CSCanada
Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 5, No. 3, 2012, pp. 101-107
DOI:10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.1678

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Women Characters in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories

REN Aihong[a],*

[a] School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, Shandong, China.
* Corresponding author.

Received 15 October 2012; accepted 18 December 2012

Abstract
This paper aims to discuss Katherine Mansfield's women characters. As a woman writer, Mansfield is very much concerned with the position of women in society. Stories of women take up most of her compositions, in which she captures various women's plight and pain. Her women characters can be neatly divided into three categories: victims in the family, invisible women at workplace, doll and rebel. Poor or rich, single or married, Mansfield's women characters are all victims of their society. A discussion of Mansfield's stories about women can enrich understanding not only of the complicated conditions of women in western society at her time, but also of her contributions to modern literature, especially to the female culture.

Key words: Katherine Mansfield; Women characters; Victims

REN Aihong (2012). Women Characters in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories. *Studies in Literature and Language, 5*(3), 101-107. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120503.1678
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.1678

INTRODUCTION
Katherine Mansfield's stories appear to be very simple and trivial on the surface, since they are for the most part domestic, trivial, and plotless, dealing with familiar experiences of daily life. Early criticisms tend to focus more on her art rather than the content and her thematic values are more or less neglected. However, Mansfield's works provide powerful and valuable insights into human conditions. Often when she seems at first glance most trivial, she is really most profound. In her writing, she deals with death, poverty, war, love, nature, marital relations, disillusionment, etc.. Her motif on women runs through most of her stories, in which she captures various women's plight and pain. From them, we can see her deep concerns with women's position in the society and her conscious effort to find a plausible way out for them.

Like other women writers, Katherine Mansfield was not able to separate herself from her role as a woman when she was writing. As Virginia Woolf noted: "A woman's writing is always feminine; it can not help being feminine; at its best it's most feminine…" (Showalter, 1986, p. 247). With a woman's special keen sight, Mansfield shows a rich, colorful but somewhat poignant world of women. In this world, women are lonely, poor, and vulnerable, suffering from all kinds of miseries. They are alienated and victimized by the male-dominated society, and yet in order to survive in the cruel world, they must depend on men for economic and emotional support. In spite of the fact that Mansfield is more considered as a descendant of Antony Chekov rather than a feminist writer in the mainstream culture, many critics do recognize that there is a feminist awareness running throughout her writing, in the sense that "there is always a strong feeling of division and discontinuity between male and female experiences of life". (Hanson & Gurr, 1981, p. 14) Throughout her whole writing career, Mansfield's works undergo a change, that is, from being feminine to feminist. A discussion of Mansfield's stories about women and the change of her theme can enrich understanding not only of the complicated conditions of women in western society at her time, but also of her contributions to modern literature, especially to the female culture.

DISCUSSION

1) Victims in the Family: Poor Women in Marriage

Katherine Mansfield was merely an adolescent young girl when she wrote the Bovarian sketches, which later came out as her first book of short stories *In a German Pension.* The stories are mostly told from a first-person, female narrator, who distances herself from the Germans through her critical, satirical tone. This bitter tone may well be attributed to Mansfield's experiences at that time as the most tumultuous and confusing of her life. She was in emotional crisis, after experiencing a failure in love, a strange one-day marriage to a man she did not love, an unwanted pregnancy of a child whose father was not her husband, and a miscarriage which was the reason for her forced stay in Germany. Moreover, she was involved with A. R. Orage's periodical *The New Age* and its literary circle; most importantly, she came into contact with Beatrice Hastings, an ardent feminist, who exerted great influence on her. The latter's particular concern was the plight of women, who in her view were in a position of domestic slavery and sexual exploitation. After undergoing so much pain in Bavaria, and becoming most sensitive to the issues of women and feminism, Mansfield was naturally drawn to Beatrice Hastings's ideas. She began to deal with feminist themes and many stories in *In a German Pension* come under this category, among which *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding* is the most disturbing.

