

Research Article

WOMANISM IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S ANNIE JOHN

* Dr. Anjeh Christina Wase

University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon.

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ABSTRACT

This research paper sets out to show that black women are custodians of culture even though most critics opine that women are weak, vulnerable and they have no value in the African society. Feminism (Womanism) has been used to carry out the research to explain how black women preserve their culture despite the inferior positions given to them in their society. Qualitative research was used to write this paper since it involves textual analysis. Information of this research paper was gathered from the primary sources and secondary sources. Womanism was first coined by Alice Walker in 1979 in her short story "Coming Apart" and was first used in her work *In Search of our Mother's Garden*. She explains that the term womanist is derived from the southern folk expression "acting womanish" the womanish girl "exhibits wilful, courageous, and outrageous behaviour that is considered beyond the scope of societal norms". A womanist is therefore a black feminist who is wilful and serious, loves women and men and is committed to the survival of the entire people. Aloysius GonzagaskechukwuOrjinta's definition of womanism would be used as our working definition in this paper. He defines Womanism as the name of the socio-cultural awareness of African women in Africa and in the Diaspora. It understands women as matured, adult, responsible and honest. It rejects associations to women like girlish, passive, weak, vulnerable, and babyish. The womanist ideology is based on gender complementarities, motherhood, family, social and cultural change. Womanism is holistic in that it stands for the liberation and welfare of women and the liberation of the whole of the African and coloured people on the African continent and in the Diaspora: woman, man and child. This article further shows how the tenets of womanism are reflected in Kincaid's *Annie John*. Womanism demonstrates how women fight against the marginalisation of all living things. Besides, it also highlights women's ability in the daily survival of the community, and their relationship to nature since they preserve it as their companion. This preservation is today an essential issue in the political, economic and cultural circles. It will as well deepen discussion in the field of feminism.

Keywords: Womanism, antioppressionism, vernacular, communitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

Most critics highlight in their books and articles how black women are weak and they are seen as the other in the society. Bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, states that in the African American society, black women have been subjected to different forms of torture such as rape, domestic violence and silence (5). Vandana Shiva in "Development, Ecology and Women", in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, also argues that the Western model of development, or mal-development, has been violent for many people, especially women and the local environment (8). On the contrary, this article will portray how black women are custodians of culture as evident in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. This research paper will answer the following questions; how does the author represent black women *Annie John*? And how do women preserve culture in the text under study? This research paper therefore puts forward the hypothesis that black women are represented as anti-oppressionists. They are also portrayed as custodians of culture in the text under study. Qualitative research was used to write this paper since it involves textual analysis. Information of this research paper was gathered from the primary sources and secondary sources. Feminism was used as the theoretical framework. According to John Mbiti and Jacques Maquet in *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (1972), states that culture is the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. He elaborated on how Africans in general count their blessings by the number of children they have according to their culture, that is why one man can get married to many wives, whether they are educated or not, rich or poor, healthy or sick, well

fed or hungry. This highlights the role of women as custodians of African tradition as they perpetuate life through child bearing and rearing (124). Maquet elaborates that, in the African community, there is the existence of love and practice of extended family system. An individual is never isolated since several persons are assimilated into one parental role. Uncles equally play the role of a father while aunts play the role of a mother. This further shows how women preserve their culture because they care for both men and children through the household chores that they carry like fetching of wood and water, cooking and washing of dresses and providing medicines to sick family members (124). Maquet posits that Africans love nature and feel they are one with it. They seek harmony with nature and achieve it by sharing its life and strength. The Africans value the whole creation as sacred. To them, nature is neither for subjugation nor exploitation, but something sacred, participating in the essential sacred nature of God himself and of all reality. Open spaces, fields, forests, trees, oceans and lakes are sacred to them and consequently important as places reminiscent of the ashes of their forefathers and the sanctuaries of their gods. This shows how Africans preserve nature due to its importance and women are at the forefront to preserve it since they touch it every day (125). John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) supports the above assertion about nature. He explains that nature according to the African tradition, is regarded as a gift by a supreme creator God, for the benefit of humanity who believed that mankind was created at the center of the universe. According to Mbiti, Women play a key role in the practice of these traditions. There are many female goddesses along with their male counterparts. There are female priestesses, diviners and other figures, and many feminist scholars have drawn from these traditions to advocate for women's rights and the place of the feminine in African societies. The traditional approach of indigenous African tradition to gender is one of complementarity in which male and

