

A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis Of Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl*



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Abstract: *This paper attempts to conduct a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Kincaid's Girl (1978). The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of patriarchal hegemony on women's struggle and their strive against the male-dominated society in Kincaid's Girl (1978). The current study is qualitative and is based on an interpretivist paradigm. The study utilizes a descriptive research design as it best suits the purpose of the present. The text of Kincaid's Girl (1978) is used as a primary data source. The data is analyzed through textual analysis and close reading. Lazar's (2005) model of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is used as a theoretical framework in the current study. The findings of the study reveal that through the authoritative instructions of a mother to her daughter, the author constructs an ideology that aims to critique the patriarchal restriction on women's access to society.*

Keywords: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Kincaid's *Girl*, interpretivist paradigm, Lazar's (2005) model

1.1 Background of the Study

According to Noam Chomsky (1968), one crucial characteristic that differentiates human beings from animals is their use of language to communicate with each other. However, an influential linguist, James Paul Gee, claims in his writings about language that language has another vital purpose besides communication, which is to enable people "to engage in actions and activities" and "to do things and to be things" (Gee and Hayes 2011). Individuals utilize language differently depending on the context. Jorgenson & Phillip (2002) state that language is arranged differently and follows distinct patterns in various spheres of social life. They refer to this linguistic arrangement as 'discourse.' Any use of language, whether spoken or written, is considered discourse. Discourse analysis (DA) examines the variations

in these patterns' arrangements and functionalities. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), in contrast to discourse analysis (DA), takes a distinct stance on examining these linguistic patterns. In CDA, the word 'critical' refers to the linguistic context. Essential pioneers in the field of CDA, Wodak and Meyer (2001), contend that speech can only be understood in light of its environment, and as a result, CDA recognizes extra linguistic variables, including society, culture, and ideology. The primary purpose of CDA is to comprehend and evaluate the ways in which language is employed to establish and uphold social hierarchies, power dynamics, and disparities. According to Van Dijk (2015), CDA focuses on the way in which a particular text or talk is used in the social and cultural context to oppose, reproduce, and ratify social power abuse, domination, and inequality.

Under the umbrella of critical discourse analysis, Feminist critical discourse analysis is an important area that aims to unveil the relationship between gender, ideology and power. The goal of Feminist CDA is not only to reveal how power relations are established and sustained at different levels but also to explore new meanings of texts and speeches (Lazar, 2005). Feminist CDA exposes the discursive strategies by investigating the systematic inequalities in society. This study adopts the feminist perspective with the help of feminist discourse analysis to analyze the literary text, which challenges the representation of women as the “Other” and lack of subjectivity as a part of their innate nature. By using Lazar's (2005) theory as a framework, this study aims to employ a feminist critical discourse analysis to examine the impact of patriarchal hegemony on women's struggle and strive against the male-dominated society in Kincaid's *Girl* (1978).

Research Objective

- To identify and investigate the patriarchal restriction on women's access to society and women's struggle against male-dominated society in Kincaid's *Girl* (1978).

Research Question

1. What is the patriarchal restriction on women's access to society and how do women struggle against a dominant society in Kincaid's *Girl* (1978)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the relevant literature and research related to the present study. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis has been studied extensively. The Researcher, Khan (2019) conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis of Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* (2001). The main objectives of this study were to evaluate and reframe the ‘objectification of the South Asian female subject as subaltern by the patriarchal power structure’ and to disrupt the ‘relevant discourse practices’. The researcher used Spivak's (1988) concept of subaltern and Lazar's (2005) model of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as a theoretical framework. The study's findings reveal that the ‘dominant

discourse interprets religion the way it suits the power structure’. The study concluded that the ‘South Asian patriarchal legitimizes the ‘othering’ of its female subject for the fulfilment of its power agenda that involves political and economic interests’.