The stories reflect her own experiences of consciousness as a woman – the bitter experience of pregnancy and labor, fears of rape, and disgust with female submission. Mansfield most vividly portrays a group of poor married women who are trapped by their womanhood and motherhood in the patriarchal society. Mansfield recognized that women all over the world had the same fate: they are subject to oppression and victimization from men as sexual objects through rape, unwanted pregnancy, abandonment and economic dependency. Through Sabina, Frau Lehmann, the nameless bride and Frau Brechenmacher, Mansfield angrily rejects womanhood and motherhood as the most divine and sublime mission of women. She not only expresses her deep sympathy towards those women's pathetic position, but also voices her anger over their silence and complete submission to their fate.

Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding is a story of male chauvinism and the beaten-down wife Frau Brechenmacher is oppressed by endless household chores and too many babies. At the beginning of the story, the wife is busy preparing her husband and herself to attend a wedding in a village. The husband is rude, thoughtless and pays no respect to the wife. He speaks to her in a commanding tone: "I want the light. You go and dress in the passage", while the wife is well used to her man's orders, and going to dress in the passage is indeed nothing new to her. Life has already taught her that to obey her husband is just her duty, which has become a habit, and it seems that she has never dreamed of venturing a protest of this.

What is more, in the excitement and liveliness of the wedding celebration, Herr Brechenmacher "forgot his rights as a husband as to beg his wife's pardon for jostling her against the banisters in his efforts to get ahead of everybody else" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 708). Mansfield captures the bullying husband with a sarcastic tone in this very sentence. However, the omnipresent, inherent disdain for women is not confined to husbands only; it also goes to the landlord, who "voiced his superiority by bullying the waitresses". Women's inferiority is further revealed through the bride. With her white dress and ribbons, the bride looks like "an iced cake all ready to be cut and served in neat little pieces to the bridegroom beside her" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 706). Without any sign of either happiness or joy, the bride looks cold and "iced" at her own wedding, since she seems to be well aware of the fact that she is nothing but a sacrifice to the male cruelty and violence, like some delicious food to be devoured by her man and by the whole patriarchal society. Her passiveness and helplessness is further stressed in her special condition. From the gossip of the women guests at the feast, we learn that she has fallen in love with a traveler and has had a child with him. However, that man suddenly disappears and deserts her, leaving her in a state of despair and hysterics. She becomes the laughingstock of the community and has to be married off hastily by her parents to a man she does not love. The ladies attending the wedding, including Frau Lehmann, criticize her, saying it is not "how a wedding should be; it's not religious to love two men." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 708). Those women thus consider the bride's behavior improper, while lenient with the heartless traveler, accepting the double standard in sexual behavior and at the same time forgetting their own position as pathetic as that of the bride. The theory that man is superior to woman is recognized as the highest principle governing the relationship between the two sexes by those conventionalized women. Man and woman are both responsible for what happens between them, yet prejudice and double standard can ruin a woman's life while a man is left intact and unharmed. The man is exempt from punishment and he can go on with his life as nothing really happens; the woman, on the other hand, is left alone to bear all the shameful consequences and sufferings, which speaks volumes for the inequality between the two sexes.

When the music is playing, Frau Brechenmacher does realize that she has no hope of being asked to dance as she watches the couples swirling around her. For a moment she forgets her five babies and feels like a girl again. This woman may feel a moment of excitement and pleasure in the merry air of a wedding dance, but

her escape is only temporary. The heavy and endless chores and her five babies have disfigured her body and made her look unappetizing, leaving her to be pushed aside and disregarded. On their way home, remembering the first night when they came home together, Frau Brechenmacher mutters a question to herself: "Na, what is it all for?" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 709). A strong sense of disillusionment overcomes her. But she becomes aware of the pointlessness of raising such silly questions after reaching home and beginning to prepare supper for her family. By that time, she has already put aside the issue of her fate and engaged herself in her duties. Before going to bed, she first goes to check whether the baby is still dry, and at the same time, she remembers to express her hopelessness and despair by muttering: "Always the same, all over the world the same. But, God in heaven – but stupid." Her utterances express her despair and helplessness on the one hand, and they also indicate that she has completely accepted and submitted to her fate and role. The story reaches its climax in the last sentence: "She lay down on the bed and put her arm across her face like a child who expect to be hurt as Herr Brechenmacher lurched in" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 711).

