

Cannibal Himalayas? Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

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Abstract

This paper examines Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* through the lens of cannibalism. It shows how Kincaid uses the cannibal scene or cannibal talk by using the discourse a la Hulme of the absolute foreignness of the locale and the threat that the locale poses to the traveler's life. Using Arens' study as a guide, it shows how blood-sucking is a crucial aspect of cannibal talk illustrated in Kincaid's text by the author's encounter with the leeches. Obeyeskere's study is used to argue that Kincaid's mission to replicate and reconstruct the Christian Garden of Eden through her seed hunting in the Himalayas, and her "socialization" with figures such as Columbus and Cook resurrect the colonial dichotomy of garden and wilderness, thereby giving a second life to the discourse of savage cannibal native which was so rampant in European narratives of explorations. There is a brief presence of cannibal counter-memory through which Kincaid seeks to address her self-alienation by braiding her identity with the women from the Himalayas.

Keywords: Jamaica Kincaid, Himalayas, Cannibalism, Travel literature, Gardening.

In the "Introduction" to the book *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, Peter Hulme describes the varied phenomenon of anthropophagy first as the primal scene, then as "primarily a linguistic phenomenon," followed by "a trope of exceptional power" and finally as "ideology" (4). Extending Hulme's visual and performative idiom with a discursive metaphor of his own, Gananath Obeyesekere notes that the question of anthropophagy is "cannibal talk" which is mostly an imputation by Europeans "to the Other, the Savage, or the Alien that he is engaged in a tabooed practice of man-eating" (1). This paper accompanies Jamaica Kincaid on her journey to the Himalaya in order to examine her memoir through the lens of this discursive and ideological scene or talk of cannibalism.

To insinuate that Kincaid's seemingly harmless travel narrative, *Among Flowers*, has anything to do with cannibalism may prima facie look like a bit of a stretch. To the purists who might potentially object to tracing the cannibal scene and cannibal talk in this seemingly innocent narrative as too metaphoric to have any basis in reality, I would

like to urge them to consider the fact that there is nothing “factual” and empirically verifiable about the discourse or fantasy of cannibalism, which, even at its referential best, remains putative. Born out of the colonial interplay of difference, cannibalism is a trope which is inextricable from power and ideology, therefore it is always a subject for contestation and questioning.

Though the cannibal scene/talk in Kincaid is a trope, it is not exactly what is known as literary cannibalism, which is “an act wherein a postcolonial author ‘consumes’ canonical works of literature while concurrently serving as a complex and sophisticated means of dismantling the legacy of colonialism” (Reynolds 3). This scene of the cannibal in Kincaid, however, is not purely intertextual. Nor is the act of eating as clearly demarcated as a postcolonial writer consuming a canonical text. It differs also from a version of universal cannibalism that Maryse Condé refers to in her interview by remarking that “Nous sommes des cannibales . . . nous voulons absolument nous approprier l’autre, faire qu’il devient notre créature, en faire ce que nous voulons (quoted in Reynolds 1). As a postcolonial and/or Black immigrant American author herself, Kincaid’s depiction of the cannibal scene is more complicated than Condé’s sense of pan-cannibalism in which we all are cannibals and we absolutely appropriate the other by making him our creature so that he does what we want him to.

In contrast to literary cannibalism in which a postcolonial reader consumes and regurgitates Western canonical texts, and to pan-cannibalism in which the other is reshaped through incorporation or introjection, Kincaid’s scene of the cannibal marks a resurgence or continuation of a neocolonialist ideology. When making these propositions, we must not overlook the fact that Kincaid herself is a fierce critic of colonialism or that the “Himalaya,” usually a plural noun singularized by Kincaid and always a subject of imperial fascination, does not have a consistent and congruous relationship with colonialism. In fact, Nepal (for which “the Himalaya,” has been used as a metonym) where Kincaid visits to collect seeds for her garden in Vermont, USA, was never colonized. Jill Didur notes, Kincaid remains implicated in “gardening cultures’ colonial underpinnings” (175) and argues that Kincaid’s consumption of colonial botanical texts reroutes colonial botany. Adding to Didur’s sense of postcolonial revision, Pramod Nayar argues that if there is a counter-colonial narrative in Kincaid’s “neo-colonial” memoir, then it has to come from her text’s “discursive instability” or her being an uncertain traveler (5). The trope of the cannibal scene allows us to bring both her counter-colonialism and neocolonialism together.

