

ALL THE MADWOMEN IN THE ATTIC: ALIENATION AND CULTURE
SHOCK IN JAMAICA KINCAID'S *SEE NOW THEN*¹

TODAS LAS LOCAS DEL ÁTICO: ALIENACIÓN Y SHOCK CULTURAL
EN *SEE NOW THEN*, DE JAMAICA KINCAID

MARÍA ALONSO ALONSO
Universidade de Vigo

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la última novela de Jamaica Kincaid, *See Now Then* (2013). Después de ofrecer una contextualización y de acuerdo con el marco teórico que articula el análisis, esta aproximación tomará como referencia dos clásicos de la literatura inglesa como son *Jane Eyre*, de Charlotte Brontë, y *Wide Sargasso Sea*, de Jean Rhys, para explorar cuestiones de alienación y shock cultural a través de la prosa compleja y barroca que caracteriza los trabajos de Kincaid.

Palabras clave: literatura caribeña, diáspora, shock cultural, subalternidad, intertextualidad.

Abstract

This article analyses Jamaica Kincaid's latest novel, *See Now Then*. After contextualising the text and according to the theoretical framework that structures this analysis, this approach will consider two classics of English literature such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* to explore issues of alienation and culture shock through the highly complex and baroque prose that characterises Kincaid's works.

Key words: Caribbean literature, diaspora, culture shock, subalternity, intertextuality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then* (2013)², her first novel in ten years, is the story of the disintegration of a conventional family that serves as an allegory of how complex and disappointing family relations can be. Thanks to the labyrinthine prose and the intertwining multiple points of view that structure the novel, *See Now Then* examines the failure of the nuclear family. Characterised by scarce dialogue in its traditional form

¹ Universidade de Vigo. Correo-e: malonsoalonso@uvigo.es. Recibido: 19-10-2016. Aceptado: 02-10-2018.

² Subsequent references to the novel will be cited parenthetically by page numbers to this edition.

and by everlasting sentences that are repeated again and again in a mesmerising way, the third person omniscient narrator that dominates the narration – which also adopts a first person Modernist-like stream of consciousness style that constantly changes its point of view from one protagonist to the other – shapes a story with no real plot in which the main aim is to illustrate the subjectivity of perceptions.

The following pages will analyse the way in which Kincaid explores different topics in her novel, starting by the disintegration of the nuclear family. At this respect, connections will be established between the text itself and the author's vital experience, expanding the intertextual references that can be found all over the novel. Issues of culture shock and alienation are also of paramount importance, since they are inevitably connected with the diasporic experience of both the protagonist and that of Kincaid herself. Finally, an exploration of the fading of love that puts an end to the Sweet marriage will illustrate the evanescence of personal relationships, one of the motifs that dominates the plot.

The ill-fated protagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Sweet, are anything but sweet. Born and raised in New York within a seemingly educated upper-class family, Mr. Sweet regrets having moved to the Shirley Jackson house in New England, the place where the family lives during the time of the narration, with his so-called "banana boat" wife, whom he hates with every atom of his body. The homicidal feelings towards his wife, who he blames for his miserable existence, are the most farsighted evidence of the dynamics of power-relations that exist in the novel. Taking Mrs. Sweet's subaltern position as the point of departure, this article will explore feelings of alienation and the burden of what Rack refers to as "culture shock" in this sample of contemporary diasporic Caribbean literature³. Rack argues that feelings of alienation are inevitably manifested in the diaspora, where the psychological cues that help an individual to function in society are withdrawn and replaced by new ones (O'Callaghan,1994). With this background in mind, two angular texts of English Literature, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), will be recalled in relation to the influential academic study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar,2000) to establish the connections that will allow an analysis of Kincaid's latest novel as a re-reading of the previous texts. Accordingly, this approach will take Said's concept (1993) of "contrapuntal reading" as one that writes back to the dominant discourse, thus impregnating the text with a number of intertextual references. As McLeod (2010) acknowledges, reading a text contrapuntally is reading a text anew by considering the historical and social contextualisation of it in order to avoid the so-called "rhetoric of blame". Thus, following Said's view of "contrapuntal reading" as one that does not necessarily diminish the value of the text under study, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, together with the academic work *The Man Woman in the Attic* will be here the three main works read contrapuntally at this respect.

