



## **Ecological Sensibilities in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother***

**Eleanor Anneh Dasi<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of English, École Normale Supérieure de Yaoundé (ENS), P.O.Box 47, Yaounde, Cameroon.*

### **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

### **Article Information**

DOI: 10.9734/AJL2C/2018/43752

#### Editor(s):

- (1) Dr. Abilio Afonso Lourenço, Department of Psychology, University of Minho, Campus de Gualtar, Braga, Portugal.  
(2) Dr. Bakare Kazeem Kayode, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Al-Medina International University, Malaysia.

#### Reviewers:

- (1) Andrew Ngeh, University of Buea, Cameroon.  
(2) Faisal Emetumah, Imo state University, Nigeria.  
(3) Godson S. Maanga, Tumaini University, Tanzania.  
(4) Solehah Yaacob, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia.  
(5) Nalan Demircioğlu Yıldız, Atatürk University, Turkey.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history/26765>

**Original Research Article**

**Received 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018**  
**Accepted 8<sup>th</sup> October 2018**  
**Published 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2018**

### **ABSTRACT**

With the development of ecocriticism as a literary theory that brings in other disciplines into literature, literary artists have been provided with a framework which treats the relationship between humans, nature and the environment and to find significant ways by which this relationship can be encompassing. Humankind's search for a suitable life has led to a conscious or unconscious destruction of nature's elements, which elements are very useful in defining individuals within specific cultural and geographical locations. The central argument in this paper rests on the significance of nature in authenticating individual and collective belonging to given spaces with respect to the coloniser/ colonised matrix. Kincaid, in her 1996 fictional autobiographical novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, uses elements of nature to defend the collective cultural and personal values of the Dominican people and a vehicle for literary aesthetics. Considering the humans' dependence on nature for their wellbeing, this study opts for an ecological consciousness that will help preserve nature and by extension, humankind.

*Keywords: Nature; environment; ecology; reclaiming space; belonging; cultural spaces; eco-feminist; biodiversity; creole.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his constant search for economic enjoyment, human beings have embarked on the destruction of the natural environment in which they live. Such has been the situation witnessed during the era of colonialism. The desire to shift power and ensure control and authority over the world's environment was guaranteed by a mechanical exploitation of nature thus robbing it of its ability to sustain and even empower humankind. This assessment is accentuated by Adams and Mulligan [1:p3] who state that "in the name of imperial endeavour, peoples and nature were subjected to conquest and control, harnessed and transformed to serve projects of agricultural improvement, industrialisation and trade." The people and the landscape were thus seized and only existed as attachments to the European colonising masters.

This can be exemplified through historical accounts which hold that Christopher Columbus "discovered" the "New World" (referring to the Caribbean region and the Americas). The appellation 'New' raises questions on the authenticity of such an assertion in a people's history for as Jamaica Kincaid contests in the bulk of her writings, the Caribbean region specifically had a spatial existence, both spiritual and material before the coming of Columbus. It was therefore new only to Columbus and the place and people he was from. Nonetheless, the implication of this newness goes beyond the surface; it was a way of denying and erasing whatever existence laid there thereby considering it an empty space waiting for the category of finding that gives the finder exclusive rights of authority and control. This again means that everything that was part of this new world, that is, the people, their cultures, their experiences, their knowledge and even their environment were remapped and brought under the boundaries of empire. Thus colonisation was not just about the political control of territory but also the domination of nature.

Most regions that experienced colonialism thus saw their natural environments destroyed, their cultures and languages almost erased and even they themselves nearly extinct as is the case with the Arawaks of the West Indies. All of these experiences and the relationship between the

human being, nature and the environment have been consciously or unconsciously represented and staged in literary writings from early writings to the present. This human being/nature/environment relationship has had a significant impact on the way literature functions and has also greatly contributed to the production of literary knowledge. In support of this is Grewe-Volpp's [2:p78] observation that a place either subtly or explicitly influences the psyche and actual behaviour of individual protagonists, more so because there are powerful forces of nature like climate, wilderness conditions, landscape and many other environmental elements that humans react to.

That notwithstanding, human beings have been a threat to the essence of the existence of their own very species. As Glotfelty [3:pxxi] explains, "We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are ... destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species..." One way through which this destruction has been effected is by a conscious or an unconscious erasure of some cultural and linguistic elements that define humans within given spaces. With the domination of 'great' cultures, 'small' cultures have been suppressed and almost extinct. However, in every ecosystem, there is a basic struggle for survival amongst living things. It is on this premise that I explore how Jamaica Kincaid, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, uses ecological space to negotiate the boundaries between domination and resistance. The questions this paper seeks to answer are, how do the West Indians use an ecological consciousness to resist the destruction of their cultures and their sense of being, and how does Kincaid use ecological awareness in the production of the novel under study? Human beings usually have an intimate connection with, and a secret understanding of nature in their various environments which shape their sense of self and worldviews. It is at the backdrop of this that the central character in the novel is able to reaffirm and redefine her identity within the Dominican landscape. Thus rather than being a site of subjugation, the environment serves as a space from which Xuela reclaims herself in connection to her culture.

