

FAMILY RELATIONS IN MY BROTHER BY JAMAICA KINCAID

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Jamaica Kincaid is the author whose works are almost unknown in Ukraine but who is generally acclaimed as the most important West Indian woman writing today who created “partially remembered, partially dreamed reality”[Simmons; 466]. Her prose is often characterised as evocative, edgy, and sometimes controversial. Her experiences of growing up under the pressures of poverty, colonialism, and an ambivalent mother inspired her to research the issues of race, gender, colonialism, adolescent angst, loss, and tenuous mother-daughter relationships. Her style, which is often described the one possessing surrealistic tones of magical realism, blurs the boundaries between literary genres and also between personal stories and history. “My Brother” (1997) of Jamaica Kincaid is a thoughtful memoir of the author that examines the nature of love, family ties, sacrifice, and death.

The major theme of the book is the relations between the mother and the daughter. Although the main event of the book is Devon’s death from AIDS, it is just a background with the help of which the author depicts her own grim childhood and the story of her escape into a new life. It gets obvious from the very first pages that the mother and the daughter are not close: “she looked at me, her eyes narrowing in suspicion and said, “What a memory you have!”-perhaps the thing she most dislikes about me” [Kincaid; 6]. Author’s memory is the main drawback in these relations and it can be explained by the presumption that having a good memory the author remembers all hardships, misery, lack of attention and love she had suffered from in her childhood. Memory in this family takes a separate place, because they prefer to forget about events, just like it happened with the accident with the ants attacking the baby: “This was an incident no one ever told my brother, an incident that everyone else in my family has forgotten, except me” [Kincaid; 6]. Memory is the feature that distinguishes the author from her other relatives, and, possibly, just because of it she is so unloved by her mother.

The mother's attitude to her other children is not much better, as Kincaid writes, "the chemises he wore were plain" [Kincaid; 5]. It happened because the mother did not pay any "customary elaborate attention" which meant embroidery stitching before giving birth to children. This passage gives a hint that giving birth to children was a usual event for the author's mother and it did not need any special preparations.

The second theme in the novel is the relation between the siblings in the family. Jamaica Kincaid states that there were four of them, but she does not mention the names of her brothers. For her they are totally anonymous. She just calls them "my brothers", for instance, "I heard my brother cry", "my other brothers, one of them almost four years old, the other almost two years old." This attitude proves that the relations in the family can hardly be called warm. Only later she calls her dying brother Devon, meaning that he became close to her.

The next theme identified in the book is death. Devon's death is the event that makes Kincaid return to her motherland and death is the motif that pierces the whole book. Even the passage going about Devon's birth gives hints that he will die soon. The author does it by describing the incident when her mother and brother got asleep and the baby was attacked by red ants. Later she compares this accident with his disease saying, "some small red things almost killed him from outside shortly after he was born and that now some small things were killing him from the inside" [Kincaid; 6].

The book is full of symbols foreshadowing coming events. The brightest symbol is the "army of red ants coming from the window" attacking a baby. It symbolizes a coming disease that will finally kill Devon, even in spite of a piece of dried afterbirth that was his talisman and was supposed to protect him. From his birth, Devon had been a source of trouble for the family: committing crimes, taking drugs, and being sexually promiscuous, so AIDS became the atonement for his sins.

"My Brother" is characterized by a deep exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, the problem of identity of former colonial subjects, especially women, and the cultural struggle against colonization and demolition of local traditions.

References

1. Kincaid, Jamaica.(1998). My Brother. New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
2. Simmons, Diane. “The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid” *World Literature Today*. Volume 68, Summer 1994: 466.