

Naming for Satire: On the Triple Oppression and Female Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*

Fang Fan & Xue Qian

Abstract: A series of naming behaviors in Jamaica Kincaid's latest novel *See Now Then* are based on the purpose of satire. In the context of postmodern writing, Kincaid not only absorbs strength from the archetypes of myths, objects and consciousness, but also satirizes and exposes the cruel reality of a female Caribbean immigrant—Mrs. Sweet who has long been living under the triple oppression caused by the imbalance of familial, racial and cultural power-relations in an American nuclear family. Mrs. Sweet, the embodiment of Kincaid's female cultural identity, makes ethical choices which are to be a powerful mother, a faithful wife and a rational writer instead of a victimized, colonized, oppressed woman that results in subverting the triple oppression and keeping the paired power-relations in a state of coexistence and contest. Kincaid's satirical naming and polyphonic narrative provides us an example of female identity variations with different roles and corresponding burden that Mrs. Sweet carries, reveals clearly the ethical choice of constructing a harmonious relationship between male and female based on Caribbean women tradition, but also manifest the ethical conflicts among paired power-relations during the practice of construction of female cultural identity.

Key words: *See Now Then*; naming; satire; ethical choice; female cultural identity

Authors: Fang Fan, Professor of English at Zhejiang University, China. Ms. Fang's research interests are in American literature and postmodern literature. She earned her Ph.D. from Xiamen University, and she was a visiting scholar at Harvard University for the 2008-2009 academic year (E-mail: hzhzdonna@zju.edu.cn).

Xue Qian, doctoral student at Zhejiang University, China. Her present research interests are in contemporary American literature and ethnic literature. Ms. Xue earned her B.A. from Zhejiang University, and she was a visiting fellow at Harvard University for the 2017-2018 academic year (E-mail: sinong_cy@zju.edu.cn).

标题: 命名即讽刺: 论金凯德小说《望今昔》中的三重压迫和女性文化身份

内容摘要: 金凯德的小说《望今昔》中的一系列命名行为都基于讽刺的目的。

在后现代语境下，金凯德既吸收了神话原型、物化原型和意识原型，又讽刺和揭露了一个美国核心家庭中家人、族群和文化权力关系的不平衡，以至于一名女性加勒比移民——小说主人公斯威特太太长期遭受的三重压迫。斯威特太太是金凯德塑造的理想的女性文化身份的化身。小说主人公经过伦理选择是自己从一个受害者、被统治者、受压迫者转而成为一个强大的母亲、忠诚的妻子和理智的女作家，致使在家庭关系中女性身份所承受的三重压迫得以颠覆，权力关系处于共存和竞争的状态。作家运用讽刺的命名和复调叙事呈现了斯威特太太在不同女性身份和相应的责任，并且向我们展示了女性文化身份建构的实践过程中权力关系之间的伦理冲突。

关键词：《望今昔》；命名；讽刺；伦理选择；女性文化身份

作者简介：方凡，浙江大外国语言文化与国际交流学院英语系教授、博士生导师，于厦门大学获博士学位（2005），哈佛大学访问学者（2008-2009 学年），研究兴趣主要为美国文学和后现代文学。薛倩，浙江大学外国语言文化与国际交流学院博士生，于浙江大学获学士学位（2012）、浙江大学和哈佛大学联合培养博士生（2017-2018 学年），研究兴趣为美国当代文学和族裔文学。本文系浙江省哲学社会科学规划项目“威廉·加斯后现代小说中的文化记忆”【项目编号：18NDJC162YB】的阶段性成果。

Introduction

*But still the heart doth need a language;
still Doth the old instinct bring back the old names.*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Piccolomini”

At every stage of the development of literature, satire has always been an aesthetic measure by which writers expose human weaknesses and reflect on the illness of the times. In the use of satirical rhetoric, writers noticed that the act of naming has significance for the identity of the satirical object, but only had their own understanding in dealing with it. As Jonathan Swift said, speaking of himself in “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (1793): “He lashed the vice, but spared the name... His satire points at no defect, But what all mortals may correct...” American metafiction writer William Gass also highlights satire as a tool to view history. To criticize a universal evil practice, Swift kept his satirical object anonymous. In contrast, Jamaica Kincaid pays special attention to the rhetorical role and politics of naming based on other satirical methods such as monologues and narratives. It serves as

