



The Transcendental Selves of Women Characters in Katherine Mansfield's "At the Bay": The Case of *Linda*

Samya Achiri
Ksar Sbahi, Wilaya of Oum El Bouaghi
ALGERIA
E-mail: sachiri38@gmail.com

Received: 15-03-2014

Accepted: 05-07-2014

Published: 01-11-2014

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.6p.98

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.6p.98>

It seems to me above all necessary to declare here who and what I am...It is a duty –and one against which my customary reserve , and to a still greater degree the pride of my instincts, rebel-to say: Listen !for I am such and such a person. *For Heaven's sake do not confound me with anyone else.* (Emphasis added)

Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*

Abstract

No one possesses the necessary talent to deconstruct a woman's character rather than a woman herself. Katherine Mansfield's fame in this area exceeds by far that of most of her predecessors and contemporaries alike. When reading "Prelude" and "At the Bay", for instance, some significant hints unveil themselves. Female characters are no more on the land; they spiritually transcend to their self-constructed worlds. This paper takes as its hub Linda Burnell, the main female character in "At the Bay", attempting to disclose how this woman is configured. Besides, it tries to come across why she is always absent though present next to the available ways of transcending earthly life.

Keywords: transcendental, self, women, modernism, alienation, time, memory, juxtaposition

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield's short story "At the Bay" (AtB) is an extension of her earliest one "Prelude". Early life events and figures are evoked in both stories: parents, sisters, aunt, and even grandmother. As a child, she felt alienated in her own house and amongst her family. Joanna Woods (2007) while trying to divulge the reasons behind this writes: "Kathleen's conviction, from early childhood, that she was an outsider in her family initially stemmed from her position as the third of four daughters of parents who longed for a son" (64). Her childhood memories continued to exert a noteworthy influence on her works all along her life in which the loneliness she encountered and familial relationships are chief themes. Woods (2007) strongly confirms the analogies saying:

Mansfield frequently portrays her parents in her writings. In two of her best known New Zealand stories, 'Prelude' (1918) and 'At the Bay' (1922), Harold [her father] appears in the guise of the self-important Stanley Burnell, while Annie, as Linda Burnell, is depicted as indifferent and distant mother (64).

Some critics like Brian Hughes, in his "Lyric Compression in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield", believe that we should adopt an approach far from the author's life "stressing the need for a more critical approach to the work of Katherine Mansfield" (109). However, no one can deny the role of the novelist's personal life, for the novelists are inevitably the offspring of three interrelated, incarcerating factors: their time, their place and consecutively the ideology of this place.

In "At the Bay", the staff of female characters is bigger than that of male characters. Yet, women are generally depicted as submissive characters. Mansfield grew in such a society which regarded women as second-class human beings. Her family, likewise, was not far from this convention. The mother, the cornerstone of the house, turned cold towards her children. She "languishly presided as a queen in the background, controlling with the unseen hand of the invalid, while her father exerted all the overt control" (Kavaler-Adler, 1996, p. 96). Linda Burnell appears as a neat reflection of this mother.

“At the Bay” consists of twelve episodes. Linda does not appear as a character until the end of the third episode. Obviously, this is done on purpose, by Mansfield, to bring into play the feeling of her physical absence before that of the spiritual. Instead of looking after his wife, Stanley prefers to stay in the living room with Beryl. The three girls, Kezia, Isabel and Lottie, are accompanied to the table of breakfast by their grandmother, Mrs. Fairfield, instead of their mother:

At that moment the door opened and the three girls appeared, each carrying a porridge plate. They were dressed alike in blue jerseys and knickers; their brown legs were bare, and each had her hair plaited and pinned up in what was called a horse’s tail. Behind them came Mrs. Fairfield with the tray. (Mansfield, 1984, p. 210)

Once again the family is around the table, Linda is absent, and Beryl is the caregiver of Stanley. In later episodes, the girls play alone on the beach while the Samuel Josephs are escorted by their mother. Women of the summer colony, in the fifth episode, leave the bungalows to colonize the beach and the sea, and Linda chooses to stay home avoiding all what might draw her out of her world.

