WOMEN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) lived only for thirty four years but has left a mark in the field of the short story within that brief span. She begins writing short stories at a time when short story is yet to be recognized as an independent genre in England and usually considered an occasional by-product of the novelist. She determinedly focuses on the short story almost exclusively although she does compose a few poems. Before delving into her stories and her portrayal of women characters from a feminist point of view it will be worthwhile to survey her tumultuous existence and how Kathleen Beauchamp graduates into Katherine Mansfield.

Dominated by her family Mansfield grows up in an atmosphere not conducive to the development of her personality and so is delighted when she is sent off to London in 1903 to attend Queen’s College. She regards the city as her spiritual home because here she can breathe the fresh air of freedom and enrich her mental faculty. Three years later when she unwillingly returns to Wellington, she appears to be rebellious and full of ideas of how a girl is tamed and tutored to be a woman in a patriarchal family.

Mansfield was a precocious child and her mental maturity was ahead of her physical maturity. Nariman Hormaszi observes,

It is clear that her intellect was almost brilliant; but to arrive at any truth of her inner nature is like groping in the dark with a spent torch.

Her intellect saved her from being a miserable wretch confined
within the four walls of a domestic kitchen…. She was a woman of deep instincts over which her dominant intellect had little sway or power or overwhelming influence. (41-42)

Born in New Zealand, she appears to be too English due to her education at Queen’s College, her marriage to an English man of letters, John Middleton Murry and her association with the Bloomsbury set. She is deeply attached to her brother whose untimely death of her brother makes her for a time sarcastic, bitter and impatient and intolerant (Hormaszi 48). She is adamant and willful but not unreasonable or egoistic. She feels disturbed by the colonial culture and her shifting moods result from her experience of exile – a cultural exile in her homeland and a colonial exile in the land of the masters. This generates nostalgic memories of childhood innocence which is recreated in stories like “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party.”

Her [Mansfield’s] tendency to combine opposing elements and the continual shifts in mood and manner also derive from her exile experience. As a response to tradition, modernity and the colonial process of settlement, she chose to return to a nostalgic and innocent image of her childhood New Zealand as well as to articulate a critique of colonial culture. By moving to the metropolitan centre, she found the means to distance herself from the culturally stifling environment in Wellington, but simultaneously to treat the experience of rupture it involved. In my view, Mansfield’s means of bridging the gap and treating the exile experience of dislocation was to create stories which promote unity between characters and place.
By re-creating landscapes of the mind she promoted a vivid image of New Zealand which served as the basis for critique of colonial culture. (Skaatan 96)

Mansfield’s stories present an apparently placid surface in the lives of her characters, while underneath something is churning in their souls, their minds and subterraneanly family relationships. The strains become visible in group situations. There is discontent as well as dissatisfaction, love as well as hatred, apathy as well as sympathy:

The central characters in her fiction are … outlaws. But they are outlaws of a particular kind; their rebelliousness does not lie so much in overt gestures as in processes of the mind and in the moments that crystallize out of consciousness to reveal to them the discrepancies between their underlying natures and the fixed social masks which they, often confidentially wear. This is not the kind of fiction in which heroic individuals pit themselves against an obviously unjust society, but a fiction in which the individual discovers herself as socially constructed … and yet possessed of previously unrecognized and unregarded elements of consciousness whose very presence indicates the potential difference of the self from how it has been perceived. The radical incompleteness and selectivity of social definition is thereby revealed. (Bowman 32)

Mansfield does not accede to the assumed dominance of male authority. She takes an active feminist position in claiming the authority to speak for herself and
choose one’s course of behaviour. Her women characters are not passive toys weighed down by life’s struggle; they are sturdy and resourceful living and thriving in a real world, refusing to dance to the tune of their creator. The desire of women to be left alone is noticeable in most of her earlier sketches and stories. They also present the trivialities of the daily routine-bound life which is made interesting by punctuating and lacing them with poetic beauty and rhythm.

Mansfield’s fiction focuses on enactments of roles by men and women in specific social locales and highlights family and love relationships, the everyday experiences of childhood, what it means to be defined as female and how a girl child is tamed to womanhood as in “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party.” The frenzied exhortation to live is central to her fiction as exemplified by “The Lady’s Maid” and “Life of Ma Parker.” Mansfield also endeavours to explore the feelings of a woman circumscribed by loneliness: her sense of isolation and alienation. Accidents and death, infidelity and lust, play a vital role in her works. She seems to suggest that life is a conglomeration of joy and sorrow, birth and death, happiness and misery, opulence and penury, one should not complain against but take life as it comes. Mansfield’s characters are portrayed in trying situations and adverse circumstances that test their inner strength and stamina.

I focus on stories in which women play dominant roles. Thematically and in terms of subject matter, her stories may be classified as follows:

a) “Prelude,” (Bliss & Other 1-42) “At the Bay,” (Garden Party and Other 9-63) and “The Garden Party” (Garden Party and Other 65-87) focus on the author’s childhood in New Zealand. These stories explore personal
trials, tribulations and dreams, how women are victimized, and children are tamed and tutored to become women by patriarchal forces. She also shows how aged women, especially grandmothers, play active roles in imposing so-called familial values designed to sustain male hegemony.


c) Frustrated feminine aspirations, the suppressed self, injured love and the sense of loneliness are crucial to “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,” “Miss Brill,” “Her First Ball,” “The Singing Lesson” (Garden Party and Other 88-119, 184-91, 192-201, 203-11) and “The Little Governess” (Bliss & Other 135-46).


Katherine Mansfield was very close to her brother Leslie. His sudden death in 1915 changes her perception on life and her literary career. She resolves to pen
the idealized recreations of her own country and the people to whom she is indebted (Hormaszi 49). “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party” are detailed recreation of her New Zealand childhood. “Prelude” revolves around the Burnell family moving house from the town to the countryside which has an autobiographical overtone harking back to her family’s shifting from Tinkaori Road in Wellington to Kasori, five miles away. Like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, too, emphasizes the importance of location in the development of an individual, mentally and emotionally. She focuses particularly on the effect of displacement and relocation on women and the potential for transformation and empowerment it might entail.

“Prelude” is full of personal crisis that affects each character’s internal weather while leaving the atmosphere unchanged. The story records the victimization of the women by patriarchal forces. Stanley Burnell, a masterful patriarch victimises his wife Linda, her unmarried sister Beryl, his daughters Isabell, Kezia and Lottie, and their grandmother Mrs. Fairfield, perpetuating his domination over them. The story of the Burnell family also extends to “At the Bay” that deals with how the members of the Burnell family spend their life in their spacious bungalow near the Crescent Bay. Stanley Burnell, the earning-member of the family, is always busy. During breakfast his sister-in-law, Beryl, his mother Mrs. Fairfield and even his daughters stand ready to wait upon him. They are culturally constructed to regard this service as their prime duty. Noticeably, Stanley Burnell himself is least interested in the activities and daily routine of the female members of his family although he raises a hue and cry if any of his required items is not in the right place or provided at the right moment. He has been portrayed as a selfish, egocentric
and dominating personality who tyrannises over and suffocates his womenfolk. As soon as he leaves the house they feel, “There was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs…. The little girls ran into the paddock like chickens let out of a coop”\(^5\)(20).

They are aware of their disadvantageous position and problems in this claustrophobic atmosphere but, like Woolf’s women, they have no guts to assert themselves and revolt overtly presumably because they are not financially independent. So, they have no other option but to toe the dictates of the patriarch for survival.

By portraying the predicament of these women Mansfield, like Virginia Woolf, underscores the need for doing something to counter the machinations of patriarchal forces. Foregrounding the victimization of the women, she questions the legitimacy of the familial norms and customs through which society undermines the individuality of the women. They feel discontented but their dissidence is only on the mental plane.

Linda Burnell, burdened and bent with bearing children, does not like her husband’s taste and temperament. She is also unable to meet his physical demands.


Her lack of love for children stems from her dissatisfaction with her husband who fails to communicate with her inner self. He does not devote adequate time to her, treats her as a mere child-bearing and food-making machine and looks upon her as a colony and not a country in which he also lives. She is aware of the fact that she is only required to meet the masculine needs of her husband and follow family conventions.

The previous chapters have discussed how family and marriage serve as important agents for inculcating patriarchal values and preserving patriarchal hegemony. A wife is defined in terms of conventional, orthodox cultural values. Despite enjoying comfort and security Linda feels frustrated by her powerlessness. She becomes flighty, whimsical and escapist, indulging in flights of fancy. Portrayed as a woman who buckles under the weight of a dreary family life, she appears to be lonely in the midst of multitude. Like most of the married women in Woolf, she is conscious of the problems ensuing from her gendered role but is unable to articulate her grievances and do anything to undermine her husband’s power. Mansfield here critiques the prevailing familial and societal norms impeding a woman’s autonomy and underlines the need of expanding her role in family and society. Like Woolf, she insists upon communication and articulation as important steps for women’s empowerment. Linda is not given any opportunity to communicate or establish any kind of female bond that might dissipate her sense of isolation and disappointment. The sense of solitariness – a pet theme of Mansfield – is also manifest here. She belongs to the family physically, but mentally and emotionally she stands apart. Thus she is excluded even when included.
Fruitful conjugal life is possible when each partner feels shares and cares for
the other. Linda is used as utility and need-satisfying object and treated as a mere
appendage and ornamental to her husband,

But all the rest of the time it was like living in a house that couldn’t
be cured of the habit of catching on fire, on a ship that got wrecked
every day. And it was always Stanley who was in the thick of the
danger. Her whole time was spent in rescuing him, and restoring him,
and calming him down, and listening to his story. And what was left
of her time was spent in the dread of having children. (33)

“Women are at the mercy of their reproductive biology and therefore are
dependent upon men for survival” (Barret 188-89). A new way needs to be
envisaged to liberate women from the hassle and trauma of child-bearing.
Reorganization of the society in terms of equality of power and freedom is needed to
rid women of their deprivation and victimization by patriarchy. Linda feels
embittered with her present role, quashed between wifehood and motherhood,

It was all very well to say it was the common lot of women to bear
children. It wasn’t true. She, for one, could prove that wrong. She
was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-
bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love
her children. It was useless pretending. Even if she had had the
strength she never would have nursed and played with the little girls.
No, it was as though a cold breath had chilled her through and
through on each of those awful journeys; she had no warmth left to
give them. (34)

Continuous child-bearing has weaned her away from child-rearing. Conventionally
she is mere half-woman – a begetter not a nurturer. There is no love and warmth in
their conjugal life. Stanley’s attitude to his wife may be explained by Erich Froman
who points out that true love has the elements of care, responsibility, respect and
knowledge and regrets that qualities of care and responsibility are absent from most
human relationships (www.erich_froman.html). Linda’s husband is not caring and
responsible husband and he treats his wife as a panderer to his needs. To him it is a
marriage of convenience without any concern and without any responsibility for the
other self.

