



## The Search For An Identity in Consecutive Verses in Jamaica Kincaid's *At The Bottom Of The River*

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### ABSTRACT

Jamaica Kincaid's first book and first short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) is a work which offers the reader a pithy and lyrical style by which the author reflects the merging of the real and imaginary world of a young Antiguan girl growing into adulthood. The curt stories in the collection are inter-related since they relate to some slices of the life of an unnamed female narrator who is the main character in all the stories. The aim of this article is to depict the most significant features which are believed to prove that the work can bear the epithet 'prose poem'. During the study on this research paper, it has been observed that the work can also be considered to be a type of 'poetic prose'. Yet, considering that both 'prose poem' and 'poetic prose' are close to each other in the sense that both of them are the genres "jumping the fence" — a phrase used, here, metaphorically and in the context of genres free from the restraints of poetry and prose—; in other words, both genres exceed the boundaries of both poetry and prose, they are hybrid genres and therefore, it has been seen no drawbacks of analyzing Kincaid's collection in the perspective of 'prose poem'. Briefly, the aim of this study is to reveal the poetic features in the work written in prose, through which one would be able to define it as a 'prose poem'. When the images, metaphors, similes and symbols are explored in the stories in the collection, it has been observed that although these figures of speech have different functions, they mainly serve to illustrate the main character's quest for identity and her depiction of her self which she gains at the end. For this reason, the study concurrently highlights the theme of search for an identity which is revealed in Kincaid's book by means of the use of the figures of speech such as images and symbols.

**Keywords:** *Prose Poetry, At the Bottom of the River, Jamaica Kincaid, The Search For An Identity*

## Jamaica Kincaid'in *At The Bottom Of The River* Adlı Eserinde Ardışık Dizelerde Kimlik Arayışı

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### Öz

Jamaica Kincaid'in ilk kitabı ve ilk kısa öykü koleksiyonu *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), okuyucuya, çocukluktan yetişkinliğe doğru yol alan genç bir Antiguan kızın gerçek ve hayali dünyasının birleşimini yansıtan özlü ve lirik tarzda bir eserdir. Derlemedeki kısa öyküler, aynı zamanda tüm öykülerin ana karakteri olan isimsiz bir kadın anlatıcının hayatından bazı kesitler sunduğu için birbiriyle ilişkilidir. Bu makalenin amacı, eserin 'nesir şiir' sıfatını taşıyabileceğini kanıtladığına inanılan önemli özelliklerini ortaya koymaktır. Bu araştırma makalesi üzerinde yapılan çalışma sırasında, eserin bir tür 'şiiresel nesir' olarak değerlendirilebileceği görülmüştür. Ancak hem 'nesir şiir' hem de 'şiiresel nesir'in her ikisinin de "çitten atlayan" türler olması — ki bu tabir burada metaforik olarak kullanılmış olup, her iki türün de şiir ve nesrin kısıtlamalarından arınmış olduklarını ifade etmek için kullanılmıştır — bakımından birbirine yakın olduğu; başka bir deyişle, her iki türün de hem şiirin hem de nesrin sınırlarını aştığı ve dolayısıyla melez türler oldukları göz önüne alındığından, Kincaid'in kısa öykü derlemesinin 'nesir şiir' perspektifinde incelenmesinde bir sakınca görülmemiştir. Kısaca bu çalışmanın amacı düzyazı olarak kaleme alınan eserdeki manzum özellikleri ortaya çıkararak onu 'nesir şiir' türünde yazılmış bir eser olarak tanımlamaktır. Koleksiyondaki öykülerde yer alan imgeler, eğretilmeler, teşbihler ve semboller incelendiğinde, bu söz sanatlarının değişik fonksiyonları olduğu gözlenmekle birlikte daha çok ana karakterin kimlik arayışını ve sonunda kazandığı benlik tasvirini resmetmeye hizmet ettiği gözlemlenmiştir. Bu nedenle çalışma aynı zamanda Kincaid'in kitabında imge ve sembol gibi söz sanatlarının kullanımıyla ortaya koyduğu kimlik arayışı temasını da vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Nesir Şiiri, At the Bottom of the River, Jamaica Kincaid, Kimlik Arayışı*

*What is poetry and if you know  
what poetry is what is prose.*  
Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar"

### Prose Poetry: The Definition and History of the Genre

It is generally known that it is difficult to define poetry because it is a very comprehensive term, the definition of which changes within various periods of literary history, and therefore, should be considered in the light of particular examples in different literary eras. Thus there are many definitions of poetry, none of which denotes completely what poetry is and almost all of which are vague and fall short of being all-inclusive and the final one. Having an oxymoronic title, prose poetry is equally hard to define since it has borrowed from different genres — mainly from prose and poetry — in different literary periods. Besides, many critics and writers have differing insights about this genre, which makes it difficult to have an objective and all-inclusive definition. It can nevertheless be attempted to define. In its simplest form, prose poetry may be defined as a type making use of poetic devices such as alliteration, repetition, rhyme and other figures of speech but written without the line breaks associated with poetry. In this respect, prose poetry may be considered to be a combination of both prose and poetry. It is written in the form of prose, that is, on the surface there are sentences coming after another and constituting paragraphs or sections in the text but no lines and no breaks between the sentences; however, it has many aspects attributed to poetry and through which poets compose their poems. At this point it may be useful to remark that in English the term 'prose' means the ordinary form of spoken or written language and is used as a noun to denote the language that is used in such works as novels, short stories, dramatic works and all the genres included in non-imaginative literature (i.e. every piece of writing that is not written in verse). 'Prose' is also used as an adjective to denote those types written in prose. In the area of poetry, the case is different. That is, there are two different words, 'poem' and 'verse', denoting the type of the literary work and the type of the language that is used in poetry, respectively. So, when defining prose poetry, it should not be forgotten that the term 'poem' actually implies the name of the genre. 'Prose' is used as an adjective defining the word 'poem' in this two-word noun. So, 'prose poem' is a kind of poem that is not written in verse, rather in prose. The definitions of prose poem appear in different ways in the works of critics and scholars. Referring to the generic qualities of the genre, Peter Johnson, in the "Introduction" to *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, defines prose poetry. He draws the boundaries of prose poem by referring to its differentiating qualities:

