

A Study of Alienation in *Miss Brill*

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Abstract: *In one form or another, alienation dominates modern literature. This article aims to study alienation in Katherine Mansfield's short story Miss Brill, existing in the relation between people and the relation between people and their heart and feelings. Further, it analyzes the severe consequence of alienation on the protagonist's recognition of the world and her psychology. Lastly, it attempts to find out the causes that brought about alienation, which might be enlightening to modern people who easily fall prey to alienation.*

Keywords: Katherine, Mansfield, Miss Brill, alienation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield, pen name of Kathleen Beauchamp, is a very important figure in the history of British literature who revolutionized English short story with the incorporation of stream of consciousness into stories, the focus on the “glimpses” and the focus on the interior life of her characters. Capturing the Russian writer Anton Chekhov’s art for stories emphasizing atmosphere and actual life rather than exciting plot, and for her “refreshing originality” and “sensitiveness to beauty”, she depicted widespread horrible alienation in modern people’s life in her famous short story *Miss Brill* through subtle and meticulous description of trivial events and subtle changes in human heart. Although many critics have studied *Miss Brill* from humanistic perspective, psychological perspective, and feminist perspective, but alienation, which is a central theme in modern literature, has not been studied in a deep and systematic way. This article aims to analyze the two kinds of alienation and find out their causes from the character’s personality and psychology and social background. Since what the author expresses gets close relationship with her own emotional experiences, we will attempt to figure out how Katherine Mansfield can discern alienation in modern society perceptively and insightfully through research of her personal experiences. Before going on to discuss the theme of alienation in *Miss Brill*, we had better ascertain what exactly alienation is.

In etymology, the word English “alienation” derives from the Latin word “alienatio”, which bears two meanings: 1)when praying, man’s spirit leaves its body and unites into one with God; 2) In the process of incarnation, The holy ghost loses its divinity and gains humanity. As time passed, the meaning of alienation developed. In the *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx thought the worker’s alienation from his and her humanity occurs in a capitalist society because the worker can only express labor — a fundamental social aspect of personal individuality — through a privately owned system of industrial production in which each worker is an instrument, a thing, not a person. However, the concept of alienation in sociology and literature differs from the philosophical one Karl Marx rendered. Today, it is generally accepted that alienation refers to the phenomenon that people, though living in a society, are not part of the society and they isolate themselves from the society because of lack of communication in psychology and social intercourse; they can not establish meaningful and satisfactory relations with others.

2. THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN *MISS BRILL*

In the short story *Miss Brill*, its namesake protagonist Miss Brill suffers terribly alienation and loneliness in the cold and indifferent society. Through vivid depiction of even the minute inner changes of Miss Brill, the pervasive alienation in modern life is manifested almost to every word. On the whole, the alienation in the *Miss Brill*’s life exists in three relations, i.e. in the relation between Miss Brill and other people, between Miss Brill and herself.

2.1 Alienation between Miss Brill and other people

Like other short stories of Katherine Mansfield where alienation exists between people’s relations, in *Miss Brill*, alienation corrodes people’s relations and impairs it beyond imagination. In the story, Miss Brill, as an expatriate in France and an old single lady, is dying for communication with others and desperate for a love relationship. She is in dire need to talk with other people, share her pain, sorrow, helplessness, hope, joy, happiness and, in fact all her life with them and more than willing to let others share theirs. In the beginning of the short story, there is a sentence “‘What has been happening to me?’ said the sad little eyes.”(Katherine Mansfield 96) Here these words

indicate that she is so lonely and eager to talk with and listen to someone that she regards the fur as something alive or someone she can communicate with. She wants to join other peoples' life so badly that she observe almost all the people very attentively and carefully in the park, trying not to miss anything important. She even "had become really quite expert" (Katherine Mnasfield 97) at eavesdropping other people's conversation. As she watches these people and listens to what they say, she thinks she participates in their life and builds some significant relations with them and feels not so lonely anymore. She badly needs someone as her company. Even though it is an "old invalid gentleman" with "the frail head on the cotton pillow, the hollowed eyes, the open mouth and the high pinched nose" who "had been dead she mightn't have noticed for weeks" (98). She even goes so far that she imagines that "they were all on the stage" (98). "They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all" (99). She need to be equal with people, join them in their life and let them care about her. And in much direr need, she is longing for a lover who can understand her past, care about her feelings, love both her virtues and shortcomings, comfort her weary and lonely heart, and cherish her like treasuring all her life. That's the very reason that she always looks at the men in the park in an admiring light and women either in a somewhat envious or sympathetic or annoyed or even hostile way. Although Miss is avid for a love relationship with someone as well as an important and meaningful relation with people around her, alienation is just like an invisible transparent glass wall surrounding her impeding her way to reach other people, which she can not discover, let alone be courageous enough to break it down. The utmost effort she has made is to go to park on time every week to watch the people in the park. But it seems that she never talked to anybody. If she can not tell stranger about her life, at least she should be able to tell her students. But even this she feels shy and queer to do. She is unable to build any meaningful relation with other people and is an outsider of the society. Alienation occupied her heart, making her be silent all the time except when she is teaching English or reading newspaper during work in spite of the crying voice for communication with people coming from her deep soul. Deprived of the ability of communication, She is just completely isolated from other people, locked in her "small dark cupboard (98)" and becomes a machine; she is doomed to be lonely and forlorn all her life. The only thing she can do is to wear her days away.

