Chapter III

3 Katherine Mansfield: The Story teller in Making

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Katherine Mansfield: The Storyteller in Making

3.1 Biographical Sketch

Katherine Mansfield was born in Wellington as Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp into a family with aspiring ambition. Her mother, Annie Dyer was a delicate and aloof personality, whereas her father, Harold Beauchamp, a successful businessman. Mansfield’s early school years were spent in Karori village, a few miles from Wellington but the Beauchamps soon left the village to make a permanent settlement in Wellington where she completed her school education. In 1903, the family left for London where Katherine joined the Queen’s College, an institution founded by Charles Kingsley to imbibe metropolitan polish to her otherwise attractive personality. Here she excelled herself in French, German, and music, and began writing sketches and prose poems. But in 1906, she returned to Wellington as a rebellious and settled personality. For the next twenty months she lived under the parental vigilance and found Wellington, “understandably provincial”. She wrote her complaints, her first work under ‘norms de plume’ in The Love Hand and The Native Companion. In August 1908, she decided ‘Katherine Mansfield’ as her pen name and left for London. Here she fell in love with a young violinist Garnet Trowell, whose father had taught her cello in Wellington. But the affair did not
Katherine left her husband the day after the marriage but remained officially connected to him for a length of nine years. She returned to Garnet, travelled with his opera company, became pregnant and separated much before the child was born. During this period she wrote a number of satirical sketches of German characters, which appeared under the title, *In A German Pension*, in 1911. These stories had first appeared in *The New Age*.

In 1910, Katherine Mansfield became ill and returned to London with a sexually transmitted disease. The illness ruined her health for the rest of her life and also contributed to her ill-timed death. Katherine met John Middleton Murry, who was first a tenant and later her lover. For the following two years, Katherine Mansfield published stories like *Rhythm* and *The Blue Review*. In 1915, Katherine Mansfield witnessed the unfortunate death of her brother in World War-I and this introduced a noticeable change in her qualitative output. She recreated in her fiction members of her family, her grandmother, her parents, and her brother. The most widely read story “Prelude” was written during these days. In 1916 Mansfield divorced her first husband and married John Murry in 1918. Her second marriage was as unhappy as her first marriage with Bowden for in the same year it was learnt that Mansfield was suffering from tuberculosis.
The same year Mansfield started making preparation for another collection of short stories which was entitled as *Bliss And Other Stories*. In early 1919 Middleton Murry took over the editorship of ‘Athenaeum’, which once again separated them for long intervals. This also brought Murry in contact with Asquith (a Princess) with whom he began a steady love affair. This is apparent in one of the letters which Mansfield wrote to him saying that she should stop writing letters to her husband for it was not one of the things which was done in their world.

Even though Katherine Mansfield became a victim of solitude because of her fatal disease she remained a model of admiration for a host of writers. She grew closer to Lady Ottoline Morrel and more cautiously, to Virginia Woolf. For a time Maynard Keynes was her landlord, Lytton Strachey was attracted to her because she was like a Japanese doll, Bertrand Russel admired her mind and attempted an affair, while T.S. Eliot warned Ezra Pound that she was “a dangerous woman”. In the year 1921 Mansfield along with Murry left for Switzerland where she wrote for *The Sphere* and this earned her a lot of money and Murry took a Chalet at Montana-sur-sierre. Mansfield could not find any relief there by the medical treatment provided to her and she moved to Paris where once again she came in contact with the circle of Russian émigré and intellectuals. In 1922 Katherine once
again ventured into writing and as a result we have profitable collections like The Garden Party and Other Stories which confirmed her place among the modernist of our generation. On January 9th Katherine Mansfield died of a pulmonary haemorrhage in Gurdjieff Institute, near Fontaine Bleau, France. Her work The Dove's Nest And Other Stories remained unfinished. Her husband published this posthumously as a fragmentary work.

3.2 Mansfield and her Contemporaries

Mansfield was highly indebted to Oscar Wild, the New Zealand poet and made ambitious efforts to imitate his aesthetic merits. Critic Vincent O, Sullivan shows how Mansfield interests in the French symbolists, the Decadents and Walter Pater reveal her greatest admiration for them. She was also an imitator of Chekhov, the Russian Storyteller from whom she learned to construct a new kind of short story. So much so that Katherine herself regarded her career as based on Chekhovian model. She was also in connection with most of the popular writers of London either directly or indirectly- ranging from Shaw to Joyce. Virginia Woolf made an equally indelible imprint on her mind as a model as Chekhov did. In one of her letters to Woolf she admits “ you are the only woman with whom I long to talk and walk. There will never be another”. (Adam International Review nos. 370-75: 1972-73, 24).
3.3 Mansfield’s Contribution

Katherine Mansfield is certainly the first among that little band of English writers who staked their whole future on the short story that had mainly been of late an occasional by-product of a novelist. It is Katherine Mansfield who is recognized as the first New Zealand writer in the domain of English letters, a craftsman who added not only a new context but also a new form to the short story. Like Henry James, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield extended the range of fiction by developing new method of capturing and conveying the atmosphere of the mind and translating the subtle nuances of human thoughts and feelings into words. Her reputation as a short story writer rests on four volumes of short stories—

(a) In A German Pension (1911)

(b) Bliss And Other Stories (1922)

(c) The Garden party and Other Stories. (1923)

(d) The Dove’s Nest and Other Stories (Unfinished, 1924).