Those poor wives like Frau Brechenmacher represent one type of women in Mansfield's fiction. They are victims and traditional sufferers in a patriarchal society, bearing tortures and indignities of their life with unimaginable self-sacrifice and patience. Though they might question the justice of their fate once in a while, they never attempt to fight back against the circumstances or people who dominate them. In every instance the cause of their martyrdom is a man and invariably it is the husband in the marriage.

Having no right to property, the poor wives are left in a position of domestic and sexual exploitation. Severely constrained by their womanhood, further burdened by the housework and children, they are not able to wrest a second chance out of life. They have lost their vitality and energy and became merely living shadows, machines for working and child bearing. Indeed, male supremacy has turned the marriage into an ugly bondage for the woman. Yet in spite of the oppression and alienation, few women look upon their situation as an intolerable surrender to men; they accept the fate reserved for them, taking it as normal and natural destiny for them, as a result of the age-old prejudices and the Victorian sublimation of "the angel in the house". Therefore, it is not difficult to understand Frau Brechenmacher's reaction to her situation in the family. For her, male dominance is the rule. Though victims of laws which denied them the most elementary rights, women like her resign to their fate, and show respect for the conventions dating from a distant past.

2) The Invisible Women: Poverty and Loneliness of the Lower Class

Mansfield wrote many stories about lonely single women who lead poor hard lives and who are emotionally or physically deprived. In the stories of this thematic group, Mansfield depicts various pitiable women characters with touching tones. There are the young girls like Rosabel, Moss, and the little governess who struggle for an existence in a cruel world, only to end up in defeat or indulgence in daydream as the only source of pleasure and comfort from life; there are the adult women who find consolation and reason for living in a canary; there are old women like the old spinster Miss Brill, a pathetic figure whose illusion of life is shattered by a chance word, and Ma Parker who is thrown into a state of utter hopelessness by life. If the stories of these poor young girls are reflections of Mansfield's early life, the difficulties and hardships she faced as a woman when alone, abroad and living on the edge financially for years, those stories about the pitiful old women can be seen as an extension of this theme. Though those women vary in age, occupation and experiences, they all belong to the lower class, suffering from the same poverty and loneliness, but still cherish some hope and aspirations for life. Therefore, the three characters I choose to analyze – Rosabel, Moss, and Ma Parker – might be classified into one group.

The title character in *The Tiredness of Rosabel* is a poor shop assistant. She is quite pretty and has a beautiful figure. However, she cannot love and be loved by a handsome, rich young man who went to buy a hat with his girl and paid attention to her. For a poor girl who "would sacrifice her soul for a good dinner" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 513), and who can hardly make herself a living, Rosabel is quite aware of her situation: she has no right to love a rich man because of her poverty and lower social status. It is a goal far beyond her reach and the only means to achieve it is through dream. Hungry and tired out after a day's hard work, she goes back alone to her apartment and begins to dream about the fairylandish life of the very rich. By daydreaming of a happy marriage to the wealthy young man, Rosabel relieves her pain and drives away her loneliness.

As Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr (1986) point out, the story operates on three time levels (pp. 29-30). First, we have the time level of remembered past on which Rosabel's daydream is based. She had two customers – a beautiful, rich girl and her fiancé Harry – come to her shop to buy a particular hat that day and the incident impressed her to a great extent. Secondly, we have the time level of the present, which shows the reality of Rosabel's existence: her dirty, mean lodging-house room and the desolation around her. And finally comes the time level of the future which only exists in her dream. By the aid of imagination and fantasy, Rosabel projects herself into the luxurious life of the rich girl. Envying the other, she dreams that they have exchanged places: she has a marvelous, big house with roses everywhere; a French maid waits upon her; she and Harry are in deep love with each other; they enjoy joyous intimacy at lunch;

later they attend a ball at which she is the most famous and most popular lady, "an English wonder". Mansfield devotes half of the story to describe Rosabel's daydream to produce a particular effect. Her contrast between Rosabel's reality and her dreamland runs through the whole story. The contrasts can only sharpen the reader's sense of discrepancy and gap between Rosabel's everyday experience and her longings. It is easy to see that the wonderland Rosabel builds for herself in her dream will never be fulfilled in the real world.