*PROSE POEM (poem in prose). A composition able to have any or all features of the lyric, except that it is put on the page — though not conceived of — as prose. It differs from poetic prose in that it is short and compact,*

*from free verse in that it has no line breaks, from a short prose passage in that it has, usually, more pronounced rhythm, sonorous effects, imagery, and density of expression. It may contain even inner rhyme and metrical runs. Its length, generally, is from half a page (one or two paragraphs) to three or four pages, i.e., of the average lyrical poem (1992: ii).*

The poetry critic for the *Sunday Times* Jeremy Noel-Tod defines prose poem focusing on its expansiveness:

*"Without line breaks, the prose poem is free [...] to extend across and down the page as far as the printer's margins will allow. And it is in this freedom that we can locate the distinctive feeling to which the prose poem gives form: expansiveness. Unchecked by metre or rhyme, prose poetry flows by soft return from margin to margin, filling the empty field of the page" (2017: 17)*

In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, it is characterized by its formal qualities: "Its principal characteristics are those that would insure unity even in brevity and poetic quality even without the line breaks of free verse: high patterning, rhythmic and figural repetition, sustained intensity, and compactness" (1993: 977). M. H. Abrams's definition of prose poem is worth recalling: "Prose poems are densely compact, pronouncedly rhythmic, and highly sonorous compositions which are written as a continuous sequence of sentences without line breaks" (1999: 247). J. A. Cuddon differentiating between "poetic prose" and "prose poem" gives a definition of the latter in the following excerpt: "A composition printed as prose but distinguished by elements common in poetry such as elaborately contrived rhythms, figures of speech, rhyme, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance and startling images" (1984: 536).

Cuddon's description of poetic prose, which is actually close to the definition of prose poem and which, I think, does not need to be regarded as very much different from prose poem, may also be helpful to elucidate the genre, prose poetry. The author identifies poetic prose as a type of prose which "approximates to verse in the use of rhythm, perhaps even a kind of meter, in the elaborate and ornate use of language, and especially in the use of figurative devices like onomatopoeia, assonance and metaphor". (1984: 520).

Martin Gray's description of prose poem brings forward the lyrical aspects of the genre. From Gray's perspective, prose poem is a "short work of poetic prose, resembling a poem because of its ornate language and imagery, and because it stands on its own, and lacks narrative: like a lyric poem but not subjected to the

*patterning of metre*" (cited in Deville, 1998: 2). The hybridity of prose poem is given by the scholar Huda J. Fakhreddine in the following lines: "*the purpose of the prose poem is poetry, but not all its elements are necessarily those we have thus far associated with poetry. In writing the prose poem, prose moves away from itself toward the poem but does not arrive at it*" (2021: 14). Thus it can be observed that all these definitions privilege the combination of the qualities of both prose and poetry in prose poem. The other common denominator of these definitions is that prose poem does not look like a poem in its written form in the traditional sense; rather, it is close to prose in appearance. That is, it is put on the page as prose; it is written in sentences and paragraphs, rather than lines. It should also be noted that prose poem is lyrical, yet it can be narrative or dramatic. Consequently, prose poetry can be conceived of as a literary form having almost all the qualities that are attributed to prose and all the qualities that are attributed to poetry except for the line breaks. Yet it should be recalled that prose poem is a subversive genre in the sense that it distorts at least two qualities of prose and poetry — for instance; the features of prose being close to the spoken language and of poetry being composed of lines. Johnson can be quoted here to see the slippery ground of prose poetry and its distortion of the boundaries of both prose and poetry:

*So what is prose poetry? To me, it has affinities with black humor. Just as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels. Prose poets, no matter how different in sensibilities, wander on this uncertain terrain. It's a land of paradoxes and oxymorons, welcoming the sleight of word artist* (1992: iii).

When the history of prose poem is investigated, one encounters the fact that Charles Baudelaire acknowledges that *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1842) written by Aloysius Bertrand inspired him to write his prose poems in *Le Spleen de Paris* (2000: 8). It should be pointed out that Edgar Allan Poe used the genre name in the title of his essay-like work *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1848), in which he discusses man's relationship to God and the universe. Likewise, Baudelaire also used the term prose poem in the subtitle of his *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose* (1862), which is accepted as a pioneering publication in the rise and development of prose poetry. Margueritte S. Murphy rightly classifies Baudelaire as the first "*exponent and practitioner of the prose poem*" and defines prose poetry as a hybrid and subversive genre because "*it arose as a poetic genre [...] to take poetry as far beyond its conventional boundaries as possible*" and it was "*formed in violation of genre, a seeming hybrid, in name a contradiction in terms*" (1992: 1). According to the author, prose poem subverts not only "*the conventions of verse but also of prose as a basic distinguishing feature of the genre [...] conventions of its own*" due to "*its marginality, its situation on the 'borderline of prose' [...], it must*

*continually subvert prosaic conventions in order to establish itself as authentically 'other'*" (Murphy, 1992: 3).

With the rise of the prose poem, the language of poetry, i.e. verse, has become a vehicle in the fictional works such as the novel and short story as it has been in the other two main genres in imaginative literature, drama (esp. the classical drama) and poetry. Though prose poem is considered to be a hybrid genre, one cannot deny the richness that it has brought to literature. When he was thinking about writing pieces looking like prose but sounding like a poem, Charles Baudelaire probably tried to transcend the orthodox distinctions between prose and verse by ensueing a sense of freedom in his art. He enthusiastically explains the facilities of the combination of poetry and prose in a letter addressed to the editor Arsene Houssaye, which also seems to constitute the Introduction to his book *Le Spleen de Paris*. The beginning of the letter reads:

*"Dear friend, I send you a work no one can claim not to make head or tail of, since, on the contrary, there is at once both tail and head, alternating and reciprocal. Consider, I beg you, how admirably convenient this combination makes it for each and all – you, me, the reader. We may stop whenever we like, I my daydream, you the manuscript, the reader his reading – whose stubborn will I would not hold to the unbroken thread of some superfluous plot [...] Which of us has not, in his ambitious days, dreamt the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, the flip-flops of consciousness"* (editor's emphasis) (Baudelaire, 2009: 9).