another satirical approach and helps to denounce ills of gender, class and cultural supremacy, which represents in microcosm what is happening in contemporary American society as a whole. Writing life for more than three decades, Kincaid, now established as one of the most distinguished African American literary voices, has come to apply her naming theory—“To Name Is to Possess”¹—to her writing practice and reach a climax by *See Now Then* (2013)², her first novel in a decade. Since the publication of her first short story collection, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), Kincaid has demonstrated a talent for seeing through the surface of objects with inimitable language craft; in *See Now Then* she unfolds the reader a world that is both mythical, material and spiritual by creating her most satirical work yet. Kincaid, as it was told many times in personal interviews, is very familiar with European literature and especially respects Dickens’s work. But unlike Dickens, she condenses her knowledge of society into the unit of the nuclear family. Since the publication of this novel, many critics have tended to read it as Kincaid’s another autobiographical work³. Any Kincaid reader, familiar with both her fiction and her non-fiction, might get disoriented with the parallelism between life of the nuclear family in *See Now Then* and that of the author since Kincaid’s works have been usually read as “roman à clef”⁴. Some other scholars propose to read this novel from a universal perspective concerning this novel a representative of imagined collective experience of the Caribbean immigrant community in the United States⁵, but nevertheless overlook the power-relations in Kincaid’s theory of naming and possession, a significant play on words manipulated in her work. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the act of naming helps speakers to establish the complex structure of the modern society: they are eager to add their own power to the language application of creating the world. According to Bourdieu (1991: 105), the act of naming has the following characteristics: 1. It is carried out under the supervision of the authority and is subject to the consensus; 2. It transforms the symbolic authority at the language level into a socially recognized power, and at the same time imposes a social consensus that cannot be disobeyed; 3. It is an endless struggle, the purpose of which is to consolidate legitimacy with symbolic marks. In this article, I propose that taking one step beyond the account

1 This is a quotation from Kincaid’s essay of the same name in *My Garden (book)*. See p. 114.

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

3 Cf. Tobar (2013), Ru (2014), Sherratt-Bado (2015), Dance (2015), and Alonso (2018); to name but some.

4 Nasta, for example, refers to Kincaid’s work 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 See Purk, A. (2014). Multiplying Perspectives through Text and Time: Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing of the Collective. *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 15.1(2014):1-14.

of the individual characters and even beyond the nuclear family, Kincaid's naming theory, as William Gass's choice of names, is not only the key of her polyphonic prose but also the key to the satirical allusions to the unbalanced familial, racial, and cultural power-relations. And among others, ethical choices are of great importance in female immigrants' construction of their cultural identities.

Naming after Greek Myths: A Satire on Familial Power-Relation

The ritual of naming plays a significant role in African cultural traditions. Names, coexistence of cultural background, social status and fortune, are considered a combination of past, present and future. This sense of naming, also Kincaid's sense of time, during the time of narration is "then and now, time and space intermingling, becoming one thing, all in the mind of Mrs. Sweet" (6). In William Gass's *Middle C*, Skizzen's father changed his own name often. Similarly, although from time to time, the narration shifts from thoughts and imaginations of the household, the novel of *See Now Then*, which revolves around the dissolution of Mr. and Mrs. Sweet's marriage, is clearly not a tragic love story¹ but a satirical allusion of familial power-relation.

The female protagonist, named Jamaica Sweet, a combination of the name Kincaid chose for herself² and a variation of "Sweetie," Mr. Sweet's pet name for his wife, the most powerful and powerless character in the novel, is the mother who has a sense of justice and a deep devotion to her obligations. The reader may get a general impression of Mrs. Sweet as "a domestic genius"³; she, however, is as talented as a Greek god. She inherits this talent from the strong maternal line of Caribbean convention, for she could always remind herself the very words that her mother requests:

Plunge ahead, put one foot in front of the other, straighten your back and your shoulders and everything else that is likely to slump, buck up and go forward, and in this way, every obstacle, be it physical or only imaged, falls face down in obeisance and in absolute defeat, for to plunge ahead and buck up will always conquer adversity. (91)

Often in her fictions, Kincaid finds her character its ancient archetype of matriar-

¹ See Sherratt-Bado (2015).

² In choosing to rename herself in 1973, Kincaid both cut off communication with her family in Antigua and "born" a new life as a writer, maintaining a distance from those on the Caribbean island who might condemn her.

³ According to American writer Lauri Colwin, a domestic genius is a woman who loved making sophisticated meals for small children and loved their company and she loved gardens.

chal power in the rich soil of mythology. The aggressiveness and dominance of Mrs. Sweet's mother is comparable to those of the mother that depicted as god Cronus in Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, who was more like a man—though she was very feminine and very beautiful and who gave birth to his children in the morning and then ate them at night (97). The narrator told us in the first part that this nuclear family is dominated by matriarchy, and the Mother who seems to be despised by every other family member, is truly very powerful. We can learn from her memory that Mrs. Sweet, like her male neighbor Mr. Pembroke, has very clear political consciousness (3). The reader won't be surprised when the narrator tells that Mrs. Sweet has been colonized since her birth in the British West Indies, domestication, therefore, is what she is so familiar with that she achieves while suffering. Her husband listed the names of the tulips his wife had planted—Queen of the Night, Holland Queen, which, among dozens of other, revealed not only Mrs. Sweet's hegemony in this family but also her inheritance of the colonial cultural heritage (142).

