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Quest for Idyllic Pleasure in Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

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Abstract

This study reads Jamaica Kincaid's travel text, Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya (2005), *as the author's quest for idyllic pleasure. Despite her identification as an anti-imperialist writer with her previous works, Kincaid turns towards simply inventing a garden in her hometown, Vermont in this text for aesthetic pleasure. Her arduous journey to the Eastern Himalayan landscape of Nepal for the quest of gardenworthy seeds to grow back in her private garden is intimately fraught with her passions of flowers. Engaging with the critical views of available critics such as Jill Didur, Pallavi Rastogi, Racia Anne Chansky and others on the book as well as concepts from travel writing theory, my study argues that* Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya *bears Kincaid's search for idyllic pleasure of gardening rather than any imperialist or anti-imperialist underpinnings.*

Keywords: gardening, colonial and postcolonial travel writing, seed-hunting, diaspora

Introduction

Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya (2005) (*Among Flowers,* hereafter) by Jamaica Kincaid, an Antigua-born American travel writer, gardener, fiction writer, columnist, and professor of African and American Studies at Harvard University, engages with the author's quest for idyllic pleasure from flowers. *Among Flowers* records Kincaid's three-week long expedition of seed-hunting in the Himalayan landscape of Nepal in 2002. As an avid lover of gardening, Kincaid accompanies three world famous veteran botanists and horticulturalists: American Dan Hinckley and Wales couple Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, in their seed exploration mission to the Eastern hills of Nepal, where they collect seeds of different kinds of flowers and

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take them home to grow in their gardens. Playing her part in the collecting activity, Kincaid too possesses seeds of various species to grow in her garden in Vermont, USA. But interestingly, more than the seed collection, the trip offers her innumerable experiences that consequently get encoded in *Among Flowers* that comes out in the print in 2005. The memoir subsequently takes Kincaid beyond her previous identification as a postcolonial writer into a writer of "literary qualities" to borrow Harrold Bloom's term (2008, p.1). She seeks simply aesthetic pleasure rather than any ideological underpinnings. With her previous works such as *A Small Place*, *My Garden (Book), Lucy, Annie John* and so on, Kincaid received criticism as a postcolonial writer who harshly critiqued the effects of colonialism. Bloom writes of her criticism as: "Most of the published criticism of Jamaica Kincaid has stressed her political and social concerns " (p. 1). Regarding *Among Flowers* too, various critics have keenly sought for the same vehement attack on the colonial affects, but they have not found it exactly so. Rather, they have found Kincaid with multi-faceted roles and identifications such as doubled roles as an Antiguan diaspora and US citizen (Chansky), an uncertain First World traveler and a horticultural insider (Nayar), humanitarian (Khasnabish), semi-colonial (Rastogi), colonial (Shuv), and privileged diaspora (Didur).

Travel Writing and Its Politics in the Postcoloniality

Travel writing mostly involves politics about the power relation between the self and the other. The traveling self enjoys the authority of judging and representing the other the way he or she likes. The representation can be positive that celebrates the differences between the self and the other or negative that degenerates the other. The representation constructs a "sense of 'me' and 'you' 'us' and 'them' . . . on individual and national levels . . . [that can] forge alliances, precipitate crises and provoke wars (Youngs, 2013, p. 1). Actually travel writing can discursively create a strong affiliation or a hierarchical differentiation between the self and the other that often results into asymmetric relationship and even tensions.

Although beginning in the antiquity, travel writing (here, mainly the Western travel writing) began to expand significantly during the European renaissance. Then onward for almost 500 years, travel writing operated effectively as a vehicle in the expansion and proliferation of European colonialization by "naturalizing and celebrating the ethos of European hegemony" (Clarke, 2018, p. 1); by "producing and circulating knowledge about the rest of the world" (Smethurst, p.1); by spinning "webs of colonizing power" (Duncan & Gregory, 1999, p. 3); and so on.

