

Katherine Mansfield and Rajam Krishnan: Womanhood from a Conventional Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to lay focus on Katherine Mansfield and Rajam Krishnan's comparative perspective of their writings in terms of treatment of themes and narrative style. Both the writers believed that true literature is a product of inspiration and uses convention with individuality and imagination. Both the writers project the suppression and oppression of womanhood; through their writing, they intend to provoke awareness to them.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield and Rajam Krishnan, Womanhood, Loneliness, conventional domestic life, Freedom and rights, Indian culture.

Comparative Literature, according to Rene Wellek, is "a study of all literatures from an international perspective with a consciousness of unity of all literary creations and experience-independent of ethnic and political boundaries." One obvious objective of Comparative Literature is to arrive at a universal view of literature independent of linguistic, national or racial demarcations. A comparative analysis does not just add to our knowledge but leads to a fuller understanding of the works of art, thereby cultivating in us superior standards of literary judgement. Comparative literature has been made odious by mechanical analogies and forced parallelisms. Influence – hunting is an intellectual game that has caught the attention of many a comparatist. Under such circumstances, a comparative study of Katherine Mansfield and Rajam Krishnan seems to be a novel venture. Though separated by two generations, by race and by nationality, one can find obvious similarities in the writings of both in terms of treatment of themes and narrative style.

A genuine similarity between writers suggests itself to the discerning reader's mind. One's appreciation and classification of a writer is basically an unconscious process and sometimes comparisons strike one with the force of lightning. To use a convention with individuality requires genius and imagination. Of course, ideas and concepts can be the unique contributions of an author following an age-old technique. But in modern literature, there is not much of sympathy for writers who are mere instinctivists or thinkers. Modern literature of the West, certainly – is marked by its

self-consciousness. Consequently modern criticism is also very much technique-oriented. But in Tamil, technique was not yet of this great importance. There were indeed a few writers like La. Sa. Ramamirtam, Mouni, and Ti. Janakiraman, following on the footsteps of Ku. Pa. Ra., who thought much about technique and evolved their own techniques. Many, however, just followed the formula.

Rajam Krishnan was interested in technique more than the common run of Tamil writers, but she was not so deep in the mystery as the other great writers mentioned above. She always strove to make her story clear and expressive and for this, she took the best course available. But Katherine Mansfield, on the other hand, made her conscious choices and learnt her art from masters with care. Her journals show that she was her own severest critic. In the Tamil world, this self-awareness as an artist was growing rapidly.

Katherine Mansfield believed that true literature is a product of inspiration. Its aim is to reveal a little mystery of life. But to reveal the mystery of life, a writer has to be the master of the situation he seeks to depict. A true work of art quickens the perception of the reader, enlarges the bounds of his experience and increases his multifarious response to life; it makes him feel enriched and refreshed. It is common knowledge that any piece of writing is bound to be dull and lifeless if it is completely devoid of emotion. Katherine Mansfield was of the view that:

“emotion is essential to a work of art; it is that which makes a work of art a unity. Without emotion, writing is dead; it becomes A record instead of a revelation, for the sense Of revelation comes from that emotional reaction which the artist felt and was impelled to communicate...” (Chatterjee 104).

The expression of subtle emotion is one of the most difficult problems in creative writing. The voice should not be too loud nor the gesture too crude. Katherine Mansfield herself said thus:

“... better a half truth, beautifully whispered, than a whole Solemnly shouted”

Katherine Mansfield has firm views on the roles of thought and feeling in a work of art:

“you must feel before you can think; you must think before you can express yourself. It is not enough to feel and write; or to think or write. True expression of them both, yet a third thing, and separate” (P 108).

In an artifact, there should be a fine blending of the heart and head. Anything in excess disturbs the delicate balance. Katherine Mansfield felt that an overuse of the intellectuality is a curse

on English writers. According to her, an ideal author is a man who makes a judicious mixture of the two elements. As an artist is concerned only with truth and nothing but the truth, Katherine Mansfield was happily contented with dishing out truth – truth of art, truth of real life and truth of poetic life. The acid test of lasting quality of literature is not modernity or technique; it is the simple presentation of truth which never becomes untruth in the course of time. Monsieur Maurois observes:

“She is right in believing that her very brevity helps her. A story of hers will often remind one of those mutilated sculptures which become all the more beautiful in our eyes as it is our own genius which, roused, and quickened by that of the artist, reconstructs its missing head or limbs” (P 96).

