BECOMING A WOMAN IN A SEXIST SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER MRS. KEMBER IN THE FICTION “AT THE BAY”

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Abstract: In the beginning of the twentieth century the differences between men and women were not just about biology, but it referred to which kind of behavior the individual is going to develop. Women usually were meant to have kids, take care of the house, and be nice to their husband. In this way, being a woman was restricted to the domestic sphere and freedom was not a common word in their lives. Writers, as the New Zealander Katherine Mansfield (or K.M.), present us, in a very intriguing way, female characters that lead us to think and ponder about those gender based stereotypes imposed on women. Considering that, we analyze the character Mrs. Kember from the short story “At the Bay”, by K.M. (originally published in 1922), focusing on the character’s gender identity when confronted with the society ideal female act. Through it, the author reveal us an attempt of breaking the sexist behavior patterns by letting Mrs. Kember question them - she does not have children nor is the caring wife, besides she has no vanity or polite language - and, for that, the character carried the consequence of being judged and despised by others. Thus, to support our analysis, we base our research on theories by authors as: Butler (2010); Reuter (2002); Zinani (2006); and Woodward (2004). We believe that despite of not being as strictly enforced as it was in the twentieth century, sexism still exists and, generally, in a masked form, promoting a delusion that it is not necessary to fight for gender equality anymore. Our work certifies that through Literature many social issues can be rethought and analyzed carefully, apart from the period that narrative was produced.

Keywords: Ideology. Gender identity. Short story.

1. Introduction

Kathleen Beauchamp Mansfield, as known as Katherine Mansfield (K.M.), was born in New Zealand (1888-1973) but lived in England for a long part of her life. When she was still a school student it was already clear her talent to write stories. Until the present day, it is counted eighty-eight short stories, besides of some poems, articles about

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literary criticism printed on newspapers and magazines, and the notes on her notebooks and letters written during her life of thirty-four years.

One of K.M. works is called “At the Bay”, a short story originally published in 1922, that provides us insights into the worlds the characters inhabit. These insights are presented to the reader through the experiences and reactions of the characters. Those same insights are many and varied although in most cases they deal with the social expectations at the time that the story is settled.

In this way, the New Zealander's fiction appear to be trivial on the surface, presenting us a typical routine of the early twentieth century middle class people, a domestic sphere, and a plot that seems to have no climax, dealing with familiar experiences of daily life. However, K.M.’s works bring valuable views into human conditions. Thus, when she seems at first glance very simple, she is being mostly profound.

In the short story “At the Bay” her writing style was no different. In a supposedly simple way, she produces a fiction that deals with death, disillusionment, and gender roles through small details, lines, and thoughts that the characters report. By that, it is possible to capture the individuals’ plight and pain, as well as, the author's concerns with women’s position in the society.

Over this perspective, it is proposed to analyze the character Mrs. Kember, in the already referred narrative, which is described with an unusual woman behavior for her time. Kember is a contrast when put aside of other female characters. She is notorious, indeed, because she refuses to conform to societal conventions in what it means to be a woman in a strict sexist time.

In order to discuss about that matter, we made a bibliographical research related to gender and identity theories. In this way, it is plausible to ponder by our study how that character performs, considering the historical context, and how K.M. stories can enrich understanding not only of the subversive conditions of women in western society at her time, but also of her contributions to modern Literature.

2. The Author’s Dissonant Writing and an Unruly Character

"At the Bay" is the story of an upper-middle-class household that lives near Wellington, colonial New Zealand. It is divided into twelve sections, starting when the sun rises over the Crescent Bay and each character goes live and spend the day. The meticulous
record of that day gives to the reader a summary of the story's action built in a constricted social environment where gossip can run rife.

The careful delineation of sequential time, ending the whole action by the end of the same day, attracts the reader into this structure that forms a unity constituted by its heterogeneous parts, enclosing us in the intriguing thought about the philosophical notion of what is old and contemporary, after all.

Knowing that the mentioned short story has eight main characters, "At the Bay" is not told by one particular individual but an omniscient narrator. This type of narrator has access to multiple characters’ thoughts, feelings, events, and dialogues occurring in the fiction. This way, the narrator has an accurate view of characters throughout the story, progressing from part to part. Thereby, the reader is able to have a more objective interpretation of the actions, since she/he is not influenced by personal impressions.

First published in the monthly literary journal "London Mercury" in January of 1922, and later in her last collection "The Garden Party", the fiction follows that epoch revealing the usual habits and conventionalities that constituted that specific period. It was around the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that a patriarchal male society and female dependence, and her struggles to attain social equality, were portrayed.

In such a way, stereotypes were established to both sexes. In order to keep this binary form strong, functions and behavior rules were given to women and men. Then, if the baby were born with a vagina, it was considered a girl and the gender that was given to her was female. As a woman, it was expected that she got married and looked after her children and home. It was believed that man and women had completely different natures, so the traits are generally polar opposites. Then, someone with a female gender was seen as weak, passive, timid, domestic, pure, and not sexual.

