

WHAT'S in a name?

The resurrection of the author in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother*

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ABSTRACT: Trying to break up the shackles that had held the literary studies still for so many years, Roland Barthes declares that the author is better off dead. Such a surprising statement aimed at wiping away all of the efforts to reach an origin of a literary text, that is to say, a unique answer or a final interpretation. Nevertheless Philippe Lejeune posits that when it comes to autobiographical writings, the presence of the author is to be felt, and even gladly expected. For this reason, hermeneutics is able to interchangeably adopt either Barthes's perspective or Lejeune's standpoint. This essay intends to shed some light on Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* based on those both perspectives. Xuela, the protagonist, can be taken entirely on her own, that is, strictly textually. In so doing, the author will be dead. On the other hand, she can also be spotted under a different name, that is, Kincaid's. In so doing, readers are to view the resurrection of an author.

KEYWORDS: authorship, autobiographical writings, Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother*.

RESUMO: Procurando acabar de vez com uma metodologia dos estudos literários que privilegiava a busca da origem de um texto, ou seja, de uma resposta única, uma interpretação final, Roland Barthes declara que o autor deve morrer. Para ele, a literatura cria vozes; porém, nenhuma delas é a do autor. Por outro lado, Philippe Lejeune defende que, quando se trata de escrita autobiográfica, a presença do autor deve ser sentida e, inclusive, esperada. Por este motivo, os estudos literários podem adotar tanto a perspectiva de Barthes quanto a de Lejeune. Este artigo pretende analisar o livro *The Autobiography of my Mother*, de Jamaica Kincaid, com base nestas duas perspectivas. Se, por um lado, Xuela, a protagonista, pode ser lida textualmente apenas, por outro lado, ela pode ser nomeada e renomeada até que Kincaid ressurgja.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: autoria, escrita autobiográfica, Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother*.

The author should be dead. This is the very conclusion reached by Roland Barthes in his iconoclastic essay *The Death of the Author* (1968). Following the same path trodden by Wimsatt and Beardsley twenty years earlier, Barthes declares that literature surely creates voices: it assembles many voices at once – the protagonist's, the narrator's, the characters' – but none of them can be traced back up to an origin. The voices uttered in a story have no identity, no personality; one can only grasp the meaning (if there is any) of what is being told based entirely on the text. Writing stories, if anything, is to make language perform by itself: "it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality [...] that point where language alone acts [...]" (BARTHES, 1968, p. 3). The author then should never be alive, his or her voice should never be heard. Linguistically, the subjectivity lies in the characters of the story as the author is merely "the man [*sic*] who writes", a tool or instrument "to make language 'work', that is, to exhaust it" (*idem*). As a consequence, any expectation towards the author's intention will instantaneously become a fallacy.

By standing for such a viewpoint, Barthes aims at banning authors from their terrain of authority and, by the same token, recovering the indispensable status of readers. Authorship, Barthes underscores, has risen up along with positivism and rationalism, whose lights have been spotted on the individual. The author's presence inside the literary text (not only on the book cover) has

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brought about an anxious desire for an only meaning, an ultimate one, eliminating any room for plurality, that is to say, for several meanings – many of which made up by readers: “the true locus of writing is reading” (*ibidem*, p. 5). The focus should therefore shift from the origin, the author, to the destination, the reader.

Although Barthes views the author as a threat upon literature, his statements do not apply to all literary genres. When it comes to self-referential and self-representational writings, the author turns into a significant figure for the hermeneutic process. While reading a literary text, readers are not expected to seek for evidence of connections between the story in the book and the author who has written it. What is truly expected is that they suspend their disbelief in order to be pleased by the narrative. On the other hand, when readers come across a narrative in which its title promises it to be autobiographical; their expectations will go down the drain if links between the story and the author are not fulfilled. Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* (1997) causes both reactions: one can read it as purely fictional as well as autobiographical.

Roughly speaking, *biography* stands for *writing life*. The term refers to a written account of a person's lifetime. Nonetheless, by the time the prefix *auto*, which stands for *self*, is added, this writing must be addressed to the very person who writes the narrative. Thus the term *autobiography* traditionally defines a written account of a person's lifetime told by that person. As for that, the voice in the story can be no other than the author's.

