

## MANSFIELD'S ART OF PROBLEMATISATION, RATHER THAN CONSOLIDATION OF IDENTITIES IN FICTIONS OF PECULIAR POLYVALENCE A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CATHERINE MANSFIELD'S "THE FLY EPISODE"

ABHIK MAITI

Pursuing M.A in English, University of Calcutta, M.A in History, Rabindra Bharati University, Diploma in Fine Arts

*"I adore life but my experiences with the world is that it is pretty terrible"*

-Letters and Journals,

Katherine Mansfield

### ABSTRACT

Hailed as "The New Zealand Chekov", Katherine Beauchamp Mansfield was one of the leading exponents of the genre of short story in the twentieth century literature. The Fly, included in The Dove's Nest is one of the shortest in the genre that deals with the protagonist's encounter with the fly that had fallen into his inkwell- the slightest of incident being, but a pretext for the hidden tension, both emotional and physical that comes to the forefront. Sylvia Berkman observes, "*no note of pathos or anguish in the story but a relentless grim depiction of the caprices of destiny*" In the classical example of fictional compression, one encounters a complex reading of moods and characters, associated with the modern short story. The Fly, is often compared to Chekov's Small Fry in which the discontented clerk crushes a cockroach to cease the gnawing of his heart. Thus Mansfield, like Chekov also used the moment of cruelty to unravel the sadist's nature of man that lies beneath the veneer of affection and goodness.

**KEYWORDS:** Mansfield's Art of Problematisation

### INTRODUCTION

The Fly becomes an outlet to various keys of emotions of Mansfield's personal grief and tragedy. "*I have known for a long time that life was over for me, but I have never realised it or acknowledged it until my brother died*" Mansfield wrote in 1915. "*Yes, though he is lying in the middle of the wood in France, I am as much dead as he is. The present and future mean nothing to me*"- echoes the boss's fate in the story as she is spent up, as much as the fly in the blot was.

Post World War literature presents a psychological analysis of characters through symbolist rendering as proposed by the French Symbolists Burgeons La Forge and Mallarme. Now under Katherine Mansfield's narrative mode, the affairs of everyday life are heightened to the standard of writing through the introduction of sensitivity in her narrative method. Like Jane Austin, her range was also limited, perhaps more restrained than Austin as she was mainly associated with her family and a few limited relationships. Probably that was the prime reason behind her additional effort and shades in her characters and the subtle relationships between people in small groups who are bound together by bonds of emotions. In The Fly, the memory of Mansfield's dead brother certainly broods over the story, as she tried to portrait the human relationship when they loss some near or clear one as boss' does in this story. Critics have pointed out that the character of 'boss' may even been her own father Sir Harold Beauchamp. The Fly, written in February, 1922 and later included in the

acclaimed compilation, *The Garden Party and other Stories*, is perhaps the darkest and the most haunting treatment of human life in Mansfield's literary oeuvre, as well as one of the most evocative expressions of the post World War I existential helplessness and despair.

Katherine Mansfield's story has a simple plot that develops in three integrated episodes – it opens with old Woodfield's conversation with the boss, followed by the boss' introspection of his private grief culminating in the fly episode which gives a sense of finality to the whole story. Though realistically the fly episode has little role to play in the mainstream plot and is rather a self-sufficient, parallel course, yet it exposes many dimensions about the boss' mind and character and dwells upon certain essential truths about human nature in general. The boss' attitude after the death of the fly enriches our understanding of the preceding episodes, for it is part of Mansfield's tour de force that attempts to understand his true nature : she only clears up the ambiguity about him by bringing about the ambivalence of his paragraph which accounts for the lasting fascination of the story.

In Mansfield's life as in her fiction, dwells a plethora of worlds spinning both inwards and outwards consistently, point to a cosmos of convergence and dissociation. It was perhaps the coexistence of worlds that caused Bridget Ore to conclude that *"Mansfield problematises rather than consolidating identities in fictions of peculiar polyvalence"*

In one of the darkest and most haunting treatment of life as one of the most evocative expressions of post World War I helplessness and despair, the story describes in minute details, a curious introjection of roles, fundamentally antimonious within the complex frame of an identity struggling to achieve definition. In the protagonist's alternating demonstration of the aggressor victim syndrome, is the oscillation between the roles of the admirer and the annihilator, lies the fulcrum of the balance of the power , explored in the story with infinite subtlety. The power equation between the boss, a prosperous man of the world who reads the financial times and drinks vintage whisky and takes pride in the re-decorated office, while at the same time, subjugating his natural response to a bewildering bereavement and Woodfield- *"the frail old figure in the muffler"* are stealthily inverted by the end of the first movement of the story and highlights the fundamental metaphysical question that runs throughout the story- *"What is the meaning and purpose of life? If life has no meaning, does it mean life is not worth living?"*

What the fly episode reveals is perhaps the vain pressing truth that a being which is higher than another lesser being is almost always essentially indifferent and even cruel to the latter. What the boss does and the fly is exactly what he accuses God as the supreme being to have done to him- taking away his only son leaving him completely devastated in the process. Such a realization surely belittles the whole point of human existence.

