

MALE DOMINANCE ON VICTIMIZED FEMALE CHARACTERS IN “PRELUDE”
AND “A MARRIED MAN’S STORY” BY KATHERINE MANSFIELD

Katherine Mansfield’in “Prelude” ve “A Married Man’s Story” Adlı Öykülerinde
Kurban Edilmiş Kadın Karakterler Üzerindeki Erkek Egemenliği

M. Başak UYSAL*

Abstract

Katherine Mansfield apparently attacks and criticizes patriarchal norms and society through totally diverse characters. Her male and female characters experience life differently because they have different and conflicting priorities and expectations. While male force dominates the female and controls society, females are mostly restricted to indoors and those female figures try to find their own identities or try to hide their real faces or understandings. In this context, “Prelude” and “A Married Man’s Story” are the significant examples of male dominance on victimized women.

Key Words: Feminism, Victimized and Submissive Women, Male Dominance.

Özet

Katherine Mansfield birbirinden tamamen farklı karakterler aracılığı ile ataerkil toplum kurallarını açık bir dille eleştirmektedir. Eserlerinde kullanmış olduğu erkek ve kadın karakterler hayatı farklı şekilde deneyimlerler çünkü birbirinden farklı ve çelişkili önceliklere ve beklentilere sahiptirler. Erkek kuvveti kadınlar üzerinde hâkimiyet kurup toplumu kontrol ederken, kadınlar çoğunlukla iç mekânlara hapsedilmiş ve kendi kimliklerini bulmaya çalışırken gerçek yüzlerini veya fikirlerini gizlerler. Bu bağlamda, “Prelude” ve “A Married Man’s Story” adlı hikâyeler kadın kurbanlar üzerindeki erkek egemen zihniyeti yansıtan önemli örneklerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, itaatkâr ve kurban edilmiş kadınlar, erkek egemenliği.

Within her short stories, Katherine Mansfield was a supporter of women’s ignored rights that rebelled against their repression with a feminist sentiment. Kate Fullbrook claims “The ideology in Mansfield’s early writing is decidedly and overtly feminist.”¹ In order to present her feminist attitudes, she penetrates the consciousness of her female characters through modern narrative

* Yrd. Doç. Dr. Atatürk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü,
mbuysal@atauni.edu.tr

¹ Kate Fullbrook, *Katherine Mansfield*. Brighton and Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986, p.61.

techniques and reflects their psychology controlled by the ideology of society. J. F. Kobler also mentions that Mansfield “most often uses her fictional techniques to go into the consciousness of a young woman struggling with her feelings of love and hatred, with her emotions as a woman in a world clearly dominated by men”² She usually focuses on the tender and gentle feelings of a woman. Her stories mainly underlie the victimization of women under male dominated ideology. Her male characters are usually senseless, selfish, self-centred, indifferent materialistic beings. Although her female characters are repressed by the male ideological apparatuses, they still continue to dream of living in romances. She tries to focus on male dominance and victimization of women and her stories reflect the otherness of women in the patriarchal society and how women were the slaves at indoors and victims of the male dominated society.

“Prelude”³ is an example of an ordinary family’s life, its family members, the relatives, servants and neighbours. It deals with social and cultural issues problematized all throughout within the major framework of feminism and anti-feminism. Various male members from different social classes and age groups of the society denote that despite their distinctive classes and identities, they all have common traits due to their shared context. According to Lucille Cooper, “Prelude” is the traditional anti-feminist culture which has shaped many men’s life and attitudes in a similar way.⁴

The female characters are the ones who show typical submissive roles in the story. Linda Burnell is a middle-class married woman and is under the shadow of her husband Stanley with a happy marriage. She is the impression of an ignorant mother on the reader from the very beginning of part I. They are moving to a new house, so, the furniture is loaded and Linda, grandma and Isabel are positioned in the buggy. However, there is no place for other two girls Kezia and Lottie. At this moment, Linda thinks she cannot bear these lump children on her lap. Then she tells the buggy driver that he should also put the boxes and some other things inside as they are “absolute necessities” for her. The chil-

² J. F. Kobler, *Katherine Mansfield A Study of The Short Fiction*, Twayne Publishers, 1990, p.23.

