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**The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing  
Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's  
"An Adventure in Paris"**

**Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.**

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**Probing the Hidden Recesses of the Human Mind**

This essay probes into the hidden recesses of the human psyche where primordial urges and emotions operating at a subterranean level manifest themselves in capricious behavioural changes. The stories examined for the purpose, Mansfield's "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris" reveal the characters' reflexes to adultery in which, as in Mansfield's, a wife's increasing possessiveness toward her husband is contrasted with another wife's studied entry into vice, in "An Adventure in Paris".

**Displaying Two Different Traits – Influence of Baser Passions**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

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Katherine Mansfield 1888 – 1923

Whereas jealousy remains the linchpin in Mansfield's, in the latter, the intractable 'curiosity' of the provincial lawyer's wife leads to a perfidy in trust. Rosemary Fell, the chief character in the Mansfield story and the lawyer's wife in Maupassant's display two traits, possessiveness and faithlessness respectively, two apparently antithetical things in matters of love. The stories highlight how baser passions could obfuscate human dignity and noble intent.

For example, in Rosemary, compassion or magnanimity is compromised for concerns of personal security whereas in the lawyer's wife, the ennui at home propels in her a desire for deviance. The similarities in the stories relate to the presence of two female protagonists, their joy in 'adventure,' which, in particular, turns to be an escapade in Maupassant's, Paris as a significant setting, and a realistic portrayal of female psychology. This essay attempts to penetrate into the mystery of aberration occasioned by causes that apparently seem to be normal and definable, but point at the characters' deliberate yet pathetic surrender to such impulses.

### **What is Aberration?**

Aberration connotes a lapse in or a deviation from the acceptable behavioural or societal norms. From a psychological or sexual perspective it might relate to deviant behaviours prompted by psychical responses to a variety of stimuli, both pleasant and obnoxious. At most, such behaviours may be beyond explanations; hence mysterious or indecipherable.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

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The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"

## **Rosemary in Mansfield's Story**

As for the stories in question, the behaviours of Rosemary or the lawyer's wife typify general failings, but the recondite psychological factors that warrant such actions cannot be overlooked. Rosemary's not so egregious a flaw compared to that of the lawyer's wife, insofar as the sanctity of matrimony is concerned, is nevertheless a pointer to the fact that jealousy is qualified by possessiveness. However, the venial aberration of Rosemary in terms of a volte-face as for a descent from magnanimity to meanness can be contrasted with her counterpart's deliberate initiation into adultery in "An Adventure in Paris".

Mansfield, at the outset, portrays Rosemary with a disqualification, in that she is 'not exactly beautiful,' thus foreclosing any further positive assessment. Again, 'pretty' could be applied to her if she is taken 'to pieces.' However, Mansfield has not divested her of other coruscating qualifications:

She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dressed, amazingly well read in the newest of the new books, and her parties were the most delicious mixture of the really important people and...artists—quaint creatures, discoveries of hers, some of them too terrifying for words, but others quite presentable and amusing (10).

Rosemary's resume misses one important, though dangerous qualification, 'curiosity,' which the provincial lawyer's wife in Maupassant's story possesses enormously; however, only to the detriment of a sacramental fidelity. Moreover, the 'curiosity' which is stated to have driven her to acts of faithlessness is portrayed by Maupassant—a *male* writer—as a result of which this ascription might be looked askance upon with a feministic reaction to a supposedly covert patriarchal bias.

### **Innate Propensity to be Faithless!**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"



Guy de Maupassant, 1850-1893

What both the writers hint at is an innate propensity to be faithless, whether it is casual, desultory, instantaneous or studied. If at all there is an adumbration of faithlessness in “A Cup of Tea,” it is rather with Philip, Rosemary’s husband who simply sings of the beauty of the girl whom Rosemary has taken to her house. However, Rosemary cannot stand Philip’s unstinting adulation of the girl since it could potentially jeopardize her own security and her husband’s affections.

