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Metaphors of Painful Attachment and Loss of Self: Instructional Entrapment in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Harmful Union in Margaret Atwood's "You Fit into Me"



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Abstract: *This paper offers a comparative analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem "Girl," published in 1978 and Margaret Atwood's four-line poem "You Fit into Me" published in 1971. This analysis examines how both works employ metaphors of painful connection and a gradual disintegration of the Self to represent different types of gendered relational violences. The prose poem "Girl" consists of one lengthy stream-of-consciousness monologue in which a mother delivers a list of instructions to her daughter. The instructions given address issues of decorum, housekeeping and women's work and how to be a lady. However, in a tone that is at once commanding, the home and home life in "Girl" become an exercise in tropological entrapment. The list of instructions serves to delimit and define the daughter through the agency of the speaker. In the four-line poem "You Fit into Me" Atwood condenses the experience of a violent romantic union into one shocking metaphor. The condensed language of the poem takes the reader from the idea of an easy comfortable union between the speaker and her lover to the idea of a forceful one. For the analysis, the researchers have employed the terms and concepts of feminist literary theorists, postcolonial critics and the Lakoff and Johnson model of conceptual metaphor theory. These theoretical frameworks have been used to examine how each text employs metaphor to demonstrate the way that concepts of femininity are produced through the internalization of tropes. In "Girl" the production of the Self through tropological entrapment occurs through a slow process of accumulation. Through the exhaustive list of instructions which the speaker compiles, the daughter is literally shaped through the burden of the mother's commands. In "You Fit into Me," the production of the Self occurs in a moment of shock. In the image of the fish hook and the eye, the metaphor of union is literalized. This literalization makes the violence of the union irrefutable. The researchers argue that although the two texts are radically different in terms of their formal characteristics, their length and their respective cultural contexts, both texts theorize femininity as the production of the Self through language. Specifically, in "Girl" and "You Fit into Me," the production of the Self occurs through a process of linguistic violence. The trope of union between the speaker and her lover in "You Fit into Me" and the speaker and her daughter in "Girl" illustrates the way in which a feminized Self is constructed and destroyed through the agency of the trope.*

Keywords: Gender Norms, metaphor, painful attachment, loss of self, Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Atwood, feminist literary criticism

Introduction

Literature holds up a mirror to the ways in which humans live and interact with one another, revealing the underlying power dynamics at work in the world. Among the many dynamics, the way in which women are encouraged to inhabit their bodies, regulate their desires and emotions, and perform their assigned gender roles comprise a form of violence. This violence is not enacted through force, but rather through language, norms, and expectations that permeate every moment of a woman's life. Jamaica Kincaid's 1978 prose poem *Girl* and Margaret Atwood's 1971 poem *You Fit into Me* are different, and yet both elucidate this form of violence with precision and urgency. *Girl* consists of a single sentence: a litany of a mother's advice to her daughter on the minutest detail of housekeeping and domesticity. *You Fit into Me* is only four lines long: it distills an entire destructive relationship into a single charged metaphor that shifts from warmth to wounding. Though they differ in scope and style, both poems take up the question of what it means to be formed and deformed through the relationships that constitute a woman's existence. This paper argues that Kincaid and Atwood mobilize metaphors of violent connection and disintegration or dismemberment to reveal the relational violence embedded in norms of gender. This paper also juxtaposes these two works in order to illuminate the ways in which language itself, its cadences, structures, metaphors, and silences and figures as the primary site in which power is exercised and resisted along the axis of gender.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Literary Theory and the Construction of Gender