In the section devoted to her, the sixth one, readers can see how distant she is from the real world. Mansfield (1984) opens the section with Linda sitting on a chair under a tree in the garden while “[o]n the grass beside her, lying between two pillows, was the boy” (AtB, p. 221). Through a swift shift, Linda transcends: “[n]ow she sat on the veranda of their Tasmanian home, leaning against her father’s knee” (ibid). Soon, she turns to be the little cherished girl Linny regretting the fact that she is married to Stanley Burnell. This stream of thoughts ends with Linda looking at her baby, ‘this little creature’, as if trying to discover the innocence residing within him. One cannot indulge in analyzing this ‘womanly’ self without knowing the preceding facts about the character in question.

2. Discussion

Linda in “At the Bay” departs worldly interactions in favor of more self-satisfying actions. To persuade the reader of the transcendental nature of her ‘self’, Mansfield employs many literary tools. She, as a modernist writer:

breaks away from the conventions of the 19th century fiction by dispensing with the independent voice of the narrator and by reducing the plot to a minimum. Her focus on the inner world rather than on the action and much of the narration is located within the mind of her characters. (Woods, 2007, p.63)

This is evident in the short story in hands in which there is no real plot. Most importantly, Mansfield avoids exposing this character physically and instead concentrates on the workings of the mind. It is a criterion which makes the mind the site of action throughout the story. What is more, it helps the reader to immensely absorb the psychological perplexity Linda is caught in. Both techniques, namely plotless narration plus this extensive focus on the mind’s manifestations, are actually interconnected given that the first bestows the writer with enormous freedom to achieve the second.

This inward vision, or vision within the mind, is epitomized by the combination of the techniques of ‘stream of consciousness’ and ‘internal analysis’ which reflect the predicaments of the soul. Since Linda is the protagonist of Mansfield’s text, these techniques are markedly associated with her. They expose her mind reflecting her inner torturing quandaries. Worth noting here is that these techniques do not refer to the same thing. To highlight the difference, Lawrence Edward Bowling, in his “What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique?”, sets the stream of consciousness technique as “that narrative method by which the author attempts to give [...] a direct quotation of the character’s consciousness”, and the internal analysis as a technique through which “the author intervenes in any way between the reader and the character’s consciousness in order to analyze, comment, or interpret” (345). Taking this into account, even Linda’s consciousness is not let alone, for the author’s voice recurs throughout the story.

Katherine Mansfield, in “At the Bay”, “continues to insist on the alienation involved for women in pregnancy and childbirth” (Moran, 1996, p. 3). And this is clearly the case of Linda Burnell. With three girls and a small boy, she gets jaded. Another son of her is seen in the picture of her husband Stanley who is “as less like a husband and more like a small boy who seeks constant reassurance” (Kavaler-Adler, 1996, p.109). The events of the story account for this: he is expecting the whole family to cater for his every need. As a businessman seeking success in the commercial, public life rather than caring about his family, he transforms their marriage into a frail relationship. No real love exists between the ‘so-called’ husband and wife. Stanley, as she believes, is mostly blamed for this sick marital institution.

Unsatisfied with her present conditions, and as a reaction to this, Linda chooses to abandon this disappointing reality. She is no longer in her house or on earth throughout the short story. Her roles as a mother and a wife are assumed to her mother and sister respectively. She yearns to live in isolation. Her happiness when Stanley leaves the house considerably escalates; she feels the relief: “[s]he was glad to be rid of him! [...] Yes, she was thankful [...] Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house” (AtB, p. 212). In a similar way, Beryl shares her sister’s,

Linda, feelings, and she “wanted, somehow, to celebrate the fact that they could do what they liked now. There was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs” (ibid).

