

On The Theme of “Isolation” In Mansfield’s New Zealand Stories

Gaohong

Abstract—Mansfield’s New Zealand stories touch chiefly on the trivial and superficial incidents of an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary family, in which she successfully effaced herself and just guided the reader to experience the people’s intense emotion for domestic affection as well as their solitude when suffering from cruelty of the reality and estrangement among people. Mansfield had her unique comprehension of the isolated relationship between people, therefore, the typical theme of “isolation” is to be illustrated, thus providing us a wider range of contemplation on human’s isolation especially in our this more modern while less humane society.

Keywords—Mansfield; isolation; New Zealand stories

Project: On the Study of Mansfield’s Cultural Identity, Project of the Education Department of Sichuan Province(2013)

Project Number: 14SB0168

I. INTRODUCTION

MANSFIELD started quite early to touch on human isolation in some of her early stories, but she developed this theme thoroughly in her New Zealand stories where she successfully effaced herself and just guided the reader to experience the people’s intense emotion for domestic affection as well as their solitude when suffering from cruelty of the reality and estrangement among people. As the settlement of England, New Zealand is aloof from Continental Europe and its tedious and suffocated cultural barrenness restrains its people to be hypocritical and unsophisticated. There is no doubt that Mansfield spent her sweetest time in New Zealand when she was a child, but she had also bitterly tasted isolation in that narrow and suffocated environment. As a rebellious child, she did not only suffer from her parents’ neglect, but was also regarded as a “different” girl, which forced her to withdraw to her lonely world. Being a premature child who was clever at observing and thinking, Mansfield had her unique comprehension of the complex human relationship around her. Among her most excellent works, she paid her attention to the isolated relationship between people, no matter they were couple, friends or folks of the middle-upper class, with whom Mansfield was more familiar as she herself was grown up in a

middle-class family. An examination of *Prelude*, *At the Bay*, *The Stranger* and *The Ideal Family* would be sufficient enough to confirm it.

II. “ISOLATION” BETWEEN COUPLES

Prelude and At the Bay are acknowledgeably known as Mansfield’s two prominent stories about an English family in New Zealand. As the central character, Linda appears to be a happy and admirable woman on the surface and has whatever a woman aspires for: she has a wealthy husband who ensures the whole family a comfortable life; she has several lovely children; she even does not need to bother to take care of the children and do the daily chores that are all well arranged by her mother. In spite of all this, Linda is not as happy as what others think her to be. She is always entangled with her inner conflicts and never feels satisfied with her domestic life.

A. LONELY AND HELPLESS MOTHER-LINDA

As a mother of three children, Linda is indifferent to them and even refuses to shoulder the responsibility of a considerate mother, which is shown from the very beginning of the story when the whole family is moving to a new house. Looking at the massive bags and boxes on the floor, she says “these are absolute necessities that I will not let out of my sight for one instant” (223)¹ without having a look at Lottie and Kezia who are left behind with the unmoved furniture. To her, the children are not as important as that luggage that she has to leave them and “cast them off”. (223) In addition, she seems to get great pleasure from casting her two children away. “A strange little laugh flew from her lips” (223) as soon as she triumphantly abandons the kids. When Kezia and Lottie join the family at the new house at last, Linda also shows little interest in them and even does not open her eyes to see them, only to ask slightly “Are those the children?” (229) she does not really care the children and even regards them as a bondage she wants to shake off thirstily.

Linda’s abdication of the role to be a mother turns to be more open and apparent in *At the Bay*. She admits bluntly that the time not spent in consolidating and listening to her husband’s story is spent in the terror of bearing children who would never be joyfully loved or even wanted even though she has the strength. For Linda, it was “useless pretending” (453) to love the children since she is always indifferent to them and really

hopes that they could be anybody's except hers. Linda's reluctance to be a mother detaches her away from her children, particularly her sensitive child Kezia who turns to her beloved grandmother for love and understanding instead. Though there is seldom any communication between Linda and her children, we are able to find a face-to-face talk between Linda and Kezia in *Prelude* when they are watching the aloe through which their different attitudes to life are presented symbolically. To Kezia, the tree is a miracle thing mixed with fear:

Nothing grew on the top except one huge plant with thick, grey-green, thorny leaves, and out of the middle there sprang up a tall stout stem. Some of the leaves of the plant were so old that they curled up in the air no longer; they turned back, they were split and broken. Some of them lay flat and withered on the ground. (240)

In Kezia's eyes, though the aloe is tall, it is thorny, which resembles much with her mother's present condition: though as a mother, she always appears to be so indifferent to her children that the latter could never approach her. She is just like an "island" (240) which separates herself from others and completely constrains herself in her own world. To Linda, on the other hand, the aloe has its different meaning: she is lonely as the aloe with all her energy and passion to life withered, as "split and broken" as the leaves of aloe.