For this analysis, the researchers have used theories from feminist literary analysis, which contend that gender is not a natural or biological entity, but one constructed through a series of discursive and behavioral practices. Judith Butler's 1990 theory of gender performativity is particularly useful to the analysis of both poems. According to Butler, gender is not something that one is, but rather something that one does to

give the effect of a fixed identity. In the case of *Girl*, the mother's list of instructions is a repeated performance, as the imperatives are not suggestions, but speech acts constructing and regulating the notion of what it is to be a woman. The speaker of the poem expects that the daughter will take up these utterances and repeat them for the rest of her life. The researchers are also interested to show how the theme from Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) text resonates throughout both poems, one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. In *Girl*, the speaker is in the process of becoming a woman. The speaker of Atwood's poem, however, has become a woman within the parameters of a relationship that renders her a possible entrance to be rent. The process of becoming a woman in both poems entails some loss for the woman.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor provides a precise linguistic framework for analysis of how both poems make the experience of gender violence comprehensible through figurative language. According to this theory, metaphor is not simply an ornament of language, but a fundamental organizing principle of the mind. We can see this in metaphorical concepts like *LOVE IS A JOURNEY*, which can be observed in a speaker saying something like *we've hit a dead end, or we need to get moving*. The poem begins with a benign example of this metaphor, the hook and eye, and then twists it in a terrifying way, the fish hook and eye. The perversion of the metaphor helps to illustrate exactly what intimate violence feels like. What was a perfect attachment becoming a deep wounding. In the case of *Girl*, the central metaphor of the poem is not as immediately clear. However, the reader can observe the metaphor of instruction is construction, or more precisely mothering is making. The mother of the poem is not simply providing instructions to her daughter, she is making her, constructing a feminine subject through a series of acts making a good medicine for fever, though not walk[ing] bare head in the hot sun. The violence in the poem does not come from any one set of instructions, but from the proliferation of them. The conceptual metaphor

framework can help the reader to understand that the metaphors in both poems are not simply a matter of aesthetics, but a matter of comprehension.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives

The mother's words in *Girl* are not just codes of femininity; they are also dense with the burden of colonial history. As critics such as Moira Ferguson (1994) and Giovanna Covi (2003) have argued, the mother's lessons and recipes reproduce the colonialist discourse of respectability that was imposed upon black women by the colonial regime to regulate their bodies and conduct. When the mother repeatedly says to her daughter, don't be the slut I know you are so bent on being, the anxiety is not just personal, but also connected to colonial anxieties of black women's sexuality and the politics of respectability. In this sense, the trope of instructional entrapment acquires an added dimension: instructing her daughter to perform certain kinds of femininity, the mother is also entrapping her daughter within the colonial grammar of respectability. The violence here is both colonial and domestic, a kind of historical, postcolonial citational politics that is further complicated by the citational politics of gender.

Instructional Entrapment in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

The most apparent aspect of "Girl" is its structure. The story is one long, uninterrupted sentence, totaling almost 650 words. Most of the sentences are in the imperative voice: "Do this. Don't do that." The mother's voice completely permeates the space of the text that the daughter's two brief responses (set in italics) almost seem lost or even defeated by the flow of instructions. This use of monologue is not accidental, nor is it merely a stylistic device. Rather, it is the central theme of the text. The form enacts the text's content: the daughter is trapped inside the mother's language. She has little opportunity to respond, to assert her own voice, or to shift the trajectory of the words addressed to her. The lack of paragraph breaks denies the reader (and the daughter) an opportunity to pause. The syntax tumbles forward without respite. The barrage of

commands builds and builds. All of this produces a reading experience that approximates the psychological experience of being formed and disciplined by another's will. Kincaid also employs a direct use of the second person: "wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday." This "you" inserts the reader into the position of the one being instructed. It removes the reader from the distance that might exist between the "girl" in the text and the reader of the text. The reader is the one being instructed, disciplined, circumscribed, and formed. Thus, the text performs what it describes: the construction of a gendered subject in the unrelenting tide of language.