The story also highlights the hypocrisy of patriarchal society which ascribes
roles to women without allowing them to fulfil these roles. Women are assigned the
roles of managers for providing domestic comfort. Inwardly, Linda laments the fact
that she could have led a different life had she not been treated as second sex and
played second fiddle to her husband. In fact, she is not even allowed to play second
fiddle and feels that her life is a fiasco because she has no say in running the family.

Linda has been depicted as a traditional house-wife, supposedly selfless, and a
provider of the needs of the male members of the family. She has been so used by
her husband that she has lost the zest for life. The pleasant things do not please her;
she feels an outcast in the family. The story suggests that our marriage, family, so-
called morality and customs are systematically designed to colonise the minds of
women. Interested in tracing the status of feminine consciousness and aspirations in
the domestic space Mansfield, through Linda, illustrates that female consciousness is essentially the consciousness of victimization – victimization by pre-set customs and operations of patriarchy.

“Prelude” exemplifies two types of conditioning: acceptance and subjugation for Linda, and acceptance, interiorisation and dissemination for the grandmother. Mansfield has juxtaposed the two types of women: those who are conscious of and resent their victimization but can do little to fight it and, those who accept and interiorize these familial and societal norms for sheer survival. Obliquely, both conditions stress the need of having one’s own income and space as advocated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room Of One’s Own*.

Both in “Prelude” and “At the Bay” Linda is projected as a woman who is conscious of the gradual annihilation of her identity. This intense awareness of one’s identity and its threatened destruction is a major concern for Woolf’s Phyllis in “Phyllis and Rosamond,” Miss Willatt in “Memoirs of a Novelist,” Lily in “The Introduction” and Rosalind in “Lapin and Lapinova” as well. Linda and other Burnell women are provided material comfort but happiness goes beyond material gratification and calls for the practice of mutual sharing and caring for each other. The ultimate aim of feminism is to move beyond the redressal of women’s grievances to engendering a more equitable society. In tracing the gradual annihilation of the identities of women in their respective families, Mansfield has shown their inability to articulate their problems and frustrations. Like Mansfield’s Linda, Woolf’s Duchess in “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” Mrs. Dalloway in “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street,” Rosalind in “Lappin and Lapinova,” enjoy material
comforts but silently chaff at the insensitivity of their partners and the disparity between their and their husbands’ taste and temperament. All of them feel suffocated in the claustrophobic atmosphere of their families but acclimatize themselves to societal values and fail to articulate their grievances. However, Linda, by arranging and fulfilling all the requirements of her husband, derives a sense of power over him as he is totally dependent on her for domestic needs and comforts. Ironically, the wife’s subjugation in the family as a service provider for husband creates a material dependency in him and she is allowed to enjoy a false sense of power through meeting the sexual and domestic needs of her husband.

In “Prelude,” Linda’s sense of bondage in her role as mother and wife alienates her from her baby and the other children. This is testified by her reaction to her daughter, Kezia, when she asks her about the aloe tree. It triggers thoughts of how her life could have been different had she chosen to nurture the submerged elements in her and spoken out against the socially constructed role imposed upon her. Stanley’s insensitivity and unconscious but total self-absorption emotionally distance his wife and children. Hence Linda resorts to day-dreaming, obsessing over an imagined lover and a different life:

‘I dreamed about birds last night,’ thought Linda. What was it? She had forgotten…. What Linda always felt was that they wanted something of her, and she knew that if she gave herself up and was quiet, more than quiet, silent, motionless, something would really happen….

Yes, everything had come alive down to the minutest, tiniest particle, and she did not feel her bed, she floated, held up in the air.
Only she seemed to be listening with her wide open watchful eyes, waiting for someone to come who just did not come, watching for something to happen that just did not happen. (16)

The story also focuses on fatigue as central to woman’s experience which acts as a catalyst for a utopian dream – where a woman can fulfil her desires and extricate herself from the agonizing experiences in the family. Linda’s day-dreaming and weariness, like Rosalind’s fantasy in Woolf’s “Lappin and Lapinova,” are escapist efforts to flee from the entrapment of marriage. However, they cannot stay there long since their daily chores pull them back into the vortex of a suffocating existence. Linda’s lassitude and fantasy denote a resigned but grudging acceptance of her life and she takes no positive steps to alter it economically or materially. Mansfield highlights the futility of individual protest against a thoroughly entrenched institution like patriarchy and obliquely calls for social reorganization that would create equality of power and freedom in heterosexual relationships.

Linda’s sister, Beryl provides an interesting insight into the position of a dependent female relative in the family. She plays a significant role in distancing Linda and her husband. Stanley is favourably inclined towards Beryl presumably because she addresses his physical and emotional demands in a way that Linda fails to do. Beryl too, exploits and enjoys this relationship and his attraction for her, Standing in a pool of moonlight Beryl Fairfield undressed herself. She was tired, but she pretended to be more tired than she really was – letting her clothes fall, pushing back with a languid gesture her warm, heavy hair.
‘Oh, how tired I am – very tired.’

She shut her eyes a moment, but her lips smiled. Her breath rose and fell in her breast like two fanning wings….

‘How frightfully unreasonable Stanley is sometimes,’ she thought, buttoning. (12)

Her tiredness, though, springs from the constant vigil of making sure that Stanley’s interest in her never flags. And it pays dividends as instanced in “At the Bay”:

Beryl was alone in the living-room when Stanley appeared, wearing a blue serge suit, a stiff collar and a spotted tie … Dropping into his chair, he pulled out his watch and put it beside his plate…. As Stanley helped himself his blue eyes widened; they seemed to quiver.

He shot a quick glance at his sister-in-law and leaned back.

‘Nothing wrong, is there?’ he asked carelessly, fingerling his collar.

Beryl’s head was bent; she turned her plate in her fingers.

‘Nothing,’ said her light voice. Then she too looked up, and smiled at Stanley. ‘Why should there be?’ (16)

Beryl also takes on the task of looking after his daughters as Linda barely pays attention to them. Beryl’s position in the family is rather tenuous. While the patriarchal familial system allows the inclusion of dependent female in-laws like Beryl in its fold, she has no official standing or authority and has to justify her inclusion by being *useful* both on the material and emotional plane. Beryl needs to make herself indispensable to the family and specially to the patriarch to ensure a permanent position for herself in the family. Unlike Linda, whose official position as a wife cannot be easily truncated even if she is indifferent to her duty, Beryl has to
be charming and on her best behaviour all the time, “Goodbye, Stanley,” called Beryl, sweetly and gaily. It was easy enough to say good bye! And there she stood, idle, shading her eyes with her hand” (19). The nuanced workings of patriarchy sustains male hegemony by giving Stanley two service providers, Linda and Beryl, and both feel paradoxically a sense of empowerment through their servility by translating it as an instance of the bread-earner’s dependence on them. Ironically, Beryl’s voluntary undertaking of domestic duties allows Linda to remain languid and indifferent without impacting the functioning of the household adversely. In this sense Beryl becomes a double service provider for both the master and the mistress of the family.

In many of her stories Mansfield illustrates the paradox of the self and its gradual extinction through role playing. Personal autonomy and continuous identity are the cherished goals of feminists that are undermined by the relentless workings of patriarchal forces. And the process begins with the taming and tutoring of a girl since childhood. In “Prelude,” the aloe tree in the garden of the new house evokes different meanings for different characters. Kezia asks her mother about the tree as she feels afraid of its cruel leaves and fleshy stems. Linda finds in the tree an image of her own desiccation. Its leaves appear to be cruel. Kezia learns that the tree flowers rarely, “Once every hundred years” (21). This is the only moment of kinship between the remote mother and her daughter. Kezia and her mother are similar in their fears and feelings regarding the aloe and the need for Mrs. Fairfield whenever they falter or are in difficulty and danger. Like Woolf, Mansfield, too, has explored the power of bonding that can mitigate unpleasant situations and moments of crisis. Kezia’s sensitivity and her love for others are best manifested when Pat, the Irish
gardener, chops off the head of the duck in front of the children. Most of the children of the house eagerly enjoy the act but Kezia is horrified. The sight of the silent body with gushing red blood violently disrupts her sense of harmony and she cries for its restoration, “put head back, put head back! She goes on weeping – ‘Head back! Head back!’” (31). Kezia has been portrayed as sensitive and intelligent girl with a questioning spirit. Whenever she is confronted with any sort of problem she goes to her grandmother to derive confidence and security. Her grandmother is sad that her son William is dead. Mansfield highlights the various types of death experienced by women. A little bit of the grandmother dies with the death of her son but she is so immersed in the ways and norms of patriarchal society that she herself has been long dead. So is Linda in her marriage and childbirth. Beryl is the most unfortunate of the lot – she does not have the luxury to acknowledge the futility of her existence lest it deprive her of the only shelter she has. Kezia is afraid of death because it means she will have to leave this world – leave her grandmother. Elain Showalter’s observations on the death wish manifested in the heroines of several late nineteenth century women novelists are equally applicable to Mansfield’s women who “wake to worlds which offer no places for the women they wish to become; and rather than struggle they die” (98).