³ Katherine Mansfield, “Prelude”, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Penguin Books, 1981, pp. 11-60.

⁴ Lucille Cooper, *Is There A Woman In The Text? A Feminist Exploration of Katherine Mansfield’s Search For Authentic Selves In A Selection Of Short Stories*. (M.A Thesis), University of South Africa, 2008, p. 5.

dren waiting innocently to be taken inside are not. This means she cares for her inanimate belongings more than her children, as Cooper explains.⁵ She is also described as a cold, ignorant mother who makes use of her mother, Mrs. Fairfield, a typical traditional grandma character, for childcare and all kind of housework. Linda and Stanley ask the grandma and Beryl to do whatever is necessary because Linda does not care about housework or children. Her mother takes care of the girls, feeds them and puts them into bed and his sister does housework with her mother as if they were servants. Besides her being an ignorant mother, Linda is also a cold, distant wife. Since the beginning of the story, she is seen as a woman who is always ill and who needs permanent rest. As a result, no one bothers her but Stanley, her husband. He shows her his love in an excessive way, but Linda does not respond him with the same intensity.

Though Linda lives in a very bourgeois life, she is so much tired with her family life and husband that she does not see or care even when Stanley flirts with her sister Beryl while playing cribbage. She just needs to be left alone to have some peace and slight moments of herself. She wants to abstain herself from this life and wants to escape from all female responsibilities as mother and wife and imagines to get on a ship and sail away. As evidently seen, Linda is really depressed and unhappy. She is in search of her feminine authenticity and something she can associate her unrealised dreams with. She needs an escape from her husband's restrictions and her role as loving wife and child-bearing affectionate mother. As Hughes puts it, she wants a life of her own, a life in which she can have and do whatever she desires, not what the society imposes upon her.⁶ If closely studied, the reason(s) for Linda's unhappiness is revealed through her fantasies, nightmares, fears and hysteria. But her dreams prevent her doing so. She lives in a society in which her feelings and desires are repressed and she is placed in a limited circle at home. Further, Linda's fear of giving birth is openly conveyed in her climax scene at part XI, when she walks with her mother towards the aloe flower near their house. In her interior monologue, she expresses her feelings in the most realistic way. Her love and hatred to Stanley are reflected with the same intensity. She mentions about Stanley as

⁵ Ibid.40

⁶ Brian Hughes, "Lyric Compression in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield", *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 1988, p. 114.

her “newfoundland dog”, because he has never been so kind and passionate to her before.

Hence, Linda gives up trying and accepts her life as it is. For her Stanley will continue earning money, she will continue bearing children, the children will continue growing and the garden will be full of aloe flowers. Within these thoughts, she brings the unuttered social truth to the surface and says she will take whatever the society and her husband give to her and will not expect or dream for more. Thence, at the end, Linda accepts or is forced to accept her role as wife and mother, though rather reluctantly.

On the other hand, male characters are the ones altering women’s lives deeply and constituting the male restriction around them. Stanley Burnell is the male protagonist character to be examined carefully. Burnell is the major male force dominating the whole story and affecting many female lives and psychologies under his reign due to his traditional “manly” attitudes. Stanley whose name already means “stony ground” appears in the story at part III, however his patriarchal impact and dominance over other members (all of which females) of the Burnell family is very clear. The first scene of Stanley’s patriarchal power is when women of the family are tired after moving from their old house to this countryside house Stanley has just bought. As it is their first night in this house, there are boxes and things scattered around. Yet, Stanley is served like a lord and the man of the house as if the house was already arranged and everything was in place. According to Cooper, Stanley’s dominance is clear in his continual demands and requests.⁷ Despite all the mess in the house, Stanley wants to wear his slippers to feel comfortable and asks Linda where they are. So, Linda says they are in “urgent necessities” box implying that Stanley’s slippers are of urgent necessities. Linda knows him and beware herself from his anger by this precaution. This obedience gives Stanley more confidence, thus, he commands more and cannot stand any protest against his reign. When he asks Beryl how long it will take to get the house straight, Beryl complains that she and her mother have done all the housework today, “slaving” rather than working. She implies she needs some appreciation and understanding from Stanley, but he gets it in the wrong way and thinks it as a protest and resistance against his sovereignty.

