largely depicted as a woman with light complexion and blue eyes mostly. In colonial and subsequent narratives this was a benchmark which posed an impediment to any cultural alterations. It remained that it wasn't possible for women of colour to be classified as ideal beauty while white women hardly struggled to achieve this ideal. As Paul C. Taylor argues, "a white dominated culture has racialised beauty... it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white [people] are more likely to have" (Taylor, 17). It is strictly in keeping with this theory that Kincaid narrates her bold tale through the eyes and life of her protagonist Annie. Taylor is lucid and sharp when he comments about the difficulties encountered in the process of achieving beauty when he clarifies, "the experience of a black woman ... differs from the experiences of ... Jewish and Irish women" (Taylor,20). Within the problems of prejudice and racism lies the question of identity.

Kincaid was born in Antigua, later migrated to America, and is now settled in Vermont. She is a first-generation chronicler of West Indian emigrant experience. The bigotry experienced by her both in Caribbean islands as well as America has connection to her contemporary period, which is mixture of various factors like ethnicity, gender identity and race. It is against this backdrop that the conditions of racial and ethnic segregation had attained its intensity. Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* is a profound inspection of the creation of racialised and gendered identities in fictional texts, specifically Afro-American and Indigenous women's writings. In the novel, Kincaid confronts Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. It is interesting to note that as whiteness is used as a standard of beauty, the value of blackness is diminished and this novel works to subvert that tendency.

Annie John, written in 1985, is her novel detailing the rearing of Annie in Antigua, a Caribbean island. Annie John, the protagonist of the book, starts out as a young child who adores her mother and is

dismayed to find that she must someday live in a different house away from her mother. Her mother tries to teach her to become an impeccable lady. Her mind rebels constantly. She is sent to a new school where she must prove herself intellectually and make new friends. She becomes beleaguered there while away from her best friend Gwen and the Red Girl. She is found experiencing a pervading depression, alienating herself from her mother and the other adults in her life. Annie John grows up in Antigua, the largest island in the Caribbean. The major themes of a postcolonial nature like multicultural diversity, ethnic medicinal practices edging on superstition, racism, colonial hangovers, cultural domination by way of education system of Christian missionaries etc are dealt with in the novel.

Annie John is happy girl initially who adores her mother. She can never be separated from her mother who is the world to her. On another plain the mother is a metaphorical representation of her attachment to the island country she lives in. Black is literally beautiful at this stage for the little girl. Her mother Anne is the model of an island beauty, her black complexion is coupled by her confidence and discipline. Her father is a carpenter and he too dotes on her. Annie loved her life in the island of Antigua full of multicultural diversity. Their life was devoid of complications and hence very happy and satisfying when Annie was small. The marriage of Annie's parents was picture perfect while others in Antigua had different tales of relationships. Before his marriage Mr. John had lived with many women who gave birth to many of his children. Yet as the story begins there is no affection anymore and he looked at them like strangers. The fishermen Nigel and Earl shared the "same wife, a woman called Miss. Catherine" (Annie John 122). The girl takes in these various aspects of her island home in its essential entirety. The people were happy in their beautiful black skins. Such were the various diversities seen on the island.

Annie's mother had a deep rooted belief in Obeah practice of casting spell on people and possible dangers resulting in disastrous consequences for the family. When Annie was very small when they walked home from the market she would be shovelled inside mother's skirt so that the



woman, whom her father had an affair and children, couldn't cast her curse and bring harm. The island may have been under white occupation but their native superstitions persisted despite Christian intervention or education. This affinity for Obeah practice is regardless of the fact that they belong to Methodist church. Annie's father did not approve of it. When Annie fell gravely ill with delusions and physical emaciation, her mother brought in Ma Chess for confirming that her daughter was not going to die like her brother Johnnie who had sadly passed away at the ripe age of twenty three. Annie gets Obeah medicines from Ma Jolie and English medicines from Dr. Stephens. The sickness is not deterred, but persists for three and a half months. Thus we see throwbacks into the native culture despite the fact that the blacks had long since been officially converted yet their Christian beliefs didn't seem to sustain them through tough times or when facing adversities.