Domestic Knowledge as Gendered Discipline

The mother's commands, then, reveal the scope and pervasiveness of this feminine pedagogy. These commands, which involve nearly every aspect of daily life—from cooking and cleaning, to sewing and gardening, to household remedies, to public etiquette, male relations, and even sexual conduct are highly legislated. They include the proper way to wash clothes, to fry pumpkin fritters, to set a table, to smile at someone you do not like, and to sit or walk without inviting male judgment. That the mother's directions are so exhaustive and all-encompassing suggests that for her, being a woman is not a natural process, but a performance, a role so detailed and extensive that it must be scrupulously studied and mastered in every last detail. In this sense, no aspect of life remains unmediated by these rules of gender. The closing metaphor of the daughter feeling trapped works precisely because of this comprehensiveness. The daughter is not, in other words, being given agency and instruction for how to behave as much as she is being completely encompassed by a framework of regulations that govern her every action. There is no room in the monologue for the daughter's wants, questions, or protests. Even when the daughter does break in, as she does to tell her mother that they don't sing those songs in Sunday school anymore, the mother doesn't even acknowledge her, let alone respond, and instead just continues to the next rule.

The Slut Refrain: Sexuality and Surveillance

What is perhaps most interesting about the mother's monologue, however, is her refrain. This refrain, in which the mother warns her daughter that she is or will be a slut, repeats throughout the monologue with slight variations, and interrupts otherwise straightforward discussions about cooking, washing, and public behavior. The force of the refrain is remarkable. On the one hand, it suggests the unifying logic of the monologue. Each of these rules, no matter how mundane, are ultimately about the policing of female sexuality. The way one walks, sits, eats, laughs, or speaks to others, is always, in the mother's imagination, a sign of sexual deviance. In this way, the domestic and the sexual are part of the same regulatory field. In the mother's imagination, every moment of the daughter's life is about the sexual (dis)honor of her and her family. This juridical surveillance is a kind of psychological violence, but violence, nonetheless. In the refrain of slut, the daughter experiences a preemptive shaming, a warning that her very status in the world rests on successfully performing femininity in a way that resists even the slightest suggestion of sexual impropriety. The self that results is neither autonomous nor free. Instead, it is a reactive self, one completely constituted in an avoidance of the name that the mother has already branded her with. In this way, the daughter's self is never fully constituted through growth and choice. Instead, it is preemptively sealed by a social contract that she never agreed to.

Harmful Union in Margaret Atwood's *You Fit into Me*

The Economy of the Four-Line Poem

If Kincaid's text is built with a proliferation of words and instruction, Atwood's is just the opposite. It uses extreme economy. *You Fit into Me* is a four-line poem, broken into two couplets. The first couplet presents what seems to be a harmless and pleasing metaphor: you fit into me / like a hook into an eye. The second couplet complicates it: a fish hook / an open eye. It is the distance between these two couplets, the leap that the reader must make between the first

image and the second, that provides the poem with much of its power. This distance recreates the entire experience of an abusive relationship. It begins with a feeling of perfect fit and ease that suddenly transforms into a recognition of terrible violation and abuse.

The brevity of the poem is in itself a commentary on relational trauma. Atwood shows that such trauma does not require explanation or elaboration. It can be accomplished in a single image, a single twist of meaning. The brevity of the poem approximates the swiftness with which an intimate relationship can change from nurturing to abusive. There is no narrative here, no unfolding, no explication or resolution. There is only a single, complete reversal that cannot be reversed.

The Hook-and-Eye Metaphor:

From *Domesticity* to *Injury* Atwood's metaphor is brilliant in its use of a single phrase that has two radically different meanings. A hook and eye is a mundane object, a small device used to fasten women's clothing. In the first stanza, this image implies something innocent and positive: two parts designed to go together, that fit together perfectly and properly. Because it is an object associated with the female realm of dress and undress, it feels safe and orderly and even loving—a relationship that functions smoothly and naturally. The second stanza destroys this entirely. By replacing the hook with a fish hook and the eye with an open eye, Atwood transforms the image into one of violence and trauma. The hook, once a simple fastener, is now a pointed tool meant to ensnare and keep. The eye, once a small circle of metal, is now the sensitive, the vulnerable organ with which one sees. The brutality of this transformation is heightened by its bloodiness. A fish hook in an open eye isn't just an idea of violation; it's a picture that nearly enacts the sensation of violation. The replacement of hook with fish hook denudes the connection between the partners. What seemed mutual, what seemed equal, is revealed to be predacious. The one hooks the other, the one catches the other, the one fastens himself to the other without the other's willingness.