Contrary to the domestic boredom of the lawyer’s wife, the opulent life style of Rosemary who had her husband’s absolute adoration, does not give any rationale for Rosemary’s unhappiness. Her contented life marked by satiety, which does not excite her to be curious, is obverse to the banal, humdrum life of the lawyer’s wife consumed by a dangerous desire to transgress the bounds of propriety. In any case, however, either opulence or indigence cannot be the *raison d’etre* of aberration. Maupassant examines the nature of curiosity in a woman, and comments:

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield’s Story “A Cup of Tea” and Maupassant’s “An Adventure in Paris”

Is there any stronger feeling than curiosity in a woman?...What would a woman not do for that? When once a woman's eager curiosity is aroused, she will be guilty of any folly, commit any imprudence, venture upon anything, and recoil from nothing ("An Adventure in Paris").

And further, he writes, she will take recourse to 'sly tricks' to do 'all those charming improper acts.' This paper does not try to ballast or examine the veracity of Maupassant's assessment, which could otherwise be a generalized one. It aims at, instead, highlighting two married women's approaches to conjugal propriety in the schema of psychoanalysis in order to study this riddle of deviance in the right perspective.

### **Insipidly Chaste!**

Maupassant's introduction of the lawyer's wife as 'insipidly chaste' is further qualified by such phrases as 'unsatisfied curiosity,' 'some unknown longing,' and 'continually thinking of Paris.' In both the stories, Paris happens to be a common setting. It is coincidental that 'if Rosemary wanted to shop she would go to Paris.' However, the lure of a city is inconsequential vis-à-vis one's incapacity for restraint. Rosemary being 'amazingly well read in the newest of the new books,' and the vicarious fantasies of sensation in the lawyer's wife, fuelled by her reading the fashionable papers can be contrasted in the sense that in the latter, the act of reading is fraught with the ulterior intent of deviance. Maupassant gauges the psyche of this character in whom the rabid haste to experience the difference hints at a foregone violation of order. The writer throws light on the interior of the character's mind:

She was continually thinking of Paris, and read the fashionable papers eagerly. The accounts of parties, of the dresses and various entertainments, excited her longing; but, above all, she was strangely agitated by those paragraphs which were full of double meaning, by those veils which were half raised by clever phrases, and which gave her a

glimpse of culpable and ravishing delights, and from her country home, she saw Paris in an apotheosis of magnificent and corrupt luxury (“An Adventure in Paris”).

### **Disdain for Her Husband and a Passion for Extramarital Sexual Pleasures**

The lawyer’s wife’s apparent disdain of ‘the regular snores of her husband,’ and of ‘those regular monotonous everyday occupation’ is but plausible yet potent a reason to drive her to dissipate fantasies; rather what Maupassant points at is the woman’s pathological obsession for transgression since she was pleasantly bedeviled by the pictures of ‘those well known men,’ and ‘she pictured to herself their life of continual excitement, of constant debauches, of orgies such as they indulged in...’

On that score, Rosemary stands a contrast to her as she never displays a passion for sexual deviance. The momentous meeting of Rosemary and the poor girl, Miss Smith, generating in Rosemary a feeling of sympathy is the first instance of compatibility of opulence and compassion in a woman of wealth. Again, the girl’s entreaties to Rosemary, ‘Madam, may I speak to you for a moment?’, and ‘Would you let me have the price of a cup of tea?’ are impassioned requests in deed, but they generate in Rosemary an opportune moment of ‘adventure’:

It was like something out of a novel by Dostoevsky, this meeting in the dark. Supposing she took the girl home? Supposing she did one of those things she was always reading about or seeing on the stage, what would happen? It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying afterwards to the amazement of her friends: ‘I simply took her home with me,’ as she stepped forward and said to that dim person beside her: ‘Come home to tea with me (13)

### **A Thought of “Adventure”**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield’s Story “A Cup of Tea” and Maupassant’s “An Adventure in Paris”

The story writer looks askew upon Rosemary's thought of 'adventure' coupled with her newfound feeling of 'triumph' after an act of generosity. Rosemary's covert wish to bask in the glory of her magnanimity surfaces in no time since she bloats to herself on doing a humane act, and further, she intends to prove to the girl that 'wonderful things did happen in life, that—fairy godmothers were real, that—rich people had hearts, and that women were sisters.' Rosemary's sororal assurance to the girl, 'Don't be frightened. After all, why shouldn't you come back with me? *We're both women*' (italics mine) underscores in Rosemary a studied dismissal of possible threats to her own security which the girl's arrival might bring. Since they are both 'women,' a compatible existence in sisterly terms is what seems possible to Rosemary.