Rajam Krishnan has not spoken of herself or her art so expensively and precisely. Yet the truth is that she seemed to understand instinctively. Her short stories have the power to convince the reader of the emotions, drives and conscious motives behind deeds. Though her style does not accommodate much of irony, there is the awareness that should not overdo emotions and motives.

In terms of generic features, it is worth looking at the structure of a typical Mansfield short story. Katherine was a conscious practitioner of her art. She was admittedly under the influence of the great Russian writer Anton Chekhov. In fact, it is easily discernible that she has modelled her stories on those of her Russian master. In her attitude to the conventional plot and in her attention to the technique of atmosphere building, she is so very much like Chekhov. Her stories are often not stories in the conventional manner of a beginning, a middle and an end. But there is a distinct flavor about her stories. It is this quality that easily distinguishes her from the other short story writers. It is almost inimitable and something that is unquestionably spontaneous.

Rajam Krishnan is a more conventional story-teller. Her stories are more event-oriented. She is able to present the atmosphere powerfully indeed, but the emphasis is on the events and characters. There is a definite beginning, a definite middle and end also.

The portrayal of woman by both sounds really good and subtle. Christian myth talks of woman as the limb of man. God, seeing that man needed a helpmate, shaped woman out of his rib. And the New Testament also holds that it is for man to rule and woman to obey. But in the West, the idea has long been under fire. Probably Mary Woolstencraft was the first articulate woman to speak of woman's liberation. The nineteenth century saw an increasing number of women asking for their rights in society no less than in family. In the twentieth century, women are indebted to the two world wars for putting them into many desks hitherto occupied by men alone. Socially and politically they gained power and the economic independence they won gave them great powers of resistance. In Ibsen's drama, one can find women of two generations: Mrs. Alving of *Ghosts* who could wield her enormous, stifling power over the family, but only behind the thick, worse-than-iron curtain of

absolute obedience to her beloved husband, and Nora of *The Doll's House* who discovers that she has lived for years with a man who was a complete stranger to her still and so quits the family and the comforting masks and curtains. They are two stages in the consciousness of women in the modern world.

Katherine Mansfield was born in 1888 and grew up during the period when woman was claiming more and rights for herself. As a matter of fact, the New woman was creating quite a sensation in the early part of the twentieth century and even in the last few years of the Nineteenth century. Katherine Mansfield lived a life that suited her temperament, falling in and out of love with great facility. She divorced her first husband after living with him for a single night and lived with Murry even before she could obtain the divorce and marry him legally, and during this period of unofficial cohabitation, she went away with a Frenchman for a few days. Hers was a more tempestuous and Bohemian life than possibly of many of the average educated New women. But in her heart, she yearned for love and security. So many of her women in the stories are those who crave security and affection and there is an idyllic quality, an undertone of longing and yearning, a wishful dream, in those stories in which women have their security. Again, perhaps, as a matter of reflection of her own life of vacillating emotions, she portrays women who fully feel the generosity of their men and feel remorseful for their own lightness. Katherine wanted the traditional fulfillment of women – children, but, unfortunately, she was denied that.

In Victorian tradition, woman was given two roles; one that of a self-denying saint, the angel-mother and the other the social-climber, the ogre. The average woman obviously must have been between the two. Much of later literature about woman was an angry, exasperated reaction to this unreal, unfair characterization of woman. Unconsciously, Katherine seems to be part of this movement, too. Her women, those who are conscious are far freer. But how far they are right, even by the implications of the world of the stories, is another question. For, Katherine seems to see such women as making a mistake and seems to wish that woman to stick to her age old ethos. How else do we read a story like “Marriage a la mode?”.

This is an interesting parallel to Rajam Krishnan’s attitude who belongs to a culture that is very different. The Indian attitude to woman has, at least in recent times, earned worldwide notoriety, thanks in no small measure to the vociferations of the articulate part of India’s modern womanhood, and their devoted allies (in public, at any rate!) the modern manhood of India. In the very early days, woman held her own in society, and enjoyed her equal rights with man. Later on came the strictures on her. There is the well-known adage that woman is always dependent on man: as child, on her father; as woman, on husband, and later, as mother on her son. The dual and contradictory manifestation of woman became common to India’s culture also.