2.2 The Alienation between Miss Brill and herself

Miss Brill, as a woman foreigner in France, is extremely fragile, sensitive, vain, timid and insecure in her deep heart. She can not muster enough courage to face up to her real life and try to change it bravely. Afraid of admitting and confronting her terrible dark life and trying to escape from those problems difficult to solve, if not unsolvable, she slips into narcissism and self-pity, fantasizing herself as a decent elegant lady in fashionable clothes, who is popular everywhere and enjoying her life in the park under the cloudless and azure sky on a golden autumn day; people there are very friendly and willing to accept her as an important member. Later she even blurs the borderline between the real world and fictional world by daydreaming that she is an elegant actress and everyone is just performing a play where she is also playing an important part. But in fact, she is only an old and incredibly lonesome women doing menial jobs and living in confining dark cupboard-like room; her best clothes is just an old broken fur, not to mention fashion; she can only afford a slice of honey cake to treat herself even at weekend; what is much worse, people in the park do not care about her at all since they know nothing about her. The real world is very harsh and unbearable for her, so she choose to live in the world she has fantasized for herself.

In order to be capable of living in her imaginative world, she consciously denies her emotional need and material need. By creating her imaginative identity and weaving a pleasant imaginary world, she not only has ignored problems in the real world, but also placed an impenetrable wall between herself and all her real emotions and feelings, which every person is entitled to have. She has alienated herself from her real thoughts and feelings on purpose. She has taken actions to prevent herself from reaching her real feelings, though not successfully. Thus she is often in a state of conflict. In her deep heart, she is almost drowned by pain, worry, alienation, loneliness and longing for love, company and a warm home. But to go on with her life in the way she fantasizes, she fights back these feels again and again. The dialogue she thinks she make with the fur and the scene about "a tiny staggerer" "rocking into the open from under the tree" and "its high-stepping mother (97)" rescuing him remind us of her maternal love and her longing for a lovely baby of her own. As have been mentioned above, her often favorable opinion about man and not so favorable opinion about women shows us her longing for a love. Her fantasy that she is a actor indicates she is in dire need of people's respect, decent career or even material success (after all, she does menial jobs she does not care about and lives in cupboard-like room.). When these longings are not possible to be realized and needs not satisfied, she feels sad in her deepest soul. But still she refuse to admit reality and deny her feelings again and again. At the beginning, "What has been happening to me?" said the sad little eyes." (96) And in the same paragraph, "when she breathed, something light and sad-no, not sad, exactly-something gentle seemed to

move in her bosom.” When the band played again after some rest, “what they played was warm, sunny, yet there was just a faint chill—a something, what was it?—not sadness—no, not sadness—a something that made you want to sing.”(96) At the time she observed the people on the benches and green chairs, “Miss Brill had often noticed—there was something funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way they stared they looked as though they’d just come from dark little rooms or even—even cupboards!”(97) These people are the projection of Miss Brill herself because in her deep soul she realized that she was an odd, silent and old lady coming from the cupboard, though she denied that. By depriving herself of her real feelings and rights to express her feelings, she seems to succeed in living in the lie she weaves for herself. However, one can not live in lie forever, no matter how beautiful it would be. In the end, the seemingly cruel true words of the boy and the girl makes her imaginative world collapse and she is, awakened from her daydreaming, forced to face the real world. What is pathetic is that even when she is forced to face the reality, the wall she put between herself and her real feelings do not collapse and she cannot express her sadness and sorrow by crying; instead, “when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.”(100)

2.3 The Severe Consequence of Alienation

When the severe consequence of alienation is mentioned, the first fictional victim that pops into our mind is Monsieur Meursault, the protagonist created by French writer Albert Camus in his novel *The Outsider*. However, the negative outcome of Miss Brill, to some extent, can be said to be as desperate as the one of Monsieur, though in a quite different way. Alienation turns Monsieur into a walking zombie who neither needs mental comfort nor affection from other people, and thus he is totally indifferent toward this world and in turn, this world treats him indifferently, not as a living human being, but as a piece of poisonous waste anxiously to be disposed of. In other words, alienation deprives him from any capability to love anything, which makes him unable to establish any connection with this world, or feel it’s not necessary to connect with this world, and this world treats him in the same way. And naturally, he goes to his doom. By contrast, Miss Brill is still passionate about this world and is longing to live a decent, respectable and loving life. She has not lost her desire to keep in touch with this world. Unfortunately, she stands in such a harsh situation, where she is an old woman living at the bottom of the society, looking creepy, poor and without families or friends, that she cannot faces up to the reality. To her, who always imagines that she is a shining and important figure like an actress, this is totally unacceptable. So the only way for her to coexist with this world is to reside in a fantasized world where she does not need to confront with the despairs from the real world and lives a desirable life, though it’s unreal, yet irresistibly attractive to her. And all of her recognition of the world is based on this fantasy. She is so accustomed to this fantasized world that when she is compelled to confronted with the real world, her bubble of her dream life shatters and all her life collapses. She has to come into the real life, which she has purposefully shunned so long and is so strange and cruel to her. If alienation creates Monsieur’s tragedy by making him a zombie without any feelings and pushing him to the physical destruction, Miss Brill’s tragedy is to first give her a temporary virtual shelter where she can live a wealthy life, with everything she dreams of, respect, love, shining profession, and physically abundance, and then ruthlessly break it into pieces and deprive her of everything by revealing the truth. The strongest anguish is not that you are indifferent from the start, but that you have once possessed the things you are longing for and then are forced to part with them. Although everything Miss Brill has possessed is fantasized, they are as real as any real thing to her before her fantasized world collapses and she is thrown into the real world. In this sense, Miss Brill’s tragedy is more destructive.