³ The term "subalternity" makes reference to the dynamics of oppression and imbalance that different subjects occupy in a hierarchy of power-relations. In her acclaimed essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Spivak highlights the importance of agency since, as she acknowledges, subaltern voices cannot be directly expressed by taking over individual or collective agencies.

Any Kincaid reader, familiar with both her fiction and her non-fiction, will struggle to avoid establishing the expected connections between her novels and the author's life itself since her works have been usually read as "romans á clef"⁴. *See Now Then* is no exception, although in a recent interview the author attempted to prevent any straightforward parallel⁵. Although autobiographies or life-writing texts usually appear in the forms of memoirs or epistolary narrations, Kincaid goes one step forward to offer a subtler connection between fiction and non-fiction. The meaning of this connection within postcolonial literature is highly significative. Boehmer (2005) explores the way in which texts that connect life and literature provide an interesting approach for female writers within a colonial and postcolonial context so as to give voice to authors, such as (post)colonial female ones, who have been traditionally silenced and overshadowed by their male counterparts. According to Boehmer, autobiography and life-writing turn into a form of political discourse uttered by subaltern subjects. Truly enough, *See Now Then* is Kincaid's first novel since she divorced, which could be considered a meaningful fact itself. In another intricate connection between the author's life and the protagonists of this novel, Mrs. Sweet's husband falls in love with a younger woman and manifests his intentions to start a new life with his new partner. Moreover, Mrs. Sweet and Kincaid share an obsessive passion for gardening, while both Mr. Sweet and Kincaid's ex-husband are composers fascinated by musicology. Mrs. Sweet also has a difficult relationship with her mother, who remarried back in the Caribbean, and regularly locks herself in a room to write letters to her, as Kincaid has acknowledged to have also done soon after she moved to the United States.

It is thanks to these scattered references that intertextuality, referred this to the connections between the author's life and her works, as well as among Kincaid's literary works themselves, plays a paramount role in the novel. Intertextuality will be here understood as the literary strategy of interrelating different texts as to favour a potential network of meanings. In this particular case, Kincaid's life can be read through her fiction since her works have been traditionally understood as an allegory of her own life. Although the role of intertextuality in relation to the works mentioned above will be expanded upon in the following paragraphs, it is necessary to locate *See Now Then* within Kincaid's literary production thanks to the more than obvious references found in the text to her previously published fiction.

As Edwards explains, Kincaid's complex identity as a Caribbean woman marked by a British colonial education system has conditioned her creative writing. Her intricate characters "are meant to spark intense emotions in the reader. But most important [she recognises] the importance of depicting racial difference alongside gender distinctions" (Edwards, 2007: 13). This is achieved in her works thanks to a linear narration interspersed with memories and flashbacks from the past. Accordingly, her

⁴ Nasta, for example, refers to Kincaid's works as a "family album" in her 2009 publication. Further readings on such a connection between Kincaid's fiction and her real life to be found in Braziel (2009), Jones (2000) or Larkin (2012); to name but some.

⁵ Interview given to Haber at <http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/Jamaica-Kincaid-Interview-See-Now-Then>, from the March 2013 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

narrators are “extremely self-reflexive, and they constantly comment on the actions that happen around them, usually in precise and powerful language that is thoughtful and poetic” (Edwards,2007: 14). This is exactly what appears to happen in *See Now Then*. The complex style found in the text accompanies some of the connections that link this novel with other works such as *Annie John* (1985), *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990) or *Mr. Potter* (2002). Mrs. Sweet, born in Antigua and raised according to the colonial education of the time, is suggested to be Mr. Potter’s daughter. As it happens in *Annie John*, she had to study the classics of English literature and was punished for her misbehaviour in class by being made to copy Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Also, in *Lucy*, the protagonist moved from the Caribbean to the United States and went through a series of vicissitudes before she settled down. In *See Now Then*, Mrs. Sweet exists in a kind of voluntary retirement within the Shirley Jackson house, which becomes her “small place” where she performs all her housewife duties like gardening, cooking, knitting and mending Mr. Sweet’s socks as if that would be enough to save her terminally ill marriage. Similarly to the patronising tone utilised in *A Small Place*, Mrs. Sweet criticises the provincialism of her place of origin whilst complaining about the difficult relationship she had with her mother. In an interview given in 1992 to Dilger⁶, Kincaid warned about the fact that the mother-daughter connection omnipresent in her fiction is all too often analysed in personal terms whereas, for her, it stands for a bigger metaphor. In her first novels, she utilised this mother-daughter relationship as one that represented the affiliation that she, as an immigrant in the United States, maintained with her mother country as to reconcile herself with the island that she happily abandoned at the age of seventeen⁷.