But how can readers come to grips with a text whose puzzling title claims to be at once autobiographical and biographical? Biographers usually rely on a wide variety of evidence, such as historical documents, interviews, family archives, and photographs, to validate what is being accounted. Similar to historians, they tend to be objective for they believe they must place their stance as close to facts as possible. In this sense, all biographies are invariably retrospective. So, how can readers determine any validity when the only information furnished by the narrator is a mother's face never seen? Moreover, the adjective *autobiographical* implies a self-referential narrative (see Smith & Watson, 2010). Any writing defined as autobiographical is supposed to encompass a pact: the one who writes, the narrator and the protagonist must match; in other words, these three elements of the story must share the same identity. However, in *The Autobiography of my Mother*, such a pact is interrupted for the author's and the protagonist's name, for instance, do not match. In addition, the book title states that the autobiographical account will not even commit to the narrator's life span, but to a third person's, that is, the narrator's mother's life span. Thus, how can readers possibly accept a text as autobiographical when it is not self-referential? As one may notice, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* tries to break up the frames of what has been hitherto called traditional autobiography.

Benvenuto Cellini, a sixteenth-century Italian sculptor and goldsmith, recommends in his book entitled *Vita* that

[a]ll men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, or which may properly resemble excellence, ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand; but they ought not to attempt so fine an enterprise till they have passed the age of forty.”

Intertwining accounts of his everyday work with descriptions of manners of his time, Cellini places himself in the middle of the world he lives in, assessing and acting in it.

Such statement and attitude may not be surprising as long as we bear in mind the first conception of identity described by Stuart Hall in his essay “The Question of Cultural Identity” (2007): the Enlightenment subject. Due to humanist and positivist ideologies, this subject was seen as totally centered, complete, unified, and provided with skills for reasoning, judging and acting. He² had an essence, an inner core that never changed and this self was fixed and individualistic. It is this conception of identity that Cellini seemed to believe in when he suggests that one should “write the story of his own life in his own hand”. He is precisely speaking of self-writing. Aware of that or not, he brought out a definition that satisfactorily framed the traditional autobiography: (a) a self-writing of great achievements, (b) based on truth, which (c) comprises a relatively long span of life.

French professor Philippe Lejeune, in his essay “The Autobiographical Pact” (1975, p. 4), posits that autobiography is a “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”. Along with Cellini, he agrees with the fact that whenever one thinks of writing about his or her own life, one must do it retrospectively and individually (instead of collectively) and must be true. Furthermore, willing to spot the differences and similarities between biography and autobiography and also between autobiography and the novel, Lejeune brings four key elements into play in order to set autobiography apart from the other genres: (1) as a life story is supposed to be told, the form of language must be in prose narrative; (2) the subject must be the individual life, primarily the story of a personality; (3) the author and the narrator (commonly a first-person one) must be identical; and concerning narrators only, (4) they must be autodiegetic and their point of view must look back on past events. He highlights that only when a work satisfies all of these premises, it can be labeled an autobiography.

Lejeune is surely aware of the fact that these premises are not exclusive; other elements may mingle with them. For instance, some descriptive writing and collective accounts can be part of the autobiographical text as well. In reality, they are even expected to come out sometimes. Nonetheless, prose narrative and individual focus must prevail. For him, the frames in which the genre is restricted should not be so strict. He understands that, to a certain extent, readers are to be given some power to classify what they read. In his words:

It is obvious that the different categories are not all equally restrictive: certain conditions can be met for the most part without being satisfied completely. The text must *mainly* be a narrative, but we know how important discourse is in autobiographical narration. The perspective is *mainly* retrospective; this does not exclude some sections from taking the form of the self-portrait, a journal of the work or of the contemporary present of the composition, and some very complex temporal structures. The subject must be *primarily* individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative. It is a question here of proportion, or rather of hierarchy: some

² Enlightenment subjects, according to Hall, were constantly depicted as male.

transitions with other genres of personal literature work quite naturally (memoirs, diary, essay), and a certain latitude is left to the classifier in the examination of particular cases. (*ibidem*, p. 5)

Even though readers notice that autobiographies share some similarities with other genres and, for this reason, are free to examine particular cases, Lejeune points out that there are two conditions that cannot be neglected as they are crucially important to differentiate autobiographies from biographies and novels: **i)** the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator ought to be the exact same; **ii)** the narrator and the main character in the story ought to be equal. According to him, in the lack of any of these conditions, the autobiographical feature is gone: “Here, there is neither transition nor latitude. An identity is, or is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees, and all doubt leads to a negative conclusion” (*idem*). In short, a text is only autobiographical by the time the author, the narrator and the protagonist are bound by the same identity.

