“Daffodil Gap”: Reading Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy as Intertextual Interrogation of the Postcolonial Condition

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Put yourself in my place, if only for a day; see if you can stand the awful emptiness inside. (Lucy, 8)

I. The Condition We Call Exile

“It was my first day." With that first sentence, Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* shows right away the narrator, new in her nameless Metropolitan dream place, already disillusioned: “It was not my first bout with the disappointment of reality and it would not be my last”(4). Confronted with the new reality, she is reminded of “how uncomfortable the new can make you feel” as the symbol of her new undergarments reminds her: "the undergarments that I wore were all new, bought for my journey" (4). She longs to go back to the place she discarded “as if it were an old garment never to be worn again” (7).

Transplanted and exiled in an amorphous cold city in winter at the first chapter of the book titled simply "Visitor", the novel portrays the

narrator as experiencing the initial disorientation of physical rupture and then ensuing shock of living-in-limbo, spatially, chronologically as well as linguistically. She resides in the interstitial space of the present and the past and, to use the Bhaktin's term, the chronotope (time-space) of the exiled narrator is both "here and now", and "there and then". As the figure of an exile, the narrator undergoes an ‘exilic jump’ as the etymology of the word exile "ex" (out of) and "salire" (to leap) denotes and makes an existential leap from the known to the unknown. By undergoing physical rupture from the familiar, she therefore repeats the archetypal universal experience of psychological loss at the moment of the entry into the symbolic linguistic world in the place of her origin and experiences the “not knowing” and “not belonging” of the disoriented childhood in a more intensified and exaggerated fashion in the new environment.

In his influential book *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*, Michael Seidel explores the relationship between the existential condition of exile and the narrative. Reading exilic narrative by literary figures Dante, Ovid, Joyce, Conrad, and Nabokov who themselves are exiles, Seidel theorizes that the "condition we call exile"[1] is an impetus for, and an allegory of, the imaginative narrative act. For an exile is “someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another” and the narrative imagination is also residing in one place and imagining and representing another reality (ix). Henry James, one of the arch-exiles himself, for example, is an exile who carries with him the “sense of rupture" and from such sense of rupture emerges his act of writing.

1) I borrow the term from the Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky who coined the phrase for his essay with the same title, reflecting upon his own condition of exile to America from Russia.

Narrative imagination and writing given birth from such sense of rupture then has its origin in remembrance, recollection, and traumatic repetition. I endorse Seidel's thesis of the relation between the condition and the exile and the narrative imagination and argue Kincaid's writings also belong to performative act of writing resulting from the condition of her exilic existence.

An exile initially experiences the phase of disorientation and disintegration due to the geographical displacement after the exilic jump, but more crucially, as a social being through language, severe linguistic displacement ensues after the initial shock. Words and things begin to unravel their fixed alliance and the anchoring point which connects the reference and its representation is unsettled. For Kincaid, a post-colonial exilic American writer from Antigua, a Caribbean ex-British colonial island nation, her exilic jump is also the moment of rupture, of splintered self. But from such condition of the exile, could the narrator develop more critical acumen for evaluating political condition of existence and in the narrative imagination and the performative act of writing, the condition of the possibility of newly composed self emerges. In this paper, I closely examine two vignettes of daffodil incidents in the Kincaid's novel *Lucy*, one in a colonial school and the other in the garden in the New World since, I argue, there lie Kincaid's effective rhetorical strategy, a political intertextual critique of colonial education, and by extension, of colonialism. As the narrator is transplanted to a new setting undergoing exilic rupture, colonial linguistic education resurfaces as traumatic repetition, leaving the narrator shattered. Kincaid's narrative imagination and the act of writing does emerge from such sense of rupture and traumatic repetition and ensuing exilic narrative is inter-textual interrogation of the political and of the personal.

As V.S. Naipaul's *Mimic Man,* Kincaid's novel *Lucy* is one of the powerful criticisms of British colonialism and demonstrates the problem of legacy of colonialism and postcolonial anxiety and dilemma. As theorists of postcolonial, notably Ella Shohat, Bonita Parry, and Chungmoo Choi, argue, "post" in postcolonialism designates 'interstices', in-between time and space, not past or after, colonialism. Postcolonial world is always-already embedded with, and burdened with, the colonial legacy. Although chronological history might declare the end of official colonialism, there is no cleanly demarcated line dividing colonial and post-colonial, "culturally." This postcolonial world is intertextual space where constant cultural translation occurs. As Homi Bhabha argues the task of turning this interim world of confusion into a "twilight zone," before a certain new beginning is the task left by history to the contemporary, postcolonial, increasingly globalized world.