## **2. CULTURAL DESTRUCTION VS. RESISTANCE: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

One of the reasons why the literary theory has acquired a paradigm that connects to today's environmental crisis is because even human life is threatened due to the over-exploitation and consequent destruction of nature. Though technological advancements have made life easier for humankind, this has been achieved at the expense of the natural environment. The human being has transformed nature such that he seems less dependent on it whereas in truth, his dependence on it is absolute. Human existence began, and has continued up to this day, with a gathering of the ready-made gifts of nature. That is why Xuela is able to conveniently function within her natural environment, depending entirely on it for her physical well-being and her sense of place. It is therefore evident that nature is the essence of humankind's being.

Tošić [4:p47] adds a spiritual dimension to the human being/nature/environment relationship when he states that where someone lives is an objective fact and how one feels about the environment in which he lives is equally a very important fact. This presupposes that the human being's perception of himself and the world at large is partly determined by his relation to, and feeling towards the environment. In other words, our immediate physical/natural environment influences the way we are. To corroborate this is Buell's [5:pp283,304] observation that our physical environment shapes our imagination. While studying the literary culture of New England in the USA, he realised that there is an attitude directly linked to the area's landscape and ethos which, according to him, indicates that the region has a cultural geography on which it is very much dependent. Added to this is Glotfelty's [6:pxix] insistence that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it." Another dimension of culture comes into play here – that which includes physical habitats and the resources they offer or withhold for human use; the range of possibilities inherent in various areas of activity (for example, language and the manufacture and use of tools); and to the degree of development. From this definition of culture, it is evident that nature and/or the environment play(s) a significant role in the culture of a society. This nature-culture inter-relatedness opens up

another concept on ecological literary criticism – that which Zapf [7:p54] terms cultural ecology, which simply refers to the biological and cultural processes that permit a population to survive within a given region. Zapf [8:p54] specifically notes that literature acts as a medium through which these processes are addressed since they portray "human and nonhuman reality with the help of categories from the discourse of ecology".

One widely used ecological term which has been incorporated in eco-literary analysis is biodiversity. This term refers to the total variety of life found on earth and measured in terms of species, both plant and animal including humans. In as much as these species are scattered all over the world, some regions are richer in biodiversity than others. Over the years, however, there has been a significant loss in biodiversity. Some species have been completely eradicated while others still face the threat of extinction, all these as a result of human activity. Most embarrassingly, the human species has been a victim of its own incongruous exploitation of nature. The Arawaks of the Antilles, for example, were almost completely wiped out during colonial contact (through wars and diseases brought along by Europeans on their colonial expeditions). The Carib people of the West Indies almost also faced the same tragedy. Xuela, in the novel, [9:p15-16] notes, "My mother was a Carib ... The Carib people had been defeated, then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden..." Though the Carib were a warlike and very aggressive people, they could not withstand the harshness and brutality of the Europeans especially as the latter had an interest in reaping the great material profit that the area promised them. "Weeds" is a botanical metaphor that reflects the derogatory images that were attributed to the colonised peoples especially those of African and West Indian descent and from an ecological perspective, they were more or less seen as obstructions to the progress of the colonial enterprise symbolised by the garden.

Human life was less an issue than the desire for fame and wealth. This is how the Carib people almost disappeared from the face of the earth. We learn from Xuela that "... they were no more, they were extinct a few hundred of them still living, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. They were like living fossils..." [10:p197]. The word fossil speaks to an ecological assessment of the gravity of the destruction caused. Thus, for the fact that only a

handful of them are still living, we can suggest, ecologically speaking, that they be added to the list of endangered species, which should be kept as specimen for future generations to see what these people looked like. This certainly is also what Kincaid means when she says that these survivors “belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case.” [11:p197]. In confirmation to this, Xuela recounts in exquisite detail the Carib people’s lives on the reserve – which life was lived “as if in commemoration of something no one can bring herself to remember.” [12:p88]. Curiously, it is here, through the island of villages and rivers and mountains, that Xuela claims her birthright. Her attachment and connection to the landscape, gives her the feeling of possession and spiritual oneness by which she feels compelled to claim the place as her inheritance.