Just as whites had prejudices about coloureds; similarly the coloureds also had certain dislike of the white's habits. According to Bell Hooks in her *Feminist Theory* this is surprisingly lacking the "internalised racism" (57) and also doesn't lead to any "self-hate, venting of anger or raging at the injustice" (57) as is usually expected in a similar situation. According to Hooks, women of Asian, Latin or Native American Indian origin found it "easy to bond with whites by hating blacks" and what follows is that "Black people respond to this by perpetuating racist stereotypes and images of these ethnic groups. It becomes a vicious cycle" (*Sisterhood* 57). Annie John gives a long list of these prejudices. "The British or whites didn't wash their bodies frequently. They smelled foul and were used to it. The British belong to a temperate zone where there is winter and predominantly cold climate most of the time. Thus washing used to be done at long intervals" (*Annie John* 48). In demonstrating pride in being black, Kincaid does not simply portray positive images of blackness. Instead, she focuses on "the harm that the black women characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a racialised society" (Matus 37). It is strikingly noteworthy when Grewal argues, "merely reversing perceived 'ugliness' to beautiful blackness "is not enough, for such counter-

rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes" (Grewal, 21).

Annie John's white piano teacher was a shrivelled up old spinster from Lancashire, England who loathed her native student's manners and looked down upon them as barbaric offspring of an intellectually inferior race. Racial prejudice seemed to be one of the reasons behind this assumption of superiority. When she was twelve Annie shifted to a new school on account of her good credentials. There was the challenge of assimilation and adapting to the new environment. The classmates, the school routine, teachers were all new and hence Annie had to integrate so that she could fit in. Annie describes Miss. Moore the headmistress as a migrant who had come to Antigua from England and who looked amazingly like' "... a prune left out of its jar a long time and she sounded as if she had borrowed her voice from an owl." (*Annie John* 36) Her physical appearance seemed to markedly reveal her maladaptation. The description of the received pronunciation of the British English is thus humorously presented. The etiquette and the manners like curtsying, greetings etc that the young girls are taught, remind strongly of the colonial influence of a long history of occupation.

In her article "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power", Sandra Bartky scrutinizes "the construction of Western femininity by applying Michel Foucault's theories about the production of subjectivity in modern societies." She further adds that Foucault argues that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies" (Bartky 62). However, Bartky recognises that Foucault does not consider gender differences and "is blind to [the] disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine" (Bartky, 63-64). She further argues that investigating various disciplinary practices that construct feminine bodies reveals "sexism operating in Western patriarchal society" (Bartky 64). However, in doing so, Bartky does not consider racial differences. She argues that "the larger disciplines that construct a 'feminine' body out of a female one are by no means race or class specific. Hardly is there any evidence that "women of color or working class women are in



general less committed to the incarnation of an ideal femininity than their more privileged sisters" (Bartky, 72). Kincaid's characters are all of multiracial origin and seem to function exactly in the perception of white and black binaries.

Annie had one day noticed one of her white teachers Miss. Nelson reading the illustrated edition of *The Tempest*. Annie was watching her enjoy the book as she excused the class to get fresh air. Miss. Nelson was like 'Miranda' of *The Tempest* who had ended up in the little island with unfamiliar people and surroundings who were unlike her and thus felt distanced from the immediate surroundings. She needed consolation from at least the cultural memories of her origin and the book seemed to provide the same feel. The anger in her narrative and tone of her words is the result of an underlying awareness of how historically they had been suppressed and had been forced to look upon even Columbus as a noble discoverer. Miss. Nelson loved Annie's autobiographical reflection about her trip with her mother to the sea side. The white supremacy is here tenderly portrayed as a precarious situation where there is a sense of displacement and alienation being experienced by even a white woman. Annie was going through much bitterness with her mother as she made huge demands on her etiquette and proper demeanour; she masked it in her writing as she felt, "... I couldn't bear to have anyone see how deep in disfavour, I was with my mother" (*Annie John* 45). Thus both the student as well as the teacher had a layer of inner sad feelings but they don't reveal it to anyone. The external concept of beauty doesn't seem to figure much in their lived experiences. Both the black and white seem to have their share of sorrows and anxieties.