Yet the critically important word in the story, 'pretty,' which punctuates the rhythm of the narrative as well as effects Rosemary's behavioural about-turn is also significantly yet innocuously uttered by Rosemary, 'Won't you take off your hat? Your pretty hair is all wet,' without perhaps being aware of the gravity the word could carry for her.

### **Pretty**

'Pretty' is a common but important word in both the stories. Whereas Mansfield reservedly uses the word for Rosemary, Maupassant avowedly uses it for the lawyer's wife, but with a pun, 'She was still pretty,' and further, 'she was agitated and devoured by her secret ardour.' What is debasing about the lawyer's wife is a consuming apprehension of losing 'those damning, intoxicating joys,' which could be experienced even for once. Thus her journey to Paris that culminates in her chance meeting with the celebrated writer Monsieur Varin keeps the story apace with a foreseeable cataclysm of changes, but the manifest intent of visiting Paris provides her no saving grace to exculpate herself from the ascription of profanity.

At least, Rosemary does not stoop to such baser machinations toward matrimonial infidelity. The overriding concupiscence of the lawyer's wife to deviate from the ennui of the household may not be exonerated, at least, on ethical grounds, but this all the more suggests, as it

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"

were, a revolt within to break free from the quotidian routine. This predilection for violation resonates the similar deviance of Madame Bovary, the eponymous character in Flaubert's novel, who transgresses the fusty bounds of sanctimony and moral propriety.

### **Crafty Steps**

The crafty, presumptuous step of the lawyer's wife to buy the figure in the shop with the intent of presenting this to Varin to win his affections is a well thought-out chicanery to beguile the writer. Her avidity for sexual interaction with Varin smacks of her bold yet perverse desire to aberrate. The gradual intimacy with Varin which would culminate in seduction passes through phases of condescension by the woman to his varied wishes.

### **Debunking of the Façade**

The writer's acquiescence to the will of the lawyer's wife is construed by her as a success in her 'adventure,' expressed through such utterances, "At last! At last!", and the most unabashed one asked to him, "What do you do at this time, every night?" This is overtly puerile, prurient and seductive an interrogation followed by intimate moments between the woman and the writer. However, Maupassant describes the woman chagrined by consummation, far from being elated by the bliss of aberration.

Much to the debunking of the façade, she finds this man essentially not so different from her husband. Maupassant gives a funny picture of this: "...and by the light of the Chinese lantern, she looked, nearly heart-broken, at the little fat man lying on his back, whose round stomach raised up the bed-clothes like a balloon filled with gas. He snored with the noise of a wheezy organ pipe, with prolonged snorts and comic chokings. His few hairs profited by his sleep, to stand up in a very strange way, as if they were tired of having been fastened for so long to that pate, whose bareness they were trying to cover, and a small stream of saliva was running out of one corner of his half-open mouth."

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"



When Varin bemusedly asks the woman in the morning, “You have surprised me most confoundedly since yesterday. Be open, and tell me why you did it all, for upon my word I cannot understand it in the least,” she replies with a note of compunction. As Maupassant writes, “She went close up to him, blushing like as if she had been a virgin, and said: “I wanted to know ... what ... what vice ... really was, ... and ... well ... well, it is not at all funny.”” The lawyer’s wife, repentant, returns to her home with a feeling of disenchantment and remorse: ‘As soon as she got into her room, she threw herself onto her bed and cried.’

Rosemary’s innocent but potentially sinister delight in getting a butt of sympathy dilutes her degree of altruism. Again, Philip’s disapproval of his wife’s decision to keep Miss Smith in their house is germane to the study of their psychological processes. Mansfield probes into this in the following dialogue:

‘But what on earth are you going to do with her?’

‘Be nice to her,’ said Rosemary quickly. ‘Be frightfully nice to her. Look after her. I don’t know how. We haven’t talked yet. But show her—treat her—make her feel—’

‘My darling girl,’ said Philip, ‘you’re quite mad, you know. It simply can’t be done’ (17).

