

The Oppositional Gaze Challenging Gender, Race, and Class Boundaries: An Analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy

التحديق الضدي: تحدي ثنائيات النوع والعرق والطبقة في رواية "لوسي" لجمايكا كينكايد

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الملخص:

بينما استندت العديد من الدراسات السابقة إلى مفهوم "التحديق الذكوري" لدراسة ديناميكيات القوة، تقدم نظرية "التحديق الضدي" لغلوريا جين واتكنز (بيل هوك) معالجة فريدة لتقاطعات النوع الاجتماعي والعرق والطبقة في التصوير السينمائي للنساء السوداوات. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل السرد في رواية لوسي لجمايكا كينكايد باستخدام إطار "التحديق الضدي"، مسلطة الضوء على وعي لوسي بموقعها الهامشي واستكشافها لذاتها. ومن خلال استقصاء التحديق الضدي للوسي وإمكاناته في تحدي ثنائيات النوع/العرق/الطبقة، تساهم هذه الدراسة في الدراسات النسوية وما بعد الاستعمار والدراسات الأدبية من خلال تسليط الضوء على الإمكانيات الكبيرة لرواية لوسي كنص أدبي يعمق فهم القراء للمجموعات المهمشة، وفي الوقت ذاته يخلق مساحة للتمكين والتمثيل الذاتي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديق الضدي، المقاومة، الهوية، الاستعمار، التقاطعية.

Abstract:

While previous studies on gaze have been influential in elucidating power dynamics, Gloria Jean Watkins' (bell hooks') concept of the oppositional gaze uniquely addresses the intersection of gender, race, and class in the representation of Black women. This study offers a novel application of hooks' theory to literary analysis by examining Jamaica Kincaid's novel Lucy—a work that has yet to be fully explored through this framework. By investigating Lucy's oppositional gaze, this study reveals how Kincaid's protagonist actively resists dominant ideologies, redefines her identity, and critiques racialised and gendered power structures. This research contributes to feminist, postcolonial, and literary studies by demonstrating how Lucy's perspective challenges binary oppositions and provides a powerful lens for understanding marginalised experiences. Ultimately, this study expands the application of the oppositional gaze beyond visual media, highlighting its relevance in literature and its potential to reshape discussions on representation, agency, and empowerment.

Keywords: Oppositional gaze, Resistance, Identity, Colonialism, Intersectionality.

1. Theoretical Framework and Research Aims

1.1 Beyond the gender binary

The concept of the gaze has been widely explored in philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, and critical theory, particularly in relation to power, identity, and representation. At its core, the gaze refers to the power dynamics embedded in acts of looking and being looked at, shaping social hierarchies and cultural perceptions. Scholars have examined how visual perception functions as a mechanism of control, reinforcing dominant ideologies and marginalising specific groups. This study focuses on three major dimensions of the gaze:

- The male gaze, as theorised by Laura Mulvey, reflects patriarchal power structures in media and cultural production, often positioning women as passive objects of male desire (2).
- The colonial gaze, as discussed by scholars such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, explores how Western societies construct and objectify marginalised groups, particularly Black and colonised people, reinforcing racial hierarchies (5,6).
- The oppositional gaze, developed by bell hooks, emerges as a critical resistance to both gendered and racialised looking relations, allowing marginalised individuals—especially Black women—to actively interrogate and reclaim agency in visual culture (8).

In her 1973 essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of ‘the gaze’ in culture studies and situated it within the framework of a binary opposition, stating:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (2 p837)

Mulvey’s influential essay, which critiqued Hollywood cinema for perpetuating patriarchal gender roles and confining women to passive positions without any meaningful gaze, has received many

critical readings over the years (2). In their chapter titled “Male Gaze and Visual Pleasure in Laura Mulvey”, Stefanovic and Parać credit Mulvey for applying the psychoanalytic theory to examine the looking relations in cinema and expose its gender line and for demonstrating the ways in which films construct viewers within a limited framework of sexual differences rooted in a patriarchal reality. However, these scholars contend that Mulvey oversimplified women’s experiences and ignored diversity among them in terms of race, sexual preference, ethnicity, class, and so on (3). Additionally, presenting other scholars’ critical readings of Mulvey’s essay, the authors (3 p354) argue that Mulvey’s work predominantly emphasised heterosexual male desire and failed to account for other forms of desire.