⁷ Cooper, *Ibid.*36-42.

So, he gets angry with Beryl and says it is the women's job to do the housework, not his, because he is the man. He should work outside and they should do the domestic work at home without any complaint or protest. He also says that Beryl cannot even pronounce a word of exhaust as she is economically dependent on him, which makes her a servant in return. Another significant proof for Stanley's male power at home is Beryl's fantasies about Stanley. Beryl, Linda's sister and the aunt of the three girls, is tired of this boring and restricting family life and she wishes to escape from this by marriage. However, she cannot accomplish it and the dreams/fantasies emerges as a result of this. Because the only dominant male figure is Stanley at home, she puts him into the place of a young man and has an affair with him in her fantasies. Stanley is very kind and appreciative of her beauty and femininity in these dreams, as contrary to the real. Moreover, Isabel, Stanley's third daughter, always tries to win her father's appreciation by ridiculing and spying on her sisters Kezia and Lottie as she must also have realised her father's influence on the family, despite her young age.

Nevertheless, despite his general aggressive behaviours, Stanley seems very affectionate towards his wife ironically, for an unknown reason. On the first evening at the new house, he tries to comfort his wife Linda, who has a terrible headache for a few hours, by murmuring a love song into her ear. Stanley's intention is so clear: Stanley wants to persuade her for another baby, by moving to this distant and "peaceful" countryside and by making a great display of his excessive love to her. Nonetheless, his efforts are in vain as Linda cannot convince herself for another child yet, which must certainly be a boy or it is the end of her life. Her heart cannot stand for another birth after three "great lumps of children." Linda grows tense and distressed even with pronunciation of this wish. Then, Linda and Stanley go upstairs, Stanley kisses her in their room, again adoringly, like demanding something.

Stanley is an entity existing with his constant shows of confidence, ignorance and despise. On the first night and morning at home, he declares his satisfaction and contentment because he has bought the house for a very cheap price, in his words "dirt cheap." Then, he gets this sunny first morning in the new house as a bonus to his trading capabilities. He is the man, money-making and purchasing person at home and he means to say that he is in fact quite sly

in trade. Fuelled by this confidence, he has a shower and does his physical exercises afterwards. Meanwhile, he cannot help complimenting to his athletic body and needs Linda's assurance "for a hundredth time" that he looks good. Forcedly, Linda who is indeed tired of everyone and everything in this family, says the words he wishes and assures him.⁸ Likewise, at part VII, he buys some oysters, pine and cherries for home, yet this is enough to make him feel as the sole leader of the house. After his indignation about Beryl's ungratefulness about her economical dependency on him, Cooper states that he emphasises his purchasing power here.⁹ He acts as if he has bought all riches of the world and he heightens his confidence until he reaches home. His days and weeks are so routine: Morning swimming, inviting his friends to his house to play tennis on Saturday afternoons, church on Sundays with his family and giving their religious service as Burnells which underlines a show off, accompanying Linda in the evenings and on Sunday afternoons have Linda's opinions on some work issues at the weekends, although she usually gets beyond the point with her feminine thoughts and so on. Here again, he expresses his dislike with femininity and his endless desire to make a great display of himself with his belongings, his body, trading capabilities, talents, job and family unity with him as the head of the family. At part IX, in another evening, the family is at dinner table and the duck is placed in front of Stanley to be served. He thinks the women make a mess of the duck while they are cutting it and thus, he is too proud while he is doing the manly deed. Then, he becomes so proud because the duck comes from his land, his property. After dinner, he tells Beryl, the aunt and Linda's younger sister that they both have good taste of food as Beryl also liked the duck. By this compliment, he in fact sublimates himself, not Beryl. Later, he and Beryl play a card game and Beryl lets him win. Because he must always be the winner. His patriarchy is seen again. Mansfield displays Stanley Burnell as artificial, aggressive, inconsiderate, women-hater and overconfident man. He has grown up in a society of male power where women have no other role but as wife and mother whereas men are the leaders and owners of the women.