Linda chooses alienation, the world outside and inside home is not worth enjoying. She prefers to stay lonely at home “to sustain a fuller sense of a self, freed from the object world” (Stevenson, 1992, p.77). This alienation is a significant characteristic of modernist literature:

alienation in modernity [...] has become more ominous and oppressive. Individuals feel themselves strangers, and also feel that society robs them of their authentic existence, hinders the realization of their uniqueness. (Sagi, 2002, p.15)

Having said this, this psychological state is not only a form of escape, yet an attempt to come to grips with a new reality and, sometimes, a new dimension of existence. This female character lives in an imaginary world, her ‘microcosm’, eager to restore her childhood discounting the actual existence. Images of the past impose themselves on her memory. The reader, as a matter of fact, finds himself flowing in parallel with these images. Being the untouchable, safe bridge, her memory is the open scene which juxtaposes the sacred past with the despised present. The juxtaposition between both experiences effectively fosters comprehension. By bringing the past to the surface of the present then, she realizes the psychological void and loneliness she suffers from. Accordingly, these memories of the past are patent spiritual manifestations of this woman as a result of the spiritual emptiness she suffers from. Randall Stevenson (1992) stresses the whole idea saying:

Memory offers a means of including its past as well as present experience. As modernist fiction, in the early years of the 20th century moves further within the consciousness of characters, and even towards their unconsciousness, the rope of memory is increasingly employed to hold past and present together (92-3).

He further argues that “structuring ‘all the past’ into present experience” is done “using the rope of memory *to escape in time*” (ibid. p. 96 emphasis added). This movement in time is discernibly pursued in “At the Bay” especially through the scene of the ‘manuka’ tree.

Apparently, the author delves into the consciousness of Linda to show how past times overwhelm present ones. In the garden and “[i]n a steamer chair, under a manuka tree that grew in the middle of the front grass patch”, Linda sits looking at “the dark, close, dry leaves of the manuka [...] and now and again a tiny yellowish flower dropped on her” (AtB, p. 220). Meanwhile, she is happy for her loneliness, “it was pleasant to know all these bungalows were empty, that everybody was down on the beach, out of sight, out of hearing” (ibid. p. 221). She, at this instant, “had the garden for herself; she was alone” (ibid). She is ready to escape to a safer space where the tree has “a private significance in the eye and consciousness of its beholder, Linda Burnell, languorously musing on the futility of fertility” (Saguaro, 2006, p.27). Linda moves from “the garden of the restrictive, vivid present” to another “time and space, a veranda located in the dreamy past of dreams” (ibid). She sees herself “leaning against her father’s knee” (AtB, p. 221). Both dreamt “to sail up a river in China” (ibid). Her reveries include memories of her own past, but “these memories also include remembering the imagined, possible futures she projected in the past (‘a river in China’, ‘the yellow hats’)” (Saguaro, 2006, p.28). Indeed, Linda envisages the entire expedition through the imaginative figure of the father though she had never attempted it.

These projects are curtailed by her marriage and motherhood alike. Hence, these natural images lead her to remember significant events. The manuka tree is not used arbitrarily; its yellow flowers echo “the yellow hats of the boatmen” and “the imagined Chinese expedition with a loved father” (ibid). Furthermore, these yellow flowers do symbolize Linda’s drained self yearning for an outlet from the shackles, marriage and motherhood to mention a few, entailed by adulthood. Complaining to her father during an imagined conversation, she confesses overtly: “[o]h, papa, fancy being married to Stanley Burnell!” (AtB, p. 221).

Contrary to Virginia Woolf, who is fascinated by time, and who gives larger freedom to her consciousness to go everywhere and to do everything, running from present to past, and leaping freely to the future, Katherine Mansfield’s consciousness, seen in that of Linda, is mostly locked up in the past. She does not think too much about the future to live spiritually in the past. Woolf (2004) was right when she said: “[t]he mind of man [...] works with [...] strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or hundred times of its clock length” (59). Similarly, the hours Linda spends in the garden cover a whole period of innocence, that of childhood. The loss of motherhood’s emotions is equated with the lost sense of time.