But when the European empires collapsed after the Second World War and primarily after the 1960s when various movements resisted the Western hegemony as well as there was a rapid development in global transportation network, travel writing started to take up different directions. In the aftermath of European imperialism, Western travel writers began to distance themselves from the "genre's implications in Empire by embracing the emancipatory possibilities" (Lisle, 2006, p. 4). They are as Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (2019) state, "more cognizant of and sensitive towards other cultures and outlooks" (p. 9). On the other hand, non-white travelers from the former colonial background such as Amitav Ghosh, Caryl Philips, Jamaica Kincaid, to name just a few, also produced a significant number of travel narratives in English. These non-white authors, also identified as postcolonial writers, attempt to alter the politics of travel writing with "revisionist or counter-narratives" (Holland & Huggan, p. 48) by challenging "Western stereotypes and attitudes" towards the non-West (Thompson, p. 164). Whether they have successfully countered the conventions of travel writing is a debate. For example, Lisle (2006) and Holland and Huggan (1998) argue, the postcolonial travel writers have not been fully successful in projecting their revisionist approach due to factors such as "privilege" of travel as well as the "obligation to economic and literary patrons" (Lisle, p. 120), and "profitable business" achieved through "cultural 'otherness'" and technologies (Holland & Huggan, p. 65). But anyway, their attempts have been rightly acknowledged for their resistance of "the gravitational pull of metropolitan centrality and cosmopolitanism by articulating [their] experiences and ontologies" (Edwards and Graulund, p. 2), for making the "'other' *perspectives*" heard by the metropolis (Korte, p. 159), and critiquing "the history of colonialism and its aftermaths" (Clarke, p. 4). Thus, despite the debate, postcolonial authors have inevitably problematized travel writing with new perspectives revisiting their painful ancestral history caused by the effects of colonization.

If the postcolonial writers strive to engage a revisionist approach to travel writing as such, what about Kincaid in *Among Flowers*? Has she been actively involved in revisiting socio-historical conditions? Or has she offered conflicted discourse as some of the critics like Chansky, Didur, and Nayar, discussed in the previous sections have observed? Or has she embraced colonial perspective impelled by her privileged position as argued by Rastogi and Bhat? Or has she spoken on ecological concern like Khasnabish and Didur? My study does not attempt to seek answer to these questions for it does not find the dominance of any socio-historical concerns. Instead, it explores, examines and analyses how Kincaid makes a quest for idyllic pleasure for her personal

satisfaction and joy. In the process, the study borrows key theoretical concepts from travel writing theory and follows APA Style 6th edition for citation and references purposes.

Critical Responses on *Among Flowers*

Ricia Anne Chansky (2015) reads Kincaid's having a "'doubled' identity" as an Antiguan diaspora and US citizen, and suggests *Among Flowers* be read along with her previous texts mainly *A Small Place* in order to trace her particular stance: "engaging with *Among Flowers* as a text conversant with *A Small Place*, rather than as a separate work, results in a more fully developed understanding of both the narrative and the author's diasporic subjectivity" (p. 135). In *A Small Place*, Kincaid stands harsh on the foreign tourists aligning herself with the natives whereas in *Among Flowers* she attempts to "affiliate with the other members of the [tourists] party" as a US citizen (p. 146). Despite her attempt for a new identity, Chansky makes it clear that Kincaid cannot discard "the spirits of her past lives", that is why, her self will always remain in conflict with itself (p. 149).

Like Chansky, Pramod K. Nayar (2013) reads Kincaid with her conflicted self. But unlike her suggestion of reading *Among Flowers* and *A Small Place* together, Nayar reads the former separately and finds Kincaid "as an uncertain First World traveler and as a (horti)cultural insider conscious of her legacy of colonial plant collection" (p. 11). Nayar sees Kincaid being aware of both the effects of the botanical imperialism and of her own engagement in the present botanical exploration as a privileged traveler. Nayar argues, Kincaid's such conflicted awareness creates "anxiety" in her so that she makes an attempt of "*distancing* from both her legacies and her present identity as a First World expert in gardening" (p. 2). But she cannot and so she remains anxious and conflicted between the two identities.