female forces operate in harmony, highlighting a major concern of this article (1). The theory of feminism will be explained below. Wilfred L. Guerin et al in their book, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Guerin et al purport that "feminism is concerned with difference and the marginalisation of women" (182). Feminism is thus a movement which is against women's domination in the world. Womanism as a branch of feminism is a movement that exposes black women's experiences and realities especially their vital roles in the African community. Monica A. Coleman in "Introduction: Ain't I a Womanist Too?" notes that the term womanist was first coined by Alice Walker in 1979 in her short story "Coming Apart" and was first used in her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. She explains that the term womanist is derived from the southern folk expression "acting womanish" the womanish girl "exhibits wilful, courageous, and outrageous behaviour that is considered beyond the scope of societal norms" (*Third Wave Womanist Thought*2). This quotation shows how womanism derives its name. A womanist is therefore a black feminist who is wilful and serious, loves women and men and is committed to the survival of the entire people. The term womanism arose during the early Feminist Movement, which was mainly led by middle class white women advocating for social change in the form of women's suffrage. The feminist movement focused on ending gender based oppression and ignored race and class based oppression. The height of this academic discourse occurred during the late 1980s when scholars such as Clenora Hudson-Weems and ChikwenyeOkonjoOgunyemi began to share findings with the world. During this time, womanism was embraced, debated, and dismissed by academics, mainly due to its perspective on the African American experience. Black Feminism within women's studies was presented in the 1990s, as a result, scholars continued to explore and contributed to the discipline of womanism. By the early 2000s, womanism had resurfaced as a unique social change perspective. This was further cemented by the publication of *The Womanist Reader in 2006*, a collection of womanist essays and critiques.

Womanism, according to Layli Philips in *The Womanist Reader*, is

A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (xx)

The above quotation shows that womanism is an ideology which clearly shows black and colored women's experiences. It is also against all forms of oppression in the community, it reconciles all men to their spirituality and connects people to nature. Womanism is different from feminism in that womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather it elevates all sites and forms of oppression whether they are based in social address categories like gender, race or class. Womanism is similar to feminism because black women experience gender problem but they are not the same since feminism is based on Eurocentric ideals while womanism is grounded on African culture. Womanism is characterized by antioppressionism, vernacular and communitarianism. The following paragraphs shall analyse these tenets in Kincaid's *Annie John*.

Women as Antioppressionists

Anti-oppressionism as a tenet of womanism explores women's marginalisation and oppression and their resistance to it. Women suffer oppression at home, family and marriage. They also suffer suppression because of class, race, education and cultural practices. Women suffer oppression at home and in the community at large in

Kincaid's *Annie John*. Annie's father traumatises women as he abandons a woman with whom he has had children and he marries another one as seen in the following quotation: "... one of the many women my father had loved, had never married, but with whom he had had children was trying to harm my mother and me by setting bad spirits on us" (15). Annie's father uses women for his sexual pleasure. A man in the Antigua society is free to have many sexual partners unlike a woman. Elena Ondekova, in her dissertation; "Feminism in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid", states that in the Antigua society men are allowed to be promiscuous but if women behave like men, they are regarded as sluts. Similarly, Olive Senior, in *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean*, posits that Caribbean men perceive women as existing for their sexual pleasures. When a man has more than one partner (woman), he is complimented as "hard seed", while a woman who does the same act is considered a "whore" and she is dragged to the gutter (58). The women see oppression when Annie's father abandons them. Annie's statement about her father's attitude towards women, "many women", illustrates how he oppresses women. One of the women fights against oppression by struggling to kill Annie and her mother whom Annie's father is attached to.