Notwithstanding these parallelisms, Purk believes that “Kincaid’s writing does not present the reader with singular personal truths, but with the imaginative writing of collective experiences” (Purk,2014: 2). It is because of this that Kincaid refers to her works as a “historiopoetic project” by establishing a connection between the history of colonialism or slavery and contemporary times. In order to illustrate this, Purk utilises Kincaid’s fictional production, including *See Now Then* which she considers catalyst to understanding the historical colonial burden through intra and intertextual references to other works. Despite obvious parallels, *See Now Then* differs from Kincaid’s previous works in many aspects. Although the author does not write about the United States in the novel, she does explore her host country through the figure of Mr. Sweet, a born and bred American who constantly points his wife out as the “other”, relegating her to the subaltern position that will be analysed in what follows.

Accordingly, this approach to *See Now Then* will offer two main avenues of research to explore the titular concepts. On the one hand, this article will explore

⁶ When asked about the love-hate relationship between daughter and mother, Kincaid answers: “I don’t really know what to say about the mother-daughter relationship [...] I’m suspecting that I’m really writing about mother country and subjective daughter country [...] the relationship between the colony and the ‘mother country’” (Dilger,2004: 86).

⁷ In the previously quoted interview, Kincaid acknowledges that she left Antigua, her country of origin, because she wanted to and she never regretted having left: “It’s one of those things with no regrets” (Dilger,2004: 81).

the way in which the novel follows the author's literary project of bridging the gap between her life and her fiction, providing the text with an intertextual dimension that needs to be understood in relation to Kincaid's experience of alienation as a Caribbean migrant in the United States. On the other, attention will be paid to the way in which the novel works as a contrapuntal reading of two classics of English literature, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, thus moving the text towards an allegory of the "mad woman in the attic" in contemporary times, an image that echoes what Rack defines as "culture shock".

Acknowledging the previously referenced similarities between Kincaid's *See Now Then*, her own life and her other works of fiction, the following pages will move forwards to explore further intertextual references in relation to Mrs. Sweet's previously mentioned alienation and culture shock. Although intertextuality can be used inadvertently, in *See Now Then* it is obviously a conscious exercise done to provide a further dimension to the text. Thanks to the parallels that will be explained in the following pages, this analysis will contextualise the reasons for the rage found in the text, which is uttered by a versatile narrator that sometimes can be identified as Mr. Sweet, sometimes as Mrs. Sweet, and sometimes adopts the form of a third person omniscient narrator. This rage, thus, is experienced by and addressed to both protagonists but from different points of view, and it serves to explore the grounds for such a hapless familial clash.

2. ALL THE MADWOMEN IN THE ATTIC: BRONTË'S BERTHA MASON, RHYS'S ANTOINETTE ROCHESTER AND KINCAID'S MRS. SWEET

See Now Then opens with a detailed description of the views Mrs. Sweet can see from a window at the Shirley Jackson house where she lives. What should simply be a local-colourful description of the neighbourhood turns into a claustrophobic sense of seclusion from which Mrs. Sweet seems to suffer. This is illustrated in the text through barely punctuated, everlasting sentences that reduce Mrs. Sweet to a passive witness to what surrounds her. However, the narrator soon introduces the key point to understanding the novel; the fact that Mrs. Sweet is not fully aware of what really happens around her:

All that was visible to Mrs. Sweet as she stood in the window, at the window, but so much was not visible to her then, it lay before her, all clear and still, as if trapped on a canvas, enclosed in a rectangle made up of dead branches of *Betula nigra*, and she could not see it and could not understand it even if she could see it: her husband, the dear Mr. Sweet, hated her very much. He so often wished her dead. (Kincaid, 2013: 6)

After establishing the grounds for Mr. and Mrs. Sweet's relationship, there is little evolution within the novel, which becomes a recount of hate and scorn aimed towards the matriarch of the family. Mrs. Sweet is despised not only by Mr. Sweet but also by one of her two children, the beautiful Persephone and the young Heracles⁸:

⁸ The names of the children are significant as there is an obvious connection with Greek mythology. Both Heracles and Persephone were the son and daughter of the god Zeus, but they had different mothers.