Cultural criticism as one point of reference explains the phenomenon of small cultures facing suppression or near extinction from “great” cultures. One of such areas of cultural dominance is noticed in belief systems. The so named “great” cultures imposed values on their captives with the intention of maintaining them at subservient positions. For example, with Christianity, the colonised people were instilled with the fear of a God at whose mention they trembled. Readers observe, along with Xuela, that the church in Roseau is full of natives who have been forced to worship and believe in the god of the conquerors, whose principles they do not understand. They simply keep in line with the monotony of attending church services every Sunday and singing hymns whose ironical undertones convey little or no meaning to them. It was not anybody’s worry if those people had a belief system or not and any mention of one was discarded with impunity. Being a western-based cultural movement, Christianity claims superiority over other religious movements. Cultures that have beliefs in spirits found in natural locations like trees, rivers, streams, brooks, hills etc., were considered pagan and animist. The scene in the novel in which the apparition in the river lulls away one of the pupils returning from school better illustrates this point. Though it was a lived event, the children who witnessed it were warned not to mention it, talk less of believing its authenticity.

One serious implication of the denial of this reality is a refusal of the humanity and spiritual independence of these people. If what happens in their environment is subjected to disbelief, how

then do they define themselves and their culture in relation to their environment? The experience of the apparition, like that of the Virgin Birth of Christian origin, is an act of faith, which holds both belief and disbelief. Why then is one of them believed and the other rejected by virtue of its origin? Some theories of environmentalism in relation to culture hold that cultures originate, persist and evolve within their local environments [13], thus understanding the environment of a region helps in understanding that region’s culture(s) [14]. By extension, therefore, styles of myths and tales were determined by the topography, climate, flora, fauna and other environmental factors of a given geographical location or place.

Place then becomes an important factor in defining both individual and collective cultural identities. Buell [15:p63] specifically explains that the concept of place, in environmental criticism, gestures towards social construction or perception and toward individual bond. He adds that identity-shaping places are not merely personal but end up being cultural artifacts [16:p70]. These places include those that have been significant to a person or a people over time [17:p69]. The significance of such places is noticed in the variety of versions of the myth of creation found in some of the world’s cultures that have survived in full capacity. The major difference in these versions is in the nature of the environment in which the myth is produced. These different myths account for the wide range of religious practices that we have around the world, which practices have become a strong cultural force amongst members of particular communities.

The apparition in the river is just one of such events that develop into a myth which serves as a cultural bond to the people of that community more so because the religious beliefs of the Arawaks centered on a hierarchy of nature, spirits and the ancestors. But because of the alleged superiority of the colonial cultures, the god of these “insignificant” people is not the correct one and their understanding of the concepts of heaven and hell is not the correct one either. As Xuela aptly concludes, “we the defeated define all that is unreal.” [18]. If we apply this experience to all other colonised groups of the world, which definitely will hold, it will not be an exaggeration to state that there has been a reduction in the world’s cultural diversity.

The roots of religious supremacy can be traced way back to Judeo-Christian belief that God

gave humans precedence over nature. At this point, I agree with Lynn White [19:p12] that Christianity has a huge burden of guilt in the human being's domination of nature given its anthropocentric outlook. With no universally accepted values that questioned or tried to contradict this Christian dogma, it came to remain true that God created every other thing for humankind to exploit for his use. Ironically, the fact that nature was created before human beings, and that humans themselves were created out of clay, an element of nature did not seem enough as evidence of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all components of nature. Even so, the human being has designed a hierarchical structure in the creation of his own species.

With the theory of speciesism, humans place themselves at the top of the creation ladder in terms of value but then not all who belong to this species have the same value. Western belief values the white race over the black and coloured races; in fact the black race was rated as close to animal species and thus was treated as that element of nature that had to be exploited for whites' ends. This, in a way, explains the domination of indigenous colonised cultures (cultures of the ethnic groups that came under European colonisation and domination) in favour of the western 'supreme' civilisations. Finding herself on this negative side of the 'wisdom' of creation, Xuela can only reject the redemption that Christianity alleges to offer and remains within her sphere of night spirits, the water goddess and *Obeah* (a creolized term which refers to a traditional form of mystical folk medicine and spirituality practiced by the African diasporic communities of the West Indian region) which are natural to her.

In terms of language as a cultural factor, there is no evidence in the text as to the original languages of the African and Carib people who now make up the bulk of the population of that region. For the Africans who were brought across as slaves, their subjugation was guaranteed by a complete annihilation of their languages and other cultural practices through dispersals. In order to communicate, they had to learn, though with difficulty, the language of the "superiors." Because the new language was learned informally, not all the linguistic, syntactic and lexical structures could be fully grasped. It ended up in a kind of patois which developed into Creole that is used up to this day though still considered as a low class language whose speakers are seeking its standardisation.