As critic Helen Tiffin notes, the post-colonial is acutely concerned with the power that resides in discourse and textuality and his/her resistance takes place in the domain of textuality, the act of reading (Tiffin 910). Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* are two major intertexts from British literary history Kincaid utilizes and problematizes in *Lucy,* writing back to the Empire as Ashcroft asserts. By engaging classic English Literature as ideological apparatus which is institutionalized as disciplinary tool as Terry Eagleton aptly theorizes, Kincaid offers the internal critique of the imperial disciplinary projects of literary education within its own framework. Along with Roland Barthes, we can say Kincaid's "writerly" performative identity is imbedded in colonial education with ambivalent desires and anxiety and her power as a postcolonial writer lies in her constant engagements with the remnants and visages of the colonial education and imperial projects.

II. The Daffodil Gap 1- Unbuttoned

Jacques Lacan uses the term "*point de capiton,*" translated as the quilting point, an upholstery button, or an anchoring point, in order to designate the points at which "signified and signifier are knotted together" (268). Upholstery buttons are places where the mattress makers' needle has worked hard to prevent a shapeless mass of stuffing from moving too freely about. *Point de caption* then is an analogy to designate the point in the signifying chain at which 'the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification' and produces the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning. Poststructural linguistics has taught us that the alliance between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Although it is arbitrary, however, a given language system-any given society constructed through, and with language-functions with certain stability with the help of *point de capiton*. Otherwise, there inevitably arises a world of non-sense.

Lacan posits that "[In] the normal (neurotic) subject certain fundamental 'attachment points' [exists] between the signified and the signifier where this slippage is temporarily halted. A certain minimum number of these points are 'necessary for a person to be called normal' and ' when they are not established, or when they 'give way' the result is psychosis. [In] the psychotic experience, 'the signifier and the signified present themselves in a completely divided form.' (268). In Lacan's psychoanalysis, Lacan notably underscores the cause for psychosis as linguistic: dislodging of the upholstery buttons, the dislocation between the signifier and signified.

We can trace the cause for cultural violence of colonialism then as linguistic, the dislocation of signifier and signified and the unstability of

the sign system. In a vitriolic essay "On Seeing England for the First Time," Kincaid cites, for instance, her stepfather's comically duplicitous colonial existence: His sartorial mimicry leads him to wear everything with the sign 'made-in-England' and a "felt" (thick wooly material) hat under the hot sun of Antigua modeling upon an English gentleman (33). Upon visiting England for the first time as a successful American writer and seeing and experiencing what she only heard about, or learned from books about England, she writes the above essay exhibiting disillusionment and anger:

> The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark. The longer they are kept apart—idea of thing, reality of thing—the wider the width, the deeper the depth …. The existence of the world as I came to know it was a result of this: idea of thing over here, reality of thing way, way over there. ("On Seeing" 37)

"The existence of the world as [she] came to know" is of course the existence of a nation as colonized. Colonial subjects live in the world of empty signifier, where 'the idea of thing and reality of thing' is kept apart, without understanding and having the experience of the referents attached to them. Such colonial existence is analogous, then, to the psychotic experience in Lacan's understanding whose main symptom is unraveling of the attached anchoring point, *point de capiton*, of the signifier and the signified.

Critic Helen Tiffin rightly observes that the gap between the lived colonial or post-colonial experience and the imported/imposed world of the Anglo-written has often been referred to by Commonwealth post-colonial writers and critics as "the daffodil gap." It is the gap between

signifier and signified, or as Kincaid says in the above essay "the space between the idea of something and its reality," which is always wide and deep and dark. As critic Ian Smith observes, British Romantic poet Wordsworth's work became as "a fixed feature of English colonial education deeply implicated in the project of curricular indoctrination, what J. A. Mangan describes as 'the imperial curriculum' that promulgated 'racial stereotypes, the creation of ethnocentric attitudes and the labelling of colonial peoples'"(801). The figure of the daffodil from Wordsworth's famous poem about daffodils, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," functions as one of the primordial symbol of English cultural legacy and thus illustrates the linguistic and existential gap between England and Antigua as the colonizing and the (post)colonized. Although colonial education teaches colonial subjects to learn by heart Wordsworth's poem and dream about the dancing daffodils, the signifier 'daffodil' of Wordsworth's poem finds no corresponding flower daffodil in the native land of Antigua as its signified. When the upholstery button is dislodged from the cushion and the signifier and signified are disassembled, substantial existential confusion ensues.