Annie explains how her father is given a superior position in the house, meanwhile her mother occupies an inferior position:

During my holidays from school, I was allowed to stay in bed until long after my father had gone to work... I would lie in bed awake, and I could hear all of the sounds my parents made as they prepared for the day ahead. My mother made my father his breakfast, my father would shave, using his shaving brush that had an ivory handle and razor that matched; then he would step outside to the little shed he had built for us as a bathroom to quickly bathe in water that he had instructed my mother to leave overnight in the dew. (13)

A man in a home only gives instructions just like Annie's father orders his wife to fetch and boil water for his bath. Women, on the other hand, are trained to hail their husbands and obey their instructions just as Annie's mother does. Men are treated differently from women because of patriarchal norms brought to Antigua during colonialism. Annie's father symbolises the colonial master and Annie's mother the colonised. This influences Annie's mother whose actions towards Annie involves suppression. Evelyn O'Callaghan, in her dissertation, "Art and Ideology in Annie John: Theoretical Issues in West Indian Women's Fiction", holds that Annie's father controls her mother and Annie's mother also suppresses her daughter. Annie's mother fights against oppression by engaging in many household activities, and gardening. In the novel, a man kills his girlfriend because he considers her the marginalised other as seen in the following lines: "A man had recently killed his girlfriend and a man who was his best friend when he found them drinking together in a bar. Their blood splattered all over him. The cutlass he had used to kill them in hand" (96). This murder proves that women are considered as objects. The killer is empowered to do what he likes. When Annie hears such a story, she fights against this kind of oppression by making friends with girls. Women's suppression by women is epitomised by the relationship between Annie and her mother. The latter shatters the bond of love and she becomes cruel to her. Annie John laments: "Because of this young-lady business, instead of days spent in perfect harmony with my mother, I trailing in her footsteps, she showering down on me her kisses and affection and attention, I was now sent off to learn one thing and another" (27). This highlights women's suppression in Antigua due to the influence of colonialism that imposes British social manners to young girls like Annie's. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005), Frantz Fanon purports that

Colonialism was not seeking to be perceived by the indigenous population, as a sweet, kind-hearted mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather a mother who constantly prevents her basically perverse child from committing suicide or giving free rein to its malevolent instincts. The colonial mother is protecting the child from itself, from its ego, its physiology, its biology, and its ontological misfortune. (149)

This excessive protection by mothers results in dehumanisation. The mother suppresses her daughter's freedom and she makes hell out of heaven. This further portrays colonial suppression of women. Annie and her friends fight against the colonial norm of sexuality by exploring parts of their bodies (74). Kincaid has portrayed classism as women's suppression in the society. In *Annie John*, Annie undergoes training to learn how to greet important people in the world because she is considered inferior (27-28). Izabella Peniere in "Postcolonial, Feminist and Transatlantic studies—A Confluence of Ideas in Jamaica Kincaid's Fiction", published in the *Kwartalnik Neofitologiczy*, argues that Annie resists colonialism when she refuses to learn the norms of the society. Annie fights against oppression as she abandons the training when she becomes aware that it is a symbol of oppression and marginalisation.

Annie is always given a subordinate role in all the games she plays with boys:

His name was Mineu, and I felt pleased that he, a boy older than I by three years, would play with me. Of course, in all the games we played I was always given the lesser part. If we played knight and dragon, he discovered Africa; he was also the leader of the savage tribes that tried to get in the way of discovery, and I played his servant, and a not very bright servant at that; if we played prodigal son, he was the prodigal son and the prodigal son's father and the jealous brother, while I played a person who fetched things. (95-96)

The above assertion demonstrates that women are pushed to the periphery in the society. Mineu plays the role of a master and Annie is given the role of a servant. This proves that women are not allowed to play certain roles or occupy certain positions in the society because they are considered weak, vulnerable and passive, even if in the subsequent chapters both authors will present the women and the environment as vital in the society. Likewise, men shape women's behaviour. Women are not allowed to behave the same as men in the Antiguan society. When Annie meets Mineu, she behaves in a very polite way; she greets Mineu and asked about his health, but the other boys behave very impolitely; they stare at Annie, whisper to each other and laugh at her. Mineu also whispers something to his friends when Annie says goodbye and they burst into laughter. Annie is thus humiliated by these boys. However, her mother sees her and calls her a slut because she saw her in town "making spectacle of (herself)" in front of four boys. A girl is expected to behave in a completely different way from that of a boy. A boy can do whatever he likes, just like making fun of girls in the street and nothing happens, but if a girl does a similar act she is considered a slut. Annie fights against oppression by creating new friends with girls such as Gwen and the Red Girl. When Annie and Mineu play, Mineu makes her to undress and sit on a red ants' nest. The ants sting Annie on her "private parts" and Mineu falls on the ground laughing, his feet kicking the air with happiness while Annie is in pains. Mineu's mother refuses to admit that Mineu has done something wrong (100). This shows how women in the Antiguan community bring up their children in a way that leads to sexism and male domination. Mineu's mother is aware of what her son has done but she refuses to acknowledge he is at fault. So Mineu grows up with the idea that he must dominate

women. As earlier mentioned, Annie fights against Mineu's domination making friends with other girls.