Xuela's stepmother asserts her superiority within this sphere of influence as she constantly speaks to Xuela in French patois in a bid to make an illegitimate of her and associate her with the odd. Historical evidence holds that the language of the West Indian Carib is extinct and there is no data as to whether traces can be found in Creole which is now spoken by all the inhabitants of the area irrespective of ancestry. That notwithstanding, the destruction of native languages continued to secure an obliteration of a Carib cultural tradition and identity. Furthermore, the inferior status accorded to Creole definitely meant that the West Indians had to associate with the European language (English) that survived.

The English language since colonial times has grown in prominence and its dominance as the world number one language is becoming problematic. Politically, this status of the language is understandable but on the other hand, the question still stands as to whether it is capable of expressing everything in the world. Each language has its own vocabulary of the natural elements found within its geographical and cultural space and given that nature's gift of the environment is not evenly distributed in the universe, can the English language boast of having found an equivalent vocabulary to those elements that are not known within its sphere of origin? For as long as English remains the global language, many other languages in the world stand a risk of extinction. In fact, UNESCO [20] prognostics state that more than 3 000 languages may be lost before the end of the century if care is not taken. If this happens, then valuable ancestral knowledge embedded in indigenous languages will also be lost. It is for this reason that UNESCO [21] has been very concerned with the preservation of language as a vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage, which heritage offers a fundamental link between biodiversity, cultural diversity and linguistic diversity.

### 3. ECO-FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

One vital way through which Xuela claims agency is in an eco-feminist consciousness. Though at first glance the word eco-feminism implies a relationship between women feminists and the environment, its meaning has extended to include the fundamental connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. McGuire and McGuire [22] see in this connection a kind of twin oppression perpetuated

by western patriarchy. Their argument is based on the duality of western patriarchal thinking which separates mind from body, spirit from matter, male from female and humans from nature. Such divides automatically create an 'other' which is usually regarded as inferior. Female and nature are therefore categorised as inferior and by extension perceived as weak and irrational. This probably explains why nature has always been feminised by the appellation 'mother earth.'

Giving nature a feminine status simply implies and assures that it is objectified, devalued and controlled by the male much in the same way as the female is. Though this idea is grounded mainly in western thought, women, as Li [23:p284] notes, because of the sex/gender role system that has defined societies over time, have identified their shared vulnerability to male superiority, subordination and oppression irrespective of their class and ethnic backgrounds. Notwithstanding the position accorded the female-nature duality and the varied trajectories of ecofeminism, eco-feminists seek, to restore the integrity of the female in the global space by coming up with concerns ranging from sexual repression through earth-based spirituality to self-knowledge. All these are attempts to find new ways of reconstructing life on earth by re-stimulating feminine spiritual power and principle.

Eco-feminists go back in time to remind us that for thousands of centuries, earth-based medicine worked; but the establishment of western medical institutions imperiously undervalued the healing power of the body, the psyche, herbs and nutrition. Ironically, the foundation of western medicine is rooted in nature as all what we have today as medication for ailments are chemicalised transformations of natural flora. Even when untended by human hand, these floras still possess healing properties. Xuela returns to the healing power of herbs to free her body from unwanted additions. After such interference, her health is regained still with another mixture got from freshly harvested ripe castor seeds. This plant has anti-biotic and anti-inflammatory properties which help repair and clean up injured or soiled feminine organs and restore their proper functioning. Xuela does not choose this option because of the unavailability of conventional medicine (she marries an English doctor) but rather as a means of re-conquering nature and a sense of place in the belief that it is real and rich enough to sustain even her wildest desires.

Kincaid contrasts Xuela's knowledge of plants for body fitness with Moira's ignorance of their importance. When Moira is introduced to a flower that causes pleasant hallucinations when brewed into a tea, she becomes addicted to it such that it turns her skin black and she dies. Coming from a different cultural and physical background, Moira lacks knowledge of the flora in her new environment and so could not decipher the danger that an overdose of the tea could cause her. Xuela, on the other hand, is familiar with this plant and takes it only when necessary. The significance of this event lies in the dichotomy between white and black women from a racial viewpoint. The issue of racism, as Hobgood-Oster [24] notes, has been an eco-feminist concern with white women wielding political and social power over women of colour. Though general eco-feminists have tried to subvert this view, women of non-European and non-Euro-American origins claim they have specific connections with, and particular attitudes towards their environments (linked to indigenous religious and socio-cultural realities).