When speaking of family, we usually mean a spiritual home, “a sage, nurturing space, a place where one can speak freely”; but home, in which one is silenced, becomes a prison, a grave, a cage (MacDonald-Smythe, 1). Skizzen's family, in William Gass's *Middle C*, is a broken one, though he always trying to make it up into a whole one. Be it spiritual or physical, Michel Foucault suggests home, as a small political territory, holds familial power-relations, which echoes Kincaid's proposal of considering domestic details as political terms. In this site for the construction of identity, Mrs. Sweet is the mother and the colonizer, for her son the young Heracles complains that since Mrs. Sweet is his mother, her voice is too “official” to embarrass him (157). The narrator's strong sense of scrutiny, for commenting on Heracles's disdain for his mother's correct, because “the weak should never be in awe of the strong” (43). This conscious of resistance to Mrs. Sweet's matriarchal power grows from her garden, an allusion to hegemony, “a place Mr. Sweet and the beautiful Persephone and even the young Heracles hated,” and spreads among other family members (5).

Born and raised in New York within a well-educated upper-class family, Mr. Sweet is proud of having a noble lineage and hence more arrogant in mind and practice. Mr. Sweet regrets having moved from his Manhattan mansion to the Shirley Jackson house, a symbolic space where they live with two children during the time of narration, whom he hates and attacks viciously in his imagination. The homicidal sentiment towards his wife, whom he married for being infatuated with her long legs then and blamed for his miserable existence now, are the most conclu-

sive evidence suggesting that he is an inheritor of patriarchal convention. The wide disparity between this couple named after “sweet,” is anything but sweet¹. Naming this “Tudor prince” after a garbage man who lived in the same New England village² and posing a striking contrast with their neighbor, a harmonious family named after “blue,” Kincaid suggests that hatred, as one of many forms of love, is intertwined with love (67).

The effect that *See Now Then* reads like a mythical allegory is heightened by its protagonists and narrators, Mr. and Mrs. Sweet, having two children with names taken from Greek myths—Heracles and Persephone³. The mythical implications of the characters’ names reinforce the author’s penetrating sarcasm which has been foreshadowed by Kincaid setting this novel in a lifeless winter. As Northrop Frye put it, “the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature” (qtd. in Abrams, 462). According to Frye’s theory, satire is one of the four main narrative genres of the four elemental forms of mythology, which is associated with the seasonal cycle of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Myths along with ritual, dreams and works of literature are recurrent items that evoke a profound response from the attentive reader, for “he or she shares the psychic archetypes expressed by the author” (qtd. in Abrams, 32). Developed by Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and deepened by Jung’s *Analytic Psychology*, the term “archetype” not only makes reference to the elemental patterns that recur in the legends and ceremonials of diverse cultures and religions, but also refers to “primordial images” that survive in the collective unconscious of human race and are expressed in the works of literature. The birth of gods, depicted in Hesiod’s long poem *Theogony*, are “primordial images” which marks patriarchy as the replacement of matriarchal society. The archetype rich in symbolic meaning not only embodies the cultural identity of the writer, but also adds the artistic charm of the novel and arouses the resonance of readers.

Naming protagonists after Greek gods, Kincaid establishes the grounds for the theatricality of the fall of Mrs. Sweet’s leading role in the conjugal relationship with Mr. Sweet. Worn a tunic⁴ knitted by Mrs. Sweet, the young Heracles, is depicted the incarnation of the greatest hero—Herakles—in Greek myths⁵, for his mother

1 See Alonso (2018).

2 Kincaid is so sensitive to language use that she employs it for expressing humor and irony. Accessible at <<http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/jamaica-kincaid-interview-see-now-then>>

3 Both Heracles and Persephone were the son and daughter of the god Zeus, but they had different mothers. Cf. M. H. Botvinnik, *Dictionary of Mythology*. Trans. Hongsen Huang and Naizheng Wen (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1985): 240-241; Otto Seemann (2005), *Mythologie Der Griechen Und Romer*. Trans. Hui Zhou. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House. pp.179-180; Accessible at <<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/01/entertainment/la-ca-jc-jamaica-kincaid-20130203>>. 3>

4 According to OALD8 a tunic is supposed to be a loose piece of clothing covering the body down to the knees, usually without sleeves, as worn in ancient Greece and Rome. See also *See Now Then*, p. 87.