While Chansky and Nayar see Kincaid's conflicted identity resulted from her attempt to make a new one out of the position as a diasporic as well as First world citizen, Pallavi Rastogi (2015) observes Kincaid embracing the colonialist discourse. Reading Kincaid and Bandele together, Rastogi asserts that these authors judge the people as the "Another Other" (p. 20) by creating "blankscapes" (p. 21) in two Asian nations: Nepal and Burma. Rastogi defines "blankscapes" as the land functioning as "an empty stage" where the travelers' fears and fantasies are "performed" (p. 21), and "another other" as the people who are othered by the colonized themselves: "when the colonized write about other colonized groups" (p. 20). Rastogi avers Kincaid's narrative gazes the Nepali landscape and people through the lens of the first world Western rhetoric.

Similar to Rastogi's argument, Shuv Raj Rana Bhat (2019) finds Kincaid in the line of colonial travel writers. Bhat reads Kincaid as an "orientalist and racist" whose travel narrative is entangled with "the rhetoric of metropolitan culture and imperial politics that provide the Orientalist lens through which the representation of the travelled places and people of Nepal is made" (p. 39). Bhat asserts that Kincaid sets an imperial gaze upon the Nepali landscape and people through different rhetoric terms such as "nomination, surveillance, negation, debasement, and binary rhetoric" (p. 24).

Jill Didur (2011) sees Kincaid's identity as ambiguous in that she tries to break away from the tradition of colonial travel writing but again falls in its trap. This is so because Kincaid adopts "language and literary forms" of the colonial travel writing as well as enjoys "diasporic class privilege" (p. 246). As a privileged diaspora, Kincaid receives funds for the trip and publication of the book from the National Geographic Society, which as Tamar Y. Rothenberg claims, bears "a particularly benign image of their [American] imperial role in the world" (cited in Didur, p. 241). For, Didur, Kincaid's memoir chronicles her experiences "simultaneously invoking and subverting the genre of the colonial travel and plant hunting memoir" (p. 237). Even then, Didur also acknowledges that the memoir calls upon ethical responsibility for diasporic cultural workers to establish a "global connectedness" through practices like gardening (p. 253). Didur's approach inclines towards eco-critical one.

Closer to Didur's reading of *Among Flowers*'s engagement with an ecological concern, Asmita Khasnabish (2010) finds it engaged with Kincaid's attempt for globalized identity, or alternatively humanitarian identity through political sublime. As Khasnabish explains, political sublime is achieved through "mutual empathy" established not only between human beings but between "human beings and nature" also (p. 3). And mutual empathy is possible only through the removal of personal ego or what Khasbanish terms as "ego-transcendence" meaning "a way of transforming negative effects and bad energy to positive affects" (p. 7). According to Khasnabish, Kincaid has departed from the "preoccupation with colonial segregation" and discussed "peace, solution, and the sublime" (p. 6) for the humanitarian purpose.

As the above discussion illustrates, critics of Kincaid have read *Among Flowers* from different angles. They have mainly focused on the social and political concerns it bears but my study concentrates on its literary quality and illustrates Kincaid's quest for aesthetic pleasure from the floral world.

Quest for Idyllic Pleasure

> One day, in the year 2000, I was asked to write a book, a small one, about any place in the world I wished and doing something in that place I liked doing. I answered immediately that I would like to go hunting in southwestern China for seed, which would eventually become flower-bearing shrubs and trees and herbaceous perennials in my garden. (Kincaid, 2005, p. 1)

The very opening lines of *Among Flowers* given above hint at Kincaid's passion for seed-hunting to invent a garden of her own. In response to the query of the National Geographic Society about her wish of doing a desired thing in a dream place, she at once responded that she wished to "go hunting" for "seed" somewhere in "southwestern China". This expression is exempt from any kind of socio-political concerns as most of the critics such as Chansky, Nayar, Didur, Rastogi and Bhat mentioned in the previous section have claimed. Instead, it is merely her personal passion for flowers.