Gender Dimension of the Metaphor

Atwood does not specify the sex of the speaker or the you in her poem, but the metaphors she uses are loaded with gender connotations. The hook and eye which the speaker speaks of in the first stanza is the kind of hook and eye used in women's garments, to hook up dresses, blouses or underwear. It is an object that belongs to women's domain of household and beauty. A fishhook, however, is an object that belongs to the domain of fishing and hunting, more associated with men. When moving from one metaphor to the other, we can sense a distinct shift of power relation: the speaker moves from the domain of female union and closure to the domain of male dominance and predation. The violence in the poem is not an equal one between two neutral parties. Rather, it is a violence already infused with the power relation already inscribed in normative heterosexuality, where one party, usually the man, has more power than the other to penetrate, control and hurt the other. The you that fits into me is not a lover or equal partner. Rather, it is a trespasser who has violated the speaker's most private space and pierced the speaker's most precious possession, the eye, a metaphor for vision, comprehension and subjectivity. An eye is not just any body part; it is the organ of subjectivity. Once the fishhook pierces into it, the speaker loses the capacity to see the world and make sense of it, to protect herself or run away. The poem implies that abusive attachment does not only wound. It destroys the very instrument through which the subject perceives the wound and runs away. This is the paradox the poem poses: the attachment that is supposed to nurture and fulfill the subject is exactly the same one that blinds and enslaves the subject.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Language as the Medium of Gendered Violence

The most significant way in which Kincaid's "Girl" and Atwood's "You Fit into Me" relate to each other is the way they both illustrate the idea that language is a medium in which gendered violence operates. In "Girl," the mother's

monologue is not merely a vehicle for control, it is the very instrument of control. The daughter is not bound by rope or locked in a box; she is enveloped by words, by an unending stream of advice, with no space left in between for her own thoughts or words. In "You Fit into Me," the violence works in the same way, through the language of the poem. The simple substitution of one meaning of the phrase hook and eye (a hook and eye fastener) for another (a fish hook in an eye) performs the betrayal that the poem describes. In both poems, language is not transparent or simply a window through which violence is viewed; it is the substance through which violence is enacted. This common focus on language as a tool of violence illustrates the larger feminist theme that language itself is not neutral or objective but rather has been constructed in the interests of patriarchy (Spender, 1980; Cameron, 1990). In Kincaid's poem, the mother speaks from within that construction – and reproduces it in the instructions and judgments she recites (even as she is also trying to protect her daughter from the full force of that construction). In Atwood's poem, the violence operates at the level of a single word or phrase – one term can simultaneously embody the safety of a hook and eye and the danger of a fish hook in an open eye, depending on who is able to define its meaning. The lesson of both poems is the same: to be gendered as a woman is to inhabit a specific kind of linguistic order – one that constitutes you as a subject while simultaneously circumscribing your agency.

The Temporality of Harm: Accumulation Versus Instantaneity

One way in which the two poems differ from one another is in their portrayal of the temporality of harm. Kincaid's "Girl" illustrates harm as an accretive, cumulative process. It is the heaping up of instructions, corrections, warnings, and observations. The process extends from childhood into womanhood and traverses the full arc of coming to know how to be a woman. The harm is not in a single directive. It is in their entirety – in the totality of the system in which every step is already scripted for the daughter before she has even had a chance to take it. This

accretive, cumulative type of harm is like what some analysts have called the “slow violence” of social norms (Nixon, 2011). It is the violence of gradual, incremental ways in which people are normalized to fit into society, often without even noticing what they are losing. Atwood’s poem, by contrast, depicts harm as an instantaneous process. The poem is clear before and after. There is a line to be crossed in the poem between the first stanza and the second. That instantaneous crossing marks the moment when a woman is suddenly awakened to a truth about a relationship, she thought was good. The harm is not gradual, accretive. It is instant. There is a similar kind of violence that gender ideologies can enact, violence that is often the moment of awakening within a domestically abusive or controlling relationship (Herman, 1992). The brevity and juxtaposition of the two stanzas of Atwood’s poem conveys the suddenness of that moment.