When asked by Kezia "Does it ever have any flowers?" (240) Linda replies: "Once every hundred years." (240) The mother, whose heart is so barren, even at this only moment of communication between her and Kezia through the whole story, she reacts in such an impersonal way and finds in the aloe her own image intuitively: Though she is disgusted with child-bearing, Linda is sensible enough that she could never get rid of the imposed role as a wife and mother, for it is the common lot of women to bear children in that traditional society. Therefore, she never expects even one child in her whole life like that aloe blooming only once in every hundred years.

As a matter of fact, the aloe is not only symbolic of Linda's dread of pregnancy and childbirth but also her terror of the sexual intercourse with her husband, Stanley. The "stout stem" and the "thorny leaves" drive Linda to think of her husband unconsciously, which is better presented through Linda's contact with the aloe for the second time. This time she stands before the aloe in the evening, accompanied by her mother. Attracted by the "long sharp thorns" (254), Linda is encouraged and her heart suddenly grows hard for she also hopes to be a person with long and sharp thorns for nobody could hurt her easily and Stanley, in particular, could never ask sex from her at his own will. Her illusion makes her connect her husband with her "Newfoundland dog", thinking that even her Newfoundland dog that she is "so fond of in the daytime" (254) would not dare to come near her. As the story goes on, Linda's ambivalent feeling towards Stanley has been expressed plainly by means of her inner monologue: On the one hand, she really "loved and admired and respected him

tremendously"(254) as long as he "wouldn't jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes" (254); on the other hand, he was too strong for the delicate Linda although he was told by the doctor that she "may die any moment" (254). Driven by the contradictory feeling towards Stanley, Linda's heart is as dry as dirt and it often wanders in an isolated world.

Linda frequently feels that Stanley's "amazing vigor seemed to set him worlds away" (233) from her. Even though she is completely exhausted at giving birth to child, her suffering has never aroused Stanley's attention and care. On the contrary, he insists on craving for more from Linda, which seems no end. However, she could do nothing to change the reality and she should continue having children while Stanley should keep on earning money. Linda is as lonely as the aloe standing on the grassy island, surrounded with various dangers from both husband and children. Marriage and sexual life becomes her endless misery and "she was broken, made weak, her courage was gone" (453). So, she has to resort to dreams and fantasies to drive off the annoyance and fear of her real life.

B. SAFETY-LACKING FATHER-STANLEY

Compared with Linda, Stanley in these two stories seems to live a much happier life as the robust and powerful head of the family. Nevertheless, if taking a careful examination of him, we may find that he is a loving, but not understanding husband who could never mind Linda's frailty to meet his physical demands and his affection to his children also lacks warmth. He can not always act as an over-complacent man especially when referring to his wife, Linda. For example, whenever he approaches near home, he always feels "a sort of panic" (241) and he feels secure enough only when he hears Linda say hi, which makes his heart "beat so hard". (242)

As a husband, Stanley never recognizes that his lust for Linda which he thinks natural is actually great pain to her who compares her feelings towards him to goods and would like to do them up "in little packets" (255) and give them to him so as to see his surprising look. To Linda, the relationship between her and Stanley is much more like the customers and guests who respectively take what he needs than the lovebirds. It is a little bit ironic that Stanley, satisfied with his present life, has never known that he is regarded to be "timid, sensitive, innocent"(453) by Linda whose whole time is spent in "rescuing him, and restoring him, and calming him down, and listening to his story."(453) Thus, Stanley's endless physical demands have already separated and alienated himself from his wife who stays with him physically but drifts away spiritually.

As a matter of fact, nearly all the characters of the two stories have their own secret life unknown to the rest of the family: the vigorous and imperative husband, the dreamy wife weary of childbirth, the young and pretty sister eager for a lover, the kind and patient grandmother, the innocent children, each living unaffectedly in his own little world. The husband does not know how ambivalent his wife's feelings are towards him; the

young Beryl could never discover that her servant Alice, as fantastic as she, is also fond of day-dreaming and even sings the same song in her dreams as she does. No wonder it is concluded by many critics that “Katherine Mansfield conceives human beings as emotionally isolated.” (as in [4])

III. “ISOLATION” BETWEEN THE MOST FAMILIAR STRANGERS

The Stranger is probably one of the most typical stories revealing the theme of human isolation. Mr. Hammond is a self-egoistic man whose possessive love for his wife finally makes him blind even to the object of his affection. He strongly believes that Janey loves him so much that he can have any demand on her. But when Janey tells him that a man is dead on the boat, Hammond feels “as though he and Janey had met a funeral on their way to the hotel.” (372) On hearing that the man is dead in Jamey’s arms, he suddenly feels “he would faint. He couldn’t move; he couldn’t breathe. He felt all his strength flowing....” (372)

In effect, Janey has not loved Hammond affectionately as he believes. For instance, in response to his warm greeting, “she didn’t even bother to answer”; (369) As their cab passes through the brightest streets, Janey “drew his hand away”; (369) Even if Janey lays on his breast, Hammond still feels that she is “so lightly, so remotely” (371) that he has to ask her to kiss him in order to ensure her love towards him. Though Hammond is quite convinced that he and Janey love each other very much, he has never tried to concern about her real needs and would never know why he could not obtain that love Janey gives even to a stranger but him. To Janey, similarly, she has no idea of the inner working of Hammond’s mind and can’t understand his inexplicable jealousy of a dead man who is evidently unrelated to their private relationship.