“sympathy from the young Heracles, simple hatred from the beautiful Persephone, homicidal rage from Mr. Sweet” (Kincaid,2013: 95). Nonetheless, Mrs. Sweet does not realise this fact, or at least the narrator suggests that she is ignorant, voluntarily or not, to the feelings that her presence provokes on the members of her family. The reader will have to wait until the end of the novel, when Mr. Sweet justifies his reasons for abandoning his wife, to find the intertextual references previously suggested.

Coined by Kristeva, the term “intertextuality” not only makes reference to the allusions to a text within another, but it shapes an entire network of allusions through which creative production is constantly reconsidered. According to her, a text “is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva,1980: 36). McLeod analyses the potential creativity of intertextuality in postcolonial literature assuring that “a re-writing takes the source-text as a point of inspiration and departure, but its meanings are not fully determined by it” (McLeod,2010: 168). According to the perspective adopted in this study, Kincaid utilises the image of the “madwoman in the attic”⁹, explored by Gilbert and Gubar, to suggest that there are certain burdens, such as cultural or racial ones and represented in contemporary literature, which have not been completely overcome. *See Now Then* illustrates this fact. Mrs. Sweet has indeed been abandoned. Her husband loves someone else and, according to his own words, “will not give her up, for she makes [him] feel like [his] true self, [his] real self, who [he] really [is]” (Kincaid,2013: 155). It is in the last pages of the novel when the reader finds out that Mr. Sweet is in love with a woman “who originates from a far different climate and culture than the one [Mrs. Sweet is] from and she is very sweet in nature, quite like [him]” (Kincaid,2013: 155). Thus, the reasons claimed by Mr. Sweet to leave his wife are to be found in Mrs. Sweet’s cultural and racial origin, as he emphasises when he says that she is “[s]o incompatible, for she did emerge from a boat whose main cargo was bananas, and she is strange and should live *in the attic of a house that burns down*, though I don’t want her to be in it when that happens, but if she was in it when the house burned down, I wouldn’t be surprised, she is that kind of person” (Kincaid,2013: 159, emphasis mine). Mrs. Sweet is a contemporary version of Brontë’s Bertha Mason who, like Mrs. Sweet, eventually commits suicide. Both women represent the failure of cultural assimilation, something already explored in English literature in, for instance, Caribbean author Jane Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. If Rhys’s achievement was focused on analysing the reasons for Mr. Rochester and Bertha Mason’s marital fiasco by reading *Jane Eyre* contrapuntally through the early years of Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester in the Caribbean¹⁰, Jamaica Kincaid does similar by locating the madwoman in the attic in a seemingly multicultural present through the figure of Mrs. Sweet. Thus, *See Now Then* should be read taking the following intertextual references into consideration.

⁹ “The Madwoman in the Attic” is an expression that recalls the image of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, Mr Rochester’s Caribbean wife who he locked up in the attic of his mansion because of her allegedly insane mental condition.

¹⁰ Bertha Mason is known as Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester in Rhys’s re-writing of Brontë’s novel.

Published in 1847, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is a Bildungsroman that follows the life of an orphan girl during her early adulthood. At the age of eighteen, the young Jane is employed by Edward Rochester to educate his daughter. As it is widely known, the couple fell in love and decide to get married, not without problems due to the existence of a mysterious woman that inhabits the attic at Thornfield Hall: Mr. Rochester's Caribbean wife who had been secluded in a room since her arrival in England for being considered a lunatic. After becoming a classic of English literature and an example of proto-feminism, contemporary re-readings of the text have focused on exploring Bertha Mason's liminality. As Spivak reminds us, there are many reasons for such a re-reading of this classic text¹¹. Elevating *Jane Eyre* from within the academia to the dawn of contemporary feminism would unavoidably relegate Bertha Mason to the subaltern position that she occupies in the novel. As an example of disenfranchised female character, Bertha Mason has been for decades on the focus of contemporary feminist and postcolonial theory due to the potentiality of her gender and racial connotations. In this vein, Gilbert and Gubar's influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* acknowledges that any feminist interpretation of *Jane Eyre* as the sole, everlasting heroine of the novel will "depend upon the dehumanization of Bertha Mason Rochester, the Jamaican Creole whose racial and geographical marginality oils the mechanism by which the heathen, bestial Other could be annihilated to constitute European female subjectivity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: xxxvi). As a matter of fact, Gilbert and Gubar analyse Bertha Mason as an avatar of *Jane Eyre* since the former materialises all the anger that *Jane* experiments within the patriarchal society she lives in. According to this analysis, Bertha is once again subdued to *Jane Eyre*'s fury and psychosis. Regarding Bertha Mason as *Jane Eyre*'s truest and darkest double, as Gilbert and Gubar do in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*, is equal to maintaining her in the subaltern position that she occupies in this master narrative. As McLeod highlights, "*Jane*'s journey from subservience to female self-determination, economic security and marriage on her terms could not occur without the oppression of Bertha Mason" (McLeod, 2010: 152). Any kind of straightforward interpretation of these two dissimilar female characters would overshadow the reasons for Bertha's seclusion in the attic, as well as the psychological abuse that led her to lunacy.