Patriarchy’s attempts at taming the girls are seen in games as well. Isabel suggests that they should play “ladies” and Pip be their father. Kezia is averse to this, “I hate playing ladies” (29). She also expresses her displeasure at being forced to attend church, “‘You always make us go to church hand in hand and come home and go to bed’” (29). Kezia’s fearlessness and inquisitiveness are reflected in her encounter with the new house: “She rolled herself up into a round, but she did not go
to sleep. From all over the house came the sound of steps. The house itself creaked and popped…. Outside the window hundreds of black cats with yellow eyes sat in the sky watching her – but she was not frightened” (11). Through her, Mansfield holds out hope for a better future for women who dare to be different.

Mansfield is always against any sort of pretension and artificiality. The servant-girl, Alice also interiorizes the manners of the family and tries to keep her manners in front of Mrs. Stubbs, a neighbour. “With her broad smile and the long bacon knife in her hand, she looked like a friendly brigand. Alice was welcomed so warmly that she found it quite difficult to keep her ‘manners’” (43). However, Mansfield is contemptuous of such artificial behaviour and illustrates through Alice how rich families use the prevalence of such pretension and artificiality to outsmart and outdo others, specially the neighbours.

Laura Sheridan in “The Garden Party,” like Kezia in “Prelude” is also sensitive and curious to know the unknown and see the unseen. An extension of Kezia and reflection of the repressed self of Mansfield’s childhood, she feels aggrieved at the shallowness, snobbishness and mean-mindedness of her family members including her parents. Her family is supposed to arrange for a party in the garden where people from upper stratum of society will gather, idle away their time, indulge in thoughtless talk and purposeless pleasure, and parade precious trinkets to outdo each other. The women in the family are supposed to concentrate only on these domestic affairs; they are not concerned with, or rather, not allowed to evince any interest in the happenings of the outside world. They have so interiorized the familial norms that they have even forgotten to feel shocked or be concerned over
the tragedy of a neighbour. That is the prerogative of the male members but Laura
does not like this:

Whereas the domestic sphere is the centre for the women, the male
members of the family move in a larger area outside the garden. The
female members of the Sheridan family are oblivious to the structures
which maintain their social status at the expense of others and seem
perfectly happy to focus on the pleasant aspects of their existence and
to ignore whatever exists outside the garden gates. This is the attitude
Laura wishes to challenge. (Skaatan 75)

The news of the sudden death of a neighbour, Mr. Scott, a carter, in an accident
changes her mood and she wishes to postpone the party but her mother, Sheridan
and others think otherwise,

‘Stop everything, Laura!’ cried Jose in astonishment. ‘What do you
mean?’

‘Stop the garden party, of course.’ Why did Jose pretend?

But Jose was still amazed. ‘Stop the garden party? My dear Laura,
don’t be so absurd. Of course we can’t do anything of the kind.

Nobody expects us to. Don’t be so extravagant.’

But we can’t possibly have a garden party with a man dead just
outside the front gate.’ (76)

Her mother adds, “But, my dear child, use your common sense. It’s only by accident
we’ve heard of it. If someone had died there normally – and I can’t understand how
they keep alive in those poky little holes – we should still be having our party,
shouldn’t we?” (78-79)
Laura’s family is not concerned with the death of the carter’s death mainly because he belongs to a poor family. Laura’s mother suggests sending a basket full of food for the hapless mother and poor children ostensibly to dole out sympathy and fellow-feeling. The snobbish and indifferent attitude of the members of the family saddens Laura. She decides to visit the bereaved family and it brings her a moment of epiphany – the realization of the difference between life and death, between opulence and penury, between sympathy and apathy. The epiphanic moment is also an important feature of Woolf’s stories. Laura’s empathy for suffering neighbours is set against the snobbishness and callousness of Mrs. Sheridan. She is not only not allowed to have her way but is also reprimanded for suggesting the postponement of the party as a mark of respect for Mr. Scott. She is forced to follow the footsteps of other women members of the family so as to become an ideal wife and mother in the future.

Then story traces Laura’s groping towards maturity and at the end Laura is, indeed, more mature than she is at the opening. The accidental death of a relatively unknown man brings for Laura the first real consciousness of the phenomenon of death. On entering Mr. Scott’s house and viewing his dead body Laura realizes the difference between life and death and how people of upper class of society are insensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of the poor. She feels, “There lay a young man, fast asleep – sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again…. Happy … happy…” (86).
‘No,’ sobbed Laura. It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie – ‘She stopped, she looked at her brother. ‘Isn’t life,’ she stammered, ‘isn’t life –’

But what life was she couldn’t explain. No matter.

He quite understood.

‘Isn’t it, darling?’ said Laurie’ (87)

Mansfield’s story passes through the sieve of her experiences. Laura’s sensitivity is reminiscent of Mansfield’s own injured feelings at the snobbishness and thoughtless pleasures of her father. Laura happens to be a girl who intends to be independent and follow her aspirations. But her dreams are overshadowed by the callousness, indifference and dominance of the others in the family who have no time for those in distress. Mansfield abhors hypocrisy at all levels. The Burnell women have been tutored to follow the conventions and regard it as the only means of happiness. Laura is supposed to perform her designated role without any divergence,

Laura, designated as a girl child … has been subjected to a process the objective of which is to change her into a “perfect wife, perfect mother and perfect housekeeper – the three requirements to make an ideal woman” … she has been in the process of forming a self … and little by little that self has been moulded into the socially prescribed shape…. In all probability, her mother went through the same stages which conditioned her to think like men, identify with their world view, not only accept but also internalize their values, and buttress the system that legitimates the interests of the dominant group. Now
it is Laura’s turn to grow into an emasculated woman whose subjectivity, shaped by the forces in society, is a collective phenomenon instead of being specific to herself. (Kaya 55; emphasis mine)

Outwardly, Mansfield’s women do not revolt but inwardly, they tend to rebel by expressing their displeasure and voicing their questions as does Laura. This internal dissidence is also a hallmark of Woolf’s women. Here the development of a girl’s individuality and the realisation of her own perceptions are obstructed by patriarchal and familial authority. Laura in “The Garden Party” and Kezia in “Prelude” exemplify how a girl is tamed and shaped by sterile codes of conduct by the family and how a girl’s autonomous development is impaired by patriarchy.

“At the Bay” is an exploration of the author’s childhood and her suppressed dissatisfaction at not being allowed the same freedom as the boys of her age. The life of the girl children is determined and conditioned by pre-set ideas and notions designed and dictated by the patriarch of the family. Kezia, a projection of Mansfield’s childhood, feels distressed at her mother’s indifference and disinclination towards life. Association and communication empower one. But the Burnell children are not allowed to mingle freely with other children presumably because of their parents’ egotism. On reaching the beach the Burnell children find the children of Samuel Josephs family which does not belong to their circle in spite of being neighbours. They are not invited to Burnell children’s parties. On the other side of the beach the Trout boys, Pip and Rags, are engrossed in their own world. Evidently, people are so preoccupied with their own activities and so conscious of
themselves that they do not feel the urge to mingle with each other, they also do not allow their children to interact with others and the children have been conditioned accordingly. Mansfield is critical of such artificial barriers constructed by the patriarchal forces.

As the morning lengthens different parties appear on the beach either to have a bath or to while away their time. The little boys are running, jumping and slapping the water. The Burnell girls are perhaps keen to follow suit but cannot do so because girls in the family are supposed to be docile and demure, not jump and splutter in water. It is a systematic effort of the family to coerce the children to graduate into womanhood with strict adherence to social and familial norms and conventions.

The firm compact little girls were not half so brave as the tender, delicate-looking boys. Pip and Rags, shivering, crouching down, slapping the water, never hesitated. But Isabel, who could swim twelve strokes, and Kezia, who could nearly swim eight, only followed on the strict understanding they were not to be splashed. As for Lottie, she didn’t follow at all. She liked to be left to go in her own way, please. (26)

The children’s grandmother, Mrs. Fairfield, is more close to them than their mother because their grandmother has completely interiorized the familial norms while the mother, Linda, is yet to become completely acclimatized to them. She is also upset by her duty of shaping her daughters to be women but she does not revolt or articulate her views, “She has neither hope nor health nor peace within nor calm around; pleasure does not please her, and even in the midst of multitude she is
lonely. Life is dreary and desolate for her and she is weary of the world” (Chatterjee 208).

In “Prelude” and “At the Bay” the Burnell women and children have the opportunity to observe how other women and children pass their time on the beach. Linda sees how Mrs. Harry Kember leads a life of her own. She also gets pleasure in interacting with Jonathan, an ordinary clerk, but “always full of new ideas, schemes and plans” (53). As stated earlier, association and interaction empower women to drive away the monotony of life. Mansfield shows Linda becoming more conscious of how she and her children are being constructed and how women like her are trapped in the enclosure of the family after her encounters on the beach. Inwardly, she starts resenting Stanley’s behaviour but it is not reflected in her open gestures. She rues, “I’m like an insect that’s flown into a room of its own accord. I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling, do everything on God’s earth, in fact, except fly out again” (54)

In “At the Bay” Linda’s disinterest in life and growing realization of her marginalization in the family are clearly reflected. She discovers her self, feels the need of having an equal relationship and freedom of choice. Erich Froman’s observation that freedom is an aspect of human nature that we either embrace or escape is exemplified in Linda’s early indifference and later awakening (www.erich_froman.html.). Forman opines that embracing freedom of will is healthy whereas escaping freedom through escape mechanisms is the root of psychological conflicts. He outlines three mechanisms: automation conformity, authoritarianism and destructiveness. Automation conformity is changing one’s ideal self to conform to a
perception of society’s preferred style of personality and losing one’s self in the process. It displaces the burden of choice from self to society. Authoritarianism gives control of oneself to another. By submitting one’s freedom to someone else, this act removes the freedom of choice almost entirely. Destructiveness is a process which attempts to eliminate others (www.erich_froman.html). Linda fails to embrace freedom of will and unconsciously subscribes to both automation conformity and authoritarianism for her comfort and survival as she has no income and house of her own and makes no attempt to become financially independent. The ensuing depression and sense of claustrophobia are the psychological effects of this submission. Mansfield highlights and critiques the trauma caused by oppressive imposition of patriarchy.