Therefore, there is only distance and alienation shared by the couple, which is also implied through the title—the stranger. It has definite reference to the dead young man on the boat. That stranger has become an invisible scar in the lives of the couple, which estranges them from each other from that very moment on. Hammond and Janey are actually the strangers to each other. Hammond is too much obsessed by self-love to understand Janey correctly and, regardless of her loving heart, Janey is unable to perceive the self-centricity that envelopes the inner being of her husband. No wonder at the end we find that “they would never be alone together again.” (373)

IV. “ISOLATION” IN AN IDEAL FAMILY

Human isolation does not only exist between couples like Hammond and Janey, but also lies even in *An Ideal Family*. The central image, Mr. Neave, is a variant of Burnell type, aging and failing. Like Stanley Burnell, he is a wealthy merchant who is engaging in his business in New Zealand. As he is becoming old, his trade is taken over by his only son, Harold. But Neave could not completely rely on Harold whom he thinks too fickle to operate his business effectively. So he persists in going to work everyday, even though he is worn out by the trouble at work. However, his wife Charlotte and the girls are always persuading him to make the whole business

over to Harold “to retire and to spend his time enjoying himself.” (422)

To these girls, everything they possess is naturally to get and enjoy and they have never considered how hard it is for their father to gain his fortune. In response to the children’s suggestion of “retire and enjoy”, old Neave has to force a smile and he is really wondering that how they could live an extravagant life “if he’d gone in for hobbies” (422) The high-fed life enables the girls to take everything for granted and seem to be indifferent, impatient and impolite to anybody and anything except for the extravagant material life. For example, at the sight of her father, Lola does not show any respect and love to him with her screaming voice saying “What a fright you gave me! Why isn’t Charles here to help you off with your coat?” (423) However, old Neave is certain that his daughter has forgotten him and is not waiting for him as she said. Soon, he finds that every one of the family is happily indulging in their own world, talking and smiling, but none has paid attention to him:

He’s 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. (425)

Old Neave has totally turned to be an outsider and a stranger to the family which he devotes all his life to sustain. Mansfield skillfully exposes old Neave’s inward pain through his monologue, which helps the readers understand that the wealthy material life does not bring people the corresponding rich spiritual life but isolation instead.

V. CONCLUSION

In her New Zealand stories, Mansfield made every effort and did her utmost to put the commonest and tiniest incidents occurred to an unromantic family in an ordinary day, in which she paid her very attention and employed her sharp insight to depict lively and truly the existing and real “isolation” physically and mentally of the New Zealanders in that very times. People who feel isolated and aloof might be the father, mother, kid, or the grandfather; or it may be an individual, a family, whoever and whatever it is, what can never be neglected is that it is Mansfield that enables us to feel vividly both the particular terrors and the inimitable delights of the small community which presents itself so life-like and real by presenting us her marvelous New Zealand stories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I firmly feel that I must avail myself of this chance to express my heartfelt gratitude to those who have provided me with much generous assistance. Firstly, I am deeply indebted to my leaders of Foreign Languages School in Mianyang Norman University (Sichuan, China), who painstakingly encouraged me to try hard on my researches and also offered me the necessary time and materials available. Secondly, my heartfelt thanks also goes to Education Office of Sichuan province (China), without whose project fund, it might have been much harder for me to accomplish this paper smoothly.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alpers, Antony. *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*. Rev. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1982
- [2] Alpers, Antony. *The Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1984.
- [3] Boddy, Gillian. *Katherine Mansfield: the Woman and the Writer*. New York: Penguin. 1988.
- [4] Chatterjee, Atul Chandra. *The Art of Katherine Mansfield*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd. 1980.p122
- [5] Daly, Saralyn R.. *Katherine Mansfield*. Rev. New York: Twayne Publishers. 1994
- [6] Fullbrook, Kate. *Katherine Mansfield*. Great Britain: The Harvester Press Limited. 1986.
- [7] Gordon, Ian A. *Undiscovered Country: The New Zealand Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. London: Longman. 1974.
- [8] Hall, Stuart., & Held, David., & McGrew, Tony. *Modernity and Its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers and The Open University. 1992
- [9] Hormasji, Nariman. *Katherine Mansfield: An Appraisal*. Auckland and London: Collins Bros & Co. Ltd. 1967
- [10] Kaplan, Sydney Janet. *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1991
- [11] Murry, John Middleton. *The journals of Katherine Mansfield*. London: Constable & Co. Ltd. 1954.