It is only when Philip finds Rosemary hell-bent on keeping the girl in their house that he starts glorifying the beauty of the girl, ‘she’s so astonishingly pretty.’ Coming back to the word ‘pretty,’ which is significant in the story insofar as it greatly upsets Rosemary and functions as a weapon for Philip to singularize his love for his wife, seems to suggest an apparent aberration in Philip. Had he been actually enamoured of the girl, or entertained any lustful intent, he would have thought of ensuring the girl’s stay in their house. But far from it, he dismisses his wife’s request to keep her. Philip’s love for his wife is marked in his endearing expressions: ‘My darling girl’, ‘I like you awfully’, and ‘little wasteful one.’

## **The Bathos**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Bibhudutt Dash, Ph.D.

The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield’s Story “A Cup of Tea” and Maupassant’s “An Adventure in Paris”

Rosemary is startled to realize the shocking difference of connotation of the word 'pretty' between her comment on the hair of the girl and her husband's comment as to the beauty of the girl. It is further compounded when Philip adds, 'She's absolutely lovely....I was bowled over when I came into your room just now....But let me know if Miss Smith is going to dine with us...'

At the height of exasperation, which is expressly caused by her husband's apparent weakness toward the girl, Rosemary behaves in a way that typifies bathos of grandeur. Plagued by jealousy, with a studied effort to ensure her security, Rosemary thinks of getting rid of this 'pick up.' The sinister alacrity in which she packs off the girl from her house confounds Philip though in no time it is understood as an act of jealousy which makes an act of nobility subservient to baser passions. Rosemary's extraordinary act of kindness is frustrated by relapsing into an ordinary act of mistrust.

### **Jealousy and Love**

As a matter of fact, no woman would perhaps like to jeopardize her own conjugal bliss by a willful entertainment of potential threat. Jealousy, thus, would be natural to persons who have mutual affections. In the case of Rosemary, it is romantic jealousy, which is, as G.L. White writes, "a complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions which follow threats to self-esteem and/or threats to the existence or quality of the relationship, when those threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential attraction between one's partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival" (24). Rosemary's sense of insecurity prefiguring an urgency of attention from her husband is perceivable in the following description where Rosemary exacts from Philip a manifest gesture of love:

Rosemary had just done her hair, darkened her eyes a little, and put on her pearls. She put up her hands and touched Philip's cheeks.

'Do you like me?' said she, and her tone, sweet, husky, troubled him.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

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The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"

‘I like you awfully,’ he said, and he held her tighter.

‘Kiss me.’

There was a pause (18-19)

### **Focus on the Inner Life of the Persona**

Mansfield ends the story with Rosemary coyly asking Philip for ‘a fascinating little box’ she wanted to buy that veritably camouflages a tacit expectation of appreciation, ‘am I pretty?’ The fascinating little box is, however, a cathexis that merely mirrors the psyche of the character. Katherine Murphy Dickinson writes, “the potentiality for arousing emotion possessed by an object depends entirely on the mind of the observer of the object, not at all on inherent qualities in the object” (35). The underlying focus is more on the inner life of the persona rather than on external reality, or as Kimber and Wilson view, Mansfield “worked almost exclusively in a mode of fragmented impressionism” (2).

### **Two Different Facets of the Feminine Psyche**

Juxtaposing Rosemary and the lawyer’s wife reveals two different facets of the feminine psyche. Rosemary’s possessiveness is contrasted with the latter’s illicit ‘adventure’ leading to the cuckolding of her husband, thus pointing at the potential danger to social order which such actions are likely to cause. However, her redeeming feature lies in her capacity for compunction that underscores a healthy balance of deviance and remorse. On the other hand, Mansfield’s assessment of Rosemary as ‘not exactly beautiful’ but ‘pretty’ is buttressed by the character’s capricious behaviour, which while testifies to the rigour of chastity, unlike that of the lawyer’s wife’s, does also highlight a dramatic downfall from the heights of benevolence to the depths of meanness.

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

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The Enigma of Aberration: Critiquing Katherine Mansfield's Story "A Cup of Tea" and Maupassant's "An Adventure in Paris"