

Volume-1, Issue-1, February 2018



ANEKANT

Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

THE DEPICTION OF CHILDREN AND CLASSISM IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S *THE DOLL'S HOUSE*

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ABSTRACT:

Katherine Mansfield is recognized as the “Pioneer of Modern Short Stories”. Modernism is an overall socially progressive trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve, and reshape their environment, with the help of practical experimentation and innovation. Mansfield was born in socially prominent family, yet she severely attacked on Class Distinction. Mansfield's *The Doll's House* showcases the social stratification and Classism prevailing in the society. Her literary work primarily focuses on the lower strata of the society. The stories are certainly the psycho-realistic interpretations of life. Katherine Mansfield effectively uses ‘children’ as vehicles for conveying a number of different themes. The children are so vividly presented and so finely portrayed that they appear to monopolize the stories. The use of imagery and symbols in her short stories are sharp and innovative without seeming forced. This paper will try to emphasize on the portrayal of children in Mansfield's *The Doll's House*.

Keywords—Mansfield, Classism, Modernism, Class Distinction, Working class, prejudice.

Classism is prejudice against people belonging to a particular social class. Class Discrimination is a biased or discriminatory attitude based on distinctions made between social or economic classes.

Classism was at its peak in England in early 19th century. The Victorian society was divided into upper class, middle class and working class. The upper class consisted of the aristocrats, dukes; nobles who were in a powerful position and had all the authority. The hereditary aristocratic families by the early 19th century had taken a keen interest in the industrial sector. The aristocrats enjoyed a luxurious life. There were a number of aristocrats who managed large industries like mining or shipping. The industrial revolution in the mid-century of the era brought about drastic changes in the standard of living in the middle-class people. The industrial revolutions opened the doors for more job opportunities and earn a decent living. This had a positive impact on education of the children.

The lowest among the social hierarchy were the working class or the lower class. This class remained aloof from the progress of the country. The working class was the most affected class in the Victorian times. Lack of money resulted in negligible food supply. For some working families; the living condition was so pathetic that they required their children to work in order to bring home extra income to survive. The conditions were so brutal for the

working class that at times children were forced to work which ultimately had a bad impact on their education.³

There was a similar condition in New Zealand in early 19th century. In her fiction, Mansfield criticized this elitist system. Class consciousness was prevailing in the society at a larger extent. The working-class suffered from poverty. The small children of the lower-class community had no education and had to work in industry and mines for earning their livelihood. Mansfield left New Zealand in 1908, aged nineteen, and spent most of her adult life in England and France, but her childhood in New Zealand played a crucial role in her creative development and inspired many of her finest stories. *The Doll's House* is a brilliant reflection of Edwardian world in which, childhood memories, classism, loneliness, and the complexity of human relationships are recurring themes. Katherine Mansfield depicts the same classism and social stratification between the upper class and the working class through short stories like *The Doll's House*. Analyzing Mansfield's working-class characters would help to understand the portrayal of Class distinction in her stories.

Katherine Mansfield is considered as one of the most competent and innovative short story writers. With her contemporaries, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, she forms part of the literary avant-garde whose innovations in the second and third decades of the twentieth century signaled the emergence of modernism. Her reputation rests on a collection of 88 deceptively simple short stories, in which she pioneered many new literary techniques and exerted an important influence on the evolution of

the short story in English. Her focus is on the inner world rather than on external action, and much of the narration is located within the minds of her characters. *The Doll's House* is one of the best examples that depict the basic truths of life.

Notable Features of Mansfield's Stories:

1. Narrative Technique—Modernist writers distanced themselves from their Victorian and Edwardian predecessors. They preferred to use third person omniscient narration.
2. Symbolism and effective use of Imagery.
3. Psychological conflict between an individual and society.
4. Her stories always attack or mock on age old worn values, religious beliefs, social evils in society(Classism,Racism) of the 'bourgeois' or aristocratic society.
5. Mansfield's stories always focus on poor and middle-class life.
6. Her stories shock the audience with unconventional 'taboo' themes.

The Doll's House is one of the remarkable short stories written by Katherine Mansfield. She has painted a picture of traditional New Zealand society in this story. The setting for this story is very important as it was set in early 19th century, a time for great social injustice. The social setting shows how the higher classes try to detach themselves from the lower ones. Snobbery is depicted in this story with social stratification as a central theme. The complexities

and insensitivities between the poor and upper-class society can be seen in the story.