It seems that the idea of prose poetry attracted Baudelaire's interest because he would feel free in writing, not strained by the boundaries of neither verse nor prose. This leads us to Jacques Derrida's idea that the sharp lines between genres are not actually so sharp as they are supposed to be. In "The Law of Genre" Derrida deconstructs the meaning of "genre" stating that genres violate each other's boundaries because there is actually a mutual permeability between genres and thus "the law of genre" is a phenomenon whose meaning is slippery. In addition, it subverts the ideas that genres have their own peculiar and distinguishing characteristics and that any genre is limited and determined by certain rules (Derrida, 1980). Prose poetry may be regarded as an example to Derrida's deconstruction of a pure genre which is not violated or distorted by another genre. In other words, his theory can be applied to prose and poetry and thus it can be claimed that prose poetry violates the boundaries and distorts the qualities of both prose and poetry and yet somehow, the outcome of the mutual violation and distortion between prose and poetry is the rise of another genre: prose poetry.

### Jamaica Kincaid and the Genre of Prose Poetry

Extending the boundaries of both prose and poetry, prose poetry seems to be a convenient and feasible genre for the authors who are in search of freedom in writing

and of the combination of prose and poetry as is the case in Jamaica Kincaid. It should also be noted that authors write prose poems in order to achieve an effective way of telling the things and thus to raise an emotional effect in the reader. It is likely that Kincaid, who has generally a pithy and lyrical style, produced her work *At the Bottom of the River* as a prose poem in order to create this special effect. Harold Bloom, censuring the critics' and academics' treatment of Kincaid's works, points out this and similar features of the author's writing and writes: "*Most of the published criticism of Jamaica Kincaid has stressed her political and social concerns, somewhat at the expense of her literary qualities*" (2008: 1). Likewise, Jana Evans Brazier referring to the stories in *At the Bottom of the River* notes that they "*have not garnered the critical attention that their lyrical and poetic brilliance deserve*" (2009: 23). The present study aims to fill this gap.

Caribbean novelist Jamaica Kincaid, who was born Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson, is a significant prolific writer who contributed many novels, short stories and numerous non-fiction works to not only Caribbean literature but also the contemporary literature throughout the world. A native of Antigua and Barbuda, the twin-island nation, Kincaid moved to New York at a young age — when she was at the age of seventeen to live, in Kincaid's own words, her "*prescribed life as a servant*" ("*Jamaica Kincaid on writing, her life and the New Yorker*"). This was a move due to the poverty of the family; her mother, who removed Jamaica from school when she was sixteen, sent her to New York City to work as an au pair (Levintova, 2013: no pagination). It is also known that "*[a]lthough much of her writing concerns itself with the West Indies, Kincaid did not return to the island where she was born until nineteen years after she left*" and she "*has received a good deal of attention and critical acclaim*" (Andrews et.al., 2001: 245). After *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid wrote three novels, (*Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). After the publication of her second novel, *Annie John*, *A Small Place* (1988), which is a non-fiction work about her birthplace Antigua, was published. Along with her novels and non-fiction work, she wrote many short stories, short sketches and columns in *The New Yorker*. In *My Brother*, which is a memoir written in 1977, Kincaid reflects on the death of her brother who was diagnosed with AIDS, and their relationship.

### A Brief Look at *At the Bottom of the River*

*At the Bottom of the River* occupies the first place in Kincaid's writing. The book containing ten pieces is a short story collection, seven stories of which were originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1983 (Andrews et. al., 2001: 245). Kincaid was awarded the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters for *At the Bottom of the River* in the following year. The stories in the collection seem to be individual stories, yet the connections between them are striking because in each story, some parts of the life of the

same main character are given, which interrelates the stories. The slices from her life are given starting from her young age by means of the subjective reflections of her particular experiences. The stories in *At the Bottom of the River* are narrated by the unnamed Antiguan young girl and touch on various themes ranging from mother-daughter relationship, the imposition of the gender roles, social and cultural boundaries and the search for identity to the feeling of suppression and the painful growth of a young girl and sexual fluidity.

### Analysis of *At the Bottom of the River* as a Prose Poem

Our attempt, in the discussion which follows, will be to examine the features that make us regard *At the Bottom of the River* as a prose poem. The discussion will begin with the analysis of the first story in the collection, which has been most anthologized and commented on.

The first thing that attracts the reader's attention about the style of the story "Girl" is that although it is a short short story, it was written as a body of a long text constituted by a single sentence punctuated mostly with semicolons; that is, the only full stop used in the story is the one that ends the story. So the whole story seems to be one long sentence, which is not a common way of writing fiction. Kincaid corrupts standard punctuation rules in prose in order to expose the reader a long series of instructions and rules that the mother gives her daughter. In other words, Kincaid's creation of such a style may be related to the effect that she wanted to create in the reader. One of the main themes in "Girl" is the mother-daughter relationship, which is a complicated one, and in which the mother's dominance over the daughter is felt much, and under which the daughter feels pressurized. Throughout the story the reader hears the Caribbean mother's instructions and advice to her daughter. They are partly about how to perform household chores and partly about behaving like a lady and being a good woman. As an instance the opening part of the story can be referred to: "*Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off*" (Kincaid, 2002: 6; All future references will be to this edition and will appear within parentheses in the text) It is apparent that the mother tries to raise her daughter in the way that her daughter will meet the expectations of the society from a woman. She pressurizes on her daughter and forces the girl to be the woman that she does not want to be. In Denise de Caires Narain's words, Kincaid offers, in the story,

*"A definition of what it means to be a girl which, in the staccato list of prohibitions and prescriptions issuing from the mother, suggests that becoming a "lady" — as opposed to becoming a "slut" — involves a precarious balancing act in which the child must constantly police her sexuality and learn to service the needs of men. This story is punctuated by variations on*

*the mother's warning against falling into "sluthood."* (2002: 337)

Throughout the story, it is observed that the mother exerts her power as a dominant figure over her daughter. The mother's directions and warnings actually define what a woman is and what the role of a woman is in the Caribbean society. The womanhood offered by the mother seems to have been adopted by the mother herself, who can be the representative of the womanhood offered also by the society. The mother's directions sound like an endless list of instructions. The girl is the interlocutor of the mother's speech. Twice in the story, the girl attempts to defend herself but it is likely that either she is not heard by her mother as the mother frets about her daughter or the mother is indifferent towards her daughter. As the girl's feigned attempt to object to her mother sounds like a trivial speech in the narrative in which the mother's voice is predominant, it is apparent that the girl's speech is not so powerful to interrupt a series of instructions given by the mother. It is not difficult to imagine the situation in which the girl is. She is overburdened and overwhelmed with her mother's directions and rules. Obviously, the girl is expected to conform to her mother's instructions, do the chores in the way that she is taught and be a good girl, and as such, she will meet her mother's expectations. It is likely that Kincaid wanted to create the feeling of being overwhelmed in the reader as well. While reading the whole story, in which a flow of instructions and counsel is heard, one understands the emotional distress of the girl facing her mother's endless directions. The putative influence pervading the story is exactly felt by the reader.