On the other hand, the ones born with a penis were recognized as a boy and attributed the male gender. They were suited to the public sphere, sexually active, brave, rational, independent, and ambitious. Besides, all individuals had to be heterosexual to be well accepted in the society. People who diverged from this binary system were by the borders of society, oppressed and marginalized, taken as repulsive or disgusting bodies, suffering abjection.

Regarding that, it is observed that through Literature is possible to create a point for social discussions. K.M. makes use of that with mastery, bringing up political issues and important events in a certain community and period of time. According to Eagleton (2006),
Literature is not dissociated from ideology due to the fact that it keeps narrow relations with what occurs in the society. Then, to question the hierarchical ideals, literary texts build a way to motivate critical thoughts on the individuals’ minds about the system of forced behavior rules.

By Literature we can apprehend cultural values and insights into another’s world. The reader can take the text as a critic or not and the writer can have intentions on criticizing some event or not. In short, the literary discuss will be interpreted in agreement to each individual concerns, her/his own experiences, and what is valuable to her/him and what is not. K.M. is not distant from that assumption.

In accordance to her personal journal, the New Zealander reveals:

I feel that I do now realize, dimly, what women in the future will be capable of […] We are firmly held with the self-fashioned chains of slavery. Yes, now I see that they are self-fashioned, and must be self-removed […] Independence, resolve, firm purpose, and the gift of discrimination, mental clearness—here are the inevitable […] Here then is a little summary of what I need—power, wealth and freedom. (May 1908)

In that fragment, the writer registers her feelings about the expectations of being a woman, differing from the ideology that gives her limitations of being whatever she wants to be. Being locked in a house, procreating, taken as a human weaker than a man, and attending to their domestic duties serving tea to her husband, acting like his housekeeper and not his lover, seems to K.M. a horrid idea.

Likewise, K.M. short stories lead us to think critically about a set of traditional beliefs. Some of the characters are questioners of their roles and their identities, other ones find comfort in their position, or only manage to live their lives indifferently. Thus, the character Mrs. Kember is introduced to us: a woman who is audacious to her time and community. She breaks the zone of restricted rules and, from the narrative discourse, we infer that she also has no fear to face the local inhabitants and be put aside from the social circle.

In the excerpt below, it is illustrated how the mentioned character was described in the fiction “At the Bay”:

The women at the Bay thought she was very, very fast. Her lack of vanity, her slang, the way she treated men as though she was one of them, and the fact that she didn't care two pence about her house and called the
servant Gladys "Glad-eyes," was disgraceful. Standing on the veranda steps Mrs. Kember would call in her indifferent, tired voice, "I say, Glad-eyes, you might have me a handkerchief if I've got one, will you?" And Glad-eyes, a red bow in her hair instead of a cap, and white shoes, came running with an impudent smile. It was an absolute scandal! (MANSFIELD, 1922, p. 20)

From that, we can notice the character misfits the stereotype of women. She does not give importance to household activities, nor to her appearance and she is not shy or polite. Mrs. Kember has an active personality and diverges from the woman female identity expected in the conventionalities of the twenties. Then, it is recognized that biological factors are not determiners for one self behave in a predetermined manner.

In the book “Gender Trouble” (1999), Judith Butler examines how it is that some people are recognized in society as women. The philosopher rejects the idea that those acts that identify a person as a woman reflect an internal, feminine essence. Therefore, in a heteronormative system it is required that oppositions between feminine and masculine must be well marked, so both genders can be linked to the bodies (sex) that are instituted by the cultural laws. Inserted in a sexist and gendered society, Mrs. Kember is found breaking those norms, refusing the fixed identity.

As the character was a dichotomy deviant, not accepting the prescribed essentiality of the female sex, people that knew her thought that she was queer – in the negative sense of the word -, an abnormal creature that should not be approached. Hence, one of the consequences of running out from the demarcated performance to each gender: one can be excluded and even seen as a repulsive being.

In the following part of the short story it is possible to observe that dislike for Mrs. Kember in a dialogue between Beryl and her mother Mrs. Fairfield:

"Here, mother, keep those for me, will you?"
Two rings and a thin gold chain were dropped into Mrs. Fairfield's lap.
"Yes, dear. But aren't you going to bathe here?"
"No-o," Beryl drawled. She sounded vague. "I'm undressing farther along. I'm going to bathe with Mrs. Harry Kember."
"Very well." But Mrs. Fairfield's lips set. She disapproved of Mrs. Harry Kember. Beryl knew it. (MANSFIELD, 1922, p. 19)

Behaving differently from other women was not a positive point attributed to the character. As she did not identify with the female group, Mrs. Kember was recognized as a deviant who is unconventional to the social identity circle. If the individual does not accept
the identity assigned to her/him, she/he will not be tolerated by others that are in conformity with the norms. In that case, every deviant of the established manners will cause a reaction on others against the rule breaking.