Kincaid, in her novel *Lucy*, then, is a contemporary postcolonial reader of Wordsworth's role in curricular culture with her acute intertextual interrogation and she uses the putative ”daffodil gap“ Tiffin mentions as a powerful rhetorical strategy. *Lucy* is a semi-autobiographical sequel to Kincaid's first novel *Annie John,* whose ending is Annie's departure from her home in the West Indies, setting sail for Britain. The story of nineteen year old narrator "I", Lucy's story reflects the vissitudes of Kincaid's post-Antiguan life in America, situating the novel in the history and legacy of colonialism. Demonstrating simultaneous intertextual imbrications and resistance to colonial education, Kincaid utilizes one of the most powerful symbols in English literary history in *Lucy,*

Wordsworth's "daffodil" poem. On one occasion, the word 'daffodil' is used as the signifier that triggers the memory of colonial education. On another occasion, it is the real material flower which disappoints and angers the narrator when she actually sees it. In such an occasion, the flower is more than the material flower in front of her: it is the flower laden with history. As such, it functions as a sign which culturally divides Lucy for whom the daffodil is a metonym for colonial education and Mariah, her new employer/surrogate mother, for whom the daffodil is a source of aesthetic pleasure and metaphor of joy and bliss. Smith aptly points out that her intertextual performativity of the languages reveals colonial confrontations and imperial self-legitimation based on the principle of the mother country as origin, source and arbiter of value (802). As the field of contesting representation, *Lucy* textually demonstrates resistance to colonial political imposition.

In a novel largely devoid of a plot, Kincaid uses the symbol of the daffodil in a series of two important vignettes, thus providing thematic and structural continuity to the novel. The first daffodil incident occurs in winter without the material flower daffodil on the scene yet, projecting to see the real flower in spring. It is effective as a rhetorical device to introduce the daffodil as a word first rather than the material flower since the narrator's colonial trauma is largely due to the linguistic rupture between the signifier and the signified at the roots of her colonial upbringing, as mentioned. The word "daffodil" is introduced to the narrator in the novel at the beginning of the second chapter titled "Mariah." When Mariah blissfully mentions the flower daffodil, the word triggers a chain of memories for the narrator:

> Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? When they're in bloom a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy. When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive. And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the

> breeze. How does a person get to be that way?
>
> *(Lucy* 18)

Here in Mariah's exuberance at seeing the daffodils [doing] "a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them" (17) Kincaid recapitulates the two opening stanzas of Wordsworth's poem: "A host, of golden daffodils/ Beside the lake, beneath the trees/ Fluttering and dancing in the breeze (ll. 4-6)," "and which are stretched in never-ending line/Along the margin of a bay" (ll. 9-10).

The narrator's response to Mariah's blissful exhortation underscores a deep cultural divide between the two women. Noting Mariah "is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze," Lucy wonders: "How does a person get to be that way" (17)? The simple question is repeated like a refrain in the chapter and sets the interrotave frame in motion : "I said it again. I said, 'How do you get to be that way'" (41)? In Kincaid's portrayal, there is no disjunction between art and experience for Mariah and she is secure in the literary tradition she belongs to in which nature corresponds with Biblical and Wordsworthian joy. The portrayal of Mariah's family is equated with the blissful joy of the dancing daffodils: "In photographs of themselves, which they placed all over the house, their six yellow-haired heads of various sizes were bunched as if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string. In the pictures they smiled out at the world, giving the impression that they found everything in it unbearably wonderful" (12).

More important in this incident than the narrator's conscious sarcastic response in the present moment is awakening of her unconscious triggered by the signifier 'daffodil', the return of the repressed, of that which "she had forgotten all…until Mariah mentioned daffodils (19) :

> I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girl's School. I had been

> made to memorize it, and then had to recite the whole poem at an auditorium full of parents, teachers. [E]verybody stood up and applauded….[H]ow proud the poet…would have been to hear his words ringing out of my mouth (18-19)

The scene of her memory is the class room of the colonial education where "recitation" of English poetry ranks high in importance. The implication of her memory is saturated with multiple meanings. First, the narrator has been chosen to recite the poem as representative of the class in a public venue and demonstrates affirmation to colonial educational projects. But at the same time, the novel shows such cultural appropriation is laden with ambivalence by exhibiting the narrator's emotional predicament and nightmarish dream on the night of the recitation. The experience of enforced memorization creates, first, the mimetic desire and longing, secondly, the awareness of "gap" between the Anglo-written and the immediate colonial experience. Thus the colonial mimicry by way of the poetry recitation is not rote memorization, but rather mimicking, 'but not quite' as Bhabha argues for colonial mimicry, with psychic wound on the one hand, but at the same time, residual space for resistance on the other.