The poetic character of *At The Bottom of the River* may be studied through some of its stylistic features. The most striking stylistic features observed throughout the stories in the book are the use of short sentences and word repetitions. Almost the whole book is composed of short sentences that are made up of subject and verb; in some sentences the subject and verb combination is accompanied by either an object or an adverb or both of them. Kincaid also constructed one word sentences. For instance; *"A mountain. A valley. The shade. The sun"*, (13). These are the opening sentences of the story "The Yard", which describe the environment. The use of conjunctions (except for 'and') is rare. To put it differently, conjunctions, if not non-existent, are not very much. One can hardly encounter compound sentences, complex sentences and compound complex sentences in the book. It can be observed that Kincaid's use of short sentences highlights the poetic quality of the book. It also adds musicality and rhythm to the expressions. There are so many examples to short sentences and word repetitions throughout the book that we can be hesitant about which one to cite. Here it will be appropriate to give just an example to the use of short sentences. The following extract taken from the initial part of the single paragraph constituting the whole story in "The Letter From Home" is just one example to many parts and paragraphs

containing short sentences throughout the book. Although the sentences here are separated with commas rather than full stops, each of them can be considered to be statements:

*"I milked the cows, I churned the butter, I stored the cheese, I baked the bread, I brewed the tea, I washed the clothes, I dressed the children; the cat meowed, the dog barked, the horse neighed, the mouse squeaked, the fly buzzed, the goldfish living in a bowl stretched its jaws; the door banged shut, the stairs creaked, the fridge hummed, the curtains billowed up, the pot boiled, the gas hissed through the stove, the tree branches heavy with snow crashed against the roof; my heart beat loudly thud! thud!, tiny beads of water gathered on my nose, my hair went limp, my waist grew folds, I shed my skin; lips have trembled, tears have flowed, cheeks have puffed, stomachs have twisted with pain;"* (22)

In the section quoted above, the musical tone of the expression, which is provided by means of both the use of short sentences and rhythmical sounds of words, is also heard. This endless series of actions made up of short expressions implies the idea that all these actions are fulfilled by the mother and they take a great place in the girl's mind. It is also observed in the book that short sentences have sometimes been formed with different arrangements and word usages as is seen in the excerpt below:

*"My skin is now coarse. What pity. What sorrow. I have made a list. I have measured everything. I have not lied. But the light. What of the light? Splintered. Died"* (13-14)

Word repetition *"serves a variety of purposes"* and it *"functions as a form of emphasis"* (Quinn, 2006: 359). Word repetition, which can also be used to create and accelerate the rhythm in the expression, may be examined in three ways qua simple repetition, repetition with variation and repetition with incrementation. Considering the poetic quality of Kincaid's book, it can be claimed that repetition functions as rhythmical as well as emphatic quality. Below are excerpts from different stories in Kincaid's book; the first two exemplify simple repetition, the second two, repetition with variation and the last three, incremental repetition:

Simple repetition: The first example: *"I have frightened you? Again, you are frightened of me?" "You have frightened me. I am very frightened of you"* (16).

Simple repetition: The second example:

*"wild and sour berries; wild and sweet berries; pink and blue-black berries; fields with purple flowers, blue flowers, yellow flowers; a long road; a long and curved road; a car with a collapsible top; big laughs; big laughing in the bushes; no, not the bushes – the barn; no, not the barn – the house; no, not the house – the trees; no, not the trees, no;"* (20-21).

It can also be observed that Kincaid repeats a whole sentence on the same page in order to emphasize the feeling of recession: The sentence *"I sit on the porch facing*

*the mountains*" is used twice (18). The author creates similar sentences containing the same verb in different tenses for three times on the same page: "*I will sit on the porch facing the mountains*", "*I am the only person sitting on the porch*" and "*I am not sitting on the porch facing the mountains*" (18).

Repetition with variation: The first example:

*"There is the sound of a cricket, there is the sound of a church bell, there is the sound of this house creaking, that house creaking, and the other house creaking as they settle into the ground. There is the sound of a radio in the distance— a fisherman listening to merengue music. There is the sound of a man groaning in his sleep; there is the sound of a woman disgusted at the man groaning. There is the sound of the man stabbing the woman, the sound of her blood as it hits the floor, the sound of Mr. Straffee, the undertaker, taking her body away. There is the sound of her spirit back from the dead, looking at the man who used to groan; he is running a fever forever. There is the sound of a woman writing a letter; there is the sound of her pen nib on the white writing paper; there is the sound of the kerosene lamp dimming; there is the sound of her head aching"* (emphasis is mine) (8).

In this part, we can regard the '-ing' at the end of the verbs as a repetition that contributes to the musical tone of the expression.

Repetition with variation: The second example:

*"I have the most sensible small suitcase in New York.  
"I have the most sensible small car in New York.  
"I will put my sensible small suitcase in my sensible small car and drive on a sensible and scenic road to the country.  
"In the country, I live in a sensible house.  
"I am a sensible man"* (19).

Repetition with incrementation: The first example: "*Yes, that too. We prayed. But what did we pray for? We prayed to be saved. We prayed to be blessed. We prayed for long and happy lives for our children. And always we prayed to see the morning light*" (12). Repetition with incrementation: The second example: "*Perhaps I will take a nap. Perhaps I will take a long nap. Perhaps I will take a nice long nap. Perhaps, while taking my nap, I will have a dream, a dream in which I am not sitting on the porch facing the mountains*" (19). Repetition with incrementation: The third example: "*a long road; a long and curved road; a car with a collapsible top; big laughs; big laughing in the bushes; no, not the bushes*" (21). Consequently, it may be argued that looking for a profoundly effective tool and a subtle way to incorporate rhythm and musicality into her book, Kincaid employed repetitions of all kinds.