Through this short story Mansfield severely criticizes the attitudes and values of the upper-class colonial society in which she was raised. As a modernist writer she develops these ideas in the story by using the third person omniscient point of view. A story written from the third-person point of view has a narrator who is not a character but an outside observer. Sometimes this type of narrator is omniscient, or all knowing, and has the power to reveal the thoughts and feelings of more than one character.³ *The Doll's House*, for example, the omniscient narrator describes the private wishes of several characters, including those of the Burnell children.

“The Burnell children could hardly walk to school fast enough the next morning. They burned to tell everybody, to describe, to—well—to boast about their doll's house before the school bell rang.”(Pg-116)

Unlike stories written from the first-person point of view, stories with an omniscient point of view offer a wider, and perhaps more reliable, perspective. Writers often use such a point of view when they wish to examine broad social issues. She prefers to represent characters through their shifting thoughts, memories and sensations. This allows her to create contrast between the adult and child narrative voices, as we see into the minds of both Aunt Beryl and Kezia.

The Doll's House is a story which is touching revelation of the curiosity and innocence that children possess. Mansfield shows the innocence of small children and the cruelty of the society that draws a line between the rich and the poor, higher and lower status of people. Small children do not know social barriers like Class discrimination while the adults are characterized by vanity, cruelty and pettiness.

One of the notable aspects of *The Doll's House* is the Mansfield's fruitful characterizations. The characters, Aunt Beryl, Kezia's mother, Kezia and the other children in the story all reinforce the contrast between the adult and the child narrative voices. The below table of characters is according to their role and importance in the story.

Table no: 1

Sr.no.	Characters	Relation of a character with each other	Nature(Socially prejudiced or not)
1)	Kezia Burnell	Youngest daughter of Mrs. Burnell. Protagonist of the story.	Humble person. Innocence with spirit of humanity. Only she notices the lamp, challenges classism prevailing in society.
2)	Aunt Beryl	Upper class woman living	A snob and arrogant person. Socially prejudiced

		in Burnell family.	character supporting classism.
3)	Mrs. Burnell (Kezia's mother)	Upper class woman, mother of Isabell, Kezia and Lottie.	A pampering parent and socially prejudiced character.
4)	Isabell Burnell	Elder sister of Kezia and Lottie.	Bossy and attention seeking person. She insults Kelvey sisters and supports class discrimination.
5)	Lil Kelvey	Elder sister of Else Kelvey, representing lower strata of society.	A stout and plain child with big freckles. Patient character, struggling and starving for social equality.
6)	Else Kelvey	Younger sister of Lil Kelvey, representing lower strata of society.	A shy, silent character with solemn eyes, she never smiles and scarcely speaks. She, Lil and Kezia only notice the real lamp in the doll's house.
7)	Mrs. Kelvey	Lower class woman,	Spry and hardworking washerwoman. Working

		mother of Lil and Else.	class character which is despised by aristocratic society. Her husband(Mr. Kelvey) is in jail.
8)	Emmie Cole	One of the friends chosen by Isabell Burnell to see the doll's house.	A flattery person who always tries to impress Isabell. Socially conscious character which always hates and despises Kelvey sisters.
9)	Lena Logan	One of the friends chosen by Isabell Burnell to see the doll's house.	A socially prejudiced character which always dislikes Kelvey sisters.
10)	Lottie Burnell	Younger sister of Isabel and Kezia Burnell.	A passive character. She is always told by parents to look pleased and happy.

Aunt Beryl and Kezia's mother are both upper class women and are socially prejudiced. We are shown Aunt Beryl's prejudiced character when she catches Kezia showing the little Kelveys, the doll's house. She says,

How dare you ask the little Kelveys into the courtyard!’ said her cold furious voice. ‘You know as well as I do, you’re not allowed to talk to them. Run away, children, run away at once. And don’t come back again.’(Pg-120)

Thus, the above dialogues exactly reveal classism. Aunt Beryl is the prime character leading the class discrimination in the society.

This is enhanced by the effective use of imagery as the narrator says,

“And she stepped into the yard and shooed them out as if they were chickens.”(Pg-120)

This quote also shows the difference between Kezia and Aunt Beryl. It shows Aunt Beryl’s superiority and prejudice, and in contrast, Kezia’s fairness and willingness to do what she believes is right. Kezia is the only character from the story who is willing to break the social barriers and connect the two extreme points.