Pictures is another story of Mansfield's depiction of women's victimization. Miss Ada Moss is an unemployed contralto singer, who is overweight and middle-aged, and quite out of her place in the world. Yet like Rosabel, with her heritage of tragic optimism, she is marked by her unbending will and her refusals to be resigned to her fate. The story takes up one day of Moss's life, a voyage about the city in search of work. As she begins her rounds from one theatrical agent to another, Moss still cherishes much hope. Moss has much confidence in herself, since she has had a splendid education at the college of music, has got a silver medal and has often sung at West End Concert. However, the series of adventures turn out to be futile and discouraging. The film companies all demand young and attractive girls. Asserting to be a respectable woman, a contralto singer even at the last minute, Moss strives hard to make a decent living with her ability and artistic skill, but it seems that the cruel and indifferent world does not need a decent artist, but a prostitute instead. During the whole day, Moss does not receive a word of sympathy or a gesture of kindness. She is only an object of indifference, treated with spite and despises, ignored and belittled by everyone she encounters. Her adventures through the city are marked by such indignities, yet Moss suffers them with remarkable good humor and considerable courage. She insists on maintaining her dignity until the last moment.

Moss's dilemma and loneliness is further revealed by her encounters with her "mirror face" – her other self. Before going out to try her luck, Moss sees herself in the mirror, and she gives a vague smile, shaking her head: "Well, old girl, you are up against it this time." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 121). But the person in the mirror makes an ugly face at her. The two Mosses now come face to face with each other. For a moment, Moss's personality is divided into two. The divided-self in the mirror can go nowhere to voice her discontents, and when she receives a word of sympathy from Moss, she is touched to the point of crying and makes an ugly face at the real Moss. Here Mansfield makes use of the conversations between the real Moss and her image in the mirror to display her inner feelings. In this cold, cruel world, Miss Moss can only get some consolation and sympathy from her reflection in the mirror. The terrible loneliness Moss suffers from as a young girl in the city totally without status, power or wealth can be deeply felt.

If young Rosabel and Moss still maintain some hope and optimism of life, though by self-deception and self-division, then old Ma Parker in *Life of Ma Parker* is utterly hopeless. Old Ma Parker is a cleaning woman for a literary gentleman. Her life is most harrowing: seven of her thirteen children died; her husband who was a baker contracted consumption and died when the children were still very little; then two daughters took to prostitution and two sons emigrated; another son went to India with the army; and the youngest daughter Ethel married a good-for-nothing little waiter who died of ulcers. Her only grandson Lennie is the sole comfort of her life to whom she has poured all her love and feelings. He is her hope and comfort and she never feels lonely with the dear angel child. But now he is also gone and his death is too hard a blow for poor old Ma Parker to bear.

After finishing her work with the dear memories of Lennie, Ma Parker thinks back of her whole hard life and feels that she can not take it any longer. She wants to have a good cry:

> No, she simply couldn't think about it. It was too much – she'd kept herself to herself, and never once had she been seen to cry. Never by a living soul. Not even her own children had seen Ma Parker break down. She'd kept a proud face always. But now! Lennie gone – what had she? She had nothing. She had nothing. He was all she'd got from life, and now he was took too. Why must it all have happened to me? She wondered. "What have I done?" said old Ma Parker. "What have I done?" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 307)

Nobody will answer her questions, because "nobody knew – nobody cared". Even her only wish to cry out her misery over the years is impossible to fulfill. She never has the good cry that she so much deserves and desires. In such a large world there is no single place where she can cry at her will. In the end, Ma Parker stands up, looking up and down, but there is nowhere. There is only icy wind and cold rain outside. Ma Parker is a more tragic figure than the cart-driver in the short story *Misery* by Antony Chekhov, who is Mansfield's chosen master. At least the poor driver can give free vent to his miseries to a living creature – a horse, whereas Ma Parker can only swallow all the pain with no creature to share, not even an animal.