> Now, let's see the concluding lines of the book below:
>
> As I walked up and down the terrain in the foothills of the Himalaya looking for plants appropriate for growing in the garden I am now (even now, for the garden is ongoing, and a stop to it means death) making in Vermont, the strangeness of my situation was not lost to me. Vermont, all by itself should be Eden and gardenworthy enough. But apparently, I do not find it so. I seem to believe that I will find my idyll more a true ideal, only if I can populate it with plants from another side of the world. (p. 189)

Like the beginning, the ending of the book also is devoid of any ideological underpinnings. It simply carries Kincaid's desire for gathering diverse kinds of flowers to make a perfect garden in Vermont. While looking for gardenworthy seeds in the foothills of the Himalaya, she keeps thinking of making her garden look like the biblical Garden of Eden. But she believes, her garden lacks the perfectness of the Eden. So, she still requires to gather seeds from the other side of the world and populate in her garden. Then only, she will find her "idyll more a true ideal". That is to say, she will acquire joy, peace and satisfaction only when her garden grows diversified and perennial flowers.

Kincaid's notion of garden may be argued as having a sense of ideological implication in that it represents the hybrid space of diasporic people, where they expect peaceful and harmonious situation as well as from where they remember and

mourn their past lives. For example, Zoran Pec´ic´ (2011) sees it as a "trope in the postcolonial context" reflecting "the notion of hybridity, both in the material sense (hybridity of plants and races) and in the political sense (the hybridization of cultures)" (p. 139). Pec´ic´ further comments: "For Kincaid, then, the garden functions not only as a trope of imperialism, remembrance and mourning, but also as a site of hybridity, liminality and ambivalence" (p. 139). For Pec´ic´, Kincaid's garden works as a site where colonial and postcolonial socio-historic experiences intermingle leaving her in liminal and ambivalent position. Indeed, Kincaid enjoys seed-hunting expenditure "within a tradition that reiterates Victorian colonial practices", but she also consciously rejects "the exotic pleasure generated within the colonial imagination" (p. 153). In this regard, Pec´ic´ finds Kincaid in the hybrid and conflicted position between colonial tradition and postcolonial condition.

Like, Pec´ic´, many other critics mentioned in the previous section have also traced Kincaid's conflicted self between her position as an Antiguan diaspora and a US citizen. For example, Chansky observes her as "a self in conflict with itself [between Antiguan diaspora and US citizen" (p. 149), Nayar "as an uncertain First World traveler and as a (horti)cultural insider conscious of her legacy of colonial plant collection" (p. 11), Didur as a diasporic writer with a class line, "[s]imultaneously invoking and subverting the genre of the colonial travel and plant hunting memoir" (p. 237), and so on. These critics see the tension in her subjectivity in connection with the privilege she acquires as a US citizen from the National Geographic Society for seed-hunting adventure and publication of the book. Indeed, they have enough room for this skepticism thanks to the fact of the Society's "imperial associations" (Chansky p. 135) and "Anglo-Saxon superiority" (Rothenberg cited in Didur, p. 241). Due to her conflicted position, Kincaid's discourse in *Among Flowers* remains ambivalent, neither sharply countering the colonialist tradition as a diaspora, nor fully assimilating it as a US citizen.

In a different angle from the above, critics like Rastogi and Bhat contend that Kincaid sets an imperial eye upon the east. Rastogi sees Kincaid framing "blankscapes" in Burma and Nepal, and gazing the people as the "Another Other" (p. 20). Bhat tags Kincaid as "colonialist and racist" (p. 39). Bhat further goes onto write that "The fact that her expedition to eastern part of Nepal was 'funded by the National Geographic Society' . . . speaks to imperial gesture reflected in the reductive representation of Nepal" (p. 39). Bhat claims that the support of the Society makes Kincaid set an imperial gaze at the Nepalese people, culture and landscape. For example, he mentions