Similarly, Salsabila et al.’s “Refutation of Laura Mulvey’s ‘Male Gaze’ Theory in Film *Little Women*” examines the evolution of the film industry since Mulvey coined the term ‘male gaze’ in 1975 (4). Exploring the concept of a female gaze and its usage in feminist film studies, they investigate how filmmaking processes have influenced the presence of these gazes. They comparatively analyse Laura Mulvey’s theories of the male and female gaze in the context of the film *Little Women*, which portrays women as independent and aspirational individuals. Through various examples from the film, including a sexually suggestive scene featuring female characters, they challenge Mulvey’s notions of female passivity and women as objects of the male gaze in film, suggesting that gender inequality and the patriarchal reality that Mulvey theorised about are not fixed. Their research suggests that female directors may better represent women’s perspectives and advocate for prioritising women’s character development over objectification to elicit shared emotions from the audience, ultimately questioning the permanence and necessity of Mulvey’s theory.

In the context of post-colonial theory, Said’s work, *Orientalism*, examines how Western societies construct and represent the East and perpetuate power dynamics and stereotypes through the gaze of the coloniser (5). Like Said, Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* discusses the psychological ramifications of internalising the colonial gaze, revealing how it engenders self-negation and fragmentation within Black individuals (6 p120). His work underscores the urgent need for identity reclamation and decolonisation. Preceding bell hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, much of the scholarship on the gaze in the field of culture studies delineated the male or coloniser’s gaze as the prevailing force that subjected the female or colonised entity, respectively

(7). That is, although their application of the gaze significantly helped reveal power relations, most of these works homogenised the experiences of all women by placing them in one category based on race, class, or gender while presenting them in a passive light.

Gloria Jean Watkins' (bell hooks') book transformed the discussion by fitting the concept of the gaze in an intersectional framework and positioning Black women's gaze in a power location.*

1.2 The oppositional gaze versus the resisting gaze

In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks coined the term oppositional gaze, which challenges traditional feminist criticism and its perception that the representation of gender is the sole defining factor of one's identity (8). By introducing the oppositional gaze, hooks highlighted the need to consider intersectionality—the complex interplay between different social identities such as race, gender, class, and more—when analysing how individuals perceive and are perceived in the visual culture. Emphasising the “power of looking”, hooks (8 p115) suggested that the acts of looking and being looked at are not neutral but rather complex processes influenced by power relations, historical contexts, and social hierarchies.

Opposing Laura Mulvey's argument that positions “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (2 p715), hooks (8 p116) identified the gaze as “a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally” and distinguished between the resisting gaze, associated with Black people, and the oppositional gaze, pertaining specifically to Black women. By placing the idea of resistance within that of the oppositional gaze, hooks stated:

[Black women] do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking

relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels. (8 p128)

Accordingly, oppositional gaze can be defined as an active engagement in a wide range of visual interactions, encompassing analysis, inquiry, innovation, debate, re-evaluation, and, most importantly, resistance. In essence, it represents a critical way of perceiving the world through the act of looking, which is intricately tied to a specific group of people: Black women. Conversely, the resisting gaze is associated with various marginalised communities and intersections of identity. Placing resistance within the framework of the oppositional gaze makes it an integral part of this concept. Consequently, while the resisting gaze signifies an effort to counteract or resist a particular force, the oppositional gaze signifies a more assertive presence by adopting an explicit confrontational stance against specific sources of power. Unlike the resisting gaze, the oppositional gaze is not merely a reaction but a proactive and deliberate approach to a looking-based engagement in which one's intellectual, analytical, and creative faculties are activated.

In contrast to Mulvey, hooks (8 p126) described Black women's engagement in this process as “the pleasure of interrogation ... [and] the pleasure of deconstructing”. In this sense, hooks' conceptualisation of the oppositional gaze helps deconstruct the White colonial patriarchal discourse by navigating the intersectionality of other identity aspects such as race, class, and gender within looking relations. Thus, it is relevant to visual culture and warrants further analysis in the context of written narratives.

1.3 Research aims and contributions

Given this context, this study analyses Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* through the framework of the oppositional gaze and makes the following contributions: First, through a meticulous examination of Lucy's oppositional gaze and its connections to colonialism, gender, and race, this study not only sheds light on the persistent political, social, and economic disparities encountered by Black women but also

Looks: Race and Representation (1992), critique the marginalisation of Black women within mainstream feminism and media. The concept of the oppositional gaze, introduced in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, challenges the dominant cinematic gaze and highlights the power of Black women as critical spectators who actively resist racialised and gendered representations.

* Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021), known by her pen name bell hooks, was an American scholar, cultural critic, and activist whose work profoundly shaped feminist theory, critical race studies, and cultural criticism. She is best known for her contributions to intersectional feminism, emphasising the ways race, gender, and class interconnect in systems of oppression. Her seminal works, such as *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Black*

presents a significant example of the oppositional gaze in the literary domain. Second, by investigating Lucy's "power of looking" (8 p115) in Kincaid's narrative, this study provides a multifaceted exploration of looking relations that transcend gender limitations. Thus, this study also provides a nuanced understanding of Lucy's narrative by addressing the limitations of past studies which have overlooked the significance of Lucy's looking relations in the narrative. Third, Lucy's active participation in looking relations remains relevant to the current efforts to address systemic inequalities and promote transformative interventions. Thus, by investigating Lucy's experiences, this study illuminates the importance of the Black woman's oppositional gaze in enabling her self-transformation. Ultimately, this study's analysis hopes to deepen readers' comprehension of marginalised groups while fostering their active engagement through critical participation in the oppositional gaze.

1.4 Overview of the novel

Set in the 1970s, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* traces the postcolonial experience of Lucy, a Caribbean immigrant who moves to the United States to work as an au pair for a wealthy White family. The novel vividly portrays the tensions between intersecting binaries of gender, race, and class, emphasising how these forces shape Lucy's self-perception and resistance.

Growing up in a postcolonial, patriarchal society, Lucy experiences internal conflict and confusion regarding her identity as a young Antiguan girl. Her desire for independence is deeply intertwined with the colonial legacy that has shaped her world, reinforcing her alienation from both her homeland and the new society she enters.

According to Youssef (9 p196), Lucy's struggle is emblematic of a postcolonial "Künstlerroman", a narrative form that follows the protagonist's self-development and search for identity in a foreign setting. Youssef asserts that Lucy's experience embodies a rite of passage, reflecting the broader struggles of displaced individuals navigating both colonial histories and gendered power structures. Her journey towards self-definition is marked by a dual resistance—against the Eurocentric ideologies of her home country and the androcentric structures of the Western world she enters.

Lucy's decision to leave Antigua and work as an au pair in New York further shapes her oppositional gaze, enabling her to critically engage with the world around her. As hooks describes, the oppositional gaze allows marginalised individuals to contest, resist, revise,

interrogate, and invent new perspectives (8 p128). Through Lucy's eyes, Kincaid unveils the complexities of race, gender, and class, highlighting the challenges faced by immigrants and the cultural clashes between Caribbean and Western societies. The novel's immersive narrative style invites readers to step into Lucy's perspective and actively participate in her acts of looking and questioning.

2. Literature Review

Considerable scholarship exists on Kincaid's *Lucy*. Studies on Lucy's gaze have each adopted a distinct perspective, such as feminism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, gender dynamics, and womanism. However, to the best of the author's knowledge, no work has examined its narrative within hooks' oppositional gaze framework, which specifically encompasses Black women's looking experiences.

Nevertheless, some works have explored the idea of Lucy's oppositionality through various theoretical lenses. For instance, in "Lucy" and the Mark of the Colonizer, Moira Ferguson connects the theme of Lucy's agency and self-assertion to postcolonialism, arguing that Lucy's journey mirrors the broader struggle for independence from colonial influences (10). Similar to Ferguson, Nichols examines how Kincaid's portrayal of Lucy can be seen as oppositional and critical of second-wave Western feminism's conservative reactions to racial difference, arguing that Lucy "will always be [...] unwilling to assimilate into institutional structures" (11 p204).

Nichols' observation is crucial because it underscores Lucy's fundamental rejection of assimilation, positioning her not only as an outsider but as a subject actively resisting dominant ideological structures. While second-wave feminism often emphasised universal experiences of womanhood, writers like hooks and Kincaid highlight how such frameworks neglect racial and postcolonial dimensions of oppression. Lucy's refusal to integrate into pre-existing institutional norms challenges both the patriarchal systems that restrict women's agency and the racialised exclusion within feminist discourse. This aligns with hooks' conceptualisation of the oppositional gaze, where Black women develop an alternative mode of looking and engaging with power structures, rather than simply resisting from within.