5 For the stories of Herakles’s great adventures see March (2008) 184-228.

predicted his triumph over whatever unfair labors, taking Heracles tore off all of "the snake with nine heads" next to him in his crib as an example (45). He seems fully capable of caring for himself, while he occupies most of Mrs. Sweet's time and generates the fall of her position. Speaking of naming this character "Heracles" instead of "Hercules," the author acknowledges his nature a powerful hero in Greek myths other than a figure in Disney animation (personal interview). As a matter of fact, the crisis of her patriarchal power results in herself and further increased by her family. The narrator introduces the fact that Mrs. Sweet plays ignorant and refuses to face this harsh reality initially:

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. (6)

Mrs. Sweet is burdened with the hostile familial environment, causing her obsessive and compulsive way of performing housework. Miriam in *Middle C*, is feared by her husband, because "his frowns could silence her in mid sentence" (Gass, *Middle C* 3). It seems that Kincaid is meticulous in portraying Mrs. Sweet's selfless devotion to her domestic chores (136). Along with the decay of her appearance, her internal world experiences a state of uncertain. Mrs. Sweet has lost her shape after the birth of Heracles, whereas she takes Mr. Sweet ridicules for fun and flirting (74-75). Later in text, Mrs. Sweet complains of her daughter's birth for cause her husband's joke about her garden shed like looking (119). In terms of the inconsistency in the description of Mrs. Sweet's physical changes, Kincaid seems to reveal Mrs. Sweet's mental disorder as an account. It is nevertheless true that she's not an ignorant victim, but a clear-headed female intellectual, for she not only taught herself housework by reading books, but she taught herself how to be not from a book but from instinct (58-59). Therefore, Mrs. Sweet's reflection and reaction to crisis cannot be accounted for psychological disorder. On the contrary, she is too resourceful to disguise herself, as Kincaid suggests that:

You always have to be careful with people who describes their victimhood... The victims you know that they are powerless, but they are not, they may not understand how to use their power. Victims are very powerful people. Victims

are not victimless, they can cause victims too. That is to say Mrs. Sweet is not innocent (personal interview).

Mrs. Sweet's ability and wisdom are condensed into those selfish action of love, somehow exerting pressure to each and every member of the Sweet family. There are times when the omniscient narrator takes us into the minds of the other principals in the novel, and often Mrs. Sweet is not privy to those contemptuous thoughts and actions: "sympathy from the young Heracles, simple hatred from the beautiful Persephone, homicidal rage from Mr. Sweet," whereas Mrs. Sweet "thought of her love for them as a form of oxygen, something without which they would die" (95, 84). The tyrannical love, thus, becomes a double-edged sword, bringing this closely-knit family to the brink of collapse.

While ethically recognizing herself "a wife and mother who had no idea of how to be her own true self," Mrs. Sweet was finally caught on the horns of a dilemma, tired both in body and soul (94). Traditionally, a female has been positioned to be obedient to a male. Kincaid resembles the self-taught Mrs. Sweet as wise as some goddesses, suggesting that she conspires and subordinates to patriarchal power thus indicating a decrease of maternal power. Unlike William Gass's random heroes and heroines, Kincaid attributes both the characters' ability and inability to love to the effects of their strong desire of having control over others. It's so regretful that what the colonizer did to the colonized has been passed on to both of their descendants; however, the colonized also suffered from another oppression of racial stereotype.

Naming after Objects: A Satire on Racial Power-Relation

William Gass, as a metafictionist, also puts lifeless object as characters. Names of many lifeless objects in Kincaid's novel are of great significance. The dehumanization of black subjects is at the core of contemporary racism and Mr. Sweet, as an inheritor of this burden, keeps subconscious the prejudices that have lasted for centuries in Western imaginary, which launches his rage towards his wife. If the couple have anything in common, the only sweet thing they identify is that each takes what they need: he married her for the exotic beauty, while she married him for permanent residence.

Raised fatherless on tropical Caribbean island, Mrs. Sweet wears quite a lot of Caribbean features—dark skin, flaring nostrils, thick lips, flat nose, which are then portrayed as a gibbon with very long arms, very short torso, crooked spine, and bent shoulders (48). As the hypothesis Hegel suggests in *The Philosophy of*

History, people who live in the tropical zone are more vulgar than those in temperate. The temperature and humidity of winter are so unfamiliar to Mrs. Sweet, a woman from tropical zone, because her home has only one season—summer—in the whole year. Her ignorance of winter reminds her husband that she is “so much of another world, a world of goods—people included—that [come] on ships” (59). Mrs. Sweet’s subordinate position to her husband is foreshadowed by Mr. Sweet’s repetitive use of the phrase “the banana boat,” a common stereotype of Caribbean people.