As illustrated above, the three poor women are all lonely souls in a hollow, indifferent world. They are invisible creatures for whom nobody cares and nobody knows. Although they live in a human society, they are ostracized and excluded from the circle of human communications due to their poverty and low social position. The only thing that they obtain from the world is endless loneliness, inhumanity and injustices that they are taught to suffer and bear even from a very young age, as the Kelveys sisters in *The Doll's House* do. On the other hand, however, Rosabel's wonderful dreamland, Moss's good humor and touching optimism, Ma Parker's ardent longings to cry out her pain all suggest that no matter how poor they are, they are human beings in need of love, sympathy, and comfort just like everyone else. Only

that their natural needs and feelings are suppressed and transformed into daydream, fantasies, mirror face, etc..

They are all vulnerable victims of the capitalist society in the early twentieth century. Among the three, Rosabel and Ma Parker represent one type of woman in two phases of life. Neither of them receives education. One is young, imaginative and full of hope of life, while the other is old and her hopes of life are deprived because of the loss of her grandson. They all work hard, but it does not mean that they can have any hope of leading a better life; on the contrary, they all live on the verge of pauperism. Moss is different from them. She has studied music and achieved much, yet her hope of finding a position to earn her daily bread is still crushed to pieces. Finally, she is forced to take up prostitution, to be victimized again when there is nothing more to offer. Moss is only one example in her final surrender to be sexually exploited. It is not difficult to imagine that those numerous nameless girls without education, without property are also not free from this fate in their efforts to survive. Educated or uneducated, young or old, those lower-class women have the same fate and all suffer poverty and endless loneliness in the indifferent world. The subordinate position of a wage-owner like Rosabel and the slave position of the servant as in Ma Parker's case are all reflections of Mansfield's social analysis of them.

3) Doll and Rebel: Ambivalence and Disillusionment of the Upper-Class Women

Mansfield's early feminism concentrated on the material needs and the miseries that women suffer as a result of poverty. In her early dealings with those poor women in marriage, she depicts the pitiable German wives who are overburdened with too many children and too much housework and who recoil from gross sexual acts that seem to result not in any pleasure for them but only in more children. With great patience and self-sacrifice, they bear what life offers them and take all for granted. With her own experience in marriage behind, Mansfield later created more poignant stories about women, which are among her most feminist and mature works. In this thematic group, she centers her attention on married women of the middle and upper-class, with whom she seems to be more familiar since she herself was born into a middle-class family. Those women are different from the former pathetic creatures who suffer because of material inadequacy. Quite on the contrary, they lead a comfortable life. They never need to bother about the food or money as since they are well-supported by their husbands. However, it does not follow that their material comfort guarantees happiness. Those women begin to develop hostility toward man. Meanwhile, they seek ways to discard their role by drifting away from their husbands, neglecting the children and household chores. They are unhappy to be ornaments or dolls of their husbands and turn to the inner world to find the meaning of their life. And invariably, disillusionment prevails, since the findings are disappointing – their spiritual lives are void and meaningless. So they are caught in a dilemma: to remain a doll or to be a rebel, to escape or to be free. In *Prelude* and *At the Bay*, Mansfield successfully captures the ambivalent feelings of Linda Burnell and Isabel.