In conclusion, in "Prelude", Mansfield shapes her narration around the major theme of dream/fantasy, role playing and wearing mask in a most striking

⁸ See Ibid.23-25.

⁹ Cooper, Ibid. p.42.

modern depiction and style reflected from a psychological perspective and through the consciousness of female characters. Consequently, the title of the story is not because it is simply an introduction to Mansfield's other short stories, but because it is a general introduction to the lives of all women in the world. It is a prelude to all women's lives because they experience the same disappointments and psychological problems. It is also story of women's problems in a traditional family life giving a message that in a patriarchal life, women's freedom is taken away from their hands. She must only have a role of being a good mother, a good wife to her husband, and in a way a very good angel at the house. It is a perfect modern beginning both to Mansfield's stories and in a feminist reading, to women's hard situation in a patriarchal world.

Mansfield wrote "A Married Man's Story"¹⁰ in her final year of life. The story opens with "Supper is over...I'm sitting at my writing table...My wife with her little boy on her lap before the fire."¹¹ It portrays a happy family with a father, a mother and a son in a calm environment. But as the story continues the opposite side is revealed. The couple is nameless, with no clear identities; man is all the time at his writing table that is a symbol of his power and has a commanding tone. Whatever he imagines to write shapes their life, he is the one that commands. The woman is referred to as the wife and the baby is always "her baby" that shows how he treats his wife as a breeding machine. The only time his wife is appreciated is "But the warmth, the quiet, and the sleepy baby, have made her dreamy."¹² As his ancestors did, he belittles the role of women and wife; it is as if women were physically and psychologically considered as inferior. A woman must be loved by a man in order to have an identity so developing her other talents is futile. Although he is not working and says "She knows —how long has she known?— that I am not 'working.'" It is strange that with her full, open gaze, she should smile so timidly,¹³ a conventional wife's vision is limited to accepting her husband with a smile due to economic insecurity. The prevalent belief in the patriarchal culture confines women to domestic roles. In the story, the wife is a representative of stereotyped submissive women that is described

¹⁰ Katherine Mansfield, "A Married Man's Story", *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. Penguin Books, 1981, pp. 422-437.

¹¹Ibid.p.422.

¹² Ibid.422.

¹³ Ibid.425.

as “Her head is bent, with one finger she is tracing something —nothing—on the table. It is cold in the kitchen; the gas jumps; the tap drips; it’s a forlorn picture.”¹⁴ It signifies the loneliness of a married woman that hopelessly tries to find a way to survive her family.

For Mansfield, the cliché of romance is inseparable from patriarchal societies because these dreams fancy women to get married but in the actual life they encounter something totally different. The man goes on “And nobody is going to come behind her, to take her in his arms, to kiss her soft hair, to lead her to the fire and to rub her hands warm again. ... And she knows it. And yet, being a woman, deep down, deep down, she really does expect the miracle to happen; she really could embrace that dark, dark deceit, rather than live —like this.”¹⁵ A woman is a deep down one fooling herself and waiting for a miracle to happen. And what the miracle will be? A gentle caring husband is limited to dreams rather than actual life. The wife at bed time tries to attract him to go to bed with her, but he resists and ignores her since in patriarchal way. On his part, man is the one that forces the wife to bed whenever and wherever he prefers, not the woman. The word, ‘cold’ is repeated frequently that is a symbol of their aimless coldly bounded marriage. Even the bed is cold. The word, ‘fire’, is used when the son is in the lap of the woman; the fire is a symbol of mother-son affection, as she takes her son to bed, the coldness is felt between wife and her husband; child is their only shared point.

Like Mansfield’s love of rain and nature, the male narrator’s first long monologue deals with his looking out of the window seeing nature, rain, and the night. Rainy nature paves the way to his deep imagination sense. His monologues float in his mind and freely express his attitudes, dreams, wishes, and memories.

The story shows the passing of patriarchal values from generation to generation. The way his father treated his wife and him is actually the one the man is following. He says “it was to dream that we were living inside one of my father’s big colored bottles. For he was a chemist”¹⁶ or says after his mother gave

¹⁴ Ibid.425.