Modern India has taken a different stand for women’s freedom and rights. Woman has been asking for her own rights and recognition of her own individuality. Her aspirations have been powerfully expressed by many writers of both the sexes. Her aspirations have been embarrassingly vocal for women themselves, as the irrepressible Kamala Das. Women’s organizations repeatedly

protest now against the vulgar exploitation of woman's biological properties. Rajam Krishnan is one of those who are very much against this kind of use of the image of woman in all art.

Mansfield's *Psychology* portrays a man and a woman – both of them artists. There is a sympathy of spirits one day he calls on her in her rooms. The meeting is marked by a spiritual communion for both of them. He comes in, stands by her by the fireside:

“Just for a moment both of them stood silent

in that leaping light. Still, as it were, they tested on their smiling lips the sweet shock of their greeting. Their secret selves whispered: “Why should we speak? Isn't this enough?” “more than enough. I never realised until this moment ...”

.....
It is not passion that ties them together, both know ...” (Collected short stories 113)

Their first few minutes make them happy but then something seems to go wrong. They feel artificial, and then their conversation, about the future of the novel and such things appear to be mere formality and rather tiresome. They both feel it very intensely and feel that they have betrayed themselves. It is all an inexplicable feeling and they both wish to escape. He bolts out on the pretext that he has got an engagement very soon. When he has left, she gets back into her room and is unable to explain to herself how this debacle has taken place. Just then, an old admiring friend comes to see her. The old lady is so full of admiration for her young friend that every day she brings her some flowers. It is the same mission now. The artist, in her disappointment, tells the old lady that she is to have some guests. The old lady is about to go away with the thought of a murmur when suddenly she feels very much moved. She warmly embraces the old lady, who in turn is overwhelmed. She goes away very happily. Her happiness somehow thaws the constructed feelings of her heart and suddenly she feels once again happy and free. She sits down to write him a note saying that she wants to continue their discussion from where they left off. She feels sure now that their friendship, which felt dead just a few minutes before will survive and thrive now.

The story is an exceptionally brilliant example of Katherine's powers of atmosphere building and mood of delineation. The mood of expectation, the mood of mystic oneness of feeling, then the rapid moods of disappointment and frustration, and then the sudden revival of feeling, are all swift and graphically captured.

Rajam Krishnan has no exact parallel to this, but there are two stories in which a comparable feeling develops. One is the story “Satyam”. In this story, Nila the girl feels instinctive sympathy for the motherless boy who comes to live next door. His father, a busy doctor, does not know what to do

because the boy cries for his mother all the time. The old lady appointed to look after him is not able to do anything with him. The boy, however, takes readily to Neela. He calls her “Ammi”. He is unable to get away from her. Her father begins to feel somewhat troubled about the growing attachment of the child. He feels that this might develop into some sort of an entanglement. He is himself a widower, and he knows what it is to bring up a motherless child. He has thus all sympathies for the young father next door. But he is aghast to see the relationship developing so far. But his daughter is not worried because she feels that when the boy begins to go to school, he would get over this attachment because there would be many more friends to occupy his time.

The father’s fears come true. Nila’s long-time fiancé Sundar returns from abroad. Theirs is a true sympathy of spirits. Through his foreign jaunt, he has been loyal to their relationship. He comes eagerly to see her and her father is overjoyed. But whenever they plan to go out or to have a talk, the little boy intrudes. It is a mutual resentment. She explains the situation to the young man, but he is unable to adjust his disappointment. The last straw is when Nila decides on taking the child with them when they go to the park. He is so furious that he leaves in a huff. Nila is disappointed. But her disappointment is with Sundar’s mind. Why couldn’t he understand this? Her father is shocked, and she tells him that she would telephone to him and explain everything to him. But then she feels that she has not done anything wrong to beg his forgiveness. Her father gets more and more worried. It was he, in days past, who did not mind this relationship between Nila and the child. One night, when the boy cries in his own house, refusing to sleep in his own house, he has gone to the doctor and has taken the child from him to his own house to Nila. He has told the father about his own difficulties as a widower with a little child:

“This is no trouble. It’ll soon be all right.
I have suffered the same difficulty.
When this girl’s mother died, she was of
the same age. If the child were much
younger, he wouldn’t remember but this
is the age, when they do. Don’t worry,
Doctor. He’s a good pastime for my
Daughter” (“Satyam” in Vadikaal 50).