The narrator then recollects her having been “at the height of [her] two-facedness” being “outside…one way, inside… another; outside false, inside true” “making little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation while making inside vow to erase the poem line by line from her memory” (18). The little girl experiences intensified sense of self split by the daffodil-poem recitation incident and the experience repeats itself as a trauma in her dream that night:

> The night after I had recited the poem, I dreamt… that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those

> same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again. (18)

The cause for the sense of rupture in self is the tension between simultaneous desire for adaptation, appropriation, and acceptance in the colonial language and innate critical consciousness. While being disciplined to long for England and "English way" due to educational, cultural, ideological apparatus, "making little noises that showed modesty and appreciation", there is critical consciousness which points out the gap between the Anglo-written and the Antiguan reality, the putative "daffodil gap." Rejecting the cultural ideological apparatus, "vowing to erase the poem line by line from memory," however, leads the narrator to nightmare on the night of recitation. Joy at seeing the dancing daffodils in the poem is replaced by the fear of being killed by the suffocating daffodils. Jamaican poet, Lorna Goodison notes: "I grew to resent that poem. I thought it was stupid to go on so much about a flower I had never seen. Something in me wanted to read about people and things that were familiar to me" (291). But she "grew" to resent that poem, only after having been disciplined in it.

III. The Daffodil Gap 2: Ambivalence of Postcolonial Hospitality

We have seen the 'gap' in the first daffodil incident is the difference between the English word and the remembered colonial reality. In the second daffodil incident, finally is the real flower daffodil staged and here the daffodil gap is the two character's distance and difference in their responses to daffodils. With excitement, Mariah takes the narrator

blindfolded to the garden, a place "she described as among her favorites in the world" as soon as the winter seems to be over (28) for the narrator's first-hand experience of the real flower: "'Now, look at this.' I looked. It was a big area with lots of thick-trunked, tall trees along winding paths. Along the paths and underneath the trees were many, many yellow flowers the size and shape of play teacups, or fairy skirts"(*Lucy* 29). The scene once again materializes Wordsworth's daffodils poem, with its images and rhythms : "When all at once I saw a crowd/A host, of golden daffodils/ Beside the lake, beneath the trees (ll. 3-5).

> Mariah said, These are daffodils. I'm sorry about the poem, but I'm hoping you'll find them lovely all the same. There was such joy in her voice as she said this, such a music, how could I explain to her the feeling I had about daffodils that it wasn't exactly daffodils, but that they would do as well as anything else? (28)

For Mariah, daffodils are simply daffodils, while for the narrator they are symbols for colonial wounds, “where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness” (30). When Mariah finally identifies the flowers as daffodils with a hope that their beauty would eradicate the unpleasantness of the memories for the narrator, she could remain only in silent despair: "how could I explain to her the feeling I had about daffodils—that it wasn't exactly daffodils, but that they would do as well as anything else? Where should I start? Over here or over there?" (28). The narrator has difficulty articulating the full imperial undercurrent of her reactions to Mariah.

In Mariah’s kindness lurks the blindness to the political history of

colonialism and the narrator's primal wounds and the hidden assumption that the narrator can draw the same enjoyment from the same sources, risking the violence of replicating the other into the mirror image of oneself. Her hospitality and the attempt to love her neighbor hides the political imposition and ethical contradiction. In her blindness, Mariah mistakes the narrator's stuttering for the sign of joy on seeing the daffodils for the first time and hugs her, while the narrator loses her voice in frustration on seeing "what a wretched daffodil looked like"(30). Thus, our narrator "moves away" when Maria tries to hug her and gains her lost voice back in the act and says this to her: "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen ?"(30)

This "moving away" and creating physical 'gap' is an indication of the recognition of the cultural difference between the two. The space made by this moving away is the gap caused by the different approaches to, and interpretation of, the daffodil. By creating such a gap, the garden episode shows the narrator excavating the archetypal pattern of colonial power relationship. But more importantly, in the garden scene, Kincaid suggests the possibility of resistance by giving the narrator's voice back, the power of articulating her story.