Mansfield’s grandmothers are, in most cases, widows and residents in their daughters’ houses. They have been presented as matriarchs of profound strength and repositories of love, comfort and security. The granddaughter heavily depends on her grandmother’s wisdom and pragmatism to survive as an individual under the pressure imposed upon her by her parents. The grandmothers have been dealt with as the most submissive but at the same the agents of succour and comfort to the dissatisfied and unsure women members of the family.

The grandmother, Mrs. Fairfield, in “Prelude” and “At the Bay,” upholding the prevailing customs of the family, is a potent agent of preserving the hegemony by providing a sense of comfort, order, serenity and security. Both the children and their mother seek succour from her. Kezia, the most sensitive girl of the family, cannot comprehend the true nature of her relationship with her grandmother but
turns to this elderly lady for comfort as she nurtures a strong affection for Kezia and her sisters, Isabel and Lottie. Her pragmatism and experience instills comfort and stability in the family. She is not dissatisfied and disillusioned with her life because she has internalized familial values to such an extent that for her happiness and comfort lie in abiding by the conventions. Her total acceptance of the imposed boundaries paradoxically vests an element of equanimity and experience based knowledge which helps her to provide material and emotional security to the family. She becomes a source of strength for the dissatisfied and unsure children and mother. The politics of patriarchy ironically makes the most submissive the most competent and useful member of the family.

A similar bond between the grandmother and the children has also been dealt with in “The Voyage” in which a girl child named Fenella, after her mother’s death, goes with her grandmother to meet her grandpa. The grandmother-granddaughter relationship frequently functions as a symbol of comfort and security in Mansfieldean fiction. Fenella’s father comes to the harbour to give her last minute advice and see them off. This physical journey on the boat inspires change and mirrors her mental progression. While sailing off her heart cries for her father, “Was that father turning round? – or waiving – or standing alone? - or walking off by himself” (174)? Her grandma is very caring and deeply religious and tells her about the do’s and don’ts while staying in the cabin which appears to be stifling and suffocating. The suffocating cabin symbolises her displeasure related to her grandmother’s advice and the need of following the norms and codes over which she has no say. Next day, as the ship reaches the destination, Fenella is flushed with joy, and exclaims, “‘It’s land, grandma,’ … wonderingly, as though they had been at sea
for weeks together” (180). She is motherless but her grandma is so deeply attached to her that she does not feel the absence of her mother nor does she feel embittered by her loss. Here the grandmother is portrayed as strong-willed and asserting woman playing the role of the father whereas the father is effemenised since he passes his responsibility to her. Similar effemenisation is evident in “The Fly” (Modern Prose 117-20) in which the movements of Mr. Woodifield, an old retired man and an associate of the Boss (the business magnate and the central character of the story) are governed by his wife and daughters. He is talkative and leads restricted life closely monitored by them. He is allowed to go to the main business area of London only on Tuesdays, “Since he had retired, since his … stroke, the wife and the girls kept him boxed up in the house every day of the week except Tuesday. On Tuesday he was dressed and brushed and allowed to cut back to the City for the day. Though what he did there the wife and the girls couldn’t imagine”(117). Here the effeminisation of Mr. Woodifield has taken place because all his movements and activities are guided by the women members of the family. He is not in a position to take any decision in running the family and even of his own life since his retirement.

“Prelude” records four stages of womanhood and how every stage is governed by family conventions. Kezia is not allowed to mix with others and all attempts are made to subdue and tame her free questioning spirit so that she is groomed into a woman who will never question her role of the wife and mother. Through the victimization and taming of the women characters by pre-set norms of the family and society in “The Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party” Mansfield questions the legitimacy of the familial and societal conventions that do
not treat women as independent beings and underscores the need for deconstructing the patriarchal forces maiming the individuality of women.

Like many feminists, Katherine Mansfield resents patriarchal domineering attitude which prevents woman’s self development. In many of her stories family relationships, deep attachment and subjugation of a woman occupy substantial space. Both Woolf and Mansfield are deeply influenced by family and they have closely observed how a girl’s life is shaped by the dominance of patriarchy. “The Wind Blows,” “The Young Girl” and “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” illustrate this. “The Lady’s Maid” and “Life of Ma Parker” are distinct examples of how attachment comes in the way of charting a new path.

Matilda in “The Wind Blows” chaffs under her mother’s dominance, a young girl in “The Young Girl” is depressed because of the assertive and artificial ways of her mother and Constantia and Josephine in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” are embittered by their father’s domination and their gradual taming when he was alive. Ellen in “A Lady’s Maid” fails to respond to Henry’s love because of her excessive attachment to the lady she serves. Ma Parker in “Life of Ma Parker” works hard and endures a lot of suffering for bettering the future of her grandson, the fountainhead of her joy and happiness. All these women feel frustrated at not fulfilling their aspirations because of the dominance of the family and deep attachment to someone.

Matilda dislikes her mother’s overbearing attitude. Life appears dreadful to her because of her mother’s excessive interference and imposition of familial values.
Here an elderly woman is pitted against another younger woman and is acting as a patriarchal agent in imposing societal norms designed by patriarchy. But the germs of independence are embedded in Matilda. She wants to assert herself by fulfilling her instinctive desires. On one windy day, disobeying her mother’s call, Matilda goes to her music teacher, Mr. Bullen, for whom she nurtures a soft spot. Matilda’s defiance is a significant act of empowerment as she dares to undermine authority and her individuality. Her music teacher is so kindly and so cordial that she sometimes cannot comprehend his true nature though she likes her closeness to him and his soothing influence on her, “Why does he speak so kindly – so awfully kindly – and as though they had known each other for years and years and knew everything about each other” (80). There is, however, an irony in Matilda’s disobedience. On one hand she feels suffocated within the family because her mother’s attempted imposition of familial values; on the other hand, she derives a sense of comfort in establishing a relationship with her music teacher presumably because he does not have any authoritative personality. Matilda’s actions are not that of as an assertive woman with an independent self. She disobeys her mother only to attach herself to a less authoritative person with a gentle disposition. It is more an attempt to flee rather than soar – the two aspects of flying which Cixous attributes to women in “The Laugh of Medusa” (301). Cixous uses the metaphor of flying to denote the simultaneous escape and freedom of women but Matilda, like Caliban in The Tempest merely replaces one authority with another.

Like Matilda, the young girl in “The Young Girl” does not like her mother’s meddling in her life. She is also disgusted with the ostentious artificiality of the social gathering of the so-called high society designed to sustain the
hegemony of the patriarchy. Mrs. Raddick, a happy-go-lucky and a babbling lady, has come to the casino with her exceedingly beautiful daughter to promote her in the social circles. Like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, she is inducing her daughter to market her desirability to prospective husbands. Her resentment against her mother’s coercive imposition and patriarchal endorsement of objectification of women is evidenced in her retort to her mother’s proposal of spending time with Hennie, “‘Oh, shut up, mother,’ said she wearily” (133). And again, “‘What utter rot! How dare you make a scene like this? This is the last time I’ll come out with you. You really are too awful for words’” (135).

Mrs. Raddick is more interested in passing her time in the casino and rich ladies than devoting time to her daughter. Further, she suggests her daughter should have tea with a stranger and a young boy, Hennie. On the insistence of the narrator and Hennie the young girl goes to a restaurant but she appears to be disinterested in everything around her. But suddenly her eyes wander, “A very good-looking elderly man stared back at her through a monocle on a black ribbon. But him she simply couldn’t see. There was a hole in the air where he was. She looked through and through him” (140). Like Matilda, this young woman’s rebellion is translated into mere transference. Instead of paying attention to the stranger chosen by her mother, she decides to pay attention to another stranger.

As in Woolf’s stories, the woman’s question in Mansfield also focuses on the generation gap. The older generation of women in Mansfield’s fiction has so interiorized the patriarchal norms that they are happy and contented to adhere to the familial and societal norms prescribed by patriarchy. Perhaps because they are
heavily dependent on the earning members of the family for their survival, security and comfort. Psychologically and emotionally they derive a sense of power from their efforts to control and shape their daughters. The younger generation feels a sense of deprivation but they do not dare to undermine their mothers’ hegemony. Both Woolf and Mansfield eschew open rebellion but focus on a crucial stage of feminist development where a woman is becoming conscious of the unsatisfactory state of affairs.

However, the young girl is completely dependent on her mother and the irritation articulated by her is an instrument to hide her vulnerability. After returning to the casino she is flabbergasted at not finding her mother where she is supposed to wait for her. She is about to cry, “I like it. I love waiting! Really – really I do! I’m always waiting – in all kinds of places.” (142). It reveals her excessive reliance on her mother and displeasure at having to come away from the restaurant where she was deriving pleasure by observing a man through a monocle. Both Woolf’s Lily in “The Introduction” and Mansfield’s young girl focus on the female gaze that scrutinizes men. But there is a big difference between this girl’s passing interest in an elderly male and Lily’s close scrutiny of Dean Swift. The young girl is deriving feminine pleasure but Lily’s gazing is directed at unearthing the privileges of a male. This female gaze, as it has been stated earlier, plays an important role in empowering woman because it enables her to access knowledge, which in turn instills self-confidence. It also reveals gender awareness and, as the feminists advocate, consciousness about one’s problems, which leads to pondering on ways of eliminating them. Mansfield’s young girl however, never approaches this threshold. She dislikes her mother’s way of life and shallow nature because she does not like to
be enslaved to prescriptive norms and traditions. She also resents the fact that her dreams and course of life are governed by her mother. Mansfield’s anger against dominance and imposition of another’s uncalled-for desire upon oneself is manifest here. Like a feminist, the daughter is conscious of her problems and feels frustrated at her inability to come out of the shackles but she never rebels actively. Also, her anger is not directed against patriarchy but against one of its female agents who is perhaps even more hapless than herself.