As the girl's story progresses, the reader sees that the girl is growing up. As the girl gets older, the poetic quality in her narrative provided by short sentences and repetitions is observed to fade a little and the expression moves away from verse and comes close to prose. Along with short and rhythmic sentences, we see longer

sentences, and the repetitions of words and phrases are reduced. For this reason, in the stories titled "Blackness", "My Mother" and "At the Bottom of the River", short sentences and repetitive expressions that bulk large in the previous sections are not used much. However, they are not non-existent.

Now it would be appropriate to look at some uses of the figures of speech throughout the stories, which add poetic nature to Kincaid's expressions. However, it should not be forgotten that Kincaid's stories in the collection do not contain all the figures of speech. Due to the length of the study, a few examples to each figure of speech (that is employed) would suffice.

Alliteration, which means the occurrence of the same letter or sound, usually a consonant, at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words, can be found in Kincaid's expressions in the book. Alliterations of "*broken bottles at the bottom*" (19), "*a big blue-breasted bird*" (21) and "*The stark, stony mountainous surface*" (25) are just three examples from the book. In the first phrase "b" and "t" are the alliterative sounds, in the second "b" is alliterative and in the third, the sound "s" is alliterative. It is obvious that the purpose of alliterations here is to provide an audible pulse that gives the expressions a lyrical effect and to establish the rhythm in the phrases. With its repetitive mode, alliteration is playful and musical, and it has a mnemonic quality. The alliterations taken from Kincaid's book might be thought to have been used to evoke a sense of rhythm and make the expressions memorable. Nevertheless, considering the fact that alliterations are not employed in literary works just for its aural qualities, the function of each alliteration should be explored in its own context. For example, the function of alliteration in "*a big blue-breasted bird*" (21) seems to be an emotive one as well as a lyrical one creating sounds pleasing. The narrator recalls, fondly, the place where she was born and the family house she was grown up. Kincaid creates an emotive effect and makes the reader feel some of the feelings that the girl feels. To examine all the functions of alliterations in the book would take a great place in this study; therefore, the example given above has been deemed sufficient.

Assonance, which can be defined as the repetition of the sound of a vowel or diphthong in nonrhyming stressed syllables near enough to each other for the echo to be discernible, can be found in the following expressions in the book; in the first and the second ones, the vowel "i" is repeated and in the third one, the vowel "o" is used repetitively: "*The two boys are fishing in Michigan, catching fish with live frogs*" (20), "*the twitter of a twittering bird is natural to a twittering bird. I can see with my own eyes the tree; it stands with limbs spread wide and laden with ripe fruit, its roots planted firmly in the rich soil,*" (35-36) and "*there comes a boy on horseback,*" (36). It is clear that the use of assonance in the segments above has given musicality and rhythm to the lines, which makes Kincaid's language in the book close to that of a poem. It should also be noted that assonance functions as the

agent to set the mood in the part it appears and to stimulate the reader's sensation. By means of assonances, Kincaid wants to evoke in the reader the feelings of the main character, who feels alienated in America when she works as an au-pair girl.

Cacophony or 'dissonance' is *"the opposite of euphony"* and it means the use of sounds that are unpleasant or harsh to the ear. Cuddon describes the term as in the following: *"harsh sounds are sometimes used deliberately by writers, especially poets, to achieve a particular effect"* (1984: 95). Cacophony is usually achieved by means of repeating such sounds as "s", "c" and "k". An example occurs in Kincaid's narrative: *"I scratch my scalp, I scratch my thighs"* (18). The cacophonous sounds in these sentences were created by the combination of two letters in each: "-sc" and "-ch". It is apparent that Kincaid created harsh-sounding sentences separated by a comma for musicality in her writing. It may also be argued that cacophony is used here to reflect the main character's boredom and frustration due to her departure from her hometown and the family.

Consonance is another figure of speech in which *"the close repetition of identical consonant sounds before and after different vowels"* (Cuddon, 1984: 153) occurs. In the following instance from Kincaid's book *"The green of the grass was green"* (37), consonance falls on the words 'green' and 'grass'. As a popular literary device, consonance is used to create a singsong quality in the language used. In the above expression, consonance seems to have a similar function.

Euphony meaning *"sweetness of sound"* in Greek is another figure of speech that is used in poetry. The term *"denotes pleasing, mellifluous sounds, usually produced by long vowels rather than consonants"* (Cuddon, 1984: 249). The following examples from the book are euphonic: *"I feel—oh, how I feel. I feel, I feel, I feel. I have no words right now for how I feel"* (18). *"Eventually, I wore myself out and sank into a deep, deep sleep, the only dreamless sleep I have ever had"* (30). Sometimes liquid consonants are considered to be euphonic because these sounds are pleasant to the ear as can be heard in the following part:

*"But things are so funny here."  
[...] "Aren't things funny here?"  
"Yes, things are funny here." (20)*

With the use of euphony, authors aim to create a part in their works that is pleasing to the ear, especially in the works that are written intended to be read aloud. Kincaid is likely to have wished to create such a part in her collection of stories in order to please her readers' ears.

Onomatopoeia is the use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions to which they refer. The term is also known as "echoism" and it *"designates a word or a combination of words, whose sound seems to resemble closely the sound it denotes"*

(Abrams, 1999: 199). In the following part that constitutes a part of a sentence, the formation and use of a word (in this case a verb) to imitate the sounds of waves is found: *"As the waves plop, plop against each other"* (31). Here onomatopoeic property of the language is observed to produce a particular sensory effect. It should be recalled that onomatopoeia also functions as an assistance for the author in his creation images without verbosity. Kincaid seems to have created an auditory image of the waves creating soft sounds in the example above.

In Kincaid's short story collection there appears another kind of figure of speech in which two apparently contradictory terms appear next to each other. As is known oxymoron *"combines incongruous and apparently contradictory words and meanings for a special effect"* (Cuddon, 1994: 471) or a dramatic effect. It is used especially in poetry like the other figures of speech that have been already mentioned and exemplified in the above part. Kincaid produced in her book such oxymora as *"silent voice"* (27), which has been used for eleven times in an eighteen sentenced paragraph, *"dying and living in perpetuity"* (13), which contains two contrasting verbs in the same context, *"the damp dust"* (23) and *"a cruel smile"* (26). In another oxymoron, we are told that *"blackness [...] falls in silence and yet it is deafening"* (25). In *"The blackness is visible yet it is invisible"* (25), *"blackness"* is described by two contradictory phenomena. The employment of these oxymora may be thought to function as the description of life's inherent conflicts, paradoxes and incongruities.