The implications of what Mr. Sweet says are profound: “If she was a banana, was she inspected? If she was a passenger, how did she get here” (17-18)? Since this well-educated man with a privileged White Anglo-Saxon Protestant background must note that among many of the imperial marine transportation, a banana boat is, a fast ship engaged in the banana trade between Central America and the United States, originally designed to transport easily spoiled bananas rapidly from tropical growing areas to northern markets and further designed as a luxurious cruise that brought passengers to West Indies on one leg of the voyage and smuggled some treasure from Caribbean on the other leg. It is a luxury for common people to eat banana in winter, not to speak of having sliced banana for breakfast every day. Mr. Sweet is in such lap of luxury when he was a boy (9). Mr. Sweet is bossy with his servant, hence can be interpreted an incarnation of colonial power. Nevertheless, his diminutive stature belies his domineering force and his consuming desire for controlling Mrs. Sweet. He confesses that he “want[s] to kill her, take an ax [...] and chop off her head and then the rest of her body into little pieces, pieces so small that a crow could devour them in pleasure,” but he carries out his plan in imagination instead of action (85). Of course, Mrs. Sweet perceives this her husband’s conceit and hostility, and plays the same disguise game as her husband. She meditates managing her life in mind:

To be abandoned is the worst humiliation, the only true humiliation, and that is why death is so unforgivable, [...] all that you used to subjugate, [...], is lost to you in death, [...], no monument erected to you can erase the fact that in death you are powerless to act, [...], you are no longer anything and only exist at the will of others and only exist if they desire you to exist, [...], for then you cannot even know your situation and pity yourself. (166-67)

Like Gass in his *Middle C*, Kincaid does not mention race obviously, but Mrs. Sweet’s focus on Mr. Sweet’s blue-blood and aristocratic family and background

contrasted with his emphasis on Mrs. Sweet's third-world backwater origin (94). Once idolizing the way her husband looks and makes him look like an eminent American and depicting herself an unattractive and overweight female, Mrs. Sweet becomes an object of Kincaid's biting ridicule. The narrator's refusal to be humiliated represents Kincaid's stance on gender and race, for she states many times that "whatever is the source of shame—if you are not responsible for it, such as the color of your skin or your sexuality—you should just wear it as a badge" (Garner, 2). It is better interpreted by American anthropologist Ruth Benedict as he points out that a culture of shame is an emotional way under the gaze of others and a product of community ethics (qtd. in Anderson, 6-7). Humiliation, hence, is a product of power-relations, whereas family is a place for its practice.

The different familial and racial backgrounds widen the gap between the Sweets. By portraying Mrs. Sweet as the narrator standing at/in the window of the Shirley Jackson house, Kincaid frames the protagonist's imagination in relation to those of other persecuted women writers, as well as female characters who endure maltreatment and suffer from humiliation.

The Shirley Jackson house on Prospect Street is an 1850 Greek Revival mansion and former residence of Shirley Jackson. In *See Now Then*, it is restored to a house, "painted white with Doric columns built in something called a Victorian style," which could be found in many British colonies (134), but this one is built with the Greek revival, "[l]ike a minor Greek temple" as Jackson once described it, a site which indicates that this is anything but a tale of domestic bliss (qtd. in Petrie, 2016). Shirley Jackson's life offers too perfect a parallel to Kincaid to resist using her own house on Prospect St. as the setting for *See Now Then*. Jackson was burdened with racial discrimination from her husband's Jewish family and was abandoned by that stereotypical 1950s husband with everything domestic left behind including the house and the children to her. She raged against the cruelty in her short story 'The Lottery,' a chilling account of the ritualized stoning of a woman that takes place in an ostensibly peaceful New England town unlike Kincaid's *See Now Then*. Jackson responds to her critics in an op-ed piece, and states that she hopes "to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives" (Jackson n.p.). Apparently, Kincaid follows the example of this Gothic novelist and challenges the community ethics of Americans.

It must not be an accident that Kincaid sets her novel in a house with five attics. Using an unmistakable allusion to the Creole madwoman in the attic, Mr. Sweet accounts the failure of their marriage to the differences between their racial

and cultural backgrounds. He initially seeks to consolidate his power by cursing his wife:

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. (159)

Although Mrs. Sweet seems to be a contemporary Bertha Mason in Brönte's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she is entrusted by Kincaid with stronger personality than both of her archetypes. Neither does she submit a suicide nor suffer from psychological disorder. Instead, Mrs. Sweet takes advantage of her husband's weakness: his powerlessness communicating with people. The impossibility of celebrating sexual, racial and cultural difference is one of central motifs that blooms from this novel, which is a fact that leads to a forced alienation accompanied by a series of spontaneous subversive action.

Having been oppressed in the racial discrimination for centuries, African descendants gradually internalized the mandatory strong position values which become their second nature. Female immigrants, especially, face their ethical choices to be themselves. Like William Gass's *Skizzen* in *Middle C*, Kincaid presents immigrants who are from ethnic communities, with economic and political independence, need to carry out ideological and psychological revolution of their own, if they want to achieve real freedom and eliminate the consciously subservience that has infiltrated into the blood and the ethnic virtues demanded by mainstream.