In “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” Constantia and Josephine reflect on how to arrange their father, the late Colonel’s, funeral and chart their future course of action. This is the first time in their lives that they are called to take any decision on domestic affairs. When alive, their father had never allowed them to do anything without his permission. Their father’s tyranny ultimately eroded their self-confidence totally. They have been so cowed down by him that they are reduced to tears at having buried him without seeking his permission. Their abject subjection borders on the ridiculous, “We couldn’t have kept him unburied. At any rate, not in a flat this size “(98). There is a great deal of affinity between the taming of Constantia and Josephine and that of Rosamond and Phyllis in Woolf’s “Phyllis and Rosamond” but the latter are not as pathetic as Mansfield’s duo.

It takes two days for Constantia and Josephine to muster enough courage to enter the Colonel’s room after his death to sort his things. Their patriarchal conditioning has been so absolute that, when he was alive, they had never opened the drawers without his permission. Their first small step towards independence is to decide to dismiss Kate, their insolent house maid, an action that will ironically
increase their domestic chores. But the main question for them is the issue of marriage. In absence of their father no one will take any initiative to marry them off. Consciously, it seems to be an act of positive decision-making but subconsciously they are looking for substitute father figures: male authority which would once again subject them to obeying orders so that they are not burdened with the task of making decisions themselves. They have spent most of their lives looking after their father and doing nothing that offends him. They have become accustomed to servility and the possibility of having to take independent decisions terrifies them. As Constantia murmurs, “The rest had been looking after their father, and at the same time keeping out of father’s way. But now? But now?” (118). Their perception of marriage is still governed by the conventional idea of women being given husbands rather than choosing them where compatibility of taste and temperament are of no importance. They feel depressed by the fact that their father had never tried to make them independent or address their feelings and emotion, and subjected them to male hegemony solely to fulfil his domestic and familial needs. Through the frustrated aspirations of Constantia and Josephine, Mansfield illustrates how family and father, potent agents of patriarchy prevent women from gaining an independent personality. It is also evident that the women have no other option but to seek security and comfort through marriage. Mansfield critiques the social system that deprives women from having a room and income of their own.

“The Lady’s Maid” focuses on class based inter-gender exploitation. Ellen, a devoted and dedicated maid becomes the victim of excessive attachment to her lady. She had been working in the lady’s house since she was thirteen. Her sense of duty and devotion prevent her from setting up a life with Henry, whom she likes and
wishes to marry. The lady, belonging to a higher class, is clever and manipulative and uses Ellen’s attachment and sense of responsibility to ensure her own comfort and deprive Ellen of future happiness, “‘You mustn’t mind about me. You mustn’t disappoint your young man. And so cheerful, you know, madam, never thinking about herself”’(253-54). The apparent kindness and self-resignation of the lady are calculated to impact the maid in exactly the way the lady intends. Ellen is so moved by the so-called generosity of her mistress in letting her go at the cost of her own discomfort that she shuts the door on Henry when he comes to marry her, “It’s all over. I’m not going to marry you’ ... ‘I can’t leave my lady’” (254). This is another manifestation of how patriarchal forces operate through different agents of the family.

Similar attachment is evident in Ma Parker, a maid in the flat of a literary man in “Life of Ma Parker.” She is also portrayed as a maid who suffers because of her close bonding and deep concern for her grandson. She ruminates on how she came to London in search of work got married to a baker and subsequently had six children. The goddess of Fortune, however, had never smiled upon her because her husband died of consumption and she had to endure a lot to look after her children. She had never grudged nor complained against anyone for her misery and misfortune. Her ability to bear with sorrows and sufferings is reminiscent of Mrs. Thurlow in H. E. Bates’s “The Ox” in which the latter works hard from dawn to dusk in different houses with a hope for a better prospect for her two sons. Like Mrs. Thurlow’s preoccupation with her sons, Ma Parker too, is obsessed with the future of her grandson Lennie, her centre of joy and happiness. Unfortunately, he dies. The thought of his tragic death stirs the deepest chord of her heart. She comes out of the
flat for the first time and wants to cry in the chilly windy night so as to lighten the load of her sorrows. But she feels self conscious about weeping on the road or in front of the neighbours and her employer,

She couldn’t sit on a bench anywhere; people would come asking her questions. She couldn’t possibly go back to the gentleman’s flat; she had no right to cry in strangers’ houses. If she sat on some steps a policeman would speak to her.

Oh, wasn’t there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody was worrying her? Wasn’t there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out – at last? (152-53)

The story exposes the stifling circumstances of the lower class women who have no space of their own to even indulge in private grief. Both the employers – the lady in “The Lady’s Maid” and the literary man in “Life of Ma Parker” – do not sincerely care about their maids as much as the maids do. It shows the insensitivity and artificiality of the higher class towards those who provide them comfort. Convention and sense of duty are used to deprive such women of charting their own path.

“Life of Ma Parker” is an exploration of the life of a hapless woman who in spite of her best efforts fails to see the light of happiness. She does not surrender herself to the dictates of Fate after having lost her husband. Her ability to work hard, endure misery and provide selfless service are striking. Ellen’s joy and satisfaction emanate from her total devotion to her lady, Ma Parker slaves away for the future happiness of her grandson. They are both hard-working, do not depend on anyone for their existence and have the strength to fight against adverse circumstances.
From a feminist standpoint they are women with income and individuality, and try to realize their dreams through honest means. The irony is that they are also stereotypical in prioritizing devotion and submission beyond the call of duty at their work place exactly in the way women are expected to do in the domestic sphere. Like Linda and Beryl in “The Prelude,” they enjoy a sense of power because of the complete reliance of their respective employers on them. Like them, these maids are loosing their source of security and comfort (in this case, income), if they leave their jobs. The maintenance of status quo in these stories depends on the complicity of both the maids and their employers. The employers exploit the willing servility of their domestic help which is occasioned by their interiorisation of the patriarchal notions of hierarchy, loyalty and self-sacrifice embedded in such relations. Through the suppression of the aspirations of the maids Mansfield has shown the manipulative power of the upper class which thwarts lower class dreams and aspirations to secure their own comfort. This exemplifies how class also plays a significant role in imposing and interiorizing patriarchal norms.

“The Wind Blows” and “The Young Lady” hinge upon the generation gap between women and the consequent tensions. The older women are conditioned to follow the patriarchal conventions and become active agents of imposing the same on the younger generation to quell their questioning spirit and the urge to challenge their validity in family and society. Similar generation gap is witnessed in Woolf’s “Phyllis and Rosamond” and “Memoirs of a Novelist.” On the surface, it might seem as a traditional projection of women as enemies of women. But both Woolf and Mansfield show the all-consuming nature of patriarchy through these encounters. Inwardly, the younger generation feels frustrated but there is no explicit
attempt to undermine patriarchal hegemony in them. The only difference is that while the older women are well-adjusted, the younger ones harbour a repressed discontent.

Frustration of feminine aspirations, suppressed self, injured love and pangs of separation and loneliness occupy a substantial space in Mansfield’s “Her First Ball,” “The Singing Lesson,” “Miss Brill” and “The Little Governess.” Leila, a perceptive girl, in “Her First Ball” feels depressed and humiliated at the social ball where women are traditionally looked upon as objects and decorative creatures. She feels alienated from the women of her age group who seem to take pleasure in their own commodification,

Leila felt the other girls didn’t really see her. They were looking towards the men. Why didn’t the men begin? What were they waiting for? There they stood, smoothing their gloves, patting their glossy hair and smiling among themselves. Then, quite suddenly, as if they had only just made up their minds that that were what they had to do, the men came gliding over the parquet. There was a joyful flutter among the girls. (196)

Miss Meadows in “The Singing Lesson” is depicted as a frustrated woman both on the personal and the professional front. She is rudely jolted by her fiancée’s betrayal who had merely pretended to be in love to fulfil his egoistic needs. He does not even have the decency to meet her to explain his actions and simply sends a note to break off the relationship,
I feel more and more strongly that our marriage would be a mistake. Not that I do not love you. I love you as much as possible for me to love any woman, but, truth to tell, I have come to the conclusion that I am not a marrying man, and the idea of settling down fills me with nothing but…. (204-05)

The rules and regulations of the school and the overbearing attitude of the headmistress are also nuanced workings of patriarchy that stifles her autonomy and marginalizes her position in the institution.