Though allusions are not specifically used in poetry, i.e. they appear in any literary work in general, we may refer to the two allusions in Kincaid's book that are so apparent and they are themselves verses taken from a hymn and a libretto respectively. In the first example, Kincaid alluded the first stanza of a well-known hymn:

*"Now the day is over,  
Night is drawing nigh;  
Shadows of the evening  
Steal across the sky." (emphasis is original) (33)*

The second allusion is from Henry Purcell's libretto called *"Dido and Aeneas"*. The whole piece constitutes ACT 2, Scene 1: The Cave: In our deep vaulted cell. It is a part that was written for the chorus.

*"In our deep vaulted cell  
The charm we'll prepare  
Too dreadful a practice  
For this open air." (emphasis is original) (37)*

Allusion is an implicit reference to *"a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage"* (Abrams, 1999: 9), or another work of art. Cuddon states the functions of allusion: *"It is often a kind of appeal to a reader to share some experience with the writer. An allusion may enrich the work by association and give it depth"* (1994: 31). These two allusions are also observed to have contributed to the poetic quality of Kincaid's short story collection. It is a common notion that

authors use allusions in their works in a number of ways and for various reasons. Writers make intertextual relationships between their works and other works from not only the field of literature but a variety of fields. Their aim is to make the reader associate the work in question with the work(s) that are alluded to and thus to give ideas, emotions or insights they want to give through their works in a better and effective way by means of the referenced work. Kincaid seems to have alluded the hymn and Purcell's libretto probably because she thought that either these parts taken from the works would communicate what she wanted to say better than she herself could have said or she aimed to make her readers see the connection between these pieces and her story, and thus to transmit the emotion revealed in the pieces to her readers.

In the figurative language of *At the Bottom of the River*, there are some other figures of speech that contribute to the literary and poetic aestheticism of the work. For instance, the employments of hyperboles, similes, metaphors, personifications as well as of images and symbols are observed in it. Although these figures of speech are not specific just to poetry, we may refer to them as they are relevant with the use of the language in the work.

Hyperbole is "*bold overstatement, or the extravagant exaggeration of fact or of possibility*" (Abrams, 1999: 120). It is "*an exaggerated or extravagant expression not meant to be taken literally*" (Quinn, 2006: 203). Kincaid made use of this trope in several scenes in her book. As an instance, we can give the following expression of the female protagonist when she tells us the extent of her sadness and repentance after she told, when she was a child, her mother that she had wished her to die. "*I was sorry and cried so many tears that all the earth around me was drenched. until finally I suffocated. I lay on her bosom, breathless, for a time uncountable, until one day, for a reason she has kept to herself, she shook me out and stood me under a tree and I started to breathe again*" (28). In another instance, the reader is given the description of the mother from the little girl's perspective: "*My mother has grown to an enormous height. I have grown to an enormous height also, but my mother's height is three times mine. Sometimes I cannot see from her breasts on up, so lost is she in the atmosphere*" (30).

The expression by which the central character expresses her feelings of loneliness and alienation is a unique simile. She says: "*I fell and I fell, over and over, as if I were an old suitcase*" (23).

There are many metaphors in the book. A few and the most interesting of them would be given here. In the first quote, the main character compares herself to a lamb in the sense that both the lamb and she herself have to live in an unusual climate:

*"The lamb is cross and miserable. So would I be, too, if I had to live in a climate not suited to my nature. My mother and I now entered the cave. It was the dark and cold cave. I felt something growing under my feet and*

*I bent down to eat it. I stayed that way for years, bent over eating whatever I found growing under my feet. Eventually, I grew a special lens that would allow me to see in the darkest of darkness; eventually, I grew a special coat that kept me warm in the coldest of coldness. One day I saw my mother sitting on a rock. She said, "What a strange expression you have on your face. So cross, so miserable, as if you were living in a climate not suited to your nature"* (29).

The character's identification herself with the lamb may be an autobiographical element. It is likely that Kincaid herself felt like this when she had to live in a climate in New York, which she was not accustomed to living as someone born in Antigua. The author herself says, in an interview, that in the Caribbean they "*don't have winter*", they "*have perpetual paradise of sunshine*" (Jamaica Kincaid on writing, her life and the New Yorker, )

In another metaphor, she sees the ship she is on as if the ship were put in a bottle and imprisoned: "*I saw that the boat was encased in a large green bottle, as if it were about to decorate a mantelpiece,*" (30). This metaphor stands for the central character's feeling of imprisonment. It may be thought to serve the identification of the character with the ship in regard with they are both imprisoned.

The following scene in which the reader is given the emotions and ideas of the unnamed central character and narrator about her own identity includes perhaps the most beautiful metaphor in Kincaid's lyrical short stories. The girl's identity crisis is reflected by means of a unique metaphor giving the image of her self merging and becoming one with the blackness:

*"The blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish: in this way I am annihilated and my form becomes formless and I am absorbed into a vastness of free-flowing matter. In the blackness, then, I have been erased. I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say "I." In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am one with it ..."* (25)

Throughout Kincaid's book there may be found several personifications, too. One of them is the one that includes the personification of an abstract idea. "*My disappointments*" says the girl, "*stand up and grow ever taller*" (15). In a personification, we see "*the attribution of human qualities to inanimate objects*" (Cuddon, 1984: 501) or abstractions. This is a figurative expression of her increasing disappointments.

Kincaid has also created original images in her book. Though images may be of various types such as visual images, olfactory images, tactile images, auditory images, gustatory images, abstract images and kinaesthetic images (Cuddon, 1984: 323), they may be defined simply as the mental pictures created in the mind of the reader.