The fly episode conveys a universally compelling existential message concerning the inevitability of death and man's unwillingness to accept this truth. In the fly episode, Mansfield seems to be highlighting the fundamental metaphysical question which runs throughout the story – *"what is the meaning and purpose of life? .... If life has no meaning, does that mean life is not worth living?"* It may be correlated with Camu's Absurdist philosophy that claims there is a fundamental conflict between what we want from the universe (order) and what we get (chaos). Life ceases its meaning when we realize that there is no purpose left to live for. This is what Dante says in his Inferno: *"I did not die but nothing in life remains."* In the fly episode, the boss in bought face to face with the nihilistic meaning-less universe by the fly's vain struggle and faces with grief the truth of his son's wasted life. The fly's struggle in fact, gives an answer that there is no answer other than what we choose to create, so that we can utter with Macbeth : *"Life's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"* and that the struggle must continue for its own sake.

Significantly, the boss's failure to remember what he had been thinking is perhaps the most important paralleling in the story, for it brings us back to what started this little drama— Woodsfield struggling to remember what he had to tell the boss. This sardonic reversal of roles put the boss at par with Woodsfield; the frail old figure in the muffler who sums up the quintessential truth about the common destiny of all. We realize that the boss's destiny can also be our destiny; and that life makes out of us a boss or a Woodsfield as arbitrarily as the fly had dropped into the ink.

The fly's futile straggle and its inevitable failure reminds us of the "*myth representing mankind, with this tragic law a mountain to the peak, only to have it rolled back down to the valley.*" The fly's struggle, however also represents the responsibility of every individual to live the best way he can in the face of hostilities of the universe – which is the crux of human existence.

Post Freudian literature finds a psychological exploration of characters through symbolic rendering. The "*fly episode*" becomes a story within a story that high-lightens man's struggle to fight the Lucretian fates, only to fall back and perish. The whole process of dying of the fly is observed with a fixed obsessive thrill and an almost microscopic vision of metaphysical power of association in the description: "*It succeeded at last and sitting down like a minute cat, began to clean it's face.*" The three dots signify the three blots of ink and the protagonist realises that between his efforts and achievement, falls a gap- they are the blots in which he perish with his pains. Even in his tormenting of the fly, he felt a sense of grudging admiration towards it. Yet, he could not curb his perverted will to drop another blot and then another until "*It was only a question of...*"

The boss's torturing of the fly is a classic example of displaced aggression and in reality is a sadistic attempt to re-assert his omnipotence. The boss fails to realise that the implication of life itself may be death. The boss's ego and the alter ego (fly) projected in the simultaneous reversal of the roles remind us of Blake's immortal lines:

*"Am I not a fly like thee*

*Or art thou not a man like me*

*For I dance*

*And drink and sing*

*Till some blind hand*

*Shall brush my wings"*

It represents the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest that forms the core of human existence. With his agonized loneliness, the boss represents the modern existential hero torn by existential anxiety: "*A grinding feeling of wretchedness seized him*" and as he threw away the fly, he threw away from himself an inwardly decomposed soul. The fly's death is the harbinger of absence of grinding wretchedness within the boss. The boss now feels positively frightened as he is now engulfed in a sense of insecurity or in state of identity crisis. For the first time he reaches out forego compensation and therefore he humbly calls Marcy for some fresh blotting papers. It is now in the figure of Macy, "Old dog" the boss tries to rediscover himself the boss's litho image that he retains throughout the story. For once his persona he reduced to the rank of a consumer which he had so and their cannot be much tragic end than this for a character like Boss,

who throughout the story holds up his 'Boss' like image and ironically, due to this image only he faced the greatest assault in the hands inevitable fate.

The realisation of man's futile struggle against fate tempts us to say with Shakespeare:

*"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods.*

*They kill us for their sport"*

The boss fails to realise that the implication of life may be death. The struggle of the fly is a metaphor to describe Mansfield's own exhausted and impotent condition for both the fly and the tuberculosis victim suffocating in ink and blood. The boss however fails to realise that the struggle of the fly symbolizes the agony and struggle of man himself. The boss is dead in his soul as the fly and slips back into the pool of his agony. With his agonized loneliness, he represents the agon and pathos of Everyman, the man within all man.

The fly's death is the harbinger of the absence of a grinding wretchedness within the boss. He now fills positively frightened, being engulfed in a vacuum of insecurity and identity crisis. For the first time, he reaches out for ego compensation and hurriedly calls Macy for fresh blotting paper. Now, in the personae of Macy, the "old dog", he tries to re-discover the little image that he attempts to retain throughout the story. For once, his personae is reduced to the ranks of a consumer from the boss like image; suffering the greatest assault in the hands of inevitable fate.

For both Blake and Mansfield, the fly represents the philosophy of existentialism, the responsibility and constant struggle of man to live in the best way he can in the face of hostility in the universe. The boss plays the role of fate and at the same time, is a victim to it. Mansfield shows us the ambivalent mind of man from which stems all the losses. The fly thus proposes the philosophy of man's struggle to live and start anew only to be tossed by fate and slip back. It dissects the soul of the boss and more universally, of an agonized entity.

Open to a plethora of readings, The Fly has been widely recognized as a canonical example of the interiorised story that makes its points through oblique references and psychological insight. In the words of Mansfield, *"One does not sit and watch the spectacle. Indeed, one is the spectacle"*

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