However, unlike Nichols, Ferguson employs the notion of the gaze, suggesting that Lucy's purchase and use of a camera places her in a position of power, enabling her to engage in the act of gazing rather than being passively looked at. She asserts, "The camera's

gaze is empowering because it enables distances and defines a distinct place and space for the gazer” (10 p248). This interpretation aligns with hooks’ oppositional gaze, as Lucy’s active reframing of the world through her lens represents an assertion of agency over her own narrative.

Evidently, Ferguson’s identification of Lucy as a colonised individual and an outsider, navigating a foreign culture and society, underscores her quest for self-determination and autonomy. According to Ferguson, Lucy initiates the process of decolonising herself, mirroring the broader context of Antigua’s struggle for partial independence (10 p256). Both Ferguson and Nichols delve into the themes of independence and oppositionality, though from different perspectives: the former through postcolonial discourse, and the latter through feminist critique. Their analyses of Lucy as an outsider align with this study’s examination of Lucy as an oppositional gazer, as the act of gazing inherently requires a position outside the dominant narrative.

Özkan analyses Lucy from a postcolonial perspective, investigating how a “colonial and maternal pedagogy” is employed to subjugate Lucy (12). Similar to Ferguson, Özkan examines the impact of Lucy’s mother on her resistance and mentions ‘the gaze’ once in this context; however, she refrains from explicitly locating it within oppositionality. Özkan states, “Lucy reinvents herself with photography by recreating images that diverge from her colonial past. Using visual media provides a new gaze she can use to form her worldview and sense of self” (12 p339). In this sense, Özkan connects the gaze to newness, reinvention, and the formation of the self—an understanding that intersects with this study’s analysis of Lucy’s oppositional gaze.

Several studies have critically analysed *Lucy*’s narrative through the lens of the gender binary opposition. A prime example of such analysis is Angela Castro’s work, titled *Power-in-Passivity: A Study of The Body and Female Recognition in Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy*. In this insightful study, Castro explores how women can assert their autonomy and cultivate alternative consciousness and knowledge through their bodies. However, Castro situates her argument within the context of the female/male binary, focusing on Lucy’s body as a site of resistance. She argues persuasively that Lucy’s recognition of her own body “[shifts] the male gaze to a more feminine understanding of the corporeal that centres on women’s desires” (13 p27). In contrast, Eleanor Anneh Dasi’s perspective emphasises the presence of the female gaze in the narrative but posits Lucy’s mother

as the gazer. Dasi asserts that Lucy’s mother’s gaze represents “the power, authority, and control that home has over [Lucy]” (14 p5). Nonetheless, for Castro, Kincaid’s narrative underscores the significance of the body in unveiling the history of colonial Antigua and contemporary North America. Her analysis of colonial education aligns with the work of the previously mentioned scholars, particularly Özkan, whose research delves into the concept of colonial education.

Castro’s analysis of how the female body transforms the male gaze falls within Mulvey’s framework in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, as Mulvey’s analysis is deeply rooted in gender dynamics. Nevertheless, Castro’s interpretation implicitly encompasses the idea of Lucy’s gaze, highlighting her endeavour to explore the power of the female body. As Castro eloquently states, “Lucy develops her individual dominance through observation of the complexities of an unfamiliar culture, which is constantly compared with her own culture, nation, and memories” (13 p59). Thus, Castro’s reading goes beyond Mulvey’s perception of women as passive/inactive.

Among the numerous articles, chapters, and dissertations written about *Lucy*, Denise M. Jarrett’s work, titled *Haunting Past, Daunting Future: A Womanist Reading of Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy*, is the only one that explicitly mentions the oppositional gaze. In her chapter, Jarrett mainly draws upon Alice Walker’s womanist theory to illuminate various dimensions of Lucy. Her chapter introduces the concept of the oppositional gaze, but she does not provide an explicit definition. Moreover, her exploration of the oppositional gaze is limited in scope as she primarily focuses on Lucy’s realisation of her agency over her own body, particularly through her ability to exercise reproductive choice over “when to have children” (15 p33). In this sense, her focus on the female body resembles that of Castro. However, a woman’s control over her body does not automatically equate to her possessing an oppositional gaze. hooks’ conceptualisation of the oppositional gaze goes beyond an individual’s agency over her physical self. It encompasses a broader framework where the act of looking, observing, and critically examining holds significant political and cultural implications. Thus, the oppositional gaze is deeply rooted in Black women’s ability to interact critically with their surroundings, deconstruct societal norms and biases, and actively resist prevailing structures of power and oppression.