Naming after Consciousness: A Satire on Cultural Power-Relation

The last part of this article will discuss on Kincaid's naming of two different works of art. Mrs. Sweet, as the narrator of her own mind and the author of "See Now Then," is actually the most powerful character in the power-relations of the whole households. She is anxious about both her patriarchal American present and her past with colonial legacy, as Kincaid finds American society only offering ignorance and being permeated by racism and the society that she has left behind was characterized by disloyalty and incompetence. In her deployment of mythical and literary allusion, Kincaid, like William Gass always does, casts the protagonist as a writer, alerting us to the aesthetics and literariness of the novel.

Mrs. Sweet secludes herself from the rest of the world in her little room off the kitchen to meditate and write. "A little room off the kitchen" is a typical space in Kincaid's novel. For example, in *Lucy*, it is an allusion to dehumanization:

The room in which I lay was a small room just off the kitchen—the maid’s room. [...] The ceiling was very high and the walls went all the way up to the ceiling, enclosing the room like a box—a box in which cargo traveling a long way should be shipped. (7).

Kincaid projects her pursuit of female identity along with her start of writing, which, in *See Now Then*, becomes more complicated with her sophisticated skills. This is quite similar to William Gass in whose works almost all heroes are indulged in writing. The small room here isn’t so much her physical home than her spiritual, in which a woman can live and think freely from all kinds of oppression and slavery. Mrs. Sweet keeps her “true self” in this private space, which she has never revealed it to anybody and channels the perspectives of others in the course of her cyclical musings (95). She imagines her children’s annoyance when she is late to meet their school bus:

She just sits in that room writing about her goddamn mother, as if people had never had a mother who wanted to kill them before they were born in the history of the world; and the stupid father named Mr. Potter who couldn’t even read, and the fucking stupid little island on which she was born, full of stupid people whom history would be happy to forget but she has to keep reminding everybody about that place and those people and on one cares and she can’t stand it. (129)

Such cursing might not be found in children’s discourse, whereas it is a figure of speech that African American writers often use in their literary works. At the beginning of the 20th century, women finally found that they should realize their own value independently of men, thus entering the stage of self-discovery and self-identity. Virginia Woolf proposes in her noted *A Room of One’s Own* that women need a room in which she can think and write freely without anyone’s disturbance, which indicates female must cast off male values to become their true selves. It then is in the post-industrial society that a female literary image with autonomy and self-identity is created, and thus the patriarchal imaginary of ideal women in the room is totally destructed. Some critics suggest that *See Now Then* reads as if Charlotte Brontë, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and Shirley Jackson had collaborated on this abandoned housewife’s lament that “reveals an impossible familiarity with Evan S. Connell’s *Mrs. Bridge* and even portrays a jilted wife which is consid-

ered to be one of the most damning retaliations since Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*¹. I wouldn't agree to describe Mrs. Sweet's or Kincaid's writing a "retaliation". In fact, Mrs. Sweet is a character who would like to find a way out to save her true self in this dangerous reality. Writing is the way in which she gives vent to her resentment, thus in reality she could still fulfill herself with love and hope:

Now and then, Mrs. Sweet said to herself, though this was done only in her mind's eye, as she stood at the window unmindful of the rage and hatred and utter disdain that her beloved Mr. Sweet nurtured in his small breast for her now and then, seeing it as it presented itself, a series of tableaux. (18)

Mr. Sweet, through initially taken with her difference and delighted to educate her "untutored and Third World" into his cultivated lifestyle, comes to desire a slim, cultured, sophisticated, quiet lady who played Brahms, like the woman for whom he finally left his wife (134, 155). He finds Mrs. Sweet's calypso² rustic and penetrating, then launches viciously worded attack against Mrs. Sweet, diminishing her as a dreadful, benighted, horrible bitch in his mind. It is his imagination while playing piano that releases his despair. Mr. Sweet locked himself in the studio over the garage, indulging himself in composing nocturnes named "This Marriage Is Dead". The cause of his unsuccessful marriage roots in his arrogance and impotence in dealing with both domestic and social positions, as stating "I have not lived my life as a scholar it is true" (52). Mrs. Sweet expresses contempt for his lack of success as a performer, for composing high art of music that no one came to hear, and for paranoid delusion of having one hundred lyre players under his construction (82). His defeat to Mrs. Sweet grew into jealousy, and his concomitant lack of concern for her leads to her disdain for his agoraphobia, his tendency to become ill whenever he had to perform, and his reclusiveness in his dark studio. The studio is depicted as a grave, a funeral parlor, in which his loneliness, solitude and bereavement are buried together with his fugues and nocturnes (48).