Before we take a closer look at Kincaid’s memoir, it should be noted that both mythically, ecologically, and discursively, the Himalayas have always been cannibals. Just recall that famous scene from the Ramayana in which Hanuman is flying to the Himalayas in search of sanjeevani plant only to be waylaid by Kalanemi, who sends an apsara in the form of a crocodile to eat Hanuman alive. Those who are not touched by myths and are ecologically minded could read reports which depict the region as an

unmanageable graveyard (Nuwer). Adding to these two layers of anthropophagy is an economic human-eating – travelers exploiting local labor and Nepalese exploiting tourists to keep their economy afloat.

Born Elaine Potter Richardson on the island of Antigua in 1949, Jamaica Kincaid came to the U.S. at the age of 17 to work as an au pair to an American family. Though sent to be the breadwinner for the family, she refused to send the money home. Disconnected from her mother, she invented a new identity for herself. She found a place for herself at the *New Yorker*, where the editor, William Shawn was impressed by her writing and what she had to say. She became a regular featured writer with her own column “The Talk of the Town.” She went on to marry the Editor’s son with whom she had two children.

With the publication of *Among Flowers*, she comes back full circle as it were from *A Small Place* (1988) to write about travel and tourism. *Among Flowers* follows Kincaid’s 1999 personal narrative on the theme of gardening, *My Garden*. In between she wrote novels including *Lucy*, *Autobiography of my Mother*, *My Brother*, all preceding *Annie John* (1985) By theorizing the figure of the traveler in *A Small Place*, Kincaid herself provides a comparative model and a point of departure for us to analyze her book on the Himalayas.

An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness. (17)

The protagonist of *Among Flowers* is not an ugly empty thing. A stupid and rubbish tourist merely gazes at and objectifies things; s/he does not write a book about the destination. And yet, there is a strong presence of the tourist in the book, and that element is exemplified by the mission of the book – seeds for a garden in Vermont. Moira Fergusson argues that in *A Small Place*, Kincaid portrays tourists as “a collective Columbus, new colonists, brash cultural invaders” (16). Fergusson reveals this crucial dimension of *A Small Place*, a dimension also shared by *Among Flowers* in which Columbus and the garden play such an important role (I will come to that later). Before that, however, I would like to point out one important chiasmus here between Columbus’ New World and Kincaid’s Himalaya. What repeats in this chiasmus is the concept of the garden, and the reversed order that this chiasmus is constructed with is that whereas for Columbus a Biblical Garden is imposed on the wilderness of the New World, for Kincaid a piece or seed from the Himalayan wilderness is introduced to an already established garden. A seemingly minor difference, but one that could have some insightful consequences for the angle that we are using to look at Kincaid’s memoir. Horticulture in Columbus’ case displaces the perceived cannibalism of the native

population of the New World; Kincaid's romantic search for a piece of wilderness to be brought back to her garden in Vermont leaves the source wide open for a fantasy of cannibalism to germinate and haunt her narrative.

If the tourist and exploration or discovery narratives cannot approximate the account we encounter in *Among Flowers*, neither does the Contact Zone model, which implies a colonial frontier, therefore lacks sophistication in which a traveler might be someone like Jamaica Kincaid with her visibly marked racial, ethnic and gendered body. As the concept of the contact zone is a linguistic model, its focus is on communication rather than wounding, blood, violence, and affects.