Even though we scarcely meet Kezia’s mother, we are shown her socially prejudiced character when Kezia asks her if she can allow the Kelveys to see the doll’s house.

Mother,’ said Kezia, ‘can’t I ask the Kelveys just once?’

‘Certainly not, Kezia.’

‘But why not?’

‘Run away, Kezia, you know quite well why not. (Pg-118)

This mainly shows the difference between Kezia and her mother. It shows how Kezia does not understand her community's social prejudice, classism, and how she does not think it is right, but also how Kezia's mother is trying to convince Kezia have the same social values and prejudice as she does.

The contrast between the adult and the child voices is also reinforced by the difference between Kezia and the other children. The other children in the story like Isabel Burnell, Emmie Cole, Lena Logan are socially prejudiced or socially conscious. They are the victims of Class discrimination. We hear this prejudice in the dialogue when the girls are sitting under the trees and they make fun of the Kelveys. Emmie Cole whispers,

Lil Kelvey's going to be a servant when she grows up. 'O-oh, how awful!' said Isabel Burnell, and she made eyes at Emmie. Emmie swallowed in a very meaningful way and nodded to Isabel as she'd seen her mother do on those occasions. 'It's true – it's true – it's true,' she said. (Pg-119)

The above dialogue not only shows the prejudice of the children but it also shows how the children are also forced to imitate their parents in the world of social rules and regulations. We can see a hierarchy within Burnell sisters. Isabel is the eldest among the Burnell sisters.

Therefore, she is bossy and has all the powers. Isabell and her friends follow their parents' lead in despising the Kelvey family for their poverty. Kezia is still an innocent child while Isabell turns into an adult by imitating her parents. The Kelvey sisters are very silent and tolerant. We can assume that the imitation is also practiced by the Kelvey sisters. Lil Kelvey too imitates her mother. This is evident when she gives a silly shamefaced smile to Isabell and her friends when they insult her.

Mrs. Kelvey is described as a 'spry, hardworking little washerwoman' (Pg-117). Spry and hardworking are praiseworthy attributes, yet this description is followed by the ironical statement,

“This was awful enough” (Pg-117)

What is awful is that she is a washerwoman; it is merely her situation, her position in community that lets Mrs. Kelvey down. The unfounded rumor that Mr. Kelvey is in prison soon becomes a 'fact'. The whole episode is a penetrating insight into the narrow-minded attitudes of provincial life. The children greatly contrast Kezia's character as she is not prejudiced and she does not understand the prejudice of her community. This shows how Isabel and her friends are like their parents, and how they mimic their parents' values and prejudice. They blindly imitate their parents. It also shows how Kezia is completely different as she does not share the same social values and prejudice, instead she questions the social ill practices. In *The Doll's House*, there is a conflict between an individual and society, a conflict between Kezia and Upper class colonial society. Kezia challenges prejudices, classism, class-discrimination

prevailing in the society. By using these contrasts and characterizations Mansfield is able to effectively mock social values of upper class colonial society.

Else Kelvey and Lil Kelvey are perfectly characterized by Katherine Mansfield. The inner characterization of the two girls shows that Else is very close to her sister and that she is very shy, rarely addressing others. Out of the two sisters, we get the feeling that the narrator prefers Else, as the endearing appellative “our Else” indicates. In fact, “our Else” is repeated 13 times in the short story, showing how feeble and delicate Else actually is. Else and Lil both mutually understand each other quite well. Thus, the writer actually glorifies the characters of children in this story.

The short stories written by Mansfield are profound in interpretation, vital in meaning and flawless in forms. Although Mansfield’s place in Western literature has been assured by her technical achievements, but she owes her lasting popularity with her readers to the elegance and wit of her writing. Her prose is noted for its artistic vision through a series of meticulously crafted imagery and symbolism.