Intergenerational Versus Relational Dynamics

While Kincaid’s text concerns itself with the passing down of gender expectations through generations, Atwood’s poem focuses on the symbiotic relationship between two adults. Here, there is no question of parent-child power structure. Instead, the poem presents two equal entities: a fit between lovers. But the equality of the fit masks the inequality of power within the relationship. The you which is the fit into the speaker, is not a guardian, but a lover who does harm. The harm, too, is different in the two texts. While the mother’s exhaustive lesson plan slowly carves away at her daughter’s sense of self, the speaker in Atwood’s poem feels a swift demolition of the self in a lover’s violent gesture. Despite the differences, though, both texts assert the same idea: the connection between individuals, be it the mother-daughter bond or a romantic relationship, can itself be the cause of undoing.

Resistance and Silence:

Both texts concern themselves with the issue of resistance, but they depict different sorts of resistance. In *Girl*, the daughter speaks twice, brief interruptions set in italics to distinguish

them from the rest of the monologue. These are the only instances of resistance to the mother’s lesson. But in neither case does the mother acknowledge the daughter’s resistance; in neither case does the daughter’s protest affect the lesson. This indicates that within the framework of passing down lessons, resistance is both possible and useless. The daughter can and does voice her protest, but it is never heard. She can and does resist, but she is never able to change her course. However, there are two instances of her voice at all suggesting that she is not completely obliterated. Despite the barrage of words, some remnants of her remains. In Atwood’s poem, the speaker’s resistance takes a different form. In stating the obvious that the hook is a fishhook, the eye an open eye, the speaker resists the vision presented in the first stanza, that this is still a benign and loving relationship. The brevity of the poem, the few words she uses, can be read as a refusal to play the game of spinning a tale, a long narrative of atonement or improvement. The speaker does not explain or justify or extenuate. She simply states the facts in the fewest words possible. This naming, small as it is, is a reclamation of the ability to see and know that the fishhook struck at. In both texts, resistance is limited, partial, but it is not absent. It exists in the daughter’s small outbursts and the speaker’s succinct naming of pain. These moments show that even when language is employed to dominate and hurt, it can also be employed, however quietly, to begin to resist.

Conclusion

Although Jamaica Kincaid’s *Girl* and Margaret Atwood’s *You Fit into Me* are very dissimilar, they both come to the same conclusion about how the very same forces that create and define a woman can also bind and hurt her, whether she be a daughter or a lover. The images used to represent this binding – the girl’s guiding confinement in Kincaid’s work and the hook-and-eye in Atwood’s – effectively illustrate the otherwise intangible binding and make it palpable for the reader. The above discussion has shown that language does not simply represent the intangible. Language is intangible. In *Girl*, the mother’s speech does not represent

the way in which a girl is made into a woman, it makes her. The reader feels the same barrage of her mother's words that the daughter feels. Likewise, in *You Fit into Me* the poem does not simply represent a painful relationship, it also enacts that pain. The contrast between the first and second stanzas performs the same jarring realization that the speaker feels. In both cases, form facilitates content. It provides readers with insight into the mechanisms of gendered power as it functions within the most intimate, domestic relationships. The analysis suggests that if gender scripts are produced and policed through language, then literature, which has a heightened awareness of and attention to language, has a particular role to play in disrupting and criticizing them. For Kincaid and Atwood, feminist literature can do more than merely represent the experience of living within a gendered script. It can recreate it; it can lay bare the way in which it operates; and in so doing, provide a space for readers to recognize, resist, and transform it. The painful attachments with which both of these poems end—the girl's imprisoning litany of instructions, the lover's hook fit into an eye—are not inevitable or necessary. Rather, they are constructed through language and social script, and anything that is constructed can, through recognition and courage, be dismantled or reconstructed. Ultimately, both "Girl" and "You Fit into Me" provide their readers with this ambivalent, difficult, and finally hopeful message: the same language that hurts us can also be mobilized to acknowledge, reject, and ultimately, to begin to heal that hurt.

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