Munir et al. (2019) conducted a research study entitled ‘*Investigating the Concept of Misogyny in A Thousand Splendid Suns: A Feminist Perspective.*’ The main aim of this study was to investigate the concept of misogyny and the status of women as discursively constructed in the textual representation of the chosen text. In order to investigate the above, both a qualitative research methodology and a descriptive research design were employed. The study analysed the chosen passages using a three-dimensional model of Fairclough and Lazar's (2005) ‘gender perspective in feminist critical discourse analysis’. The study concluded with these findings that women's suffering and fight for their equality and rights are discursively represented as the men's gaze of hatred.

Amir et al. (2020) conducted research on Ali's *The Stone Women* (2000) from the perspective of Lazar's (2005) feminist critical discourse analysis. The study aimed to show how women were away from social circles and how the ideology of men's superiority has been institutionalized and naturalized. The study used corpus-driven techniques. Lazar's (2005) feminist critical discourse analysis was used as a theoretical framework in the present study. The study concluded that the place and status of women in Pakistani society have been gendered, and they have been victims of social and economic discrimination. Social institutions like family and marriage support men as dominating members of society to make their discourse privileged, preferred and justified.

The above studies are highly relevant to the present studies as in all these studies, the researchers conducted Feminist Critical Discourse analysis of different texts. However, the current study is different from the above studies and is unique as it tries to conduct a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the short story, *Girl* (1978).

METHODOLOGY

The current study is qualitative and is based on an interpretivist paradigm. The study utilizes a descriptive research design as it best suits the present study's purpose. The text of Kancid's *Girl* is used as a primary source of data. The data is analysed through textual analysis and close reading. Lazar's (2005) model of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis is used as a theoretical framework in the current study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Lazar (2005) argues that Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis presents a politically motivated perspective on gender and aims to unveil the relationship between gender, ideology and power. The goal of Feminist CDA is not only to reveal how power relations are established and sustained at different levels but also endeavours to explore new meanings of texts and speeches. Feminist CDA exposes the discursive strategies by investigating the systematic inequalities in society. There are five interrelated principles of the Feminist CDA. First, it believes that gender is an ideology that divides people into two distinct groups based on sexual diversity and naturalness. Second, power is closely related to feminist critique. Although the feminist movement has not stopped, the effects of male hegemony and patriarchal society have made it difficult for women to wield power. Third, gender is performative and constitutive. It argues that men and women in the current historical period are consciously "performing" male and female identities. Fourth, feminist critique is reflexivity. A person or institution can use feminism for non-feminist purposes/therefore, constant self-reflection is necessary. Fifth, the Feminist CDA scholarship qualifies as analytical activism. Through research and dissemination, the ultimate goal is to make society more inclusive and to make gender less of a primary condition for determining self-awareness and relationships with others.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Analysis

Excerpt 1.

"Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bare-head in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum in it,"

From the above excerpt, it is evident that at the very beginning of this short story, there is a reinforcement of traditional gender roles. The mother's instruction on domestic tasks such as laundry, cooking, and sewing are ways through which the author upholds the notion that women are responsible for performing these roles. In addition to this, the tone through which it has been communicated is authoritative. This form of tone is also significant in bringing out the aspect of power relations. The listener is the recipient of the imperatives and is expected to comply obediently without questioning any of the stipulated roles. Additionally, the use of the imperatives themselves, which prompt the listener, "Wash," "put," "don't walk," "cook," and "soak" also serve this function. In the same way, it acts as a socialisation tool, implying that the listener has already been included in a system that dictates and demands that she meets the expectations that society has deemed appropriate for her. Through this, harmful gender stereotypes have been presented. The listener's agency has been deliberately curtailed, as she is not encouraged to question or challenge the roles.

Excerpt 2.

