

Analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* from the Perspective of Feminist Stylistics

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Abstract: *Girl* is contemporary Antigua-American writer Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical writing, which describes a girl dictated by the instructions of her demanding mother about how to behave properly like a lady. Through the narration of daily life between mother and daughter, the influence of colonial history and colonial culture on the family life of African Caribbean women is reflected in the work. With the analysis at three different levels of words, sentence and discourse from the perspective of feminist stylistics, the weak feminine role and the inferior social status of women in Antigua are explored. A traditional and typical Caribbean mother and daughter relationship of the controlling mother with the obedient daughter is revealed.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid; Feminist Stylistics; Lexical Level; Sentence Level; Discourse Level

1. Introduction

Jamaica Kincaid is a prominent contemporary Antigua-American writer who focuses on writings involving essays, novels, and short stories. Her works, usually influenced by the social and historical context of Antigua, are mainly about such themes as personhood, family relationships, feminine roles, and colonial Antigua. The opening of Kincaid's literary career was greatly related to her mother whom she both loved and hated because Kincaid's mother was deeply affected by the British colonial culture and education and transferred it to the education of her children. Thus, the narrative of the mother-daughter relationship is the core feature of Kincaid's works, which runs through all of her works. Kincaid's autobiographical writing *Girl* is the first story of her collection *At the Bottom of the*

River^[1], which is the epitome of the relationship between Kincaid and her mother. It reflects the influence of colonial culture on African Caribbean women by means of presenting the mother-daughter relationship. The story describes a girl being dictated by the instructions of her demanding mother about how to behave properly like a lady in Antigua, how to care for her husband and educate the children, and how to avoid going astray, with the imperative statements running through the whole text. *Girl* reveals the mother's as well as the Antigua society's expectations and requirements of what a mannered woman should be, which provokes our consideration on feminine roles in Antigua.

Feminist stylistics is a significant tool to study female writing, and explore gender politics and feminine roles in literary texts. Thus, feminist stylistics which is a branch of stylistics will do great help in analyzing this short story. Sara Mills who opens up the study of stylistics to feminism, argues in her *Feminist stylistics* that feminist stylistics is feminist which uses linguistic of language analysis to examine texts^[2]. Mills proposed that the analysis of texts should focus on three levels: the level of word, the level of sentence and the level of discourse. The word level mainly involves gender-specific or sexist language; the sentence level refers largely to metaphor, presupposition, transitivity, and ready-made phrases; the discourse level mainly deals with conversational analysis based on some pragmatic theories^[2]. All the three levels give some certain inspirations to the analysis of feminine roles and female situations, which will be used in the following parts.

2. Analysis of *Girl* at the Lexical Level

Sara Mills handles the issue of gender bias with the analysis at the level of individual words. She pays attention to specific types of sexism

in language and gives an account of their usage which exposes how sexist the society is. According to Mills, sexism in language can be defined in various ways, and one of these proposed by Mary Vetterling Braggin is that if the use of language constitutes or promotes an unfair difference between sexes then it is sexist [2]. Some nouns are assigned a gender in English language which regard men and women differently. These gender-specific or sexist language often reflects that women are secondary with a lower status who usually subordinate to men and rely on them. Besides, some feminine words tend to have derogative or even indecent connotations. On the contrary, some masculine vocabularies are endowed with neutral or even superior meaning.

In the mother's talk, the word "slut" is an example of gender-specific or sexist language, which is mentioned four times at specific points. This word "slut" attracts readers obviously, especially female readers who may feel uncomfortable since this specific word is an insult to females. Yet for males there are few such vocabulary to describe a bad man. The repetition of the word "slut" reveals the mother's worry of her daughter having the possibility of turning into the "slut" woman. The mother repeatedly warns her daughter against becoming the slut and meanwhile strictly scolding her of becoming the slut, which reflects that the mother is extremely worried about her daughter's future. Obviously, she is not confident in her daughter with the fear that her daughter is very likely not to obey her commands but eventually become the "slut" woman warned against.

3. Analysis of *Girl* at the Sentence Level

At the level of sentence, Sara Mills puts emphasis on the analysis of such aspects as metaphor, presupposition, transitivity, ready-made phrases, etc. [2]. Yet among these areas, *Girl* will be mainly explored from the perspective of metaphor. Mills argues that metaphor conventionally works at the sentence level instead of the lexical level in isolation although metaphor might seem to occur at the lexical level. Metaphors usually have an influence on reinforcing stereotypical knowledge and give people strong impression on the context. According to Black, metaphors are better considered as systems of belief instead of individual things [3]. By analyzing

the author's ways of description and creation, certain system of belief is also reflected in *Girl* behind the author's use of images.

In Jamaica's *Girl*, the poor girl even doesn't have the opportunity to express herself under her mother's overwhelming control. In the whole conversation, there are only two times that the girl is able to respond to her mother, which occur in the middle and in the end of the conversation respectively. At the end of the conversation, the girl reply "But what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?" [1] when her mother instructs her how to identify the fresh bread. The girl's response starts with the conjunction "but", which functions as the shift and transition of the conversation reflecting her objection and contradiction to her mother's words. The word "bread" mentioned in the dialogue is a metaphor, which symbolizes freshness, pureness and holiness. The girl's innocent question may arise from her doubt that perhaps usually the baker would not allow anyone to squeeze the bread in order to keep them clean. Yet her mother's exploding answer "You mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" [1] indicates that the girl is compared to the kind of disreputable and dirty woman whom the baker refuses to touch the bread due to his distain and contempt. The mother's sharp complaint ends the whole conversation, implicitly demonstrating that the mother negatively feels the girl may become unsatisfactory and notorious if she behaves with ill and undisciplined manner. Thus, the use of the word "bread" metaphorically signifies the innocent and pure femininity and virginity. This metaphor also reflects the ruin of the fragile and weak femininity by the filthy and perilous society.