Many images are conveyed in *At the Bottom of the River*. To give a few examples: *"The children's voices: pinks, blues, yellows, violets, all suspended"* (15). It is a visual image that stands for various voices of children; the voices of children are reflected as something colorful. In the collection, in the story called "In the Night", which is populated by ghosts and other extraordinary creatures, the reader encounters many images. They are the evocations of the mysterious and the uncanny in the mind of the adolescent girl that are created by the stories that her mother told her. The girl transmits a part of these stories to the reader: *"The night-soil men can see a bird walking in trees. It isn't a bird. It is a woman who has removed her skin and is on her way to drink the blood of her secret enemies"* (8). Likewise, the image of jablesse is incarnated in the memory of the girl: *"It's a person who can turn into anything. But you can tell they aren't real because of their eyes. Their eyes shine like lamps, so bright that you can't look. That's how you can tell it's a jablesse. They like to go up in the mountains and gallivant"* (9).

The image of the man (the girl's father), *"who sits on nothing"* is a powerful image challenging the reader's mind: *"He sits in nothing, this man: not in a full space, not in emptiness, not in darkness, not in light or glimmer of. He sits in nothing, in nothing, in nothing"* (33). Auditory images can be found in the following part which is actually the girl's reminiscence:

*"There is the sound of a cricket, there is the sound of a church bell, there is the sound of this house creaking, that house creaking, and the other house creaking as they settle into the ground. There is the sound of a radio in the distance—a fisherman listening to merengue music. There is the sound of a man groaning in his sleep"* (8).

In the following part, one may find an abstract image that appeals to one's sense of touching; so, it is a tactile image: *"The night is wet in some places, warm in some places"* (8). Another image appears on page 12. It is a visual image. It is the image of the light that is refracted and then disappeared. The author says: *"But the light. What of the light? Splintered. Died"* (12).

Kincaid also depicts the natural elements by means of new and original images. To give an instance, the warmth of the sea is resembled to *"freshly spilled blood"* (39) in the last story that has given its name to the book.

At the end of the analyses of all these figures of speech in *At the Bottom of the River*, it is observed that they serve both to create a musicality and rhythm in the language of the work and to create a sensual effect on the reader. They are used to create mood in the work and to transmit the mood to the reader. Besides, they function as an element to illustrate the main character's quest for identity and her depiction of her own self, which she eventually gains at the end. Therefore, it is essential to study the function of the figures of speech in the context of the nameless female main character's search for an identity. To this end, the study will highlight, in what

follows, the theme of search for an identity, which is revealed in Kincaid's book by means of the use of images and symbols.

### **The Theme of the Search for an Identity in *At the Bottom of the River***

One of the great themes of *At the Bottom of the River* is the search for an identity. Throughout the stories the central character is observed to be in a struggle to constitute her identity not only as a child and a teenager but also as a female and a Caribbean-born woman struggling against alienation and marginalization. It is seen that the key images and symbols in the book are related to the character's search for an identity and her struggle to constitute herself. The fourth story of the collection called "Wingless" follows the girl's search to define her identity. She is observed not to be dependent on her mother as she was in her early childhood and to be more self-conscious. There is a wide range of images, metaphors and similes throughout the story; an example may be given here. The girl says: *"Let me cherish my disappointments, fold them up, tuck them away, close to my breast, because they are so important to me"* (15). With the images used in the above expression one can understand that the girl will make use of her experiences for her formation. The story also foreshadows that the girl at last will have an identity of her own.

The girl expresses her wish of growing up in the following part which has a symbolic value. She aspires to be a young beautiful woman in order to control the others as her mother does as the girl grows up. She says: *"I shall grow up to be a tall, graceful, and altogether beautiful woman, and I shall impose on large numbers of people my will and also, for my own amusement, great pain"* (14). In her eyes, her mother is a dominant figure controlling everything and everyone and imposing her own thoughts on others. Despite her mother's dominance over the girl and the girl's desire to emancipate from her dominance, her wish of being like her mother can be considered to mirror her struggle to find herself as a teenager.

She expresses that she got rid of the hatred and hopelessness within her as follows: *"I shrug of my mantle of hatred [...] I shrug of my mantle of despair"* (27). The narrator's hatred may be thought to have stemmed from unresolved and repressed anger against her mother; the girl's despair may be thought to have stemmed from the powers colonizing and repressing her country. These expressions containing the images of the *"mantle of hatred"* and *"mantle of despair"* are the evocations of love within her despite the lack of the things she misses and all desperate and painful situations in her life.

Throughout the stories in the book in which the reader sees a reflection of the main character's episodic memory, her reminiscences are given in an elusive way because the character seems to have given her childhood memories from the perspective of a little girl. This is also related to the elusive, ambiguous and fragmented nature of the

narrative. In one of these scenes we see that the girl remembers both her mother and herself as images of shadows: *"The shadow of my mother danced around the room to a tune that my own shadow sang, and then they stopped. All along, our shadows had grown thick and thin, long and short, had fallen at every angle"* (28). The image of shadows creates in the reader the ideas that either the girl vaguely remembers the things or her visual intelligence is a developed one.

In the story "My mother", the girl describes the physical change she undergoes due to her adolescence:

*"I was no longer a child but I was not yet a woman. My skin had just blackened and cracked and fallen away and my new impregnable carapace had taken full hold. My nose had flattened; my hair curled in and stood out straight from my head simultaneously; my many rows of teeth in their retractable trays were in place"* (29).

The girl's depiction of her adolescence also includes images such as *"blackened and cracked skin"*, *"impregnable carapace"*, *"a flattened nose"* and *"curly hair"* (29). She describes her physical appearance when she reaches her puberty, by means of the images that evoke the girl's blackness. Among these images *"impregnable carapace"* is worth mentioning in the sense that it suggests a racial quality which the girl would never escape from throughout her life. "Blackness" is an important motif in the story "Blackness". In Braziel's view, "blackness" has an existentialist, philosophical, political and even racial meaning in the short story "Blackness" (2009: 34); (Braziel presents in her work a very detailed textual analyses of the concept of "blackness" in "Blackness" through the perspective of Frantz Fanon in the chapter called "Alterraains of "Blackness" in *At the Bottom of the River. Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New World*. (USA: State University of New York, 2009). pp. 21-22). "Blackness" is a desperate and despondent story in which the girl feels deeply isolated. In a previously quoted part taken from the first page of the story, we see that the girl imagines herself as being swallowed up in the soft blackness. She describes herself as absorbed in *"blackness"*, as if she were not in the real world. She feels *"annihilated"* and *"erased"*; furthermore, she is unable to point herself and say *"I"* (25), which reveals that the girl cannot find an identity of her own. All these images are related to the girl's struggle in her quest for an identity.