Epiphany and the glimpses of a particular mood are of Mansfield’s pet themes. This letter mentioned above is humiliating and injures her self-esteem. She realises that she has failed to choose the right person and this undermines her confidence. Failure of love is not always due to the inability to communicate, it could also stem from an immature perception of love as indicated in “The Singing Lesson.” It might also result from the disparity between one’s perception and object of love. Miss Meadow is also worried about the possible reaction of her colleagues and students at the news of the break off. Her apprehension is yet another manifestation of patriarchy. The rejection of woman by her man is seen as the inability of a woman to hold on to her man and often evokes ridicule. These anxieties prevent Miss Meadows from concentrating on her class,

This little ritual of the flower had been gone through for ages and ages quite a term and a half. It was as much part of the lesson as opening the piano. But this morning, instead of taking it up, instead of tucking it into her belt while she leant over Mary and said, ‘Thank you, Mary. How very nice! Turn to page thirty-two,’ what was Mary’s horror when Miss Meadows totally ignored the
chrysanthemum, made no reply to her greeting, but said in a voice of ice. ‘Page fourteen please, and mark the accents well.’ (205)

Meanwhile, the headmistress, Miss Wyatt, calls in her to hand over a telegram. The headmistress is not at all happy with such telegram because it is not a message of death or accident. It is an outpouring of Basil’s love that displeases her. “I must say I don’t approve of my teachers having telegrams sent to them in school hours, unless in case of very bad news, such as death,’ explained Miss Wyatt, ‘or a very serious accident or something to that effect. Good news, Miss Meadows, will always keep, you know” (210). The overbearing and dominating attitude of the headmistress towards Miss Meadows may presumably emanate from the fact that she herself might not have enjoyed love nor drawn the attention of any man and so is jealous of Miss Meadows’s engagement. She too, inwardly, might be desiring a heterosexual relationship although she has passed the prime of life. However, the contents of the letter change Miss Meadows’s mood from despair to delight. This is reflected in her order to the students to sing a song that cheers and uplifts her heart. Her reaction to the letter is paradoxical: her fiancée’s unwillingness to marry depresses her but the expressions of love in the same letter of rejection consoles and delights her.

In this story, Mansfield portrays the pettiness of those in authority, the double dealing of men and the shackles of convention that bind even the economically independent women. In spite of being a teacher, Miss Meadows views marriage as her ultimate fulfillment. She is dejected at her fiancée’s rejection as she has interiorised the traditional values that prioritize the woman’s role as a wife and
homemaker and is willing to play a secondary role in love. Marriage, family, institutions and so-called morality are so designed to colonise the minds of women and exclude them from power and freedom. Through Miss Meadows, Mansfield suggests that economic independence is only the first step towards emancipation; the mind needs to be decolonized as well. This requires changes in both familial and societal fronts. We need to move towards reciprocal change and look anew at the harsh political realities. In a way, Mansfield here anticipates the concerns of post-feminism which, “Shifts the issue from identity to relationships, from a concern with oppression to one with the concept of freedom” (Jain 91).

Miss Meadows in “The Singing Lesson” feels offended, slighted and cornered on being jilted by her lover. It undermines her self-belief and dignity and humiliates her. She is disappointed and disgruntled but does not protest. Instead she is assailed by an overwhelming sense of shame. It is a classic example of guilt transference – the man has deceived her but she interprets it as her inability to sustain his interest in her. Thus enslaved by the patriarchal construct of man-woman relationship where the woman is always guilty, she needs to imbibe and internalize the “concept of freedom” as insisted upon by post-feminists.

Leila, a girl with a mind of her own, in “Her First Ball” is pushed into the adult world and subjected to the nuanced workings of patriarchy. At the ball, she is introduced as a country bumpkin desperately in need of male company, “‘This is my little country cousin Leila. Be nice to her. Find her partners; she’s under my wing,’ said Meg, going up to one girl after another” (195). A fat and bald-headed man takes her as his partner and Leila instinctively begins dancing in spite of her initial
hesitation and distaste for the man. While dancing she feels a good sensation and learns to be happy in a different way hitherto unknown to her, “Her first ball! She was at the beginning of everything. It seemed to her that she had never known what the night was like before” (199). Mansfield traces the complex responses of the mind torn between individual autonomy and social allures.

Leila, initially averse to the idea of ball where women are objectified in terms of beauty, ironically, derives feminine pleasure by subjugating to a male dancer. The same happens in the second dance with a young man with curly hair. She walks to the dance floor haughtily but within a few seconds she is assailed by a joyous sensation just like Elsie in Lawrence’s “The White Stocking,” who revels in the sensation of melting away as she dances with her former employer, Adams despite her husband’s disapproval. She is delighted that she is still an object of desire for males other than her husband.

Leila is not as malleable as Elsie. She is perceptive and wishes to choose her own partners for the dance in contravention to the traditional practice of allowing only the males to exercise their choice. Through the portrayal of Leila’s disinclination to be treated as a passive sex object Mansfield questions the validity of the prerogative of the male members in such social gathering that subjugate and marginalize women and prevent them from making their own decisions. However, Leila is presented as a perceptive girl with a duality in her character who observes and questions the workings of male hegemony but derives inward pleasure in submitting herself to a male member at the ball. It exemplifies the overbearing power of patriarchy that tames women’s autonomy and independence.
As in Woolf, solitariness of middle aged women, is an important theme in Mansfield’s short stories. Miss Brill, a middle-aged woman in “Miss Brill” and Fraulein in “The Little Governess” suffer from a sense of loneliness. Miss Brill tries to communicate with the people around her but is thwarted by their indifferent attitude. Fraulein, a middle-aged lady, goes alone to Munich to be appointed a governess to a doctor’s family. She feels lonely on the train but her encounter with a male co-passenger dispels her loneliness for some time. However, she feels let down when the man tries to kiss her under the guise of geniality and cordiality.

Miss Brill, a poor spinster, leads a life of her own. On a cheerful Sunday afternoon she takes a seat on a rotunda and, in keeping with the joyous atmosphere, she looks forward to setting up a conversation with those around her but is greeted with indifference. A keen observer on human life, she looks closely at those around her and realizes that artificiality, heartlessness and hypocrisy govern their lives, “There was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, nearly all odd, and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even cupboard” (186-87). Her surmise is reiterated by the conversation of a boy and girl near her,

“No, not now’, said the girl. ‘Not here, I can’t.’

“But why? Because of the old stupid thing at the end there?’ asked the boy.

“Why does she come here at all – who wants her? Why doesn’t she keep her silly old mug at home?’ (190)

Though Miss Brill is harmless and harbours no ill-feeling towards anyone, she appears to be persona-non-grata which disheartens and depresses her. The story
probes into the alienation of elderly women and the indifference of the people towards them. It also critiques the insensitivity and indifference of the self-centred urban populace. Miss Brill leads a life of her own as she does not bank on anyone for her existence. Material security gives her personal freedom but it comes at the cost of loneliness and alienation. Self-absorbed individualism and closed communatiriam in an insensitive society prevents one from reaching out to a lonely woman and mitigating her sense of alienation.

Miss Brill longs for companionship to share her thoughts and exchange her feelings. But the indifference of the people breaks her heart,

But today she passed the baker’s by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room – her room like a cupboard – and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklace quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying. (191)

Miss Brill’s loneliness and sense of emptiness remind us Woolf’s Miss V. in “The Mysterious Case of Miss V.,” Isabella Tyson in “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection” and Miss Anning in “Together and Apart.” They also feel the same estrangement. Woolf has underlined the need of having communication and establishing sorority for driving away drudgery of life because articulation and communication are significant steps towards empowering women. Apart from dissipating the sense of loneliness it instils self-confidence. All middle aged spinsters mentioned above try to communicate with the people around them but are
rejected as uninteresting and ordinary. Ironically, they all rue the lack of a permanent relationship with a male of their choice or a family of their own.

Miss Brill is a woman of substance and a keen observer of life around her. This keen observation of life and surroundings plays an important role in Mansfield’s fiction because it makes one conscious of how one has been socially constructed and how the forces of patriarchy colonise a woman. Miss Brill is aware of her position in society and feels the futility of leading a solitary life. Her loneliness is intensified by the callousness of the people around her and makes her realize the importance of a long term relationship. Despite their sensitivity to women’s issues both Woolf and Mansfield seem to suggest that women seeking fulfillment through male companionship must legitimize it through marriage and they must marry in the prime of their lives when they are physically attractive and are still valued in the marriage market. Otherwise they will have to suffer from a sense of emptiness despite their education, independence and zest for life. Neo-Freudian psychologist Erik Erikson believes that avoiding intimacy, fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness and sometimes depression (www.erikson.html). In her youth Miss Brill has bypassed the need for intimacy and relationship to lead an unencumbered and unfettered life but with age she realizes the futility and emptiness of a life without male companionship. Here Woolf and Mansfield are not advocating subjugation to males as the precondition for women’s happiness as Lawrence does; they are highlighting the social conditions fostered by patriarchy that enforce such subjection.
“The Little Governess” narrates the encounter of Fraulein, an elderly lady, with an old man on a Munich bound train. Fraulein is initially indifferent to the old man who occupies a seat near her. But curiosity prompts her to peep at him and when he volunteers to converse she derives inward pleasure. In fact, she feels impressed by his appearance, cordiality and fellow-feeling. Gradually she develops a soft corner for the man as if he were an old and trusted friend. He tries to help her in every possible way and guides her to the hotel where she is to stay for sometime before reaching her destination. She is delighted by his attention, “She wanted to run, she wanted to hang on his arm, she wanted to cry every minute, Oh, I am so frightfully happy! He guided her across in roads, stood still while she ‘looked’ and her kind eyes beamed on her and she said ‘just whatever you wish’” (145). But she is taken aback by his proposal to sit beside her and drink to her health and disgusted by his kiss on her mouth before she can resist him, “It wasn’t the same old man at all. Ah, how horrible! The little governess stared at him in terror. ‘No, no, no!’ She stammered, struggling out of his hands” (145).