Prelude and *At the Bay* are best known as Mansfield's two remarkable stories about an English family in New Zealand. They are built around the same cast of characters of the Burnell family. The central character Linda Burnell is the mistress of a large, wealthy family. She is a happy woman on the surface and has no worries whatsoever: her husband is a wealthy businessman of high social status, who provides the material welfare to the family and who loves her sincerely; her mother takes care of her children and all the household chores; they live in a comfortable country house with a nice garden. As a woman whose social destiny is marriage in that society, no doubt Linda has a successful marriage. Yet in spite of all this, Linda is deeply unhappy. She is always torn by her inner conflicts or ambivalent feelings. Linda's unhappiness derives primarily from the role imposed on her by marriage. She is supposed to shoulder responsibilities of a careful mother, an obedient wife, and a hard-working housewife. The problem lies in the fact that Linda hates her role as a woman and intends to forsake it and escape from it.

Linda's abdication of her role as a mother is depicted from the very beginning of the text when the family is moving to the new house. Her behavior as a mother is rather eccentric, since she distinguishes between the bags and boxes which are absolute necessities, not to be let out of her sight for one instant, and the two youngest children Kezia and Lottie, for whom there is no space left in the buggy. Moreover, she seems to derive much pleasure from her cruelty of casting away her children. After she decides to leave them behind, "a strange little laugh flew from her lips". When the children are sent to their new house, Linda's response to their arrival is unusually indifferent. She does not care, not even bothers to open her eyes. If Linda's pleasure in abandoning her children still lies concealed in *Prelude*, then in the later story *At the Bay*, she brings quite into the open her hostile feels towards them. She makes the confession that the time not spent in calming and listening to Stanley's story is spent in the dread of having children, which is her "real grudge against life":

> …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…As to the boy – well, thank heaven, mother had taken him; he was mother's, or Beryl's, or anybody's who wanted him. She had hardly held him in her arms. (Mansfield, 1981, p. 213)

Linda's reluctance to be a mother provokes anxiety and divisiveness in her family and the sensitive child Kezia turns to her grandmother for love and comfort instead. In so casting Linda, Mansfield questions an assumption of the society: women are born with a maternal instinct.

Linda's contradictory feelings are mostly connected with her husband Stanley Burnell. In this story Stanley is portrayed as the typical and socially admirable male chauvinist of that time. As the bread-earner of the family, he does nothing at home and takes great pleasure in being served by his mother-in-law. To Linda, he is a loving, thoughtful husband whom she loves and admires and respects tremendously. He is the soul of truth and decency, awfully simple, easily pleased and easily hurt. However, Linda's feelings toward him are polarized with the change of the day and the night. As a wife, the first thing Linda has to endure is the sexual needs from her husband, which she dreads and hates tremendously. Her feelings are vividly captured in her implicit comparison of her husband with her obedient, loyal Newfoundland dog of whom she is very fond in the day time. But she wishes the dog "wouldn't jump at her so, and bark so loudly and watch her with such eager, loving eyes" because "he was too strong for her; she had always hated things that rush at her from a child." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 54).

Linda's resentment and fear of male sexuality and her abhorrence in pregnancy and childbirth are most vividly conveyed in a symbolic way. For several times, as she withdraws from others and wanders alone to the garden, Linda comes face to face with the aloe tree which is a feminine symbol. She admits that she likes that aloe more than anything else and she particularly likes its sharp, long thorns which nobody dares to come near. The thorny aloe tree symbolizes Linda's wish to be a strong, independent woman who can protect herself against the responsibilities as a wife. She imagines that the aloe tree is a ship that will carry her away from her sexual unease. A defenseless woman, Linda can only find sustenance in a plant to satisfy her desire to be free of the sexual role imposed on her by marriage.

Linda will not and can not tell Stanley her true feeling towards him. Certainly he will not be able to understand her – the emotional gulf between them is too wide since there is no sign that they ever communicate either on verbal or non-verbal level. As she recognizes with silent laughter, life is absurd, which is spent in "waiting for someone to come who just did not come, watching for something to happen that just did not happen." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 28) This kind of life is, indeed, absurd and meaningless for anyone. As a result, Linda seeks ways to escape.