For Émile Benveniste, a personal pronoun refers back to no one else other than the very person uttering the discourse. This means that first-person narrators, who address themselves using “I”, are only real inside the text (*ibidem*, p. 8). Recollecting Barthes, once we try to spot an origin for such an utterance outside discourse, the “I” will be dead. Even though the usage of this personal pronoun leads readers to think of a name – related to an actual person or an author – it does not mean that the pronoun and the name are compatible. This “I” always ends up anonymous.

At pains to find out in which ways the manifestation of identity takes place in the author and in the narrator, Philippe Lejeune posits that an autobiographical attitude cannot coincide with anonymity. So, if autobiography designates self-referentiality, Lejeune can only conclude that, for auto-diegetic narrators, person and discourse are joined together by the proper name: “It is in the proper name that person and discourse are linked even before being joined in the first person” (*ibidem*, p. 11). Autobiography is, then, labeled primarily by this pact: readers credit what they have read to the name printed on the book cover, precisely, to the author:

In printed texts, responsibility for all enunciation is assumed by a person who is in the habit of placing his name on the cover of the book [...]. The entire existence of the person we call the author is summed up by this name: the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person, which requires that we thus attribute to him, in the final analysis, the responsibility for the production of the whole text. In many cases, the presence of the author in the text is reduced to this single name. But the place assigned to this name is essential: it is linked, by a social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a real person. (*idem*)

In autobiographies, the presence of the author is not only manifested on the book cover, but also inside the book, in the narrative. And this manifestation is what readers expect to come across because they know this genre claims for such a presence. Lejeune inevitably disagrees with both Barthes and Benveniste as he concludes that the author must be somewhat present in autobiographical accounts.

But proper name is not what binds author and first-person narrator in *The Autobiography of my Mother*. Jamaica Kincaid is not actually the protagonist's name. In this very sense, the Lejeunian pact between author and reader is forever broken. In fact, *The Autobiography of my Mother* is catalogued as fiction, and yet a publisher's note (on a page right before the inscription for Derek Walcott) warns readers that "this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental". If one takes this warning seriously, Kincaid must be ignored: her presence is nothing but a name on the cover.

As a work of fiction, *The Autobiography of my Mother* spots all the lights on the motherless autodiegetic protagonist Xuela Claudette Richardson. Depicted as a character that has learned from suffering and harsh words, Xuela longs for her mother, who "died at the moment [she] was born [...]" (KINCAID, 1997, p. 3). She struggles to tell her mother's story, but she is incapable of doing so as she acknowledges that her mother lacks a supportive background:

[...] I do not know what language she spoke; if she ever told my father that she loved him, I do not know in what language she would have said such a thing. I did not know her; she died at the moment I was born. I never saw her face, and even when she appeared to me in a dream I never saw it, I saw only the back of her feet, her heels, as she came down a ladder, her bare feet, coming down, and always I woke up before I could see her going up again. (*ibidem*, p. 198)

The narrator's incapacity even blurs the title of the novel³. Her mother's past cannot be tracked down through documents or family archives – it is impossible to recall her mother retrospectively to build up a biography of hers. Xuela does not know which language her mother spoke or whether she loved her husband, Xuela's father. Because she died while giving birth to Xuela, her presence is nothing but a ghostly figure walking away, recollected in the narrator's dreams:

It was while sitting in this place that I first began to dream about my mother; I had fallen asleep on the stones that covered the ground around me, my small body sinking into this surface as if it were feathers. I saw my mother come down a ladder. She wore a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels, and that was all of her that was exposed, just her heels; she came down and down, but no more of her was ever revealed. Only her heels, and the hem of her gown. At first I longed to see more, and then I became satisfied just to see her heels coming down toward me. When I awoke, I was not the same child I had been before I fell asleep. I longed to see my father and to be in his presence. (*ibidem*, p.18)

Perhaps frustrated for not being able to trace her mother's background, the narrator turns her attention to her father. Ma Eunice, her father's laundry worker, though not unkind to her, is rejected from the very beginning as a mothering figure, as though nobody else could fill in the blank her

³ For the moment, the word novel is to be used once I am considering *The Autobiography of my Mother* to be a work of fiction altogether.

mother's death has left: "[...] she still had some milk in her breast to give to me, but in my mouth it tasted sour and I would not drink it" (*ibidem*, p. 5). Despite having the ability to speak, Xuela deliberately decides not to do so until she is four years old: "I knew I could speak, but I did not want to" (*ibidem*, p. 6). As no one can take her mother's place, Xuela longs for her father and his presence. As for that, the moment she decides to speak for the very first time, the sentence is a question asking whereabouts her father is: "His visits were quite regular, and so when he did not appear as he usually did, I noticed it. I said, 'Where is my father?'" (*ibidem*, p. 7).