"on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions;"

From the perspective of Lazar's (2005) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the above instructions can be seen to support patriarchal constructions of womanhood by placing restrictions on their autonomy and agency. The imperative to "walk like a lady" is an example of the poison of gender stereotypes and "strict standards of femininity". The use of the word

“benna” to define women’s status as “sluts” can be interpreted as the commodification and objectification of their bodies, as well as an effort to restrict and control their sexuality. The prohibition on socializing with “wharf-rat boys” can be viewed as an attempt to limit the freedom of women’s speech and association. These instructions impose on women the role of a modest, silent, obedient female, who is expressly placed in a grammatical subordinate position.

Furthermore, the use of imperatives—both in the commands to do certain things or refrain from doing others—and the positions of those spoken to as subordinates point to a woman in the context of a greater social hierarchy of man-idol as a more powerful, authoritative figure. Therefore, the patriarchal norms are subtly translated into the language by instructing a woman in the imperative tone, in the subservient position, to submit to the expectations of a man. By analyzing the given passage through Lazar’s lens, we can see that even the most seemingly innocent and innocuous admonitions hide and support an oppressive patriarchal discourse. As such, they must be addressed with skepticism and opposition to actively work towards the subversion of such structures as norms and expectations of womanhood.

Excerpt 3

“This is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming”

It can be determined that the above statement is in the form of a patriarchal discourse that controls women’s actions. The phrase “behave in the presence of men” implies that women have to be the way other people, except men, want to see them. Also, warning women not being “recognized as a slut” is an aggression towards female bodies because the speaker implies that women appear slutty in the eyes of the people surrounding them. The term “slut” in English is not considered to be impolite or rude; still, it depends on the tone in which it is said. The term reflects the culture in general because most societies imply that if a woman has

multiple partners, she is a slut, and it is not normal for men to see a woman with too many partners, although men can use it.

Based on the tone of the speaker, we can analyze that this patronizing discourse against women used a kind of authoritarian relationship between men and women. Here, the speaker wants the female audience not to be like a slut. Otherwise, she will not only have a negative social image, but people will also reject her, and she will be alone. Therefore, it is evident that this statement is an example of patriarchal discourse because it fixes women in the margin and limits them in their actions in society by controlling their behaviour.

Excerpt 4.

“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?”

The author uses the phrase “the kind of woman” to classify women by their behaviour. The author implies that the listener is potentially such an undesirable woman as she is refusing to go wherever she is invited. The baker “will not let you go near the bread-kind of woman” foreshadows a woman not accepted in society and denied access to resources and opportunities. The author uses a condescending and shaming tone while imposing shame and ridicule at the listener. The author does not imply a different interpretation of the phrase ‘the kind of woman,’ as she describes the listener’s potential behaviour as a reason for social isolation and pariah status. The pronoun ‘you’ gives the listener a sense of the danger of getting rid of the kind of woman but does not encourage her to wait passively for future events. Such a discourse maintains the public understanding that a woman’s behaviour must be monitored and controlled to avoid becoming a social pariah and losing social status. Such discourse should be replaced with a woman’s empowerment to challenge and respond on equal terms as a person, not an object, and to resist and disempower generic and essentializing models.

4.2 Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the above excerpts from the short

story *Girl* (1978) shows that power and gender are related, creating certain interdependencies in the text. The short story, *Girl* (1978) uses the mother's voice to convey societal expectations and power mechanisms. Power is not limited to the above-control dimension, as the transmission of gender roles and expectations also implies their internalization. It becomes apparent that a woman, the mother who voices the norms for her daughter, is also subject to the same institution that socialized her. Therefore, the relationship between power and gender is cyclical and nested, reinforcing the same rule. Thus, the power dimension of the mother's discourse represents the element that shapes the daughter's identity vis-à-vis current gender and sex norms. The power associated with gender manifests its role in defining societal expectations and a standard set of behaviours that make a woman. The analysis reflects the existence of overarching societal power that reproduces over generations and prescribes how women ought to behave, thus maintaining male dominance.