But now he is worried. The doctor also is worried now. He feels that his son is growing too attached to the girl and that it might cause problems. When Sundar walks off in a huff, the doctor feels very unhappy. But Neela refuses to give in. She takes the boy to the Park. Her own feelings become stronger and she takes the child out the next day also. But her father is shocked that she has not made her peace with Sundar and he dies of the shock. And all the help that the doctor is able to render is to pass the message to Sundar and to her brother who lives far away, in some foreign country.

The story is based so much on Indian social realities. For one thing, the father is afraid that Sundar might misunderstand the relationship between her and the child. And when he hears of

Sundar's resentment, he is even more worried. Whether he considers the child an intrusion or misunderstands the relationship between them and the doctor, it is Nila who is going to reap the consequences. And later when he hears her complaining of Sundar's attitude on the previous occasion, he feels utterly choked. He has a severe heart attack and despite the doctor's effort to dies. The father's anxiety, his fears of society – the fear of both the fathers about the consequences of the relationship between the boy and Nila – are all parts of a clear social picture.

The other story is "Ninaivupuyal" where we find a young man and a young man who have emotional sympathy with each other, and as a result, she seeks his help to correct her errand husband. At last the two succeed in their efforts. In both these stories, the man lacks the ultimate refinement to understand the other party.

In the case of Sundar of "Satyam", it is his inability to appreciate the girl's responsive heart, full of the milk of human kindness. It is sheer falsity of feeling on the part of Ravi of the other party.

The women in all these stories are women with outgoing minds and their men are not capable of an equal intensity of this sympathy. Rajam Krishnan's special interest falls on mothers. Katherine Mansfield has priority for grandmothers. The emphasis on motherhood is something characteristic of Indian literature. Rajam Krishnan has dealt with it in a variety of ways. Katherine Mansfield's most remarkable story on the mother-instinct is "The Life of Ma Parker". But it is a story that surveys the whole of her life. It is incidentally the story that comes nearest to Indian ethos, where self-effacing mothers are the rule. The feeling of motherhood comes out most forcefully in grandmothers in the stories of Katherine Mansfield. This is probably an echo of her own experience. It was her grandmother who brought her up because her mother happened to be sickly. In story after story, one can see the grandmother taking over. She matters to the children more than what the mother does. In "Prelude" and its companion pieces, it is the grandmother who comforts the children when they are frightened; it is she who comforts the mother also. In the story "The Little Girl", Kezia finds her refuge in her grandmother when she has her nightmares.

In Rajam Krishnan, the mother and her love for her children find ample expression. Not only that, to her, the motherly feeling in woman is also of great significance. In "Oru Devataik Katai", Rajam Krishnan portrays a mother who is overwhelmed by her concern with quotidian existence. But still, her concern for the daughter Kanaku lives. When the child catches fever after a severe drubbing at her brother's hand, she regrets her own part in it. Repeatedly it is her unhappiness over what she thinks is her daughter's waywardness that resurrects her in our minds. In a much later story, "Aaya", she describes a poor woman. Ranjitham is the mother of many children and her husband is not a good sort at all. He is an endless wife beater, but she sticks to him because socially he is a protection to her. Another story portraying motherly affection is "Engirundu Varukuvato!". In all these stories, one finds the domestic bias of Rajam Krishnan. It is the way in which a woman faces up to her responsibility that always impresses Rajam Krishnan.

Rajam Krishnan does not believe that woman has really gained a truly honoured position in society. To gain her legitimate position in society, says Rajam Krishnan, woman must realise that

“her liberation and greatness lie beyond physical appeal. Rajam Krishnan is convinced that woman should find this greatness and liberation within the framework of conventional domestic life. There is but one woman she represents in this ideal – but that woman does not get into the entanglement of conventional family life.

The utter loneliness of woman is also a theme that impresses both the writers. “Pictures” and “Miss Brill” and “Engirundu varukuvato!” may be cited as the fitting examples for this theme.

Thus, these authors have dealt with many facets of women’s life. Woman is so often thought of as a mother, wife or in some way as an individual responsible for the welfare of the unit. Sometimes, of course, she can fall because she does not understand her destinies. That is the only way the two writers look at womanhood.

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