The current study aims to provide a more inclusive reading of Kincaid’s narrative. Drawing on hooks, this

study focuses on the intersection of three social forces: gender, race, and class. In the United States, Lucy attempts to take control over her femininity, which has been restricted and violated by patriarchal structures and colonial institutions. By forming new relationships, particularly through her interactions with her employer and surrogate mother Mariah and her close friend Peggy and other women and men in the United States, Lucy redefines her sense of self, identity, origin, and relationships. Consequently, she rejects feminine passivity and adopts the role of an active Black female interrogator whose venturing out of her home country represents a strong rejection of oppressive institutions. Lucy's new interactions help her broaden her horizon and perspective by building close relationships that bridge racial and gender-based differences. Lucy's new female community helps her realise her Caribbean female identity and encourages her to search for a new discourse on womanhood and personhood. Nevertheless, White women such as Mariah and Peggy, who have completely different worldviews, continue to perpetuate a colonial ideology by trying to control her life and body.

3. Discussion

3.1 Lucy's oppositional gaze, outsider positioning, and binary oppositions

In *Lucy*, Kincaid employs the protagonist's outsider positioning as a narrative technique to challenge the rigid binaries of race, gender, and class. By presenting the world through Lucy's oppositional gaze, the novel destabilises conventional power structures that cast Black women as passive and White men as active. As Nichols observes, Lucy's perspective "repositions the reader's gaze—disrupting its authority—to challenge the cultural colonizing implicit in the US ideal of immigrant assimilation" (11 p193). This disruption is evident from the outset, as Lucy is referred to as a "visitor" (1 p11) and later as the "girl from the island" (1 p59), reinforcing her exclusion and marginality. Being an oppositional gazer necessitates opposition to the centre (11 p204) and a state of in-betweenness. Her realisation—"Everything I could see made me feel I would never be part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in" (1 p101)—highlights how her oppositional gaze enables her to critically engage with and destabilise dominant ideologies.

Kincaid's critique of colonial beauty standards in *Lucy* is not an isolated theme but rather part of a broader literary interrogation of colonial legacies, identity formation, and resistance—a project that spans multiple works. In *Annie John* (1985), Kincaid similarly explores the psychological and emotional toll

of Eurocentric beauty ideals, particularly through the protagonist's complex and often fraught relationship with her mother, a figure who embodies both love and colonial authority. Much like Lucy, Annie experiences a deep sense of alienation as she becomes increasingly aware of how colonialism has shaped Caribbean womanhood, reinforcing beauty standards that privilege whiteness and European femininity. The mother-daughter dynamic in *Annie John* reflects the internalisation of colonial values, mirroring Lucy's own struggle to reject inherited ideologies and forge an independent identity.

Beyond individual narratives, *A Small Place* (1988) expands Kincaid's critique from the personal to the explicitly political, offering a scathing examination of colonialism's enduring grip on Antigua. While Lucy operates through a deeply subjective, character-driven lens, *A Small Place* functions as an unfiltered polemic against the lingering economic and psychological structures of colonial rule. Kincaid's rhetorical style in *A Small Place*—marked by direct address, irony, and scornful wit—parallels Lucy's own sharp observational gaze, reinforcing the idea that oppositional looking is both an act of defiance and a means of reclaiming agency. In both works, Kincaid foregrounds the impact of racialised beauty norms, linking them to larger mechanisms of colonial control that dictate how bodies are perceived, valued, and disciplined. Through Lucy's gaze, Kincaid critiques the enduring impact of colonial ideologies, urging readers to reconsider how beauty, race, and power intersect in postcolonial identity formation.

One of the most paramount examples of Lucy's outsider perspective emerges in her perception of Mariah's beauty. She describes Mariah's physical appearance: "She looked so beautiful ... with her pale-yellow skin and yellow hair, and she looked blessed, no blemish or mark of any kind on her cheek or anywhere else" (1 p24). Through her position as an observer, Lucy engages in acts of looking and revision (8 p128). Initially, Lucy seems to internalise colonial beauty standards, wherein lighter skin tones were idealised, and the White Caucasian body became the model of beauty (16 p159). Scholars argue that colonialism not only imposed political control but also redefined aesthetics, associating whiteness with power, desirability, and moral superiority (17 p392). The perpetuation of Eurocentric beauty standards in colonised societies resulted in the marginalisation of darker-skinned individuals, particularly women, whose worth was often measured against these racialised ideals (18 p218).