“The Little Governess” illustrates how men of all age regard women as objects of consumption. The old man has given Miss Fraulein company for quite some time in the train and he guides her to the hotel so when he gets positive and reciprocal response from her he simply assumes that she is game for sexual advances as well. Conditioned by patriarchy, he is unable to imagine that a woman might desire only friendship and communication without any sexual connotation. Her desire to be recognized as a fellow human being rather than merely a woman has no place in a patriarchal society.
Miss Brill is depressed because she is neglected by the people around her and therefore lonely. Miss Fraulein is not however, an immediate victim of loneliness because she is going to work as a governess. Her temporary solitariness while journeying is driven away by a male fellow traveller but she is repelled by his attempts at taking undue advantage. However, like the women of Woolf, Mansfield’s women are aware of their victimization by patriarchal forces; but outwardly, they also do not dare to do anything to undermine the assumed dominance of the male members of the society. At the same time Leila, Miss Brill and Fraulein suffer from a sense of incompleteness as they share no enduring relation with a male and this makes them rather forlorn as they grow old. Mansfield, like Woolf, asserts the complementarity of the sexes over their opposition. As mentioned earlier, Gonzalez-Herero and Garcia-Martin suggest “social and community service and mass communication” as the means for neutralizing the alienation brought on by aging (154-55). Similarly both Woolf and Mansfield suggest that these women could engage themselves in different community activities and bond with like-minded people in various organizations to overcome the sense of estrangement because at this stage they are unlikely to set up a special relationship with a male and the society will not look kindly upon their attempts in this regard.

Man-woman relation, marital maladjustment, the degree of freedom in married life, clash of ego also occupy a substantial space in Mansfieldian fiction. “Mr. and Mrs. Dove,” “Marriage a la Mode,” “An Ideal Family,” “The Man Without a Temper,” “Bliss” illustrate the complex facets of marital relationship. “Mr. and Mrs. Dove” is about a man-woman relationship where Annie plays a dominating role in contravention to tradition. Annie has inherited a huge fortune from her
parents. Reginald, a young businessman from Rhodesia, has a soft corner for her but he is unable to say so because he suffers from inferiority complex owing to his lower status and position. William in “Marriage a la Mode” feels frustrated with his wife Isabel because of her bohemian life and snobbish attitude which she wants to impose upon him. “An Ideal Family” probes into the maladjustment in marital relationship and Mr. Neave’s feeling of being neglected by his wife and family despite him being the bread winner. In “The Man Without a Temper,” the wife depends heavily on her husband, Robert, because of her illness and thinks that he regards her as a burden which might create a distance between them. “Bliss” is about the blissful conjugal life of Bertha and Harry which is upset by her discovery of Harry’s intimacy with Miss Fluton.

Reginald in “Mr. and Mrs. Dove” decides to return from Rhodesia and declare his love for Annie. He enjoys her company and pines for her deeply but is uncomfortable that whenever they are together she laughs at him without rhyme or reason. This hurts his male ego. She herself does not know why she laughs at him but she inwardly enjoys laughing at him. Her laughing at Reginald suggests her dominance and authority over him — a role reversal of the convention of man-woman relationship.

The day before his departure for business Reginald decides to propose. Just at this point she draws his attention to two doves:

To and fro, to and fro over the fine sand on the floor of the dove house, walked the two doves. One was always in front of the other. One ran forward, uttering a little cry, and the other followed,
solemnly bowing and bowing. ‘You see,’ explained Anne, ‘the one in
front, she’s Mrs. Dove. She looks at Mr. Dove and gives that little
laugh and run forward, and he follows her, bowing and bowing. And
that makes her laugh again …’ comes poor Mr. Dove, bowing and
bowing (128).

Here Mr. and Mrs. Dove obviously symbolize Reginald and Annie. Annie
deliberately emphasizes Mr. Dove’s “solemnly bowing and bowing” because she
longs for Reginald to follow her and indeed, in reality, he is always docile around
Annie as he thinks of her as superior to him in every respect. She likes him and so
assures him – “That’s all wrong. I’m not above you at all. You’re much better than I
am. You’re marvelously unselfish and … I’m none of those things. You don’t know
me. I’m the most awful character” (129-30) – but at the same time is flattered and
pleased by his submissiveness.

Annie’s evocation of Mr. Dove reminds us of Rosalind’s fantasy of
imagining her husband as a rabbit in Woolf’s “Lapin and Lapinova.” Rosalind’s
visualization of her husband as rabbit in the game of hare and rabbit is an escape
route from the claustrophobic atmosphere of her husband’s family and her marriage.
Annie’s desire to look upon Reginald as Mr. Dove reflects her inward desire to
regard him as timid and submissive and dominate him after marriage.

Reginald proposes but her remarks that she cannot marry a man whom she
laughs at depresses him. Yet, when he is about to depart she entreats, “‘No, don’t.
You can’t go yet,’ she said imploringly. ‘You can’t possibly go away feeling like
that’” (131). And again, “‘How can you be so cruel?’ I can’t let you go until I know

for certain that you are just as happy as you were before you asked me to marry you. Surely you must see that, it’s so simple” (132). Annie’s insensitivity is generated by the sense of power that wealth gives her. There is duality and complexity in her nature: she does not like his cowering attitude though she likes his unselfish kindness. At the same time she desires a gritty partner with guts. These conflicting emotions prevent her from reciprocating Reginald’s love while at the same time aware that he is the man for her. So, she urges him to come back but in a deliberately heartless way as though she does not want to give herself away. She has the courage to do this because she is financially autonomous and her future is secure. Perhaps Mansfield is trying to say that such treatment meted by men to women is considered natural but it seems so very heartless and unnatural because Annie is a woman and to top it all she has not achieved financial security through hard work, it has merely been thrust upon her. Mansfield also seems to suggest that hierarchical power relationship between a man and a woman is not conducive to a happy future no matter who is on the top.

A domestic tragedy is played out against a background of broad social satire in “Marriage a la Mode.” William works in London and returns to his family every weekend. His wife Isabel mingles with people of the upper stratum and prefers a sort of carefully careless life. William is enamoured by his wife. He reminisces, “The exquisite freshness of Isabel! When he had been a little boy, it was his delight to run into the garden after a shower of rain and shake the rose-bush over him. Isabel was that rose-bush, petal-soft, sparkling and cool” (157). But he cannot comprehend Isabel’s continuous search for new experiences and is unable to adjust to her flamboyant lifestyle.
William feels that Isabel is changing: her emotional attachment to him appears to be gradually decreasing. She tries to induct her husband into the bohemian circle but is not quite successful. Isabel’s desire to change William’s taste and temperament to suit her own tastes reminds us of Hilda in Lawrence’s “The Shades of Spring” who inculcates in Syson, her lover, culture, education and refinement to suit herself. Similar efforts are made by Mersham to “educate” Muriel in Lawrence’s “A Modern Lover.” In both the cases the plan boomerangs and their ultimate desires are frustrated. Similarly, Isabel’s efforts to change William’s tastes and attitude prove futile. Feminism calls for the respect of the otherness of the self and envisages a relationship based on equal enjoyment of power and freedom unlike the patriarchal endorsement of hierarchical relationship in marriage. Consequently, Isabel’s attempts to impose her own preferences on William ends in a fiasco and William withdraws to London thinking that he has failed to fulfil her desires. He sends a letter from London stating, “God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness” (168). Initially, Isabel does not take the letter seriously, and as usual she reads this letter to her friends who laugh, sneer and jeer at the contents of the letter. But later she realizes her folly and regrets her maltreatment of him, “Oh, what a loathsome thing to have done. How could she have done it! God forbid, my darling, that I should be a drag on your happiness. William! Isabel pressed her face into the pillow. But she felt that even the grave bedroom knew her for what she was, shallow, tinkling, vain” (169).

Isabel has never been content with the idyll of normal marriage and motherhood. She has an insatiable desire to see the unseen, feel the unfelt and so
befriends a flamboyant and bohemian set of people. In doing so, she fails to pay due 
attention to her husband which makes him misunderstand her. Her inability to 
perceive her husband’s changing mood upsets their conjugal life. She realizes her 
folly and decides to mend her behaviour. The story has a dual message. On one hand 
it suggests that while championing her own taste and temperament a woman should 
also look to her partner’s legitimate demands or else it might result in estrangement. 
On the other hand, it also illustrates that a woman is never completely free to do as 
she pleases in marriage which demands a prescribed norm of behaviour.

“An Ideal Family” probes the conflicting concepts of an ideal family 
envisaged by Mr. Neave and his family. He is saddened by his wife and children’s 
self-absorption and feels that they ignore him. Mr. Neave and his wife Charlotte 
have very different priorities and interests as does their son Harold who would 
rather have his father sit idle at home than go to work in this old age,

‘Why will you be so unreasonable, father? There’s absolutely no 
need for you to go to the office. It only makes it very awkward for us 
when people persist in saying how tired you’re looking. Here’s this 
huge house and garden. Surely you could be happy in – appreciating 
it for a change. Or you could take up some hobby.’ (239)

Despite being poles apart in terms of interests and perceptions, the family members 
are careful not to cut a sorry figure in front of the neighbours and associates. People 
think that theirs is an ideal family which is so happy that even marriageable 
daughters do not want to get married and leave the house. In reality, Mr. Neave feels 
neglected by his family and longs for companionship and genuine understanding at 
home. His dreams of an ideal family where everybody cares for him and pays him
attention is reminiscent of Rosalind in Woolf’s “Lappin and Lapinova” who transforms her conjugal relation into an imagined game of a rabbit and a hare. Both Mr. Neave and Rosalind are embittered and cannot adjust themselves to the prevailing practices of the family. Their dreams provide an escape from the agonizing moments of marital life. Mansfield here focuses on a harsh reality – the redundancy of an aged member of the family. Mr. Neave’s wife, Charlotte, is neither particularly docile nor aggressive; she has merely become habituated to a life imposed upon her by domesticity where her daily chores and children are her priority. Her unmindfulness hurts Mr. Neave deeply,

Perhaps, he thought vaguely, he had been asleep for a long time.
He’d been forgotten. What had all this to do with him – this house and Charlotte, the girls and Harold – what did he know about them?
They were strangers to him. Life had passed him by. Charlotte was not his wife. His wife! (246)

“The Man Without a Temperament” delves into a husband-wife relationship where an invalid wife is totally dependent on her husband, Robert. He seems caring and careful of her needs. The wife is torn between her desire to not be a burden on any one including her husband and the terror of loosing him precisely because she is such a burden, “Robert, the awful thing is – I suppose it’s my illness – I simply feel I could not go alone. You see – you’re everything. You’re bread and wine, Robert, bread and wine. Oh, my darling – what am I saying? Of course I could, of course I won’t take you away”(107). Her own dilemma makes her interpret Robert’s solicitousness as mere magnanimity – mere discharging of husbandly duty – and not a token of true love. She also hates being so dependent on others. Like Woolf’s
women however, none of this turmoil comes to the fore. Outwardly, she says, “Silly! I want you to go. I can’t expect you to drag after your invalid wife every minute … How long will you be?” (102)

Mansfield closely replicates the tensions of an independent mind trapped in an invalid body and its impact on husband-wife relationship. Although Robert shows no resentment, the wife’s inability to move and enjoy time with her husband pricks her. She is afraid of becoming a hindrance to her husband’s normal life style. She desires respect and freedom in her relationship and does not like to be treated as an object of pity because it undermines her sense of dignity. Erich Froman considers love to be an interpersonal creative capacity rather than an emotion. As stated earlier true love has the elements of care, responsibility, respect and knowledge (www.erich_froman.html). Robert seems to possess these qualities in his treatment of his wife but the wife is tormented by her inability to reciprocate in equal measure.