However, on the basis of the claim of white dominance, Moira tries to maintain superiority over the Dominican women by virtue of her whiteness (European origin) but ironically, a plant on this same landscape whose inhabitants she despises (because of their black skin colour), does not only take away her life but renders her black before it does. Significantly, Xuela understands the dangers of taking an overdose of that particular plant but does not warn Moira. The implication of her silence points to a reversal of the polar opposites of white equals superior and black equals inferior and by so doing, she manifests superiority over Moira with respect to the values of the environment which is natural to her. This perspective in a sense debunks the universality of feminist issues and supports black women's claim to a redefinition of feminism to include the varied experiences of women from different (especially minority) cultural backgrounds. Women of colour, for example, have material connections with the environment which defines them and places them within specific cultural contexts. Moira's ascribed superiority is based on colonial prejudices and this fact alone presupposes a division. There is therefore no possibility that the problems faced by women from the governing cultures will be the same as those experienced by women from dominated regions.

Eco-feminists warn that sexual repression and control of women's reproductive powers are key

mechanisms used to maintain patriarchal hegemony. In such a situation, giving birth to and raising children was a matter of necessity and not desire or love. Ma Eunice has six children by different fathers suggesting lack of control of her sexuality and the result is a polarised form of motherhood. That is why as a single parent, she finds it difficult to create a warm filial relationship with her children. Her actions towards and treatment of the children are life-sustaining but lack the affection and tenderness that go with mothering. Xuela's stepmother for her part gives in to patriarchy by maintaining the preference given to male children over females. All her love, care and attention are focused on him in the hope that he will continue the lineage and legacy of his father. Her daughter and stepdaughter are simply looked upon as meaningless appendages in the family line. Not even the death of the son changes this status of the girls as the mother figuratively dies with him. Xuela's stepmother therefore accepts patriarchal subordination and control of her body notwithstanding the fact that she is an independent entity of creation and has the right and liberty to choose much in the same way as the male does. It is for this reason that Ruether [25:p204] warns that "women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination." This presupposes that systems of patriarchy that objectify and seize agency from the woman should be confronted.

Accordingly, Xuela wields power from the eco-feminist reminder that women exercised self-determination over their bodies with an extensive holistic knowledge about birth control, abortion, birthing and other gynaecological concerns. The series of abortions she commits is geared towards rejecting the socially ascribed role of mother and/or the conventions of motherhood, and resisting the control of women by both patriarchal traditions and dominant colonial authority. From an eco-feminist standpoint, women have a right to sexual pleasure and freedom, while abortion becomes an option or a strategy for resisting and refusing participation in a system that ensures their own mutilation. Xuela is able to maintain control of her sexuality by turning to the secret powers available in nature. She engages in a kind of medicinal folklore that enables her to affirm her body in her local environment. Thus with knowledge of the utility of nature around her, she succeeds in shifting agency to her own body.

"Nature" and "earth" have always been given feminine qualities as observed in the appellations "mother nature" and "mother earth." Though eco-feminists may consider this derogatory, it nonetheless holds positive power as it provides constructive psychic healing in desperate situations like the lack in mothering Xuela experiences. Kincaid measures the weight of this loss by equating the beauty of the coming to life of a human with that of a flower, which all form part of the beauty of creation. The description of a flower in bud, from its tightly furled petals to its natural loosening and then to the bloom that gives the glamour and marvel, is juxtaposed with experiences collecting around the eyes and mouth, "the weighing down of the brow ... the thick gathering around the waist, the breast ..." [26] which are all wonderful to behold. Unfortunately, no mother beholds Xuela during these initial moments of her life and by extension, she does not go through proper mothering, whether of biological or of community mother.

This dilemma is at the genesis of all the social and psychological difficulties she encounters in life. However, as Putnam [27] holds, in cases where there are no community or alternative mothers to help motherless daughters, these latter go through self mothering through mother earth and/or mother nature; communicating with it and appreciating its power. Xuela particularly learns to understand the voices and sounds of the natural environment around her which gives her a comprehension of her world. Generally, her favourite moments are those where she is able to sit and listen to, feel and smell the components of nature. She recounts:

... I loved that moment when the white flowers from the cedar tree started to fall to the ground ... their petals ... a soft kiss of pink and white, then ... crushed, wilted and brown ... and the river that had become a small lagoon ... on whose bank I would sit and watch families of birds, frogs laying their eggs ... [28].