¹⁵ Ibid.425

¹⁶ Ibid.430.

birth to him “She never left her room again. Bed, sofa, window, she moved between the three.” and adds “I longed to be my father”¹⁷. He ignores his wife and has even no fatherly feeling to his own son. The male narrator recalls his personal history that explains his behavior. Repressing his wife is a metaphor of repressing the women his father used to have affair with. His damaging childhood experiences obsessed about his father’s cheatings, disloyalty and the probable killing of his mother reveal why he treats women this way. All his past experiences keep him away from moving forward. As a representative of the patriarchal society, he has inherited the role of his father and tries to suffocate his wife and their marriage through silence, ignorance, indifference within this sense. He, like his father who left his mother in a room after giving birth to his son to breed him, has killed his wife emotionally. It is as if he takes pleasure in irritating and ignoring her. He adds “After my mother’s death I hated to go to bed. I used to sit on the window-sill, folded up, and watch the sky”¹⁸. Death of his mother had such a big effect on him that he still follows the same habit of preferring not to go to bed at nights. Then he goes on to recall the many women who were in his father’s room at nights laughing all night. Next he goes on to refer to the wall between him and his father that he tried unsuccessfully to make a hole with a pin. The father-son love was not reachable for him because the fatherly pride and ignorance were the obstacles. He was unable to have a fruitful contact to his father that has led to being unable to understand this holy love toward his own son.

In the story the long confessional monologues offer his approach to the concept of family, and marriage. He is against the family as a unit. Not only he claims women must do the chores and every day home tasks, he is bored with his wife. For him, a woman is to be a mindless object, babysitting, cleaning the dishes, and above all a believer of her husband’s “every day little lies” with a nice smile. Mansfield successfully establishes a balance between psychological realism and socio-cultural satire in this story. The middle class women were merely treated as servants, sexual tools, and child breeding machines; the one that is very well signified in the wife character. The wife represents the women who accept their fate of being domestic slaves, the women in married life struc-

¹⁷ Ibid.430.

¹⁸ Ibid.435.

ture; she is doomed to bear the indignities of her husband, he does not even answer her questions and prefers to offer short lies instead of a reasonable reply. Instead of appreciating her patience, he criticizes her big eyes frequently; the only contact they have is eye contact that he believes hers are like a cow's eyes. He reduces her to a mindless being capable of milking and watching. He even says the child isn't his "H'm, someone has brought a baby! ... I feel inclined to blame my wife for having brought the baby in from outside.. ..my wife doesn't seem to me the type of woman who bears children in her own body. ... Where is that animal ease and playfulness, that quick kissing and cuddling one has been taught to expect of young mothers? Indecent or not, one has these feelings. And one other thing. How can I reasonably expect my wife, *a brokenhearted, woman*, to spend her time tossing the baby?"¹⁹ The wife is blamed for not being a good mother accompanied with confessing to her being a brokenhearted woman. The wife is the one that disturbs his long imaginative monologues. When she goes to bed he says " She is gone; she will not come back again to-night. It is not only I who recognize that; the room changes too. It relaxes."²⁰ He is in peace when all alone. He talks about her fault in the last autumn, but does not clearly define it.

The wife's traumatic repression is obvious in her behavior and the man knows that his past is a dominant force in her life too. The story ends by these words "But now I was taken, I was accepted, claimed. I did not consciously turn away from the world of human beings; I had never known it; but I from that night did beyond words consciously turn towards my silent brothers..."²¹ He lives in his imagination and past memories. He turns to his never possessed brothers that may represent his male ancestors not even his devoted mother.

Conclusion

Both these stories propose male views on women to become domestic and slaves. Women may question and challenge the system, but they do not change it or imagine a better life. They just settle for the real benefits of security and status men provide them. Whether women follow the ideological conven-

¹⁹ Ibid.425.

²⁰ Ibid.428.

²¹ Ibid.429.

tions or not the men are free to choose them. The main shared point in both stories is that women must be taught to be docile and submissive. The obvious fact of Mansfield's stories is that whether women are married or spinsters, whether they are submissive housewives or try to liberate themselves, nevertheless, they are the victims and the men around them play the main roles for them.

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