This study contributes to the feminist discourse by showing how language can be used to reinforce patriarchal ideology as well as to deconstruct it. *Girl* (1978) can be seen as a perfect example of how literary works can be used to capture, represent, and even intuit social dynamics. Despite the simplicity of its narrative, the work truly provides an in-depth analysis of what constitutes the mother's perception of expected behaviour and the dynamics supporting this perception. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis helps expose the meaning and the underlying text analysis later beyond the story and the form of the literary work. In other words, the structure of *Girl* (1978) expresses the meaning; the text is the series of commands determining the mother's life. Therefore, the fact that one of the voices was removed from *Girl* (1978) is evidence that there is sufficient space for deviations and critical reconsiderations. Hence, the best works of literary art cause questions and help disassemble societal norms' pillars.

The way in which the text portrays the transmission of gendered socialisation from

mother to daughter is representative of many literary narratives in which the family becomes a site of reinforcement or contestation of the prevailing norms and structures of society. The analysis suggests that literature is capable of both perpetuating and subverting gender ideologies. Kincaid's choice to present the text as a single monologue without any traditional narrative breaks challenges the established conventions of storytelling and forces the readers to confront its narrative and content. It is possible to say that the approach to the study of the *Girl* (1978) text encourages further exploration of the ways in which the choice of narrative can be used to address and criticise the social issues in literary works. Finally, it is suggested that the feminist critical discourse analysis approach is a valuable tool for uncovering the ways in which language and power are related in literary texts. The focus of the given analysis on the discursive practices used by Kincaid in *Girl* (1978) allowed examining the text and discovering that the gendered power described in it is exercised and struggled in subtle and often unrecognised by the reader's ways. Using the same approach can lead to a more insightful understanding of how gender and power are represented in other texts of literature in different cultures and historical periods.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings reveal that from the very beginning of this short story, it has been shown that through the mother's instructions to her daughter, the author wants to critique the interrelation of gender and power. It becomes apparent that a woman, the mother who voices the norms for her daughter, is also subject to the same institution that socialized her. Therefore, the relationship between power and gender is cyclical and nested, reinforcing the same rule. *Girl* (1978) can be seen as a perfect example of how literary works can be used to capture, represent, and even intuit social dynamics. Despite the simplicity of its narrative, the work truly provides an in-depth analysis of what constitutes the mother's perception of expected behaviour and the dynamics supporting this perception.

The findings also reveal that Reading Kincaid's *Girl* (1978) as a text leads to several conclusions. First, the sheer number of tasks and the fact that the mother starts accusing her daughter of all sorts of inappropriate behaviour or actions even before the girl goes into it certainly imply the idea that what the mother is telling her daughter is impossible to adhere to. Second, there is this vague feeling of the relationship between the daughter and the speech of the mother being monstrous – because when a woman actually follows even a part of the mother's advice to the letter, her image looks monstrous and incorporates all of the problematic portrayal of the mother in the text. Finally, there is this vague feeling that the text leaves somewhat unresolved. The question posed by the text is whether or not the daughter is actually coupled with the mother's speech and not coupling society's expectations of her.

However, one can read Kincaid's text as a reversal – and interpret it as her own response to literary works like *Girl* (1978). The daughter's response to the infinite command indicates that there exists the possibility that the expectations society has of the girl incorporated in the text are not realistic and can be refused or subverted. Thus, there are two ways in which one can interpret Kincaid's *Girl* (1978)– read the text directly as the vivid exploration through the language of the ways in which patriarchal ideology “successfully” implements its rules and regulations through subjugation-related speech. The second way to view the text is to interpret it as Kincaid's response to the dominant ideology's premise that anything can be implemented through force. Although at first glance, the fact that the daughter responds only 26 times in a text of 653 words seems too little to count, the response has been given nonetheless, and thus the second of the two interpretations holds ground too. Thus, in a few words, Kincaid's *Girl*(1978) can be read as a critique of how patriarchal ideology is implemented through language and speech, showing readers how such an implementation is successful even if bloodless – or as an effort to show that there is no form of ideology-following and acceptance in just coping with others is

harmless.

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