Besides, Annie is sent to England to learn how to become a nurse because she is a girl: "I did not want to go to England, I did not want to be a nurse, but I would have chosen going off to live in a cavern and keeping house for seven unruly men rather than go on with my life as it stood" (130). Annie is pushed to the periphery to travel to England to be a nurse because she is a female. She fights against suppression in *Lucy* when she refuses to communicate with her family while in America. The educational system in Antigua demonstrates women's suppression. It produces and maintains colonial ideology, and it preserves the idea of superiority. The school encourages the division between pupils. The less studious girls are considered inferior: "the girl who scored lowest was made to wear the dunce cap all day the following day" (75). Miss Edwards prefers Hilarene because she is a "model of good behavior and keen attention to scholarship" (73). Annie John fights against this kind of oppression as she gains the first position over all the other girls (72). This outlines how the Antiguan culture is wiped out by foreign culture; the British Educational system. Edward Brathwaite Kamau in "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" (1974), published in *Daedelus*, points out that

... second, the process of education began—first clerical, then secular, but always colonial. Depending on who owned the territory, the ex-slaves were to be molded into the British or the French or the Spanish system. They began to learn to read or write so that they were diverted from the oral tradition of their inheritance; they became literate in a language which was foreign to them, 'liberated' into a culture which was not theirs... At the same time, there was no countervailing influence to help them learn about their own tradition. This of course did not 'have to' happen. (75)

The educational system in Antigua is colonial. The ex-slaves are molded into British or the French or the Spanish system. The colonised are deprived of their own traditional inheritance in favour of the colonisers' culture. Motherhood in Antigua is influenced by the power of the Queen of England. The queen dominates the colonies politically, economically, and culturally, even though she claims to be the model of motherhood. Antiguan mothers tend to impose this domination from the queen to their daughters for them to be a replica of the queen's culture. But when the daughters resist their mothers' domination, the mothers distance themselves from their daughters. This makes Annie's mother to send Annie to learn good manners that is the queen's culture.

Women as Custodians of African Culture

Through Communitarianism and the Vernacular, women's self-assertion in the preservation of African culture would be revealed. As signposts to Women's Empowerment, the vernacular is one of the characteristic of womanism, as earlier mentioned that will show how women in the text under study preserve African culture. It involves everyday people and everyday life in the society. Womanists are concerned with things that unite people and provide harmony in the society: food, shelter, relationships, love, life, death and the contemplation of the transcendental. Women act as a group and also as individuals to keep living things healthy. In *Annie John*, women help their fellow women during funeral programs. Annie's mother prepares Nalder for burial. "Nalder's mother wept so much that my mother had to take care of everything, ... my mother had to prepare the little girl to be buried" (6). This highlights communality in African society, which womanists promote. Sonia also dies in Annie's mother's arms (7). This proves that women always help to solve problems in the society. Women are always involved in household

activities. Annie's mother keeps their environment clean and she grooms her girl child to take her place. Annie notes: "If I was at home when she happened to do this, I was at her side, as usual" (21). Jane Smiley, in "Paradise Lost", observes that Annie helps her mother with daily activities like washing dresses (*The Guardian* 1-11). Annie's mother airs their things in the trunk and changes the camphor balls for the clothes to smell good. The trunk symbolises the self, Annie uses the objects in the trunk to define who she is. At her young age, she shares her mother's trunk because she has no separate self of her own. Later, she requires her own trunk to represent herself. Women are vital since they are able to pass on knowledge to their daughters for survival. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, contends that "the mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women . . . countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women (96). This shows how women empower their daughters for the future to care for their families and the society at large. Besides, women play important role in the society as they give birth to children. We find many characters in the text who are children born by women such as Annie John, Mineu, the Red Girl, Gwen, Annie's father, Pa Chess.