Mr. Sweet is a musical professor of a college, protected by the power that produced by his knowledge and intelligence, he announces to his son that he is leaving the boy's mother for a younger woman from another cultural background, had an extramarital affair with his young and beautiful girl students (9, 16). It is an age-old story epitomized by *Medea*, the play by Euripides set in the age of ancient Europe-

1 Writing Well Is the Wronged Wife's Revenge In 'See Now Then' Accessible at <<https://www.npr.org/2013/02/05/170553462/writing-well-is-the-wronged-wifes-revenge-in-see-now-then>>

2 Calypso is Caribbean song about a subject of current interest. Steel band originally came from the West Indies. These musical types indicate Mrs. Sweet's cultural background. Cf. Broughton (1995).

an empires and featuring a woman from Colchis whose husband Jason leaves her for the youthful Glauce, daughter of King Creon of Corinth (Sherratt-Bado, 1198). *See Now Then* is a reworking of this classical story, and it offers an oblique commentary on the ways in which variations of modern imperialism impinge upon interior spaces—the private space of one’s consciousness as well as the inside of one’s home. As Kincaid’s writes, “The defeated and the triumphant were now settled into the normal disfigurement of everyday living” (128). It suggests the familiar story of a woman’s betrayal by her husband, but with an anti-imperialist undercurrent as it metaphorizes the event of decolonization and the withdrawal of the patriarchal power from the conquered, feminized territory.

It seems that Mrs. Sweet’s daughter is kept away from her mother, because the beautiful Persephone is not so much in a parasitic relation with her father as under his strict control. Her name, however, is the hint dropped by Kincaid in the text, which might arouse the reader a primordial image of an eponymous goddess in Greek myths. The goddess of Persephone, kidnapped by the king of the netherworld and imprisoned for four months each year, is capable of using her emotional swing to lead to the spring’s return to the earth and the nature full of life. Although her has very few words, only a little description of her voice by her parents, she is of great importance to cope with the construction of the positive way of pursuit a female identity in action:

The beautiful Persephone made an island out of her salads as it sat on her plate, the collapsed portion of soufflé was a beach where a vicious pirate of Elizabethan times ruled or where vicious people who came from Haarlem sunned themselves because winter in Holland can sometimes be vicious. (142)

The Dutch city of “Haarlem,” an allusion to New Negro Movement, Harlem Renaissance, stands for the vigor and creativity of African American literature in the current of sports, music and booming business, which brings the marginalized life and cultural identity of black people forward. Kincaid overlays the New England small village with the grand narratives of Greek myths, while simultaneously subtending it with the suppressed narrative of the Antiguan migrant. By using the third-person point of view, which distances the reader from the writer, each family member speaks silently in their minds, talking about other people, things and events, which compared to the first-person point of view utilized by Mrs. Sweet while writing in her small room, is less familiar and intimate to the reader, thus, making the text more reliable. This cyclical narrative structure also repeats the ritu-

alistic sacrifices of women by patriarchal society, which operates under the guise of 'community' and whose basic unit is the nuclear family.

Kincaid, like William Gass, is one of the authors that employ high technique of using both literal and figurative meanings of words such as the mesmerized conjunction and adverb scattering through the text. But this could only be best illustrating by her naming code, the book title of *See Now Then* for example¹. She once explained that "there is a play on words," conferring philosophical reflection on time. Kincaid paid close attention to "a tyrannical effort" that time had, which could be an additional evidence of her interest in power-relations. She had gradually built up her own theory of naming and possession. Also, through naming, female immigrants go through their ethical conflict and become the "independent" female.

Conclusion

In William Gass's *Fiction and Figures of Life*, Gass states that ethics is "in the rush to establish principles" (Gass, 240). Also ethical conflict and ethical choices decide the fundamental content and style of literary works (Nie, 30). Observing Caribbean immigrants' life by her naming theory, Kincaid's satirical novel is not only a critical examination, but also a subversive aesthetic memory. When Kincaid observes and analyzes social phenomena, she highlights the interaction between subjects, which has both criticism and appreciation. Kincaid's early works were satirized by angry emotions, condemning colonialism and cultural hegemony, and shouting for the enslaved ancestors and compatriots in the post-colonial state of existence. *See Now Then* shows the understanding of aesthetics after achieving sophisticated writing skills. This novel reveals the life of beauty and ugliness, love and hatred with magical and exaggerated satire beyond the reader's imagination. The imbalance between familial relations, ethnic relations and cultural relations in American