In *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid produces scenes in which reality and surreality coincide with each other. "Holidays" is a short story in which the young girl has an identification with her welcoming aunt when she arrives in New York to take on a job as an au pair girl for an American couple. In this sense, the story mirrors Kincaid's own personal experience of leaving home to work in America. The following extract mirrors the narrator's self-image — an image of identity that merged with that of her aunt: *"as we walked along, our steps became one, and as we talked, our voices became one voice, and we were in complete union in every other way. What peace came over*

*me then, for I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began"* (31). What should be considered here is that through the steps of two persons walking side by side, the author has created an image of one person; their steps complete each other and then become just one person's steps. Likewise, both their voices turn out to be one voice. In this scene it is observed that the young girl, who is in a quest of identity, identifies herself with her aunt. The images created here serve to illustrate the young girl's identifying herself.

The narrator, when she becomes a young woman, seems to have a reconciliation with her identity and an acceptance of herself. In the following extract taken from the last story in the book, the author has employed such images as *"flesh"*, *"blood"*, *"muscles"*, *"tissue"*, *"cells"* and *"vital organs"* (38-39) to suggest the physical being of the young woman, and *"will"* (39) to suggest her spiritual existence. Additionally, her standing *"above the land and sea"* (38) may be thought to suggest her overcoming life or furthermore, her realizing herself:

*"I saw myself clearly, as if I were looking through a pane of glass. I stood above the land and the sea, and I felt that I was not myself as I had once known myself to be: I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and bones and tissue and cells and vital organs but was made up of my will, and over my will I had complete dominion"* (38-39).

Obviously, the main character in the fictional world of the book finds her own self by means of writing as Kincaid herself found her own self in her real life. Kincaid wrote in *My Brother* that writing "saved" her life. She sees the act of writing as an act saving her life. She writes:

*"I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would his dying. When I was young, younger than I am now I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life. When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew, instinctively, that to understand it, or to make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it"* (196).

As Kezia Page states *"Kincaid locates her writing as a kind of emotional response or working through of difficult situations, or a means of escape in desperate situations"* (2011: 87). However, it is the act of writing by which she has constructed her identity as an author. This autobiographical quality of *At The Bottom of the River* leads us to the idea that like Kincaid, the character identifies herself as a writer, which means that she eventually finds her own identity.

However, the narrator is lonely in the path of authorship. The part in which she resembles herself a *"prism"* gives one the idea that she finds her own self as an author; for this reason, she describes herself like a beautiful prism that is *"many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light [...] that never could be destroyed"* (40). Yet, her identity as an author is the one

that is not presumed by her mother and her Caribbean society. For this reason, she is like “an apple just picked standing alone on a gleaming white plate” (40). The following excerpt includes this and other images:

“I stood as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that never could be destroyed. And how beautiful I became. Yet this beauty was not in the way of an ancient city seen after many centuries in ruins, or a woman who has just brushed her hair, or a man who searches for a treasure, or a child who cries immediately on being born, or an apple just picked standing alone on a gleaming white plate, or tiny beads of water left over from a sudden downpour of rain, perhaps—hanging delicately from the bare limbs of trees—or the sound the hummingbird makes with its wings as it propels itself through the earthly air” (40).

The authorship, which is foreshadowed in the above extract, and by which the narrator forms her identity, is confirmed in the last paragraph of the story in which the reader is provided with novel images and symbols. The authorship is associated with “a room”, “the lamp”, “books”, “a chair”, “a table” and “a pen” (40). The narrator’s act of likening her previous life — the life before she becomes a writer, to being in a pit and her becoming a writer to emerging from her pit is a sophisticated likeness:

“And so, emerging from my pit, the one I sealed up securely, the one to which I have consigned all my deeds that I care not to reveal – emerging from this pit, I step into a room and I see that the lamp is lit. In the light of the lamp, I see some books, I see a chair, I see a table, I see a pen; I see a bowl of ripe fruit, a bottle of milk, a flute made of wood, the clothes that I will wear. And as I see these things in the light of the lamp, all perishable and transient, how bound up I know I am to all that is human endeavor, to all that is past and to all that shall be, to all that shall be lost and leave no trace. I claim these things then – mine – and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth” (40).

It is this identity which makes the young female character and narrator of the stories strong. It is this identity by which she finds herself. And finally, it is this identity she is happy to have and which is a promising one.

## Conclusion

*At the Bottom of the River* is a rich and dense agglomeration of prose poems through which the reader sees how beautiful to keep the poetic aspects in a piece of prose is. As a prose poem, *At the Bottom of the River* is also a work which makes the reader see literature as created artifacts of language, and as such make them more sensitive towards good writing. As readers, while one is reading Kincaid’s stories, one gets a sense of the importance of the individual words, word combinations and moreover, the sounds of the words. One also gets a strong sense of the originality of the author’s choice of words, their being used together by the author and the meanings of the words given to them by the author.

Briefly, Kincaid’s unique use of language in her work is observed by the reader. The poetic quality of short stories in *At the Bottom of the River*, in other words, their being prose poems, lies in their rejection of the basic assumptions about both prose and poetry. In this sense, the stories subvert specifically formal qualities attributed to both prose and verse. In order to stress the poetic nature of Kincaid’s book, a variety of figures of speech employed in it are explored in the study. As a result of the analyses of the figures of speech in *At the Bottom of the River*, it is observed that these literary devices serve both to create a musicality and rhythm in the language of the work and to create a sensual effect on the reader. It is also inferred that Kincaid used them to create mood in the work and to transmit the mood to the reader. This study aiming to reveal the poetic language in *At the Bottom of the River* in order to argue that the stories in it are prose poems also reveals that there is a thematic unity and progression within the collection. Therefore, the study is also an exploration of images, symbols and motifs in the book that serve to depict the narrator’s struggle to find her own self and identity as a child, a teenager and a young woman. At the end of the study, it is highlighted that the young woman’s quest for self and identity is illustrated by means of the original images in the book. Likewise, it is pinpointed in the study that the woman’s self which is independent yet alienated is depicted by means of sophisticated unique images and symbols in the stories.

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