Women's ability to care for the society is seen through Annie's grandmother's mammy attitude towards her grandson, when his parents left him and travelled to America:

she took care of him and worked hard at keeping him well and clothed . . . in the morning, his grandmother would awake at half past five or so, a half hour before my father, and prepare his bath and breakfast and make everything proper and ready for him, so that at seven o'clock sharp he stepped out the door off to work. (23)

The grandmother does not mind about the absence of the grandson's parents. She takes care of him, works hard and clothes him for him to be healthy. She gets up at five thirty to prepare his bath and breakfast so that her grandson can eat before leaving the house. This shows how black women are lovely and caring. They sacrifice for the wellbeing of their families. In the novel, the Red Girl acts like a boy. One day, Annie tries to throw stones at a guava tree to pick a ripe guava but to no avail. The Red Girl helps her as she climbs a guava tree and cut fruit for Annie, a thing no woman has ever done before. This act leads to Annie's surprise. Kincaid contrasts boys and girls through Annie; she notes how she has never seen such an action being done by a girl. She knows that only boys climb trees and girls throw stones, but the Red girl climbs the tree better than a boy (56). This once more proves that women are able to do what men do, and even better just like the Red Girl. Kincaid, as a womanist, through the Red Girl's attitude, shows that there is nothing that women cannot do; thus women ought to abandon their traditional way of thinking and use their skills. Women protect their family as Annie's mother takes some of her daughter's belongings to an obeah woman. She takes Annie's earrings, neck chain, bracelets and underclothes to the obeah woman when Annie is about to travel to England, for protection from evil spirit and every kind of misfortune (134). The fact that the obeah woman is able to protect Annie's belongings from evil spirit demonstrates that women are custodians of their tradition. Mothers also stand for the comfort of the family as Annie says: "But I couldn't wish my mother dead. If my mother died, what would become of me? I couldn't imagine my life without her. Worse than that, if my mother died, I would have to die too, and even less than I could imagine my mother dead could I imagine myself dead" (88). Annie holds that she will not prosper in life without her mother by her side. She prefers to die when her mother dies. This explicates women's vitality in the society. Besides, Annie's maternal grandmother Ma

Chess, the Obeah figure, cures patients by performing an aspect of Afro-Caribbean culture. She cures Annie from sickness (57). Ma chess's caring nature is revealed. Ma Chess shows love to her granddaughter as the latter observes that "Ma Chess fed me food, coaxing me to take mouthful after mouthful. She bathed me and changed my clothes and sheets and did all the other things that my mother used to do" (126). Thus, the Obeah women, through their motherly love restore life. The Obeah, a feminine practice, evokes the pre-colonial world in Antigua.

Kincaid lays emphasis on women's creativity. This is seen through Annie's mother:

there was the chemise, made of white cotton, white cotton, with scallop edging around the sleeves, neck, and hem, and white flowers embroidered on the front—the first garment I wore after being born. My mother had made that herself, and once, when we were passing by, I was even shown the tree under which she sat as she made this garment. There were some of my diapers, with their handkerchief hemstitch that she had also done herself. . . . for instance, the flowers on the chemise, the first garment I wore after being born, were not put on correctly, and that is because when my mother was embroidering them I kicked so much that her hand was unsteady. (Annie John 20-21)