Being fully aware of the inconsistencies found in this classic of English literature, Jean Rhys tried to explore further the character of Bertha Mason in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Travelling through time and space to the protagonist's early adulthood in the Caribbean, the author gives voice to that madwoman in the attic, so the reader can learn things from her point of view. Like *See Now Then* and *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel of anxiety. In her analysis of Rhys's novel, Borrows focuses her attention on the fact that Mr. Rochester falls in love with an exotic "other" that soon becomes apparent when he realises that, for him, Antoinette has "[l]ong, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European

¹¹ "Spivak speculated that the 'cult text' status of *Jane Eyre* in women's studies reflects an ideology of 'feminist individualism in the age of imperialism' [...] that actively linked the feminist with the imperialist project" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: xxxvi).

either' (Rhys,2011: 40). She is beautiful, but she is other. The contradictory force of repulsion/attraction at the heart of colonial desire is also at the heart of colonial racism" (Borrows,2004: 55). What Mr. Rochester does not appreciate is that, thanks to Antoinette and the benefits of that marriage, he can enjoy an accommodated and wealthy life in England. As a colonial white patriarchal subject, Mr. Rochester infers his power towards his othered wife inflicting submission by secluding her in that cursed attic, something that can also be noted in Mr. Sweet's attitude towards his black Caribbean wife through the myriad of abuse he utters to her. Mr. Sweet and Edward Rochester maintain the same attitude towards their wives. They were once fascinated by their exoticism but, once this fascination wore out, love turned into scorn.

Moreover, there are many parallels linking the authors with their female protagonists. Brontë and Jane Eyre shared the same sense of confinement and starvation of the nineteenth century female, Rhys and Antoinette Rochester come from the same white privileged-class background, and the similarities between Kincaid and Mrs. Sweet have already been mentioned and will be further developed in the following pages in relation to the failure of the idea of contemporary multiculturalism. Certainly, the three female protagonists of the novels suffer from the patriarchal oppression of the societies where they live yet they react to them in different fashions and with differing levels of success. To understand the reasons for their angst, schizophrenia and distress one must explore the burdens of their surroundings, be they public or familial, in order to examine the psychosocial implications of their rage or the hatred of others towards them.

See Now Then does not only refer to *Jane Eyre* and to *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the sense pointed out in the paragraphs above, but in a sense that goes beyond a straightforward character interpretation. Issues of race and culture are present all over the text in order to highlight how Mrs. Sweet deviates from the norm established by her husband. Thus, Kincaid's female character echoes Rhys's contrapuntal reading of Bertha Mason while re-writing it once again in contemporary times. By doing this, *See Now Then* brings to the present the widely discussed problematics of reading a text contrapuntally. There is no doubt that the social, historical and even cultural context of Kincaid's novel greatly differs from the ones that surrounded the writing of the previously mentioned English classics. Notwithstanding this, Kincaid succeeds in presenting a series of intertextual motifs and metaphors that allows the reader to establish a number of parallels among the novels.

One might wonder why it is necessary to read two classics of English literature contrapuntally once again. The answer is to be found in the patriarchal system that has favoured a process of otherness on these female protagonists by relegating them to a subaltern position. Kincaid reveals this in her new novel. The same dynamics of exclusion that fostered Rhys's contrapuntal reading of *Jane Eyre* can be found in the text under analysis. The author engages with both the perspectives of the colonised, Mrs. Sweet in this particular case, and the coloniser, Mr. Sweet and the privileged site that he occupies. By offering these two perspectives, *See Now Then* could be perceived as a novel that represents the collective experience of diasporic subjects unavoidably

attached to this experience of dislocation of physical and cultural referents. It also joins contemporary feminist debates by bringing once again issues of gender and racial distinction represented as a burden present in liberal societies.