The cannibal scene/talk model - both general and very specific (general because I understand the model to imply, on the one hand, a *Western discourse on the other*, and the *fact, fear*, and the *ritual* of being eaten alive; and on the other hand, going beyond this west and the other dichotomy, and bringing in a Foucauldian conceptualization of cannibalism that he develops in *Abnormal* - the creation of monsters that is the effect of modernity leading to the disciplining of governmentality. The disciplines that make this transition possible include anthropology, especially ethnology. Let's go now and take a walk in the Himalaya with Kincaid in order to examine the cannibal scene that haunts her narrative.

Hulme defines the "primal scene of cannibalism" as an "aftermath" witnessed by Westerners, in opposition to its "performance" (2). The cannibal scene in Kincaid by contrast is at once, an aftermath, performance, and forecast. The plot of this archetypical scene starts as soon as Kincaid is approached with the plan to go seed hunting in Nepal. She remembers her recent similar trip to China and reveals that in comparison to what transpired in the Himalaya, her China trip was "a luxurious kind," especially because "[n]ot once was my life really in danger" (2). Kincaid opens the narrative with this foreboding remark (which represents a forecast of the impending doom), and recalls the email of her would-be travelling companion as if he had witnessed all these: "Have you heard of the plane crashing and the bus going off the road in the floods, all in Nepal?" (6). She delivers the proof of the threat to her life, as if it were a performance, by pointing out that as soon as she lands in Kathmandu bats and rats, especially the former which she is afraid could be "settling into my hair" (19). Though not exactly acts of anthropophagy, all these instances function as props for the cannibal scene or cannibal talk.

In *The Man-Eating Myth*, William Arens recounts an incident of being called a blood-sucker in Tanzania where Africans use this epithet for Europeans to express their conviction that "African vitality" is being literally consumed by Europeans (13). Arens uses this encounter to show how the myth of cannibalism proliferates in disciplines such as anthropology. Regardless of the basis of such myth, blood sucking remains a prominent descriptor of the cannibal scene/talk. A few days after Kincaid sets out for a

“walk” in the Himalaya, she comes upon an army of leeches. The encounter takes place in the hill overlooking the Arun river, where Kincaid and her friends decide to camp for the night. No sooner than they had felt a sense of relief at finding a place to camp, then:

[S]omeone pointed out a leech and then another and then another, and soon we realized that we would camp, we would spend the night in a field full of leeches. Immediately as we entered this area, we were attacked by them. At first, it was just one or two seen on the ground, then leaping onto our legs. Then we realized they were everywhere. (85)

This scene of attack by the leeches and Kincaid’s description of falling victim to the attack – she believes that the leeches are “eagerly burrowing into our thick hiking socks, trying to get some of our very expensive first-world blood” (73) - exceed the conventional framework both of travel narratives and contact zone narratives. This is why it exceeds travel narratives: In *Abroad*, Paul Fussell notes:

Before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration. Each is roughly assignable to its own age in modern history; exploration belongs to the Renaissance, travel belongs to the bourgeois age, tourism to our proletarian moment. (38)

As Fussell himself admits, there are frequent overlaps: thematic as well as historical. In light of Fussell’s categories, Kincaid seems more like an explorer than a tourist. The figure of the gardener that she portrays brings her close to Columbus and Jefferson while her walk among the flowers in the Himalaya reminds of Thoreau or other travelers in exotic places. Kincaid herself makes these associations. In her essay, “The Disturbances of the Garden,” she recalls her fascination with the Book of Genesis, especially the story of God’s creation of a garden and its division into two distinct parts the Tree of Life (agriculture) and the Tree of Knowledge (horticulture). One stands for good, the other for evil, things forbidden. One signifies the bare necessities of life, the other implies desire beyond needs. This second category of gardening, which led to the fall of man is what Kincaid calls a heap of disturbance insofar as it reminds her of her “ancestors’ violent removal from an Eden” – Africa (Kincaid). Then she adds a startling and disturbing paragraph in the essay on how Columbus’ arrival in the New World is a parallel move from the Tree of Life to the Tree of Knowledge, hence conquest as fall but also an opportunity to rebuild the garden in America.