Annie's mother makes chemise out of white cotton. She is able to decorate the shirt with flowers. Her choice to embroider flowers symbolises women's connection to nature; their love of nature and how they long to be close to nature daily. Her creativity helps to economise her family's funds since she uses the dress when she gives birth to Annie. She does not only make chemise but she also makes diapers and handkerchief. She carries out her activity under a tree. The shade of the tree inspires her creativity. The tree symbolizes shelter and comfort which the environment gives to the whole universe. This also shows the harmonious relationship that exists between women and the environment and it portrays the role of the environment. Annie's mother's creativity shows how black women are productive in the society. Women groom their children so that what they have created can be used in the right way and kept in a good shape. This demonstrates that they care for everything in the society. Annie's mother also makes curtains: "The curtains hanging at my window my mother made with her own hands. The nightie I am wearing, with scalloped neck and hem and sleeves, my mother made with her own hands" (132). Through her creativity, the mother gains respect. Likewise, women give birth to children like Annie John, the Red Girl and Gwen to perpetuate life. Communitarianism is another tenet of womanism that would be elaborated on how women in Kincaid's *Annie John* preserve the African culture. Womanism as earlier mentioned advocates for the optimisation or well-being for all members of the community. This tenet embodies all living things; humans, animals, plants, microorganism as well as the inanimate components of the Earth. Womanists seek to reconcile living things especially the relationship between people (women) and nature. Kincaid through her work portrays the relationship between people (women) and nature. Douglass A. Vakoch, in "A different Story", published in *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, And Literature*, postulates that "there is an innate connection between women and nature. Essentialists believe that men have inherent limitations in their ability to connect to the natural world by virtue of their sex" (4). This statement highlights the close link between women and the environment unlike men who have limitations to be closer to nature due to their sex. Kincaid in *Annie John* demonstrates how women connect to nature. Annie feeds animals: "that summer, we had a pig that had just had piglets; some guinea fowl; and some ducks that laid enormous eggs that my mother said were big even for

ducks. . . I had nothing to do every day except to feed the birds and the pig in the morning and in the evening" (1). Annie takes care of animals in the morning and in the evening every day. Annie's mother keeps many types of animals like pigs, guinea fowl and ducks. This exposes women's love for nature's wellbeing. Similarly, in Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela loves land turtle. Xuela sees three land turtles crawling in and out under their house, and she immediately falls in love with them, she has wanted to have them near her, and to speak only to them each day for the rest of her life. She decides to take the three turtles later on and place them in an enclosed area where they could not come and go as they pleased and so they completely depend on her for their existence. She gives them leaves of vegetables and water in small seashells. She sees them beautiful: "their shells dark gray with faint yellow circles, their long necks, their unjudging eyes, the slow deliberateness of their crawl" (11). The shells of the turtles portray how they have not been cared for, their "unjudging eyes" stands for innocence in relation to the whole of nature. Kincaid's description of the shells with the word "circle" reechoes the oneness of all elements of nature. Even though women protect nature, Xuela later on destroys the turtles when she keeps them hungry. This explains that women can only protect nature when they are free from any form of domination because Xuela fails to protect the turtles because of the stress which she suffers from Madam Eunice. It is ironical that Xuela suffers oppression from a woman even though women in the Antiguan society suffer oppression from Patriarchy. Annie's mother's love for nature can be viewed as she goes to the bushes to touch leaves: "my mother had wandered off to look at some strange kind of thistle, and we could see her as she bent over the bushes to get closer look and reach out to touch the leaves of the plant" (24). This assertion highlights the relationship that women have with nature. They desire nature and they go close to it just like what Annie's mother does. Likewise, Annie's mother correlates with nature as she swims in the sea: "My mother was a superior swimmer. When she plunged into the seawater, it was as if she had always lived there . . . and she could tell just by looking at the way the waves beat if it was safe to do so. She could tell if a shark was nearby, and she had never been stung by a jellyfish" (42). Kincaid uses hyperbole to show women's closeness to nature as Annie's mother swims freely in the sea without any fear and she also has an idea on how creatures in the sea behave. On the other hand the creatures in the sea did not harm her and she has an idea concerning the creatures. Similarly, Annie, unable to swim despite her mother's efforts to teach her how to swim, she goes into the sea on her mother's back, her arms grasping around her mother's neck. At this position she feels the source of her mother's power and energy, the magical power of the sea contained in her which Annie desires to absorb and to be part of: "I would place my ear against her neck, and it was as if I were listening to a giant shell, for all the sounds around me—the sea, the wind, the birds screeching – would seem as if they came from inside her, the way the sounds of the sea are in a seashell" (43). It is through her mother that Annie comes into contact with the sea. The mother is protective, not only in the sense that she makes her daughter safe, but also in the sense that she acts as her daughter's channel to the source of nature. D. Simmons remarks in "Jamaica Kincaid and the Canon: In dialogue with paradise lost and Jane Eyre", states that

By the end of Annie John, we come to understand that the magical, transformative, and curative powers attributed to . . . woman only serve as a metaphor for the power of a woman who knows herself to be a part of the natural world and the vessel of its fertility, who keeps that connection by continually immersing herself in the natural element, and who is able to use her power bath and restore one whose own connection has been broken" (Melus 39).