3. JAMAICA KINCAID'S *SEE NOW THEN*: ALIENATION AND CULTURE SHOCK IN THE LOST PARADISE

The act of migration might be regarded as a "contra natura" decision since it is, in most cases, conditioned by external forces. The "pull" or "push" factors that might encourage this choice do not only explain but exacerbate the trauma that migration sometimes delivers¹². The forced migration to England inferred an unavoidable shock to Bertha Mason's psyche, something that can also be observed when the reader digs deeper into the character of Mrs. Sweet, who emigrated to the United States. According to Miller, the representation of Caribbean subjects as victims of lunacy is a metaphor to be found in both the colonial history and in the diasporic condition of Caribbean peoples: "We are, after all, children of exodus" (Miller, 2013: 16), a circumstance that has its consequences in the migrant's inner self. As a matter of fact, it is quite common in contemporary Caribbean literature to find examples of migrants who suffer from mental conditions such as schizophrenia or post-traumatic distress disorder. Miller's *The Last Warner Woman* (2010) and Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003) are two examples of this.

The reader knows from the first pages of the novel that Mrs. Sweet arrived in the United States on a "banana boat", a statement compulsively repeated by Mr. Sweet with the clear purpose of ridiculing his wife. The term "banana boat" makes reference to the ships that transported bananas grown in the Caribbean plantations to, mainly, the United States. In the context in which it is uttered in the novel, the connotations of this expression are clearly offensive and racist: "she who had just not long ago gotten off the banana boat, or some other benighted, even the vessel on which she arrived" (Kincaid, 2013: 9) or "[p]eople who come on banana boats are not people you can really know and she did come on a banana boat" (Kincaid, 2013: 14). However, we will have to wait until the middle of the text, in one of those interspersed flashbacks that deal with the mother-daughter relationship, to learn that Mrs. Sweet "has a story that began with her mother hating her and sending her away to make money to support her family" (Kincaid, 2013: 97) back in the Caribbean. Of course, due to the unreliable narrator that adopts different perspectives all over the novel, the reader will need to be diligent when taking their own decisions regarding these statements due to the constant change in the narrative strategy followed in the novel and to the differing points of view adopted by the narrator.

¹² Lewis (1990) defines the "push" factors of contemporary diasporas as those caused by poverty, unemployment or political instability; whereas the improvement in the means of transport, the wish to have access to a Western education or the wish to have a better life are considered to be the main "pull" factors.

Be it forced by her mother or not, the fact is that Mrs. Sweet arrived in the United States as a young girl and met Mr. Sweet, who fell in love with her exoticism. Nevertheless, instead of celebrating racial and cultural difference, *See Now Then* stands for the failure of what Bhabha (1995) calls “hybridity theory”. According to Bhabha, his concept of hybrid identities makes reference not only to the cultural interchange that takes place in the diaspora, but also to the dynamics of oppression and imbalance that this interchange implies. In addition, Ashcroft et al. (2004) highlight that the term “hybrid” has frequently been used in postcolonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural exchange, when its true nature is much more complex. Actually, “hybridity theory” represents one example of how critical theory can build new forms of knowledge regarding postcolonial studies; however, *See Now Then* makes the reader ponder up to which point cultural assimilation has been positively achieved in contemporary times, despite all efforts. According to McLeod’s reading of Bhabha’s postulations as applied to postcolonial literature, “hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves [...] Instead, they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription” (McLeod, 2010: 254). The female protagonist of the novel is illustrative of how these routes have been unpredictable, if we take Bertha Mason as our main referent. As Mr. Sweet constantly reminds the reader, he hates the wife he married contrary to the advice of his mother: “my dear mother, who warned me not to marry this horrible bitch, my dear mother who would see right away that we were not compatible, my dear, dear mother, who warned me against taking up with this woman of no proper upbringing but I loved her legs” (Kincaid, 2013: 16). The root of Mr. Sweet’s mother’s reluctance in accepting this marriage is based on pure racism since, according to her, “someone who arrives on a banana boat is suspect” (Kincaid, 2013: 18).