1 In the personal interview that I conducted with her, Kincaid interpreted her meditation on language and politics: It ("See Now Then") is (philosophical). It means to be. Because there is a play on the words. The words are simple, ... see, now, and then. But if think of them, they are confounding. Because to see is to try to understand, to try to make sense, to arrange... I mean when you see something, all sorts of rapid things happened in one second now, but now... yesterday we were in class that was now, but now it's then. And tomorrow is also then, but it will be a now tomorrow when we are in it. So, I'm just trying to understand how time works and what we mean by time. We've talked about racism and invention, but the largest invention is time, social time. And how we have arranged it and divided it up and democratized it sometimes, and used it for tyrannical reasons sometimes you know, like before the wrist watch, time was centralized. And we knew time if the church or the government told us when the church bell rang. So, time had a tyrannical effort, because someone was in charge of it. But if you have something like this (pointing to her wrist watch), you know we can make our own time. But, what does that mean? This thing that we've commodified. I don't understand it but I'm trying to understand it. I like trying.

social life is exposed through the archetypes of myths, objects and consciousness. It is pointed out that the Caribbean female immigrants are still suffering from the triple oppression of gender, race and culture hegemony in their daily life. The polyphonic narrative of *See Now Then* provide a solution that any pair of power-relation could coexist in a relatively contested and balanced situation, in which individuals and groups can obtain a relatively complete self-identity and equal social identity through ethical choices. Understanding the author's naming conduct, we can understand Kincaid's satirical purpose, which is to educate, to guide and to reshape a society full of human brilliance, tolerance and hope.

Works Cited

- M. H. 艾布拉姆斯、杰弗里·高尔特·哈珀姆：《文学学术语词典（第10版）（中英对照）》，吴松江等编译。北京：北京大学出版社，2014。
- [Abrams, Meyer Howard & Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (10th edition). Trans and Ed. Wu Songjiang. Beijing: Beijing UP, 2014.]
- Alonso, Maria Alonso. All the Madwomen in the Attic: Alienation and Culture Shock in Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*. *Estudios Humanísticos. Filología* 40 (2018): 279-292.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Bell, Robert E. *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary*. California: Oxford UP, 1991.
- 鲍特文尼克等著：《神话辞典》，黄鸿森、温乃铮译。北京：商务印书馆，1985年。
- [Botvinnik, M. H. *Dictionary of Mythology*. Trans. Huang Hongsen and Wen Naizheng. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1985.]
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Boston: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Broughton, Simon, Mark Ellingham, David Muddyman & Richard Trillo, ed. *World Music Rough Guide* (2nd edition). London: Rough Guide Ltd., 1995. 504-508.
- Dance, Daryl Cumber. "'I Married My Mother': Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 23.1(2015): 8-19.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Freeman, Ru. "One Book to Rule Them All: Jamaica Kincaid's *See Now Then*." Accessible at: https://www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_notebook_view/19/one_book_to_rule_them_all_jamaica_kincaids_see_now_then.
- Garner, Dwight. Jamaica Kincaid: Dwight Garner reviews Jamaica Kincaid's book *The Autobiography of My Mother*. *Salon* 13, 1996.
- . The Marriage Has Ended; Revenge Begins. Accessible at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/books/see-now-then-jamaica-kincaids-new-novel.html>.

- Gass, William. *Fiction and Figures of Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.
- Gass, William. *Middle C*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Hegel, G.W.F. Geographical Basis of History, Part I. In *Philosophy of History*. Trans. Silbree, J. A Project by History World International, 1857.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *Lucy*. London: Picador, 1994.
- . *My Garden (Book)*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.
- . Personal Interview. Harvard University, Boston. 5 December 2017.
- . *See Now Then*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- . *The Autobiography of My Mother*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.
- Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. London: The Cambridge UP, 1970.
- Leitch, Vincent. *American Literary Criticism—from the Thirties to the Eighties*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.
- MacDonald-Smythe, Antonia. *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2001.
- March, Jenny. *The Penguin Book of Classical Myths*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.
- Nasta, Susheila. “‘Beyond the Frame’: Writing a Life and Jamaica Kincaid’s Family Album.” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 3.1 (2009): 64-85.
- Nie, Zhenzhao, *Literary Ethics and Others*, Wuhan: Huazhong Normal UP, 2012.
- Petrie, Fetsko. In *Search of Shirley Jackson’s House*. Accessible at: <https://lithub.com/in-search-of-shirley-jacksons-house/>
- Purk, A. “Multiplying Perspectives through Text and Time: Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing of the Collective.” *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, 15.1 (2014):1-14.
- 奥托·泽曼, 《希腊罗马神话》周惠译。上海: 上海人民出版社, 2005。
- [Seemann, Otto. *Mythologie Der Griechen Und Romer*. Trans. Zhou Hui. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2005.]
- Sherratt-Bado, Dawn Miranda. “*See Now Then* by Jamaica Kincaid.” *Callaloo* 38.5 (2015): 1198-1201.
- Tobar, Hector. “Jamaica Kincaid scrolls through time in *See Now Then*.” Accessible at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/01/entertainment/la-ca-jc-jamaica-kincaid-20130203>