3.3.1 An Assessment of her Works: Book by Book

In a German Pension (1911)

This includes sketches based on Katherine Mansfield’s experiences in Germany. These stories portray many of the Germans as gross people preoccupied with fountains of food and long detailed descriptions of their digestive process; yet there are moving details of
people and their society described often sharply and crisply with a
touch of satire. In *A German Pension* reveals Katherine as a budding
storyteller noticeably raw and who is in search of her own style. This
collection includes thirteen stories.

**Bliss and Other Stories (1922)**

This collection of short stories reveals Mansfield's talent as a
short story writer for the first time. Her subjects now included issues
like: marriage, family relationships and people in London struggling to
prove their potential and make way in a difficult world along with little
ironic episodes. Here the writer fathoms the truths of experience on
several levels of life and not limited by social class or interest in life:
arts or the life of leisure. This collection has thirteen stories of which
Bliss is a tale of modern woman who is reticent, sensitive and married
to a man who is bubbling with life. Strangely she feels attracted to a
mysterious woman who introduces herself as Mrs. Fulton. While
giving a dinner party she realizes that her husband is an acquaintance
of her model friend where by, she looses all attraction towards this lady
and her prime concern is now to protect her family and her being.
Therefore, the story ends with Bertha asking herself "Oh, what is going
to happen now... but the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of
flower as still". ‘Still’ is infested with powerful connotative value for
it implies that Bertha’s life will remain the same as it was earlier; there
is no possibility of change and it is the sameness of life which haunts her with the sense of nothingness. With the aid of a symbol like the 'pear tree' Mansfield hints the message that Bertha will be looked up for her loveliness and her role as a mother and wife. But her desires will always remain elusive and unfulfilled.

**The Garden Party and Other Stories (1923)**

This collection contains a number of her best-known works—The Garden Party and Her First Ball. These two stories are centered on a young girl's experience of the world around. In the later story Mansfield shows that in the midst of wonder and pleasure comes an awareness of age and realization that no experience lasts. Here the writer is at her best. Of the seven stories the title one is very well received and this asserts Mansfield's calibre as a storyteller. The Garden Party is a single character story and is almost straightforward in its narrative. The story reveals the psyche of a child who is first introduced to the social values face to face. With Laura as the central character the story reveals the impact of the encounter with death, which is surprisingly not a horrid one. Laura had a feeling that death is ghostly but when she sits by the side of the corpse of her friend's father, she realizes the falsity of this social belief.

**The Dove's Nest and Other Stories (Unfinished, 1924)**

The Dove's Nest And Other Stories is an unfinished collection.
Here the technique called stream of consciousness is used superbly to probe more deeply into the essence involved in the experiences of her characters.

3.3.2 An Evaluation of her Potential

Katherine Mansfield is a modern short story writer like D.H. Lawrence, for in her short stories we find psychology playing a vital role. Like her contemporary Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield seeks to efface herself from her work, by merging her creative self with that of her fictional characters. In a letter to her husband John Middleton Murry, she describes how *The Stranger* was composed:

I’ve been this man been this woman. I’ve stood for hours on the Auckland wharf. I’ve been out in the stream watching to be bathed. I’ve been a seagull hovering at the stern and poster whistling through his teeth. It isn’t as though one sits and watches the spectacle. The world be thrilling enough, God knows. But one is the spectacle of time. (*Katherine Mansfield*, 1981).

Katherine Mansfield’s ability to assume an infinite variety of roles is not only a modernist writer at creation but also the woman artist’s strategy for demonstrating the “endless flexibility of the female self”. Katherine Mansfield’s stories instead of projecting and promoting the traditional idea of unity expose the disjunctions that characterize all
human experiences. Here the self is at war with the environment, with other people and even with itself. Andre Maurois, called her technique ‘feminine impressionism’. She adds:

...in her fiction, we know those things as woman know them without having it clearly stated, without any logical structure being built up. (Katherine Mansfield: An Appraisal, 83).

Typically Mansfield is remembered for her unique efforts; she laboured at two goals—unity and coherence. In her writings “we are excited; our curiosity is roused as to what lies beneath these strange rich surfaces”. (British Writers and Their Work, III, 43).
Works Cited