Therefore, taking into consideration these prejudices as the basis of their marriage, it is not surprising that Mr. Sweet eventually dehumanises his wife to the extent that “in his mind Mrs. Sweet was so much of another world, a world of goods --people included-- that came on ships” (Kincaid, 2013: 59). The explanation for this process of dehumanisation is actually to be found in the intangible scars of colonialism. Historically speaking, it was with the Slave Trade Act of 1788 that African slaves transported to the Caribbean were legally considered as cargo as to exempt them from any kind of humane treatment. The dehumanisation of black subjects is at the core of contemporary racism and Mr. Sweet, as an inheritor of this burden, keeps in his subconscious the same prejudices that have lasted for centuries in Western imaginary. These dynamics of power-relations nurture his hatred towards his wife:

Mrs. Sweet voice, her voice! So nauseating... the sound of it often made Mr. Sweet want to empty himself of the contents of his own stomach or remove his stomach; her voice, Mrs. Sweet’s voice, so full of love for everything and everybody that she loved, so repulsive to Mr. Sweet, for he did not love her; the sound of her voice reminded him of the sound of a single nail raked along the side of a pane of glass; of the sound of a steel spatula against the bottom of a frying pan, as a perfectly fried egg was removed to a breakfast plate; and with that voice, she liked to sing “Beauty’s only skin deep, yeah, yeah, yeah”. (Kincaid, 2013: 85-86)

Scatological descriptions of dysfunctional body reactions are common all over the text as an illustration of Mr. Sweet's malfunctioning attitude towards any attempt to conciliate himself with his wife. Due to Mrs. Sweet's wishes, "that bitch who blocked his progress in the world, for it was her presence in his life that kept him from being who he really was, who he really was, who he really was" (Kincaid,2013: 10), he decided to leave New York and moved to New England. Once there, he hates everything that has to do with his new location and with this new life. Because of his personal frustrations, Mrs. Sweet becomes the target, not only of her husband's rage, but also of the rest of her family's anger. Rage, in this case, is equal to violence; or at least that is the way it is perceived by her as the narrator, while adopting her point of view, describes how Mrs. Sweet feels treated by her family. Their children inherit Mr. Sweet's hatred towards their mother, who they also ridicule at every opportunity. This hostile familial environment obviously affects the protagonist and her obsessive-compulsive way of performing housework –such as mending socks, cooking or gardening– is an indicator of Mrs. Sweet's crestfallen state of mind.

However, Mrs. Sweet is not a passive victim. A few sprinkled comments suggest that Mrs. Sweet is not as sweet as the reader might think:

And so it was that one day, out of the blue, now, to be exact, Mr. Sweet said to her, you have said horrible things to me and to the young Heracles and to the beautiful Persephone and to the other people that have not been yet born of you and me. On hearing that, Mrs. Sweet cried and cried, not wanting to believe that she was the kind of Mrs. Sweet who could say things that were not kind and sweet and she grew silent. (Kincaid,2013: 39)

According to this, it is questionable whether Mrs. Sweet's unkind behaviour is a consequence of the hostility she suffers or the motivation for it. Actually, it is by the end of the novel when the narrator includes a clear reference which indicates that Mrs. Sweet can be truly rude and discourteous with other people. As an example of this, we find the incident with the waitress at the Alldays & Onion, to whom Mrs. Sweet laughed at for being married to what she considered to be an ugly man. "Mr. Sweet could not bear her anymore, for she insulted the waitress and her husband and that was the final straw; it was then when [he] wanted to be with someone who wouldn't instinctively be unkind to people" (Kincaid,2013: 171). The novel is, thus, left open to interpretation by the reader. The different points of view offered in the narration jeopardise any kind of attempt to portray one of the protagonists as more reliable than the other, and vice versa.

Whether this antipathy towards her is motivated by misbehaviour or not, the truth is that culture clash increased her alienation within the Shirley Jackson house, the attic of her seclusion. Mrs. Sweet's story is one of hostility and familial disintegration, both back in the Caribbean and in the host country. Her diasporic situation definitely motivates the culture shock from which she, and the rest of her nuclear family, suffers. Indeed, *See Now Then* questions the very notion of familial relationships through the subjectivity of the perceptions that the narration illustrates. The evolution in the tone employed by the narrator is a good indicator of this. Her subaltern othered position is manifested by the dynamics of power-relations that articulate her marriage. From

the first moment, the string of abuse from which Mrs. Sweet is subjected increases her alienation from her surroundings. Her “banana boat” condition is probably the most accurate sign of the racism that still prevails in her host country. However, by the end of the novel it is questionable whether or not she was as passive and docile as the narrator suggested during the first pages of the novel.