In addition to the consequence of alienation on Miss Brill’s recognition of the world, it causes great negative effects on her psychology. Because her recognition of the world is totally based on her fantasized world, she is unwilling to recognize anything real in the real world and make all her attempts to escape from them. Thus deep down in her heart, she rejects the real world and refuses to build any connection with the real world, which leads to her complete disjunction with it, let alone her establishment of any deep meaningful connection with it. Therefore, the harmful effect of alienation on Miss Brill’s psychology is that it leads to her total rejection of the real world and deprives her of any chance to connect with it in a deep and meaningful way.

2.4 The Causes that Lead to Alienation in Miss Brill

There are both subjective and objective causes that lead to alienation in Miss Brill’s life. If we scrutinize her character, we will find that she is a fragile, oversensitive, insecure, vain, self-conceited and narcissistic woman. These incorrigible character flaws make her life a tragedy. Because of her fragility, oversensitivity and insecurity, she is afraid of being hurt by any people, and therefore, she refuses to take any risk and closes her heart so completely that no one can reach it and her true feelings can reach no one, even herself. Besides, due to her

narcissism and strong desire to escape from the problems in the real world, she fantasized a world where she is an respectable elegant lady popular with people, by using a little our imagination, maybe even with a warm family and considerate husband. Living in her fantasized world, she looks down upon those people in equal situation to her and inferior to her. Thus the complacency her imaginative identity brings her impedes her way to communicate with people in about-the-same situation as her because she thinks she is superior to them and will condescend her to be with them. Neither does she care about them nor have any interest in talking with them. However, those people are most likely to make friends with her, understand her and help her solve her problems in life since they are in similar situation and having similar experiences. So she willingly closes the door which leads to the smooth road of communication. In other words, she isolates herself from these people on purpose. As for people superior to her, she is self-abased and afraid of being laughed by them because of her oversensitivity and insecurity. This leads to her intentional isolation from them. The result is that she isolate herself from all the people; and further, because she can not pluck up courage to face her own true feelings, she isolate herself from her consciousness. She made herself become a looker-on of life and she thought she was overlooking all people from above and was entitled to judge them and their life. However, since she was an outsider of life all the time, she never had a taste of what real life was, let alone to judge it, which made her actually the most pathetic one, one even more pathetic than those she show sympathy or contempt for. Katherine Mansfield once said “risk, risk everything”, but Miss Brill loves herself too much to take any risk, which makes her life doomed to be meaningless.

Another cause that leads to Miss Brill’s alienation is the social environment. In modern materialistic society, people are frenzied with their ambition to pursue material success. They have little time to and little interest in caring about human beings. Distrust between people sprawls like plague as there are so many crooks and frauds. As a foreigner in such a society, it seems reasonable to feel insecure and afraid of opening her heart to people. Therefore, Miss Brill’s alienation are at least in part caused by society.

Actually, alienation which Katherine Mansfield represented so vividly and deeply in *Miss Brill* gets close relation with her own life experiences. As a child, she was brought up in an family lacking warmth and understanding. Later, she went to London to pursue her literary dreams, but as an expatriate, she was not able to integrate herself into the mainstream society and her literary genius was not recognized for a long time. These experiences make her an outsider and results in her contradicted feelings and oversensitivity and insecurity. As a writer, she always indulges herself in fantasies, trying to find consolation from literature. These experiences and feelings are so similar to Miss Brill’s, no wonder that she says she writes Miss Brill because she loves the character too much. However, one point makes the big difference between them, that is, the author likes to risk everything, while Miss Brill refuses to take any risk. It’s the very similarities and differences that make the masterpiece represent alienation so well.

3. CONCLUSION

Alienation Katherine Mansfield represented in *Miss Brill* has an universal meaning in modern society. Actually, alienation is a widespread phenomenon and take a great toll on people’s welfare nowadays. With her great talent for writing and unique personal experience, Katherine Mansfield depicted it vividly and incisively, though through an extreme example. Her work arouses great concern to alienation and the group who easily fall prey to it as well as those suffering with it. Apart from this, people living in modern society feel alienation one time or another unavoidably. Therefore, it is no doubt that *Miss Brill* will resonate with modern readers of one generation after another.

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