As to sun and sea, they “are not only landscapes but genuine pointers to inner reality” (Sagi, 2002, p. 36). They are both indicators of time as well. While the former works as an indicator of external time, that in which the Burnells live and experience the outer events, the latter is peculiar to Linda’s mind. The sun is a dynamic marker of time. Mansfield writes: “VERY [sic] early morning. The sun was not yet risen” (AtB, p. 205), and she adds in the ninth episode:

“[w]hile they [Linda’s children] were playing, the day had faded; the gorgeous sunset had blazed and died” (ibid. p. 219). The sea is described as a ‘sleepy sea’; though it moves, it is presented as if it is stagnant. Unlike the river, it shows that Linda’s time is ‘motionless’. It is thus self-revealing because it discloses Linda’s complicated psychological state which is exceedingly devastated. That is why this motif is associated in most of the sections with ‘darkness’. The following quotations evidence the case: “[t]he breeze of morning lifted in the bush and the smell of leaves and wet *black earth* mingled with the sharp smell of the *sea*” (ibid. p. 207); “[a]nd now the quick *dark* came racing over the *sea*” (ibid. p. 219) (emphasis added in both). In this short story, the sea is also used as “a metaphor [which] epitomizes the yearning for the beyond, yearning to transcend reality” (Sagi, 2002, 36). The reader, thus, can deduce the reason behind Mansfield’s choice of the sea as an image to close the story with:

A cloud, small, serene, floated across the moon. In that moment of darkness the *sea* sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and *the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked [sic] out of a dark dream*. All was still. (AtB, p. 223 emphasis added)

Linda’s relation with the real world is mystic and ambivalent. She is “inclined to perceive herself in terms of inappropriate of her being” as modernist characters do “perceiving themselves as objects in the real world” (Sagi, 2002, 21). The spurned life or reality in this character’s case is substituted by a desire towards her ‘self’. She acknowledges that “she did not love her children [...] Even if she had had the strength she never would have nursed and played with the little girls” (AtB, p.222). Still the poorest victim is her baby whose dark-blue eyes lament: “[w]hy don't you like me” (ibid). In a more precise psychological term, she turns a narcissist since she is at the center of this universe caring about no one except her inner endeavors. Nevertheless, Freud, from another angle, distinguishes narcissism not as “a perversion, but the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every creature” (Freud qtd. in Borch-Jacobson, 1989, p.54). Linda’s narcissist nature is apparently seen in the episode of the garden. The garden and the calm atmosphere ought to reveal the inner truth and to shed light on the unconscious facet of the self. Shelly Saguaro (2006) writes:

what they [gardens] focus on, predominantly are women , children, food and flowers, comings and goings, and in relation to these, perceptions and processes which are deeply interior, the conscious and the unconscious aspects of secret selves (26-7).

3. Conclusion

By creating duplicate figures of her society, Katherine Mansfield attempts wittingly to address a universal impasse which is gender inequality. The latter results in numerous psychological problems leading her female characters to favor escapism as an indispensable attitude to live by. To help the reader to absorb the perplexity that her female character is enmeshed in alongside the transcendental nature of this womanly self, Mansfield makes use of a set of modernist techniques and conventions. Concentration on the workings of the mind rather than the traditional physical exposition of the characters is a foremost technique to accomplish the aforementioned point. For this very reason, tackling alienation, as generally a dominant modernist theme, by the author under scrutiny, in particular, or by other modernists becomes a must. The stream of consciousness technique is also a superbly helpful literary expedient used as a revelation of despair. Last but not least, juxtaposition between past and present experiences in “At the Bay” successfully promotes Linda’s comprehension of the social conventions that render women as the property of men i.e. as manipulated objects.

References

- Borch-Jacobson, M. (1989). *The Freudian Subject*. London: Macmillan.
- Bowling, L. (1950). What is the Stream of Consciousness Technique?. *PMLA* 65(4), 333-345.
- Hughes, B. (1995). Lyric Compression in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 8, 109-119.
- Kavaler-Adler, S. (1996). Katherine Mansfield: A Theory of Creative Process Reparation and its Mode of Failure. *The Creative Mystique: From Red Shoes Frenzy to Love and Creativity*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Mansfield, K. (1984). *At the Bay. The Collected Short Stories*. Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin Books.
- Moran, P. L. (1996). *Word of Mouth: Body Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf*. University Press of Virginia.
- Sagi, A. (2002). *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*. New York: Rodopi.
- Saguaro, S. (2006). Botanical Modernisms. *Garden Plots: the Politics and Poetics of Gardens*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Stevenson, R. (1992). Modernism and Modernity. *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Woods, J. (2007). Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923). *Kōtare* 7 (1), 63–98.
- Woolf, V. (2004). *Orlando: A Biography*. London: Vintage.