See Now Then is, definitely, a novel of angst and distress. The intertextual references that connect the text with Kincaid’s previous works and with other classics of English literature bear witness to the intricacies of its prose. Consequently, the contrapuntal dimension of the story does not simply address *Jane Eyre*, it reads the character of Bertha Mason anew suggesting that the madwoman in the attic is still present in contemporary times due to the intangible scars left by the history of colonisation. Racial and cultural difference fosters the intertextual connection among the texts previously mentioned, providing *See Now Then* with a dimension that goes beyond a straightforward representation of either *Jane Eyre* or *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As an example of a postcolonial text, *See Now Then* writes back to the colonial discourses that still exist in contemporary society through Mrs. Sweet, a colonial subject othered by her own husband. Kincaid echoes the female subaltern position that can be observed in the characters of Bertha Mason and Antoinette Rochester without explicitly mentioning them. As these, Mrs. Sweet has also gone through a process of dehumanisation that allows her to turn into a subaltern subject sentenced to occupy this position no matter the historical or social context that surrounds her.

4. CONCLUSION

If there is an author that knows how to write about relationships, that is Jamaica Kincaid. In *See Now Then*, daily routine becomes the thin line that separates love from deep, insane hatred. The fact that Mr. and Mrs. Sweet are not in a happy marriage is made clear from page one, preparing the ground for the complex story of power-relations that articulate the text. Despite the elaborated style with which the action starts, *See Now Then* deals with one of the most common topics in literature: the fading of love. The elevated tone of the narration overwhelms the reader with a series of sentences of pure detestation and revolt uttered by Mr. Sweet to his wife. These, together with a set of long descriptions that are sometimes purposely detailed and sometimes consciously vague, frame a novel that unveils a series of interesting intertextual references. The potentiality of these, which have been addressed in the pages above, characterises Kincaid’s prose.

In this particular case, the different points of views adopted in the novel suggest a great deal of subjectivity regarding familial relationships and increase the unreliability of the narrative voice. As mentioned before, time does not evolve in the text as the reader would expect, trapping the characters in a series of temporal loops that create an erratic cadence, magnifying the gap between the couple. Indeed, the reason for Mr. and Mrs. Sweet’s disintegrating relationship can be traced back to the protagonist’s alienation due to the culture shock induced by her diasporic situation.

Mrs. Sweet is indeed that madwoman in the attic, as it has been suggested in this analysis, a fitting description that assists the author to illustrate a series of cultural and emotional clashes between the couple. *See Now Then* is, after all, a novel about the expectations the characters have of others and of their own achievements, all of which are jeopardized by the burden of history and subalternity.

As she does in her other works, Kincaid suggests that even presumably open-minded, cultured and liberal men can oppress their partners due to underlying racial prejudices inherited from colonial times. The disintegration of the conventional family mentioned before is just an excuse to put into practice what could be referred to as a rhetoric of blame, a term introduced at the beginning of this analysis. In order to illustrate this, the author utilises a present-day Bertha Mason, suggesting that the power-relation dynamics existing in the eighteenth century still run nowadays. Kincaid also suggests that, as pointed out by McClintock (1995) in her keystone of postcolonial theory *Imperial Leather*, the colonial burden still operates through the over-sexualisation of (post)colonial women induced by the (neo)coloniser. Mr. Sweet is a neocoloniser and, by dehumanising his wife, he represents an attempt of re-colonisation. Thus, a series of dichotomies such as coloniser/colonised, privileged/subaltern or native/alien appear naturally within the patriarchal system that Mrs. Sweet enters once she arrives in the United States.

As a matter of fact, Kincaid's complex Caribbean identity motivates the hybrid tone found in the text. The impossibility of celebrating cultural and racial difference is one of the main topics that bloom from *See Now Then*, which is a fact that induces Mrs. Sweet into a forced alienation, as it happened to Bertha Mason. The figure of the madwoman in the attic, hence, represents gender, racial and cultural burdens as they have been illustrated in English literature over the last centuries. Indeed, Mason, Rochester and Sweet, as the three female protagonists linked through the present analysis, illustrate the failure of cultural assimilation. By representing Mrs. Sweet as a Bertha Mason in what is supposed to be a multicultural present, Kincaid's contrapuntal reading of Brontë's and Rhys's masterpieces brings back the feminist debate around the figure of the madwoman in the attic thanks to the gender and racial connotations that it entails. Only time will tell if we will witness a time when all the madwomen in the attic will be regarded as relics from the past instead of everlasting figures of our time.

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