"Don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; Don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all" [1]. The above lines are the mother's warning to her daughter about how to behave like a lady outside. The author's use of the words "flowers" and "blackbirds" are metaphoric. Flower here is a symbol of something appears attractive and tempting which may also have hidden dangers and evil. The mother intends to tell the girl not to be easily attracted by external temptations which may hurt herself since she might catch something. Blackbird used in the sentence symbolizes something bad and unwelcome but

the mother reminds the girl “it might not be a blackbird at all” [1]. The mother aims to let the girl know that sometimes she should not judge things superficially because they may be just false appearance. These two metaphors show the mother’s strict command to the girl hoping her to behave properly instead of becoming undesirable.

4. Analysis of *Girl* at the Discourse Level

Some pragmatic theories such as turn-taking in conversation and cooperative principle are adopted for the analysis of discourse in *Girl*. Turn-taking in conversation is a central issue in the analysis of discourse. According to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, all conversations involve the use of turn-taking system which means the changes of roles in conversation between the speaker and the listener always exist [4]. That is to say, during the conversation, the speaker becomes the listener and then the listener changes into the speaker in turn. We can usually obtain an A.B.A.B.A.B distribution of talk between the participants since they take turns in speaking in their conversations. Short points out that turn-taking patterns can reflect the power relation between the participants by analyzing the unequal turns in conversation, initiators of conversational exchanges, masters of the topics, interrupters, etc [5]. Besides, Cooperative Principle or Gricean Maxims, proposed by H. P. Grice, is a kind of agreement to cooperate conversationally toward mutual ends when people converse with one another [6]. Grice argued that “Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” [6]. According to Grice, people ought to obey certain rules or maxims in order to cooperate conversationally, which include the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner [6]. Gricean Maxims enable people to communicate successfully with others and reach assumed discursual goals. Yet violating these principles will lead to conversational implicatures and reveal power relation between the participants. *Girl* is a conversation between the mother and the daughter with a total number of 650 words. Yet in the whole conversation, the girl only speaks two times with just 25 words. According to the turn-taking theory, the number of turns of the two participants in the conversational is

unequal, which reflects that the mother with the longest and most turns controls the conversation topic and dominates the conversation. The sharp-tongued mother directs orders and requests to her daughter with repeated command from beginning to end in the conversation totally neglecting her daughter’s feelings and thoughts. Thus, it can be easily concluded that the power relation between the two participants is that the mother is the powerful speaker while the daughter is the powerless speaker. The girl is overwhelmed by the mother’s commanding voice of endless instructions teaching her how to become a qualified housewife at home and a mannered lady in public. The girl is in such an oppressive and passive position comparing with the privileged status of her mother that she has merely two opportunities to respond to her mother: “But I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school” and “But what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?” [1], which shows the girl’s trivial participation in the conversation. The girl’s first utterance is her denial that she does not sing benna in Sunday and never in Sunday school, but her response goes unnoticed by her mother who continues her own talk without any reply. Here the mother’s following talk has nothing to do with the former utterance, which breaks the cooperative principle and violates the maxim of relation that requires one’s utterance should be relevant to the purpose in hand [6]. It is clear that the imbalanced relation exists between the mother and the daughter and it is the mother who has the power to determine the conversational exchange. The girl’s denial of singing benna in Sunday when her mother says “don’t sing benna in Sunday school” also reveals that her mother’s utterance violates the maxim of quality in cooperative principle which requires people not to say that for which you lack evidence or which you believe to be false [6]. The mother’s breaking of the maxim of quality also reflects in the repeated mention of the word “slut”. Even though there is no sign and evidence of the girl’s promiscuity, the mother repeatedly warns her daughter against becoming a slut. Although the mother’s scolding her daughter of being willing to become a slut is contrary to fact, it suggests that the mother is extremely worried about and deeply love her daughter. The mother’s alarm and fear about her daughter’s future indicate

the weak feminine role and the inferior social status of women.

5. Conclusion

With the analysis at three different levels from the perspective of feminist stylistics, it is concluded that the feminine role is weak and the social status of women is inferior in Antigua from the conversation between the mother and the daughter. Through the narration of daily life between mother and daughter, the influence of colonial history and colonial culture on the family life of African Caribbean women is revealed in the work. A traditional Caribbean mother and daughter relationship is reflected through the analysis of *Girl* in terms of sexist language, metaphor, turn-taking in conversation, cooperative principle, etc. The typical Caribbean mother and daughter relationship is that the mother gives her love and concern in a controlling manner and the daughter can but obey her mother's commands. This phenomenon which is the production of certain social values may provoke our thinking

to explore a better and healthier parent-child relationship. When get along with their children, parents should be patient, gentle and reasonable giving children more chances to express themselves instead of excessively strict commands.

References

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