“An Ideal Family” and “The Man Without a Temperament” are not ostensibly about clash of egos or sexual tension as the rest of the stories in this group. At first glance they do not seem to have any explicit feminist agenda. But they expose the construction and deconstruction of expectations that marriage as a patriarchal institution fosters. A husband and a bread earner, like Mr. Neave, is conditioned to expect special attention from his family members and trapped by that expectation he feels neglected and frustrated. If Mr. Neave is let down in his expectations from others, Robert’s wife is frustrated at not being able to fulfil her own expectations. As a wife, she should be an able companion and not a burden to her husband and this failure makes her distrust the good nature of her husband –
Robert cannot possibly love a wife who fails to be a wife! Marriage constructs roles for its functionaries – wife, husband, children, and parents – and conditions individuals to play them out and any deviation from this role play leads to frustration and unhappiness.

“Bliss” is about the disruption of blissful conjugal life caused by infidelity. Bertha thinks that she is leading a perfectly happy life with Harry because they have every material comfort, are deeply attached to each other and have a baby. But sometimes she apprehends that she is not warm enough for him,

Oh, she’d loved him – she’d been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way. And, equally, of course, she’d understood that he was different. They’d discussed it so often. It had worried her dreadfully at first to find that she was so cold, but after a time it had not seemed to matter. They were so frank with each other – such good pals. That was the best of being modern. (76)

Mansfield adroitly suggests the possible faultines in an apparently blissful conjugal life in the above passage. The two partners’ levels of sexual needs are different and this is covered over by the stress on friendship – “such good pals.” And despite Bertha’s claim of theirs being a “modern” marriage that accommodates such differences, it cannot accept the breach of monogamy. Bertha’s blissful conjugal life is shattered at a dinner party in their house where she discovers Harry’s closeness and his deep feelings for Miss Fluton, a passionate woman, with a zest for life:

Harry with Miss Fluton’s coat in his arms and Miss Fluton with her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put
his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said: ‘I adore you,’ and Miss Fluton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry’s nostrils quivered; his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: ‘Tomorrow,’ and with her eyelids Miss Fluton said, ‘Yes.’ (77)

Bertha cannot think that her husband may be attracted to another woman. It is a rude blow to her firm conviction of mutual love and her sense of self-respect. She scrutinizes anew her self, her past and the differences between her and Harry’s perceptions. She realizes that she has been used as an object to satisfy the domestic needs of providing a family for Harry. She is also aware that because of her economic dependence and social customs she will continue as a wife despite the knowledge of Harry’s infidelity. Mansfield thus exposes the hypocrisy of marriage which is more of a convenient contract than a true pact of love. Through Bertha’s predicament of being disillusioned and yet persisting with marriage, Mansfield critiques the patriarchal system that does not provide adequate opportunities to women in life and relationships and how women with no income of their own are forced to face an uncertain future and endure duplicity and falsehood for mere survival.

Like Woolf’s women Mansfield’s women are mostly portrayed as dependent either on their fathers or on husbands in one way or another. Annie, Isabel, Charlotte are exceptions because they are not depicted as submissive and docile but as assertive, independent and dominating. Their male counterparts feel embittered because of the incompatibility of their taste and temperament and the inability to
assert their superiority in their relationships. But none of the women has achieved economic independence through their own labour. In the pre-War stories of Lawrence, women like Muriel in “A Modern Lover,” Hilda in “The Shades of Spring,” Mrs. Radford in “Her Turn,” Lucy in “A Sick Collier” and Elizabeth Bates in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” do not play second fiddle to their male-partners. Apart from Elizabeth Bates all try to pursue their will and desires, albeit in domestic management. The women in the Mining stories are depicted as superior to their husbands because their defiance and assertion in the family are not linked to sexuality but premised upon domestic affairs. Hilda, Muriel, Winifred, Elsie, Mrs. Adams in the Nottingham and the Croydon Period are presented primarily as women concerned with love, love which is explored as a power-relationship where the male dominates and which has a strong physical undercurrent. In post-War stories Lawrence has shrewdly shown the submission of women in their conjugal life to the male power for their ultimate sublimation. However, no happy and harmonious relationship can flourish if one of the partners is subordinated; each partner needs to respect the otherness of the other self. Mansfield’s assertive women in their conjugal relationships are not sensitive to the needs of their counterparts which leave them feeling frustrated and embittered. She firmly believes that any sort of authorial and dominating force curbs a healthy relationship as reflected in the disappointments of Reginald, William and Mr. Neave. Similar maladjustments and frustrations are discernable in Woolf’s characters – Mrs. Dalloway in “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street,” Mabel in “New Dress,” the Duchess in “The Duchess and the Jeweller” and Rosalind in “Lappin and Lapinova.” They are all discontented in various ways and feel oppressed by the machinations of patriarchal forces in their families. It is interesting to note that while Lawrence focuses primarily on sexual tensions within
and outside marriage, Woolf and Mansfield prioritize the emotional aspects. There is an autobiographical overtone in the treatment of embittered conjugal relationship in the writings of both these authors, “Mansfield and Woolf’s personal writings reveal tensions in their marriages that are comparable with those in their relationships with their fathers. Theoretically both are clear and outspoken about men and marriage” (Smith 51).

Mansfield’s short fiction introduces us to wives, daughters, sweethearts, widows and businessmen who belong mostly to the middle class family and are ordinary individuals pitted against an unjust society. She has portrayed missed connections, frustrated dreams and desires, complicated emotions in a rigid society. Mansfield is strong-willed albeit fickle-minded, an enlightened and emancipated woman, who has suffered both physically and mentally and has derived a lesson from her pangs and agonies.

Mansfield is not a conformist; she dislikes pre-set ideas and prescribed norms. At the same time, she is heavily influenced by her family and the deep attachment to her brother. Her women are portrayed in relation to the family and her own frustrated longings are discernible in her characters but most of them shine out as individuals with ingenuity and guts to face adverse and trying situations. In “Prelude,” “At the Bay” and “The Garden Party” she has recreated her childhood and shown how a woman is victimized and a girl child is tamed to be a woman. These women are aware of their victimization and disadvantageous position but, as in Woolf, they are primarily portrayed as submissive. This is presumably because they are not economically independent and therefore dare not articulate their grievances or resort to overt gestures to subvert patriarchy. The elder women have
been portrayed as storehouses of comfort and security to the young girls but they also play as active agents of patriarchy, imposing familial and societal values.

In many of Mansfield’s stories family relations, deep attachment and subjugation of a woman to the authority of others occupy a substantial space. The young girls, Ellen and Matilda illustrate this. Frustration of the aspirations, suppressed self and injured love because of assertion of the authority are palpable in Constantia and Josephine, Leila and Miss Meadow. These women suffer because of the shrewd operations of patriarchal authority in one way or another.

Miss Brill and Fraulein reflect Mansfield’s own sense of alienation and estrangement. They are used to show the insensitivity and self-absorption of the metropolis. Annie, Isabel, Charlotte, Robert’s wife and Bertha are deployed to illustrate various facets of marital maladjustments. Some of them are assertive and imposing leading to misunderstanding and disappointments in marriage. It suggests that wholesome and harmonious conjugal life is possible only when both partners respect each other’s individuality and address each other’s feelings.

Overall, Mansfield’s women emit a sense of entrapment. Several of her women – young Kezia or old Miss Brill – continue with a mechanical and monotonous existence aware of being misfits and of the constant onslaught on their individuality. But they do not buckle or bend easily under the weight. The urge to survive in the midst of heavy odds, in other words, their resilience, is the hallmark of Mansfield’s fiction.
Both Woolf and Mansfield closely observe the prevalence of patriarchy in every field – familial, societal, professional – that suppresses the realization of women’s inward aspirations. Through the frustration and the disillusion of their women characters they question the validity of stereotypical norms and customs that curb the individuality and destroy relationships. Angela Smith remarks,

For a woman to find her deepest realization of herself in her work was of course abnormal within the social codes of the first part of their century; Mansfield and Woolf in their attitude to childlessness, are probably reacting to the way in which femininity was constructed by their societies when they are growing up at the end of nineteenth century. Part of their experience of liminality, shared with their contemporaries, was in being between centuries; both felt themselves to be in tune with a modernity that could not fulfil itself in colonial Wellington, or in Hyde Park Gate. (48)

But both Woolf and Mansfield have succeeded in highlighting the consciousness of women. Both interrogate the incompleteness of society that fails to provide ways and avenues to women for being economically, intellectually and emotionally independent to chart a path of respect, freedom and autonomy thus exposing the hegemony and manoeuvrability of patriarchal forces.