Xuela learns to appreciate nature and be in one with it and significantly, it is while sitting in this place that she first begins to dream of her mother. By her own evaluation, she becomes a new person altogether after this dream, and with an already formed image of her mother, she is subsequently able to conjure up her portrait. Through this imagination, she builds a spiritual connection with her. Thus nature's pristine

quality plays a vital role in recovering Xuela's lost maternity that is the source of her life-long dilemma.

#### 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS/FLORA/FAUNA AND LITERATURE

The term ecology used even in literary studies evidently suggests the human being's relation with the physical environment and most especially the ways in which this relation is exploited. In this regard, Gersdorf and Mayer [29:p10] consider ecocriticism as the "ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature" and how the constructions of nature metaphorically function in literary and cultural practices particularly in relation to humans and their natural/cultural environments. In other words, they are concerned with how nature is thought of in different cultural, critical and disciplinary contexts and the relationship between nature, humans, language, art and literature. As Buell, Heise and Thornber [30:p420] observe, works of imagination bear witness to the interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments. They argue on the centrality of place in eco-critical literary studies as partly intended to revive the "historic neglect of setting relative to plot, character, image and symbol in literary works." There therefore cannot be any existence out of the physical environment which in itself denotes place. Thus, for the human race to exist in a given space, it must inter-relate with, if not mutually depend on its emotional, aesthetic, artistic and physical elements. Significantly, literary artists draw extensively from nature to develop literary elements which express the evolution and complexities of the human condition. This, in a way, explains why evidence of an ecologically informed discourse is part of, and equally important in an eco-critical literary analysis.

In *The Autobiography of my Mother*, Kincaid uses flora and fauna for their aesthetic value in literature, their interconnectedness with humans and to show some dimensions of culture (particularly folk medicine and superstition). The novel is replete with a wide range of nature imagery, symbols, metaphors and figurative language to accentuate its major thematic concerns and most especially, Xuela's self-assessment. The novel opens with Xuela presenting her life as being on "precipice" against a "bleak, black wind" [31]. These images do not

only point to her defenselessness but also to the hostility that characterises life in general. The death of her mother at her birth, which extends into the loss of a protector, caregiver and nurturer exposes her to such hostility and turns her world into "silent, soft and vegetable-like in its vulnerability, subject to the powerful whims of others" [32]. Kincaid here reiterates the dangers of growing up without initiation into culture and society (mediated by the mother), which sometimes results to a misfit and recluse in character as witnessed in the personality of Xuela. No matter how noble and pure people's intentions are towards her, she always sees behind them a malevolent meaning. Ma Eunice's and her father's efforts to see her through her kindergarten years are rather slighted than appreciated, making them look more like predators instead of protectors. The result is that she carries in her a blend of contempt and sadness which extends into her refusal to bear children (whose lives will also lean on the edge of a precipice) thus breaking a chain in one life continuum of the wider ecosystem.

Xuela's psychological disposition and the background to her actions can also be observed from flora and fauna imagery. For example, she becomes aware of the futility of her wanderings through the image of a bee going leisurely in and out of a wild bush blooming with many small deep pink flowers and short petals. The reflection of her life in the bees highlights Kincaid's bio-centric view of nature and from a metaphorical perspective, it points to the vainness of human endeavours. But again, it symbolically reveals the fulfillment that can be attained when one comes to terms with such futility. Xuela reaches this point when she resigns from the life of solitude she has been living and moves back to her father's house where events help her define herself against prejudices. This contributes to plot development as well as exposes readers to the impact of the nature around us on our various perceptions and understandings of ourselves and our motifs in life.

Nature's rationality is further emphasised in the human/non-human dichotomy as exemplified in the anecdote of Xuela and the spotted monkey. Her act of throwing stones at the monkey lacks rationality and shows hostility of humans towards non-humans but the monkey's response has a strong basis as it simply tries to defend itself against Xuela's hostility. One symbolic representation of this incident is its illustration of the way humans relate with animals in different

cultures and places, and the place of animals in human morality and mythology. In Hindu mythology, for example, Hanuman, the monkey god, is believed to have helped other gods (particularly Rama) and humans and his heroic exploits are revered and upheld by Hindu followers as a model for all human devotion. In the same vein, Xuela insists on and uses this incident as part of the authentic definition of the Dominican cultural and geographical landscape. These realities and experiences vary from one region and culture to another and someone from a different cultural background may doubt the veracity in the story of a kind of cogent and moral confrontation between a human and a monkey. However, science has established that the primates are humans' closest intellectual neighbours (proven here by the monkey's ability to catch a stone and throw it back at Xuela) but then it is only in a close relationship with them that people can become aware of this fact. At another level, the monkey's reaction (the display of characteristics typical of its kind) is an attempt to resist human domination and control while at the same time claiming its right to its own being and existence as an independent element of nature. For one thing, ecocritics will be interested in this behaviour of the monkey towards the antagonism of the human, and for another, it is just another proof that a non-stoic approach to non-human life allows for a peaceful cohabitation between humans and animals for humans will react in a similar way to any such aggression.