Kezia’s uniqueness is further reinforced by Mansfield through use of Symbolism. She uses three main symbols in the story-

- a) The doll’s house
- b) The gate
- c) The lamp

The title of the short story is very explicit, as it reveals the object around which the main events take place: The doll's house. The doll's house is probably the most important symbol in the short story. Initially it represents something expensive and created in detail, something that only children from the wealthier class would receive as a gift. The doll's house also symbolizes pride and envy, as Isabel prides with it and the other girls from the school envy the Burnells for their luck. The title of the story also reflects the false pride and artificialness of the upper-class society. Secondly, when the Burnell children are opening up their doll's house, Mansfield portrays the wonder and perspective of children uncovering a new and miniature world. On the other side the adults dislike it due to its irritating smell. Therefore, the doll's house is kept in the courtyard. The narrator says,

“And perhaps the smell of the paint would have gone off by the time it had to taken in. For really, the smell of paint was coming from that doll's house—but the smell of paint was quite enough to make anyone seriously ill, in Aunt Beryl's opinion.”(Pg-113)

The smell coming from the doll's house signifies the childhood, the innocence, and the equality and also smell is free of social prejudices. Thus, adults despise that smell and keep it outside in the courtyard till the smell is gone. The Burnell's house is filled with social prejudices and classism. Kezia and the Kelvey sisters live in the doll's house whereas Burnells live in their own socially stratified house.

The gate in this story is the gate to the Burnells' house, and they control who come in and out of it. Trespassers and especially lower strata of society are strictly prohibited to enter through the gate. The Burnells allow everyone but the Kelveys through the gate; this shows the Burnell's social prejudice towards the Kelveys, and shows how the gate is a literal boundary that symbolizes a partition in their society. In the story, Kezia sits on the gate she swings on the gates opening and closing them. Then she slips off like she is going to run away and leave the gate closed on the Kelveys, but she hesitates, and then makes up her mind, she swings out and opens the gate to the Kelveys. This shows how Kezia is sitting on the boundary, wanting to challenge the social prejudice and let the Kelveys in, but unsure whether to do so as she is strictly told not to by her family. But Kezia does what she feels is right, and she lets the Kelveys in through the gate to see the doll's house. In doing so, she breaks the boundary of social prejudice in her community and she also allows Else to see the little lamp.

The lamp is another significant symbol that further supports Kezia's difference. Kezia is the prime personality, the real hero of this story. Kezia, in particular, is fascinated by a little lamp inside the doll's house and believes it is the most beautiful part of it. She understands the significance of the lamp in human life. She thinks the lamp is perfect, the only thing that really belongs in the doll's house, it looks real. The lamp is the single object that looks real in the artificial doll's house. Everybody else only notices the big things.

This shows the difference between Kezia and the others in the story. Kezia is as natural, as bright like the lamp and open and free of prejudice. On the contrary, the others are like the dolls, they are not very natural or real, they are prejudiced and not very open. The other children and Aunt Beryl are living illusionary life. They are as deceptive as the Doll's House. They are representing regressive component of society who are pessimistic.

“I seen the little lamp’, she said softly.”(Pg.: 121)

The lamp symbolizes light and hope, and Kezia is the enlightened character that notices the lamp. Kezia is a ray of hope, an optimistic personality who challenges the rigid structures of the society. The lamp not only reinforces Kezia's difference, but it also links Kezia to Else. Both Kezia and Else recognize the lamp but it is because of Kezia that Else is able to see the light as Kezia allows her to do so by letting her see the doll's house. Both these symbols are significant as they reinforce Kezia's difference, and show how she is not prejudiced, and how she is the only one who tries to break the social boundaries in the community. Kezia is the only one amongst all that makes all the difference!

Katherine Mansfield points out a remarkable difference between childhood and adulthood in this story. Childhood is innately human, innocent, enlightening and pure like a lamp. On the contrary adulthood signifies sadistic attitude and artificialness. Adults adopt masks and present themselves before society in a pretentious way.

Mansfield basically focuses on children. She tries to express her notions and views by using children as effective tools. Class

discrimination was deeply imbibed in early 19th century. Its outcome was that children were in a dilemma, children were in a confused state of mind. The aristocratic society supported classism and children blindly imitated it. The child voices were silenced and crushed by the 'bourgeois' society. They were not guided correctly by the adults. Mansfield experienced the same in her childhood and tries to convey the message of equality.

The pompousness of the aristocratic community is brought down by an enlightened lamp, Kezia. Kezia not only evolves as a character but also as a human being! A child understands more than an adult. Kezia's humbleness towards Kelveys is a ray of hope. A beautiful gesture shown by Kezia is nutritious to mankind. A quote by John. F. Kennedy will be suitable at this point, "Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for future!"

Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House* marks the evolution of children and tries to establish social equality in society.

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