This points out that women connect themselves to nature by continually immersing themselves to the sea which is a natural element. Women are also able to use their power to restore another person's connection to nature which has been cut off. In addition, women's relationship to nature is further portrayed in Annie's exclamation: "what a serpent", here Annie compares her mother's pretentious attitude to that of a snake. Similarly, Annie's mother carries a snake home in her load and it did not harm her:

On one particular day, after they had loaded up the donkeys with the provisions, there was an extra bunch of green figs, and my mother was to carry it on her head. She and her father started off for their home, and as they walked my mother noticed that the bunch of figs grew heavier and heavier—much heavier than any bunch of figs she had ever carried before. She ached, from the top of her neck to the base of her spine. The weight of the green figs caused her to walk slowly, and sometimes she lost sight of her father. She was alone on the road, and she heard all sorts of sounds that she had never heard before and sounds that she could not account for. Full of fright and in pain, she walked into her yard, very glad to get rid of the green figs. She no sooner had taken the load from her head when out of it crawled a very long black snake. She didn't have time to shout, it crawled away so quickly into the bushes. (69)

Annie's mother carries a snake on her head together with her load without knowing and when she reaches the house, the snake leaves her load to the bushes without harming her. This proves that they are good friends since snakes are dangerous around human beings. The fact that the snake chooses to be close to Annie's mother and did not accompany Annie's grandfather reechoes women's connectedness to nature. This is an allusion to the *Holy Bible* wherein, the snake in the Garden of Eden chooses to be closer to Eve than Adam as it deceives Eve to disobey God. The snake in the *Holy Bible* can be contrasted to the snake in *Annie John*. The snake in the *Holy Bible* is destructive as it lures Eve to sin but the snake in *Annie John* did not cause any harm. This means that Kincaid intends humans to care for all elements of nature including the snake despite its bad reputation as a sign of God's obedience just like pope Benedict elucidate in the *Encyclical letter*. In like manner, Annie and Gwen relate to nature as they sit under shaded trees to discuss: "It was in a nook of some old tombstones—a place discovered by girls going to our school long before we were born—shaded by trees with trunks so thick it would take four arm's lengths to encircle them, that we will sit and talk about the things we said were on our minds that day" (49-50). Women find comfort with nature. Annie notes that the place that she usually sits with Gwen has been discovered by girls who have been schooling in their school some years back. The place is shaded by trees and trunks. The fact that the trunk encircles the girls portrays how nature and women are one. Annie and Gwen are able to express their feelings because of the shade which the trees have provided. Besides, Ma Chess's connection to nature is seen as she usually baths in the sea before using herbs: "Ma Chess never took a bath in just plain water and soap. She took a bath, once a month or so, in which things like animal and vegetable had been boiled for a long time. Before she took this bath, she first swam in the sea" (123-124). Ma Chess does not bath with plain water and soap but she boils animal and vegetable which are elements of nature to bathe with. Animals and vegetables in her bath symbolise power to purify her physically and spiritually. She also bathes in the sea. The sea is an element of nature which connotes her connection with the gods. This forms the bond between God, man (women) and nature. ManyakaTokoDjockoua, in *Cross-Cultural Affinities: Emersonian Transcendentalism and Senghorian Negritude*, mentions the bond

between God, man and nature (88-97). In addition, Kincaid correlates women and nature through her description of Annie's mother's way of eating: "my mother's mouth going up and down like a donkey's as she chewed each mouthful thirty-two times" (136). Kincaid uses simile to compare Annie's mother to a donkey to show women's connection to the environment. A donkey is an obedient and hardworking animal; women too just like Annie's mother obey instructions given to them in their homes. Women are also hard-working in the society just like how Annie's mother does everything possible to keep her house in good fate and obeys her husband.

CONCLUSION

All in all, even though women are considered as objects and suppressed in the society, womanists such as Kincaid through her characters rebel against it and showcase their worth as custodians of African culture; Ma Chess preserves the obeah culture that detects and provides solutions to problems. Women also are the first educator of children at home, they carry out household chores, they protect their family from evil spirits with the use of herbs, they relate to nature and above all preserve the environment through gardening. Further research can be carried out on ecology in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*.

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