Lucy's awareness of these beauty hierarchies is further emphasised in her gaze upon Mariah's blue eyes:

She looked at me, and her blue eyes (which I would have found beautiful even if I hadn't read millions of books in which blue eyes were always accompanied by the word 'beautiful') grew dim as she slowly closed the lids over them, and bright again as she opened them wide and then wider. (1 p37)

Lucy's reflection—'even if I hadn't read millions of books'—highlights her awareness of the ways in which colonial beauty standards are constructed and perpetuated through cultural narratives. By consciously distinguishing between her personal perception and the imposed ideal, Lucy positions herself as a critical spectator, refusing to passively internalise the colonial discourse. This act of looking, analysing, and deconstructing is an act of resistance, allowing Lucy to interrogate and ultimately reject the colonial discourse that frames whiteness as superior.

Scholars argue that Western beauty industries and media have historically privileged lighter skin tones, thin facial features, and straight hair, reinforcing colonial aesthetic norms (17 p6-7). The global skin-lightening industry, for instance, is a direct consequence of these historical power dynamics, promoting the notion that lighter skin equates to higher social status and desirability (17 p9); (18 p218). Similarly, Hall (1995) argues that representations of women in Western media continue to elevate Eurocentric beauty ideals, marginalising darker-skinned women. This phenomenon has been widely critiqued in contemporary Black feminist literature, including works by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and by Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), both of which expose the psychological damage inflicted by internalised colonial beauty norms.

Notably Lucy's oppositional gaze extends beyond admiration of White beauty to actively reinterpret and critique the privilege that underlies it (8 p128). This is particularly evident when she critiques Mariah's untouched and unchallenged life:

She acted as if she had never quarreled with anyone over a man or over anything, would never have to quarrel at all, had never done anything wrong and had never been to jail, had never had to leave anywhere for any reason other than a feeling that had come over her. (1 p24)

This passage contrasts Lucy's own reality with that of Mariah's uncomplicated existence. In Lucy's world, Black women, like her mother, must endure struggles that White women such as Mariah are exempt from. The phrase "would never have to quarrel at all" underscores Mariah's racial privilege, reinforcing how whiteness shields individuals from structural oppression. Furthermore, the phrase "had never had to leave anywhere for any reason" emphasises Lucy's position as an observer, allowing her to critique the obliviousness of White women to systemic inequalities.

Lucy's critical gaze is also directed at Mariah's friend Dinah:

She was very beautiful, and it mattered a great deal to her ... I could see that Dinah was attached to her beauty: she stroked her hair, from the crown of her head all the way down, constantly, she would put hands to her mouth, not in modesty but as a gesture to draw attention to her lips, which were perfectly shaped, the sort of lips used in advertisements for lipstick. (1 p55)

By aligning Dinah's gestures with beauty advertisements, Kincaid invites readers to question how media perpetuates Eurocentric ideals.

Lucy's oppositional gaze disrupts these portrayals, compelling the reader to critically reassess what is considered "beautiful" and why. Her rejection of these ideals is explicitly stated: "I did not like this kind of woman" (1 p55). This observation transcends personal preference; it represents a broader critique of the constructed nature of beauty under colonialism. While Dinah embodies the traditional beauty standard reinforced by Western advertising, Lucy refuses to validate or conform to it. Instead, she looks deeper, questioning the authenticity of colonial beauty ideals:

It would never have occurred to her that I had sized her up immediately, that I viewed her as a cliché, a something not to be, a something to rise above [. . .] a woman in love with another woman's life, not in a way that inspires imitation but in a way that inspires envy. (1 p56)

Through this critical stance, Lucy's oppositional gaze does more than resist; it actively deconstructs dominant representations of women and questions the motivations behind them. Lucy's preoccupation with women's appearances could, at first glance, be interpreted as internalised patriarchy or colonialism, potentially reinforcing the sexualisation of women.

However, Kincaid gradually reveals that Lucy's scrutiny is not limited to women. As we become more familiar with her oppositional gaze, it becomes clear that Lucy applies the same critical perspective to male characters, demonstrating that her interrogation of power, privilege, and beauty transcends gender.

Lucy's preoccupation with women's appearance could be misinterpreted as an example of internalised patriarchy and colonialism, resulting in the sexualisation of women. However, Lucy's attention to detail is not solely limited to women. As we become more familiar with her oppositional gaze, Kincaid reveals that Lucy has similar critical perspectives on males' physical appearance.