Still with respect to representations of human intricacies in non-human features, a complex metaphor for colonial human relationships is revealed in Xuela's comparison of her father's neocolonialist tendencies to life in the jungle where the stronger animals engulf the weaker ones; "a bird of prey, an insect vulnerable to a bird of prey, a master of the jungle, a ruler of the plain ..." [33]. Darwin's principle of the struggle for existence can be applied here if we take the image of the prey to mean the colonisers and the insect to mean the colonised. The colonising race ensures its survival and continuation by victimising the less privileged and weak group. With the territorial expansionist ideas of empire, focus was on preserving the dominant race rather than on acknowledging the right to survival of other races and/or species. Social Darwinism comes into play here. It maintains the view that only the strong (who definitely are the fit) succeed in society and so are superior and therefore have the authority to rule over the weak. Such strength is measured in what society

values - capitalism and political power. These strengths and their resultant successes were mostly got through exploitation of the vulnerable "inferior" races and the proletariat class. This explains the legacy of cruelty and exploitation characteristic of colonial rule which Xuela's father incredibly mimics. On the basis of this, she rejects her father's material inheritance because of her hatred for a culture that is partly responsible for her present predicament. She nonetheless claims a spiritual identification and her birth right by walking through the environment that marks her origin - "an island of villages and rivers and mountains" [34]. What therefore gives Xuela a sense of being and place therefore is not the material possession that is acquired from the land but the land itself in its most untamed state.

From every indication, human life is reflected in the complex inter-relationships of the biotic constituents (living organisms) in the wider ecosystem. Kincaid [35:p191] makes this more evident when she declares through Xuela that

A human being, ... a people, will say that their surroundings, their physical surroundings, form their consciousness, their very being; they will get up every morning and look at green hills, white cliffs, silver mountains, fields of golden grain ... and they feel themselves become one with it, they draw strength from it, they are inspired by it to sing songs, to compose verse ...

The truth about this is confirmed in Philip Bailey's obsession with rearranging the Dominican landscape to reflect an idealised English countryside. Unfortunately, the Dominican climate is unfavourable for the flowers he plants and so the luxury of a transported English garden in his present location eludes him. Nonetheless, his imagination takes him into a spiritual journey to scenes from his childhood during which he was in perfect equilibrium with his British surroundings. This does not only provide a sacred bond with his place of origin but also authenticates his being and repositions him in the conquering group. From this position, he attempts to re-conquer the landscape by mutating tropical fruit trees and making them bear a resemblance to what is native to British soil. Such a practice has been termed by Alfred Crosby (qtd in Huggan and Tiffin [36:p3]) as ecological imperialism, that is, "the violent appropriation of indigenous land to the ill-

considered introduction of ... European agricultural practices." Though Philip's operation can be considered an ecologically valuable task, it however denies the legitimacy and supremacy of Dominica as an independent geographical space. During colonial control, even nature in the conquered zones was measured by European standards, insinuating, therefore, that the colonised places had nothing to offer in terms of ecological productivity and/or scientific importance. Shifting the natural potential of one geographical region to belong to another unrelated place can be judged as ecological theft. Such theft is manifested by the rich English men in Roseau who return from church and drink a cup of English Tea and/or cocoa "even though they were quite aware that no such thing as a tea tree [or] ... a cocoa tree grew in England." [37].

Contrasted with Philip's ignorance and attempted adulteration of the landscape is Xuela's mastery and preservation of its spiritual and physical resources. Her disapproval of gardening for luxury as opposed to gardening for necessity (she thinks here of food security) tells of the value she has of the land as the key in sustaining life. There is no rationale in growing plants (flowers) for the simple pleasure of it while humans need the savour of fruits and vegetables for physical growth and good health. Philip's fruits are genetically mutated and cloned and these processes destroy their original taste though they equally increase their sizes and form new species. Xuela does not participate in their consumption but rather moves Philip to the mountains where her ancestors preserved the originality of the flora. This way, she enters into a physical and spiritual communion with the landscape that defines her wellbeing and sense of place.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the relationship between humans and the environment is significant at various levels of existence. Not only do nature and the environment sustain physical human life, they also help the spiritual and cultural dimensions. This is why nature comes into play in different cultural and disciplinary contexts. But humans have either ignorantly or consciously created divisions with other species and even their own kind in the quest for physical, material and spiritual comfort by creating dualisms that give dominion of one kind over another and destroying both the physical, material and spiritual environments of those that have been