She acknowledges that Columbus’ arrival in the West Indies and his encounter with the indigenous population “changed the world of the garden” (Kincaid). Interestingly, though, this change is described by Kincaid not as parallel to the fall she described in relation to the forced migration of slaves from Africa, but in relation to the possibility of transplanting of fruits, flowers, and herbs across the globe. That is why the model of the contact zone narrative cannot be employed to analyze *Among Flowers*. In

Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as:

The space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6)

Instead of focusing on the conditions of coercion, conflict, and inequality, Kincaid uses a colonialist vantage point to highlight the movement of seeds and plants across the globe and across different languages and knowledge systems. Kincaid's encounter with the leeches blurs the distinction between exploration, travel, and tourism, bringing together the confluence of the romantic and the grotesque, and modernist narratives of the self and its post-modernist parody.

A similar framing of the garden in terms of the Book of Genesis takes place in Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*. In the concluding chapter of that book, she chronicles her experience seed-plant hunting in China, she wonders "if I was in the original garden . . . Eden," but quickly adds, "only this time turned inside out, only this time (in China) the garden was in a state of banishment; I was in the wild" (226). Two intensely problematic issues emerge from such framing: i) every garden does not have to be the original garden, especially ones in Nepal or China - countries where Biblical framing of things is not culturally predominant; ii) the rhetoric of wild vs. domestic flirts with the colonial rhetoric of America as the virgin land, and natives as wild, cannibal savages. In *Cannibal Talk*, Obeyesekere argues that the origin of cannibal talk often lies in the "European socialization" of the period of exploration and seafaring; it is a discourse that results from "a subculture of sailors with a tradition of the practice of anthropophagy that in turn gets locked into the primordial fantasy" (43). Kincaid's fantasies of being in the wild, blood-sucking, and life-threatening Himalayan terrain are the product of the colonial company (socialization) she keeps - Adam, Eve, Columbus, Cook, etc.

So far, in this article, I have shown how Kincaid's *Among Flowers* uses the cannibal scene or cannibal talk to look at the Himalayas. This is done in the book, I have argued, by using the discourse a la Hulme of absolute foreignness of the locale and the threat that the location poses to the traveler's life. Using Arens' study as my guide then I showed how blood-sucking is a crucial aspect of cannibal talk illustrated in Kincaid's text by the author's encounter with the leeches. I cited Obeyesekere as my third step in the analysis of cannibal Himalaya to argue that Kincaid's mission to replicate and reconstruct the Christian garden of Eden through her seed hunting in the Himalaya, and her "socialization" with figures such as Columbus and Cook resurrect the colonial dichotomy of garden and wilderness, thereby giving a second life to the discourse of savage cannibal native, a discourse so rampant in European narratives of explorations.

Two key differences between the theoretical sources and my own text of analysis and its contexts must be acknowledged here – i) Hulme, Arens, and Obeyesekere’s works focus primarily on regions such as Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and Pacific Islands. The Himalayan region is mostly absent from the anthropological and historical accounts of cannibalism. ii) All three studies quoted so far in support of our arguments that Kincaid employs the cannibal scene primarily involve Europeans engaged in cannibal talk on non-European, - often previously colonized, people and cultures. *Among Flowers* defies this binary by juxtaposing an African American writer depicting a place and people not colonized by any European power. To respond to these differences, though the Himalaya is not a region discussed in Western discourses on cannibalism, as we passingly referred to a scene from *The Ramayana*, insinuations of cannibalism are far from being completely foreign to the region. In fact, the Shaivite tradition within Hinduism, especially the Aghori order of Shaivite ascetics, has a close relationship to the region. One only needs to recall the description of “cruelty” and “savagery” associated with the Gorkha soldiers from this region (Gould 371) to gauge the importance of the cannibal scene when it comes to the Himalaya. Cannibal talk flourishes not just via the European-native binary but in cases where a non-Euroamerican speaker assumes the subject of enunciation as does Kincaid by claiming nativeness of the United States (84), thereby completely abandoning her roots in colonized Antigua or by ranking her blood higher and more precious (73).