A distinguishing feature of Lucy's gaze is her fragmentation of female/male bodies into parts. This close reading of the body is employed as a technique to disturb gender and racial binary oppositions. For instance, Lucy is sexually involved with several Black and White lovers. Each time she discusses her sexual relations, she provides us with a detailed description of her lover while placing them in her interrogation and revealing her past. For example, Lucy recollects Tanner, the boy with whom she shed her virginal status when she was only fourteen:

At fourteen, I discovered that a tongue had no real taste. I was sucking the tongue of a boy named Tanner, and I was sucking his tongue because I had liked the way his fingers looked on the keys of the piano as he played it, and I liked the way he looked from the back as he walked across the pasture. I liked the way behind his ears smell. (1 p43)

Lucy focuses on the way the tongue tastes and makes her feel while locating it in the food culture of "cow tongue" (1 p43). Similarly, Lucy introduces Hugh to the readers by vividly describing each body part of his that she likes: "His name was Hugh. I liked the sound of his voice ... I liked his eyes – they were plain brown. I liked his mouth and imagined it kissing me everywhere ... I liked his hands and imagined them caressing me everywhere" (1 p64–65). However, despite admiring his features, Lucy suggests that for her, Hugh's most attractive quality is that he reminds her of her outsider positioning:

Isn't it the most blissful thing in the world to be away from everything you have ever known, to be so far away that you don't even know yourself anymore and you're not sure you ever want to come back to all the things you're a part of? (1 p64)

Hugh's earlier words serve as a reminder of Lucy's position as an outsider, something she has acknowledged herself by stating, "[I] knew so well just what he meant" (1 p64). Hugh's words make him more appealing to Lucy as they begin to share an intimate moment. In another scene, she describes Paul's gaze as follows: "Paul's eyes, sparkling blue light, were trained on me; his eyes reminded me of a marble I used to have, my lucky marble I used to have, the one that, when I played with it, always won" (1 p96). Lucy then confirms that "I looked at this man whose eyes reminded me of my winning marble" (1 p96). Thus, Lucy observes Paul's eyes while he is looking at her. This situates them in her past experiences and invites the reader to engage in the act of looking with her. Here, she is evidently in control of his gaze.

In analysing this scene between Paul and Lucy, Dasi explains Lucy's gaze as follows:

Lucy's relationship with her lover Paul plays out another shift in the colonial gaze. He gives her an exotic position from which she watches the other guests leave his party. From this position, she too is able to see, in the same way as she is viewed, through reflections of an ethnocentric gaze. (14 p6)

Similar to this study, Dasi's reading emphasises Lucy's exotic (outsider) position and places her gaze in the colonial discourse. However, while Dasi treated Lucy and Paul's gazes as equal, this study analyses Lucy's objectification of Paul's gaze as something that strips it from its power, thus suggesting an oppositional gaze. Moreover, in her later interaction with Paul, he shows a photograph of Lucy "naked from the waist up"; this is when she "grew tired of him" and begins to deconstruct their relationship (14 p153). While Paul attempts to objectify Lucy under his colonial gaze by showing her naked photo, she uses her oppositional gaze to deconstruct his attempt by stripping naked his inner thoughts. For example, she exposes his self-centred nature by narrating an incident in which he falsely interprets her song about love as a declaration of love for him, which progresses into a deeper examination of him: "I knew him better than he realized ... he loved ruins, he loved the past but only if it had ended on a sad tone ... I could have told him that I have sized him up, but it was not as if he were going to matter to me" (14 p153).

Thereafter, she narrates them eating together at a restaurant and then going back to her apartment, saying that she does not "think of it as home, only as the place where I now lived" (14 p154). Accordingly, Lucy's relationship with Paul not only highlights the complexity of the colonial discourse but also

underscores her journey towards self-discovery and detachment.

However, through her oppositional gaze, Lucy's investigation of the world goes beyond gender and race divisions to encompass class opposition. In one particular scene, Lucy highlights the acute presentation of the intersectionality of class and race divisions. During her train journey with Mariah and her children, while in the dining car, Lucy observes that White individuals are the ones being served, whereas the Black individuals are working as servers. She articulates this observation with the statement, "The other people sitting down to eat dinner all looked like Mariah's relatives; the people waiting on them all looked like mine" (1 p32). Thus, Lucy's keen observations and critical commentary provide a profound insight into the complex interplay of race, class, and identity in the society she navigates.