Like so many other women in Mansfield's stories, Linda has no power to alter her circumstances and she can only find freedom in her dream. She constantly dreams of birds, of escaping or driving away from everybody in a small buggy and not even waving, and of being rowed fast away in the thorny aloe ship. Linda also seeks refuge in her mother, on whom she depends emotionally just like a child. Not considering cooking as her duty, she refuses to go into the kitchen but enjoys seeing mother in it. Subconsciously, Linda longs to regress to childhood, when there is no responsibilities to shoulder, no sexual role to play and all her troubles in life to be taken care of by the adults.

All her dreams of escape are only her imaginations that can never be fulfilled, sine she can not envision what shape escape should take. However, they embody her rebellion and resistance against the dominance of the patriarchal society represented by Stanley as the rule-maker and center of authority. Asking herself a question that has no answer like Frau Brechenmacher, Linda Burnell comes to an epiphany: "Why this mania... to keep alive at all? What am I guarding myself for so preciously? I shall go on having children and Stanley will go on making money and children and the gardens will grow bigger and bigger..." (Mansfield, 1981, p. 54).

So finally Linda is forced to accept a life that leads nowhere. It is very likely that she will never have the resolution of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who leaves her husband and seeks her independence and identity in the big outside world. Lacking a rebel's resolution and power, Linda will stay at her husband's side and continue to drift away from her life, remaining languid, unhappy and idle all her life.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Mansfield's writings, we are reminded more than often of one fact: women are inferior to men. All her fictional women are victims, members of an underclass, whether in terms of economics or in terms of their relative positions within the family structure. They are subject to oppression from men at some level: poor single ladies like young Moss and old Ma Parker have to serve men in order to make a living, either by manual labor or by prostitution; on the other hand, the married women, no matter poor or rich, are subject to victimization by serving as their husbands' sexual objects, birth machines and property. Through the depiction of various women, Mansfield shows her deep sympathy for the miserable lower-class women, her distinct dislike for the class distinctions, her frustration and anger over many women's refusal to overcome their conditioned acceptance of their role, and brings out into the open the conventional suppression of women in marriage, where they have been given a social, sexual and economic role to which they must conform.

Mansfield's limitations are also obvious. Confined by her poor health, her scope of writing is narrow. Most of her stories are domestic, restricted to the familiar matters. She is too pessimistic about life because of her own traumatic life experiences, which are reflected in her fictional representations of women. We see no hope for her women characters. As Chen Jia (1981) notes in *A History of English Literature*, "The first world war left its mark upon her out-look so that like other postwar intellectuals

of the 'lost generation', her philosophy grew to be one of pessimism and disillusionment in life and she adopted a passive attitude of non-resistance to social evils." (p. 486). Second, a similar pattern can be found in almost all her stories about women: authority, the world of men and adults are cruel to women, who have no chance to escape but have to submit and be crushed; the female protagonist is sensitive, weak and fragile while the masculine adult world is insensitive and strong. Besides, we find those women characters, without exception, suffering from a lack of communication with the outside world. They are shut away not only from the contact with the opposite sex, but also from the circles of their own kind. Rich or poor, single or married, they just keep to themselves and withdraw from the larger world, and no matter how painful their cases are, those lonely souls never have a friend to talk to, and therefore they have to swallow the bitterness of life themselves. In spite of all, Mansfield's contemplation upon women's life and fate will always encourage women all over the world to struggle on for a better life. Indeed, with her various pitiful but truthful women characters, Katherine Mansfield deserves a more secure place in world literature.

REFERENCES

Alpers, A. (1982). *The Life of Katherine Mansfield*. London: Oxford University Press.

Berkman, S. (1951). *Katherine Mansfield: A Critical Study.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

CHEN, Jia. (1981). *A History of English Literature* (Vol. IV). Beijing: the Commercial Press.

Hanson, C., & Gurr, A. (1981). *Katherine Mansfield*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kobler, J. F. (1990). *Katherine Mansfield: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co..

Mansfield, K. (1981). *The Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. London: Penguin Groups.

Showalter, E. (1986). *The New Feminist Criticism*. London: Virago Press.