In this section of the article, I would like to discuss a dimension of cannibal talk in *Among Flowers*, this time with the help of Michel Foucault’s discussion of cannibalism in *Abnormal*. To recapitulate our arguments, Kincaid’s narrative cannot be fully understood without engaging with the cannibal scene or talk. I have used cannibalism here generally and very specifically. By taking cannibalism “generally” I mean: the fear of being eaten, the “myth” (Arens) of anthropophagy: its mythogenic (i.e. divine hunger), pycogenic (psychosexual need), and physiogenic (natural hunger) roots. Cognizant of the fact that theorists sometimes draw a distinction between cannibalism and anthropophagy (e.g. Peter Hulme and Gananath Obeyesekere), I argue that the attack of the leeches again unsettles the boundary on the one hand between the fantasy that the other is going to eat us (cannibalism) and the “fact” of sucking out “the expensive first-world blood;” and on the other, between man-eating-man, and animals-eating-man. When cannibalism is in question, the supposedly “self-evident” distinction between man and animals disappears.

Kincaid’s narrative also contains a more specific manifestation of the cannibal scene inasmuch as it defines the “Western discourse of the Other” in terms of the return to nature, hence the title “Among Flowers,” which uncannily echoes the 17th century Puritan discourses of “the errand into the wilderness.” I would like to cite two theoretical sources here in support of my argument: First is Grotius from *The Right of War and Peace*:

The Hebrews have a proverb, *If there were no sovereign power, we should swallow up one another alive*. To which agrees that of St. Chrysostom, *Take away the Governor of States, men would be more savages than Brutes, not only biting but devouring one another* (Grotius 106).

Grotius uses sovereignty as a shield against the general cannibalism of the masses. The second example is from Foucault's *Abnormal*, which traces the construction of monstrosity in France to the revolutionary era of 18th century – where Foucault locates the production of double monstrosity: “the monster from below and the monster from above, the cannibalistic monster represented above all by the figure of the people in revolt, and the incestuous monster represented above all by the king” (Foucault 101)

What does it have to do with *Among Flowers*? If we see “the cannibal scene” of leeches burrowing deep in order to draw out “the expensive first-world blood,” we find that Kincaid situates the scene in the narrative strategically between two other encounters: with the Maoists and the Mountains. If the former are blood-thirsty, the latter contribute to the loss of orientation of self.

Kincaid suspects that Maoists may kill her; in fact, leeches were not the first to draw the blood in the narrative. Kincaid imagines her own blood projected onto the red drawings by the Maoists across the Himalayas. “It was just before we crossed the bridge,” she says, “that I saw some Nepali script and a drawing of a star (as in red star) in bright red ink on the concrete foundation of the bridge” (62). “Maoists, I thought,” she gasps, “at least here they are, this is a sign of them. They had forever been on my mind. . .” (62). She remembers Dan had told her that the Maoists were not killing foreigners. But she knows that “when someone starts killing people, though at first, they draw a line at the kind of people they will kill, eventually that line gets erased as they start killing some other people” (62).

Even when Kincaid was still in the capital city of Kathmandu before setting out for a walk in the Himalaya, she suspects that the Maoists “couldn't kill the king [so] they would kill me instead” (20). Kincaid posits herself as a totemic animal, which replaces the king and is intended for sacrifice by the Maoists, the cannibals in revolt. Throughout her adventure in the Himalaya, she feels suspended in the mountains between the monsters from above and the cannibals from below marking the slump of the region into the state of nature [which for some is the state of perpetual emergency whose logic demands the production of the sacred and totemic animal for killing]. Her fears for her life, her inability to read into the minds of the Maoists and the leeches, and the geographic adversity she encounters, make for her the measure of the extent to which the Himalaya *is* in a state of nature where Maoists, Mountains, and leeches have joined forces to consume other human beings. For Kincaid, the Himalayas interface the garden, which coincides with the state of nature itself.