These observations demonstrate Lucy's awareness of her outsider position in relation to various kinds of privilege. Ultimately, by positioning Lucy as an outsider, Kincaid's narrative reveals her oppositional gaze, which is a powerful tool for challenging the power dynamics and rigid limitations of race, gender, and class. Consequently, by centring Lucy's gaze in her narrative, Kincaid diminishes the false representation of blackness/femaleness as passive and whiteness/maleness as active and invites the readers to experience the story in a way that disrupts traditional perceptions and challenges societal norms.

3.2 Lucy's oppositional gaze and self-definition

Lucy's self-definition extends throughout the narrative. However, she ensures that she brings a new self-definition to light. According to Patricia Hill Collins, Black women "deconstructed the term woman by using her own lived experiences to challenge it" (19 p99). This resonates strongly with Lucy's attempts to define herself by emphasising her lived experiences: "I was not a man; I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant" (19 p92). Lucy's assertion of being a 'young woman from the fringes of the world' underscores the perspective she brings as a woman and an outsider. The symbolic act of 'wrapping around my shoulders the mantle of a servant' adds another layer to her self-definition, as she consciously assumes a role that has often been relegated to the background, guiding the readers' gaze towards the marginalised working class.

Within the realm of the oppositional gaze, the process of invention takes on a profound significance for Black

women as they shape their identities. Lucy, embodying creative self-invention, asserts that "I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition" (1 p131).

Drawing a parallel between Lucy's inventive process and the art of a painter, Kincaid sheds light on the intuitive nature of her self-definition. Just as a painter draws from their inner emotions and instincts to bring a canvas to life, Lucy defines herself by tapping into her innate understanding and feelings. The absence of precision and calculation underscores the organic nature of her self-exploration, thus emphasising her authenticity.

Lucy continues to identify herself: "I had memory, I had anger, I had despair" (1 p131). This statement "comes at a moment when it's especially clear that Kincaid's protagonist has chosen a particular identity for herself" (20 p156). As Collins asserts, "the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects" (19 p114). Through her creative inventiveness, Lucy not only defies the coloniser/colonised, male/female gaze discourse but also asserts her power as a human subject.

4. Concluding Thoughts on Lucy's Oppositional Gaze

This study analysed Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* through bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze, demonstrating how Kincaid utilizes Lucy's gaze as a narrative device to invite readers into an active engagement with looking relations. Through her acts of resistance, revision, interrogation, and invention (8 p128), Lucy's gaze deconstructs dominant discourses, challenging both patriarchal structures and the lingering effects of colonialism. However, Kincaid's portrayal of Lucy's oppositional gaze extends beyond individual resistance, functioning as a critical lens through which broader conversations on identity, agency, and power can unfold.

Through its narrative construction, Kincaid transforms *Lucy* into "a critical space where the binary opposition was continually deconstructed" (8 p123-124), encouraging readers to not only witness but actively participate in the discourse of the oppositional gaze. This process challenges the binary oppositions of race, gender, and class, demonstrating how literature can be a powerful vehicle for fostering critical consciousness, self-definition, and social change. As the reader's perspective intertwines with Lucy's, the novel

transcends its immediate narrative, making the oppositional gaze not merely an individual act of defiance but a collective tool for interrogating dominant ideologies.

While hooks originally theorised the oppositional gaze to deconstruct visual representations of Black women, this study extends her framework into the realm of literature, applying it to a narrative of Black female immigrant experience with strong autobiographical resonances. By doing so, this study expands the scope and applicability of the oppositional gaze, illustrating how marginalised voices secure empowerment, autonomy, and agency through storytelling.

Future research could further explore reader engagement with Lucy's oppositional gaze, employing reader-response studies, surveys, or interviews to assess how readers—across diverse backgrounds—respond to Lucy's perspective and its potential influence on their perceptions of race, gender, and power. Additionally, comparative studies could examine how the oppositional gaze functions in the works of other African-American and Caribbean women writers, including Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison, revealing commonalities and divergences in the use of gaze as a tool for self-definition and resistance.

Moreover, while hooks initially conceptualised the oppositional gaze in relation to Black women, future scholarship could explore how women from other marginalised communities employ their gaze in literature. Investigating how the oppositional gaze operates across diverse cultural, geographic, and historical contexts would provide a richer understanding of how women's agency is asserted through acts of looking and self-representation beyond the African American and Caribbean literary canon. Ultimately, such studies would contribute to the broader discourse on intersectionality, visual politics, and feminist literary critique, further demonstrating the enduring relevance of the oppositional gaze in contemporary discussions of identity and representation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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