The school routine was nightmarish and dismal for Annie. She found the classes of her white school teachers like Mr. Slack from Canada on 'Introductory Physics' rather dull. Miss. Edward was another teacher of history who found frequent use of the 'dunce cap' by way of asking questions daily. Annie's classmate Ruth was asked when Columbus had discovered Dominica. She didn't know it though she was from England and she didn't know much about West Indian island nations. The school curriculum taught many historical facts but all from

the coloniser's perspective. Annie's classmate Ruth whose father was a missionary in Africa; she had come from England. In England according to Annie no one would have reminded Ruth of the terrible things her ancestors had done. Annie was proud of her ethnic origin. Thus concept of the white and black, and their consequent differences seem to be imposing quite a lot of oppressive emotions like shame and anger on the multiracial community inhabiting the native island. She says about Ruth:

"Her ancestors had been the masters, while ours had been slaves. She had such a lot to be ashamed of, and by being with us every day she was always being reminded. We could look everybody in the eye, for our ancestors had nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenceless." (*Annie John* 76)

Annie hints at how racial domination by way of education was being achieved in the school. The teachers and the books were giving a different colonial perspective. The native children like her didn't know on which side they really belonged—"with the masters or the slaves" (76) because many didn't know what really happened in the past and the whites of their times behaved unlike the ancestors. Colonial tentacles prevailed so much so that they too celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday and kept up all the coloniser's acts. Annie was sure of one thing that their ancestors were not monsters who would have annihilated alien ethnic race they came across. She says: "... I was sure that if our ancestors had gone from Africa to Europe and come upon people living there, they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans on first seeing them, and said, "How nice," and then gone home to tell their friends about it" (76).

Annie suggests that no matter how strong or violent her ancestors had been, they would never have stooped to gruesome and ferocious acts that had been done by the whites. Her sense of pride in her beautiful black ancestors is very much palpable here. Antigua had been tampered by the English colonial scheme; its native culture had lost its innate virtues and the new values were decided by the British. The school teachers and the educational system superimposed its 'superior' values on the native culture. Annie's teachers or the shops



fraternized the English way of life while Antigua and even children like Annie disliked this neo-colonising approach of the colonizers who wrote out their life's drama and did not leave them with any choice. Being black, for Annie and many islanders, was a sense of being aware of their native origins and their culture. This can clearly be seen in the ways that the black women are portrayed in *Annie John* by Kincaid. There is a distinct segregation and ensuing distrust between the whites and blacks on the island.

Sometimes there is a sensitive predicament preventing emancipation as according to Grewal, "individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions" (Grewal, 21) and Kincaid seems to cross this impediment as the protagonist seems free as Terry Eagleton says "ourselves from ourselves" (21) and the central character at the end of the novel is able to cross over into new land of hopes and opportunities shedding her inhibitions and traumas behind which is quite an improbable move usually for the victims of such oppression this awareness may come too late. Kincaid shows the hazard of the alteration of western ideology when it gets embedded into the unhappy black community's obligatory or explicit hierarchical power structures. The protagonist Annie's consciousness needs to be interpreted as having the primary function of decolonizing her mind from colonial repression. She frees herself from many of the white values imposed on black people and the reader witnesses an amusing growth of self awareness and a bold stance while commenting about her native folk as well as the white population who had subjugated them for so long. The novel culminates in her physically distancing herself away from all that she knows and loves, by leaving home for nursing school in England. It uncovers issues as assorted as mother-daughter relationships, racism, education, the question of identity in a fractured world etc.

The novel *Annie John* analyses themes that are coloured by qualities of fragmentation with a focus on the themes of identity, belonging and alienation. Kincaid explores a lack of a sense of discovery of the self mingled by a sense of frustration, shame and anger. The feeling of shame

arises as an offshoot of inadequacy or vulnerability. Asante in his article "The Future of African American Rhetoric" states the way out of all the incongruities pervading the multiethnic communities like the Afro-American population when he says, "Clearly the most effective way for African Americans to regain a sense of sanity in the world is to reject dislocation and to reclaim our place as participants in the human drama. Enslavement, segregation, and political and economic oppression were meant to strip us of our sanity and to marginalize us forever." (*The Future* 36) The vision of this afro centric future as a liberating world where one has the agency and are no longer "objects or victims" is in keeping with how Annie doesn't succumb to her fate. Instead of being shamefaced and gloomy she overrides her situation. The girl represents denunciation of western social constructs. She also illustrates the most sensitive awakening at the same time realising the dismal predicament of powerlessness which is engulfing their island lives. Her eventual escape from Antigua is explicitly a cry for help. Annie assumes that a transcultural status would emancipate her and endow her with control and a sense of agency which was sadly lacking in her native island. She hopes that her anger and shame would be eclipsed by accomplishments once she crosses the transcultural borders.

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