But, just like her mother, Xuela's father is also an incognito. Even though he is described as a "[...] tall man; his hair was red; his eyes were gray" (*ibidem*, p. 39) and "[...] he was a very vain man, his appearance was very important to him" (*ibidem*, p. 4), he remains an unknown person to his daughter. As a rich Dominican police officer (whose fortune is suggested to have been earned illegally), his presence, in his uniform, causes people to be afraid. Through Xuela's eyes, he takes the shape of a greedy perpetrator of pain and fear.

From the day she was born, Xuela was raised by Ma Eunice. At the age of seven, however, after many sporadic visitations, her father finally came to take her to his house for he had gotten married again. Although he is being lovely and kind, for the first time saying he loves her and then repeating it over and over, Xuela does not believe him at all. She could not do so. For a little girl who has never experienced love, his repeating the word alone could not turn it into a real sentiment:

The word "love" was spoken with such frequency that it became a clue to my seven-year-old heart and my seven-year-old mind that this thing did not exist. My father's eyes grew small and then they grew big; he believed what he said, and that was a good thing, because I did not. (*ibidem*, p. 23-4)

Still at the age of seven, Xuela is taught how to write letters, and then such learning compels her to write her own accounts. Just like writing a diary, she writes letters in which she discloses the rough time she has had as well as she lets her feelings about her life come out. She learns that a letter has six parts and concludes that the address of the recipient should be her father: "My dear Papa, you are the only person I have left in the world, no one love me, only you can, I am beaten with words, I am beaten with sticks, I am beaten with stones, I love you more than anything, only you can save me" (*ibidem*, p. 19). Although Xuela's letters are addressed to her father, she reveals that the words she has written down are not meant for him. As he has never performed a way of love other than repeating the word "love", he is unable to be loved by Xuela. In fact, the letters are meant for "the person of whom [Xuela] could see only her heels" (*idem*), that is to say, her absent mother. Her father has been regularly present, yet her mother, even in her absence, is the one able to love Xuela and be loved by her.

The Autobiography of my Mother is a novel that portrays a narrator who longs for both her mother and her father. Her desire for rendering her mother's biography forces Xuela to also tell her father's story. Nevertheless, she realizes never would this enterprise be accomplished if she had not delivered her own accounts. Only from telling her own story could she draw a family reconciliation. In spite of the fact that her mother has been a mystery for her absence as much as her father has been

unknown for his presence, the moment Xuela puts her life down in her own words, she achieves personhood, able to come to terms with her identity.

Regardless of the publisher's note, which warns readers that Jamaica Kincaid's work is fictional, *The Autobiography of my Mother* also presents considerable scope as an autobiographical narrative. If some of the light beams that spotted Xuela only are moved to Kincaid as a real person, one may notice that her narrative is not entirely coincidental.

In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, because Romeo carries the name of an enemy of her family, Juliet wishes Romeo could wipe his name out and take hers in order to cease all the long-term rivalry between Montague and Capulet:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; -
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name! That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Without that title: - Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself. (SHAKESPEARE, 1996, p. 254)

Renaming himself is what Juliet wants from Romeo. In so doing, they both would be free to love each other. Names for their families are so relevant, so attached to their identity, that they can only be lovers if they are not recognized as Montague or Capulet anymore. Juliet begs Romeo to take any other name rather than his, for she knows the one he has is synonym with tragedy.