categorised as "small" and therefore "meaningless." Many minority cultures, especially those that have suffered European colonisation like the West Indies have been victims of inconsiderate exploitation of their natural environments. They have witnessed offensive transformations in their flora, they have seen their cultures denigrated, and they themselves have been reduced to objects. The black female body has particularly been objectified and used as a site of subjugation as observed in the character of Xuela. However, these same environments that have been monopolised and subdued have also served as a site for resistance, cultural assertion and self-definition, especially for the black West Indian female. All of these have been expressed through literary aesthetic elements, especially imagery, derived from nature and the environment. Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* therefore provides the reader, through Xuela's eyes, with an awareness, first, of the damage that has been done on nature in the West Indian environment and the resistance that has been put forth for its conservation, and second with an ecological consciousness in an attempt to preserve what is left of its diversity given its immense importance in all domains of human activity.

## CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, written consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

## REFERENCES

1. Adams WM, Mulligan M, Editors. Introduction. Decolonising nature: Strategies for conservation in a post-colonial era. London: Earthscan. 2003;1-15.
2. Grewe-Volpp C. Nature 'out there' and as a 'social player': Some basic consequences for a literary ecocritical analysis. In: Gersdorf C, Mayer S, editors. Nature in literary and cultural studies: Transatlantic conversations on ecocriticism. New York: Rodopi. 2006;71-86.
3. Glotfelty C, Fromm H, Editors. The ecocritical reader: Landmarks in literary

- ecology. Georgia: The University of Georgia Press; 1996.
4. Tosić J. Ecocriticism – Interdisciplinary study of literature and environment. In: *Facta Universitatis: Working and Living Environmental Protection*. 2006;3(1):43-50.
  5. Buell L. *New England literary culture: From revolution through renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1986.
  6. Glotfelty, xix.
  7. Zapf H. The state of ecocriticism and the function of literature as cultural ecology. In: Gersdorf C, Mayer S, Editors. *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. New York: Rodopi. 2006;49-70.
  8. *Ibid*, 54.
  9. Kincaid J. *The autobiography of my mother*. New York: Vintage; 1996.
  10. *Ibid*.
  11. *Ibid*.
  12. *Ibid*.
  13. Steward J. *Theory of culture change: The methodology of multilineal evolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1955.
  14. Milton K. *Environmentalism and cultural theory: Exploring the role of anthropology in environmental discourse*. London: Routledge; 1996.
  15. Buell L. *The future of environmental criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell; 2005.
  16. Buell L. *Writing for an endangered world: Literature, culture and environment in the U.S. and beyond*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; 2001.
  17. *Ibid*, 69.
  18. Kincaid, 37.
  19. White L Jr. The historical root of our ecological crisis. In: Glotfelty C, Fromm H, Editors. *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press. 1996;3-14.
  20. UNESCO. *Convention for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage*. Paris; 2003. [Cited 2018 January 21]  
Available:<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>
  21. UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme. [Cited 2018 January 21]  
Available:<http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/>
  22. McGuire C, McGuire C. *What is ecofeminism anyway?* New York: Ecofeminist Visions Emerging; 1991.
  23. Li HL. A cross-cultural critique of ecofeminism. In: Gaard G, Editor. *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1993;272-294.
  24. Hobgood-Oster L. Ecofeminism: Historic and international evolution. In: Bron T, Ed. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*. London: Continuum; 2005.
  25. Ruether RR. *New woman/new earth: Sexist ideologies and human liberation*. New York: Seabury; 1975.
  26. Kincaid, 56.
  27. Putnam A. *Mothering the motherless: Portrayals of alternative mothering*. Canadian Women Studies. 2004;23(2): 118-123.
  28. Kincaid, 17-18.
  29. Gersdorf C, Mayer S. Nature in literary and cultural studies: Defining the subject of ecocriticism – an introduction. Gersdorf C, Mayer S, Editors. *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*. New York: Rodopi. 2006;9-24.
  30. Buell L, Heise UK, Thornber K. Literature and environment. *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources* [Serial Online]. 2011;417-441. DOI:10.1146/annrev.environ-111109-144855
  31. Kincaid, 3.
  32. *Ibid*, 17.
  33. *Ibid*, 118.
  34. *Ibid*, 89.
  35. *Ibid*, 191.
  36. Huggan G, Tiffin H, Editors. *Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment*. London: Routledge; 2010.
  37. Kincaid, 142.

© 2018 Dasi; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*Peer-review history:*  
*The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:*  
<http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history/26765>