Kincaid's partaking in orientalist tradition by naming the Sherpa porters as "Cook," "Table" and "I Love You" (p. 30). But, I have a different opinion from Bhat's since I believe Kincaid's naming activity has nothing to do with the colonial tradition. Colonial tradition as Stephen Greenblatt states, "entails the cancellation of the native name . . . [for] the taking of possession" (p. 83). But, Kincaid's naming has no intention of taking possession, which she herself clarifies as, "I have no desire to possess" (p. 7). Rather, it is simply for the convenience of calling the porters, which Bhat himself acknowledges as "difficulty involved in pronouncing" (p. 30). Similarly, Bhat also accuses Kincaid of embracing the rhetoric trope of debasement by constructing "nature, particularly the bank of the river as defiled" (p. 34). Debasement as a rhetoric trope "centers around the notion of *abjection* . . . [for] a justification of European intervention" (Spurr, 1993, p. 77-78). But, Kincaid neither projects herself as more civilized than the locals nor wishes any civilizing intervention in Nepal. Instead, she unhesitatingly goes into the river for a bath uttering "But we were desperate to renew ourselves and water always offers the illusion of that, renewal (p. 172). Therefore, seeing ideological implication in her seed-hunting mission seems injustice to her.

Further, if the fund support and the trip itself are read from the postcolonial perspective, it can be argued that Kincaid has subverted the colonial tradition in that, being a black female from the formerly colonized society, she receives the fund and involves in the tradition of seed exploration. It marks the breach of "the stereotype of the travel writer as white, male, middle class and heterosexual" (Holland & Huggan, p. 73). More interestingly, Kincaid shares her tent with Dan, a white man, which can also be read as the break of the colonial ego that is predominantly fraught with moral superiority. Sharing a tent outside marriage, even with a black woman, would be, in no way, thinkable for a colonial traveler. While saying that, however, it would be wrong to assume Kincaid implicates an intention of demoralizing the white Dan. Instead, the sharing could be just for avoiding the possible frightening occurrences at night in such lonely mountain sides. Or she could have simply taken it as a normal thing, or a "used to" thing for "the people like us" (p. 25). She rather appears accustomed to the Western style of living. So, she even does not feel it odd to drink "beer" and sit "naked" in the bank of the Mewa river (p. 155), and to "pee" while the people are peeping from the other side (p. 157). These events too, if analyzed from the postcolonial perspective, may indicate at the reversal of the colonial travel writing which often delineates the

non-Western people as naked and uncivilized. But, here, Kincaid and her Western friends remain naked and even pee in front of the people. Again reading this way would be a mistake since the events are the outcome of the current circumstances rather than of any ideological implication.

Thus, my contention is that examining Kincaid through her involvement in socio-historical concerns is faulty. Contrary to the anti-imperialist stance in the previous works, she remains completely free of any position and fully concentrates on her personal passion for gardening that developed in her childhood from the circumstance of being isolated from her family. She makes it clear as: "This account of a walk I took while gathering seed of flowering plants in the foothills of the Himalaya can have its origins in my love of the garden, my childhood love of botany and geography, my love of feeling isolated" (p. 7). The separation from her family at the age of seventeen seems to trigger passions in her for flowers, which could be her friends in such an isolated situation. Thus, she wishes to grow them in her garden not to "possess" but to befriend (p. 7). Kincaid's flowers are her friends and garden her home, where she feels homely forgetting her troubled family life. She wishes to acquire idyllic pleasure from flowers.

Conclusion

Finally, *Among Flowers* reflects Kincaid's quest for idyllic pleasure from the floral world. Despite her previous recognition as an anti-imperialist writer, Kincaid refuses to take any stance in this book. Although various critics have discussed her socio-historical concerns, my study has primarily focused on her personal passions for various kinds of flowers. She has developed a keen love for flowers from her childhood when she happened to survive a painful alienated life. With veteran botanists and plant-hunters, Dan Hinkley, Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, Kincaid makes an arduous journey to the difficult mountainsides of the Eastern region of Nepal with an ambition of collecting more and more gardenworthy flowers that she would grow in her garden in Vermont. She likes to make her garden look like the biblical Garden of Eden by bringing flowers from the other side of the globe. She believes, she will feel absolute joy only when she succeeds in populating her garden with varied kinds of flower available in every corner of the world. Thus, *Among Flowers* is a quest for aesthetic pleasure beyond any orientalist or anti-orientalist underpinning.

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