IV. Post-Exilic Eminence

The novel *Lucy* documents one year's time span right after the narrator's exilic jump. In this interstitial space of melancholic exile, the narrator "I" is initially nameless, amorphous. Toward the end of the novel, however, does a more clearly defined subjectivity, a character

with the name "Lucy" as a short form for "Lucifer," the Satan, emerge. As such, the novel models upon the story-telling framework of the classic Western genre of *bildungsroman.* In Kincaid's intertextual project as a postcolonial, however, the genre *bildungsroman* and its theme of development are criticized and revised. The novel *Lucy* problematizes two main themes of the development narrative of *bildungsroman,* the achievement of education and sexual initiation, by showing the difficulties and uneven development of the main character. In Kincaid's narrative, the roots of such difficulties of growth are deeply embedded in the trauma of colonial education, not just the current trauma of exilic rupture, as discussed. The insidious trauma of colonial education is reawakened in the exilic setting for the narrator and such reawakening of the dormant early trauma complicates the current trauma of the narrator's exilic jump as is shown in the two daffodil episodes discussed in the paper. It is important, however, the colonial education is not even and smooth in constructing and constituting the girl into a colonial subject; there remains a residue in her constitution as a colonial subject and as such, such residue operates as the resisting force for her, prompting her to launch an exilic jump.

Against the backdrop of the burden of colonial history represented in the linguistic daffodil gap and of ambiguous postcolonial hospitality, Kincaid allows the narrator a room for certain growth. It is not arriving in "marriage or a secure job" as prescribed in traditional bildungsroman genre. She simply "arrives" at a new starting point. As she has left her mother and mother nation inflected with colonial history, she now leaves her surrogate mother, Mariah, and her ambiguous hospitality. She arrives at a starting point of inventing herself and it is at this last juncture Kincaid endows the anonymous narrator, who is dubbed "Poor Visitor"

in the first section of the book with a name, Lucy, for the first time in the novel, thus pointing toward asserting an agency and creating a new subjectivity: "At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter" (162).

> In the debris of the historical past, a new beginning:
> I understood that I was inventing myself in the way of a painter. I could only count on intuition. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair. I was going somewhere new again…(144)

Jamaica Kincaid once observed that "A sort of desire for a 'perfect place, a perfect situation,' comes from English Romantic poetry. It described a perfection which one longed for, and of course the perfection that one longed for was England. I longed for England myself. These things were a big influence, and it was important for me to get rid of them. Then I could actually look at the place I'm from" (Bonetti 131). In her exilic space, here, she looks at the place, over there where she came from and explores the present postcolonial world implicated with the past history.

Through her narrative imagination instigated by exilic rupture and traumatic linguistic alienation of colonialism, Jamaica Kincaid successfully accomplishes her intertextual interrogation of colonial education by way of incorporating Wordsworth's poem as a rhetorical strategy and illuminating the 'daffodil gap.'

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❖ ABSTRACT

"Daffodil Gap": Reading Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* as Intertextual Interrogation of the Postcolonial Condition

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In Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy*, the narrator grows up with the burden of colonial legacies embedded with Englands' imperial disciplinary projects, its language, educational institutions, discourses. Colonial education interpellates the narrator into a colonial subject through its multiple ideological discourses and systems. Teaching the literature of England is the most insidious form of the Empire's disciplinary colonial projects, more powerful than military enforcement: Its mode of operation is creating phantasy and instigating and planting desire for such phantasy. As Homi Bhabha aptly theorizes as colonial mimicry and ambivalence, the narrator as colonial subject grows up split and confused as an ambivalent subject, simultaneously mimicking and desiring for the phantasized England as real, while resisting and criticizing such up-bringing and mimetic desire.

This paper explores Kincaid's rhetorical strategy of employing Wordsworth's poem, "I Wandered as a Lonely Cloud," especially her use of the flower "daffodil." Employing the concept of "daffodil gap" suggested by postcolonial critics, this paper closely examines two episodes involving the flower daffodil in the novel, one in a colonial classroom and the other in a garden in a new world and suggests that Kincaid accomplishes intertextual critique of colonial education and imperial projects.

Key Words

Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid, Daffodil Gap, exile, linguistic alienation, *point-de-caption*, intertextuality, the postcolonial

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