And yet renaming is what is performed in *The Autobiography of my Mother*. Jamaica Kincaid was actually born Elaine Potter Richardson, but adopted her current penname when she started writing. According to Leigh Gilmore, Kincaid picked her first name for it calls up the West Indies. Her surname, she said, she has chosen because "it went well with the first" (GILMORE, 2001, p. 102). Both Kincaid's background and her autobiographical⁴ work evoke Caribbean countries: (1) she renamed herself Jamaica; (2) she was born in Antigua; and (3) the setting of Xuela's story is Dominica. Moreover, in *Mr. Potter* and *Lucy*, the narrators are called Elaine Cynthia Potter and Lucy Josephine Potter respectively, all of which resemble the author's actual name. These examples highlight that Kincaid's narratives are not so fictitious: it is in the name that the Lejeunian pact is restored. In *The Autobiography of my Mother*, the proper name ties author and the first-person narrator together.

Authors who constantly rename themselves go along with what Hall (2007) defines as postmodern subjects: they are not anymore composed of a single identity, but rather of several, many times incompatible and opposable to one another. In this sense, identity is always plural, unfinished and

⁴ From now on, the adjective *autobiographical* is to be used, for I am analyzing *The Autobiography of my Mother* with regard to the author's background.

ever-changing, assuming different positions at different times: “It is historically, not biologically, defined” (HALL, 2007, p. 598). The renaming technique has become an opportunity for Kincaid to deal with her postmodern and multiple identities.

It is worth noticing that the narrator’s surname in *The Autobiography of my Mother* refers back to the author’s real name rather than her penname. Such an observation emphasizes that Kincaid’s renaming process has begun in the very moment she decided to write her stories: “Jamaica Kincaid may have initiated her experiments in naming when she renamed herself” (GILMORE, 2001, p. 102). Furthermore, Gilmore poses that Kincaid, by making up different names for her narrators, intends to place herself far from the limiting self-referentiality that pronouns usually furnish. As she renames her narrators, she blurs the reference point traditionally given:

Kincaid avoids the ways autobiographical writing splits (or doubles) the “I” into “myself” and “herself” by coming up with different names for herself and her characters. In so doing, she exposes a crucial limit: that identity exceeds its representation, and the violence of splitting (or doubling, or extending) the “I” into autobiographer and character makes possible both alienation and nostalgia for the fictional unity of an “I” [...]. (*ibidem*, p. 103)

She makes indeed possible not only alienation and nostalgia, but she also gives birth to a plurality of identities which somewhat shares her background. In wanting to achieve personhood, Kincaid realizes that she must give up her name and take another again and again, in an everlasting renaming process:

A person is not something ‘there’ [...], but a possibility, an aspiration which, because it is that, can never be fulfilled once and for all. The person is, in other words, implicated in an endless process of working through personae. On this definition, the person is neither identical with the self or the traditional philosophical subject. (CORNELL *apud* GILMORE, 2001, p. 103-4)

When Georges Gusdorf stated “autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist” (GUSDORF *apud* FRIEDMAN, 1998, p. 72), he may have had in mind the postmodern selves described by Hall. Nevertheless, owning unresolved or unstable identities does not mean one is oblivious of a self. Identity, as Hall states, has no inner core because it has become unfinished and fragmented. Its pieces are picked up in accordance with the situation one faces, for identity is never permanent or fixed. Xuela, for instance, knows her father “was a part of a whole way of life on the island which perpetuated pain” (KINCAID, 1997, p. 39), but she still misses him because he is also a member of her family. He is truly the only familial bond to whom she can get attached – a protector and a pain-perpetrator at once. Assuming one position or another will depend on Xuela’s momentary perspective.

Finally, an autobiographical writing is surely possible as long as it resembles a “world beyond the text” (LEJEUNE, 1975, p. 11). There will be obviously room for lapses of memory, errors, and involuntary distortions. However this writing must seek for “a commitment to being true about oneself”

Jorge Luis Borges, for instance, on the occasion he met his “other”, admitted that to recollect is to meet yourself (BORGES, 2009, p. 9). Readers will read the account as entirely fictional if a resemblance between author, narrator and protagonist is not perceived. For renaming her narrators, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* is fictional; yet, for the very same reason, her narrative is autobiographical. On the one hand, a restrictively textual analysis labels it as a work of fiction; on the other, Kincaid's actual name and background allow it to be regarded as autobiographical. Joining both readings together may be the best way available of coping with Kincaid's work. In this sense, an autobiographical novel will emerge to bridge the gap between truth and imagination. An author is what Barthes wishes to be dead in literary texts, but when it comes to autobiographical accounts the resurrection of the author is expected and gladly celebrated.

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