A Foucauldian model of cannibalism, thus, not only unsettles the binary of the Western traveler producing the myth of the cannibal other, it also calls for an examination and offers the possibility of a critique of “bio-politics” involved in producing the truth about the figures of the cannibal monster. Seen in this light, Kincaid’s text engages in the production of a cannibal Himalaya bent on shedding her first-world blood and feasting upon it.

Is it an anthropological text, then? Foucault would argue that it is because like all anthropological texts on the “so-called primitive populations,” it is concerned with “the problem of the community of blood” (Foucault 102). In other words, as a narrative depicting a people in revolt, Kincaid’s text not only produces and documents the “truth” about cannibalism from below, by describing the author’s exposure to the consumption of her “expensive first-world blood,” it also raises the question which Foucault thinks haunts all anthropological texts – What should we eat or shouldn’t eat, and with whom should we enter into blood ties and with whom we shouldn’t?

If Kincaid’s text engages in the biopolitics of disciplining cannibalism – that is producing the truth of cannibalism – it is also involved in producing the subject of that discipline: namely the figure of the author or “traveler” constructed through the fear of being eaten by cannibals. Unlike traditional theorization of cannibalism in which the author/traveler – almost invariably white, European, male – produces the discourse of cannibalism as the discourse of the other, the figure of the author/traveler in Kincaid is produced by the discourse of cannibalism itself. After walking away from the Maoists and the leeches, which Kincaid confesses “became indistinguishable” in their demands “which we felt included our very lives” (90), and after climbing further up in the mountains, Kincaid is overtaken by a sense of loss of self, which she describes in a curious way:

When we reached Chyamtang . . . I came down with a case of loss of sense of self, but not only was this not new, I actually enjoy this state and were not for that, I really would be in a state of loss of sense of self. (95)

This Whitmanian current of offering oneself to be consumed produces in Kincaid the sense of self through losing oneself to the fear of the cannibal Himalaya. Cannibalism’s simultaneous production of the cannibal monster and the subject of the traveler/author bestows a positive and constructive meaning to cannibalism itself. As in the Foucauldian concept of power, which Foucault defines in terms of the total structure of actions representing not only their negative aspects including repression, domination and forbidding but also their productive and enabling aspects, the cannibal Himalaya in Kincaid functions as what a critic of Caribbean literature and cannibalism, Graham Huggan, calls the cannibal counter-memory to the hegemonic European record (126). The cannibal counter-memory in Kincaid emerges not only in her thoughts of being assaulted and endangered but curiously also through her identification with the people

she meets. Sometimes she encounters ghostly apparitions of her estranged mother in the women of Nepal, at other times Kincaid locates the hair she wears in the heads of the poor women from the Nepalese village. She can only conjure up her sense of self and body through these metonymic and partial fragments represented in the faces and bodies of the women in Nepal. This curious identification with the people, places, and the history of Nepal makes her narrative not auto-ethnography but an impossibility of ethnography as it exceeds notions of a stable, and autonomous self or body definable in terms of the anthropological logic of blood.

Kincaid captures this sense of exposure, incompleteness, grafting and incorporation of the other through her actions as a gardener. She concludes the text by remarking that the true ideal of a garden demands that she “populate it with plants from another side of the world” (189). Kincaid believes that the sense of loss of self or the fear of being consumed by the other inheres all encounters with the other. Cannibalism is inextricable from this notion of self which arises at the very moment of its consumption, incorporation, and grafting by and of the other.

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