According to Mendes - who is based on Howard Becker (2008) - explains that:

It is a relevant condition for society that all participants share a single set of normative expectations, because the social standards were supported and incorporated. When a rule is broken, restorative measures are required which are stipulated by formal means, laws, and through moral sanctions that society provides for certain types of conduct. According to the labeling theory, whether or not the act is deviant depends on the way others react to it, that is, the deviation is a result of the reactions of others, since it dazzles an intervention process put into practice to select, identify, and typify individuals.  

In this violation of the rules, the character puts into instability a practice that needs to be reinforced, avoiding as much as they can to allow the acceptance of people who is not inserted in the gender system since they are a threat to the maintenance of the order. In this aspect, women had to have the same fate: being subjected to oppression, being a mere source of sexual pleasure, being economic dependent, and being unwanted pregnant. Questioning that fate meant to challenge the traditional truth about who you should be and do that fixes stereotypes related to a physical and behavioral model (WOODWARD, 2004, p. 67).

During the dialogue illustrated above, it is also remarkable the ideological aspects over the reaction of Mrs. Fairfield towards what Beryl told her. By ideology, we apprehend that it is a system of beliefs used to explain, justify, interpret, and evaluate people and their activities (EAGLETON, 1991). Thus, when the characters present us their discourse, we can observe that they are inserted in a particular history, so their speech will be based on a set of ideas, empowered by dominants societal groups, structuring the common sense among a specific part of the population.

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2 From the original text written in Portuguese language: “É condição imprescindível para a sociedade que todos os participantes compartilhem um único conjunto de expectativas normativas, sendo tais normas sustentadas, em parte porque foram incorporadas. Quando uma regra é quebrada surgem medidas restauradoras, que são estipuladas tanto por meios formais, através de leis, como informalmente, através de sanções morais que a sociedade estipula para determinados tipos de conduta. Segundo a teoria da rotulação, o caráter desviante ou não de um ato depende da maneira que os outros reagem a este, ou seja, o desvio é resultado das iniciativas do outro, visto que ele encandeia um processo de intervenções colocadas em prática para selecionar, identificar e tipificar os indivíduos”. The translation into English was made by me.
The gendered ideology constitutes itself as an order based on sex assignments of limits or possibilities, power or subordination. It is in this way this system supports structures of conventions, desires, and ideology. These are so interlaced that makes it difficult to separate gender from other aspects of life. The discourses in Literature, and in our own daily lives, are clear examples of how the referred structures are marked, since every statement and narrative that it is said carries values and intentions shared with a distinct social circle (REUTER, 2002).

Following this affirmative, behavioral ideals are internalized and naturalized by individuals, reflecting on their written and spoken speeches. That takes us to a point where the dominant thoughts are reproduced, disregarding other perspectives, settling limited functions and conducts that must be put into practice. Those incorporated conformities reinforce social inequalities between men and women, which still perpetuates nowadays. If it is stated that there are restricted roles, we can assume that there is no freedom to express their selves. Thus, a woman was defined as a wife, a mother, and a householder, a person with a destiny, not a choice. The predetermined social performances in a cultural context lead to acceptance or the disobedience to the order, which is the case of the character in discussion.

Despite of not being feminine, Mrs. Kember attended the norm of being in a heterosexual relationship, like in the excerpt confirms: “True, she had no children, and her husband … Here the voices were always raised; they became fervent. How can he have married her? How can he, how can he? It must have been money, of course, but even then!” (MANSFIELD, 1922, p. 20) But having relations with someone of the opposite sex was not enough to the character being included in the societal sphere.

As a wife, it was expected that she took care of her house and husband, giving him affection, respect, and support. Her sexual pleasures were denied - that was an act attributed only for prostitutes in the XIX century - , regulating women’s sexual life to procreation (PERROT, 2003, p. 16). Mrs. Kember did not take on any of those responsibilities assigned to her: she did not do household chores, nor seemed to be tender with her partner, or had a kid.

Being audacious to diverge from the oppressive system, K.M.’s character creates her way to feel some liberty of becoming who she wants to be. In this way, she preferred to be excluded by people like Mrs. Fairfield and the other women at the Bay than
subordinates herself to the sexist ideology. Limits just exist because it can be transgressed and Mrs. Kember’s break of boundaries was an illustration of those patriarchal restrictions.

3. Conclusion

As we have analyzed, Mrs. Kember persistently resisted to be conformed to the prescribed female identity. The character, which diverged from the route of stereotypes, was not too passive and caring as she was supposed to be since the performance of an individual had to be in accordance to the birth sex. In this direction, it was relevant that we pointed out the context of the short story’s event due to in the beginning of the twentieth century the patriarchal principles were still strict and it was very challenging to be opposite to the law.

In this way, it is possible to say that Mrs. Kember was adventurous to take a chance to try to become whoever she wanted to be in such disciplinary sphere. Even though it was written 94 years ago, “At the Bay” introduced us the mentioned character in a particular way that we can closely relate it to the individuals in the supermodernity times, as Augé (2012) named it. Those individuals with fragmented identities, deviating of the binary paths, or denying heteronormative relations are present in the XXI century, but with less oppression and laws to make them stop, because values did not keep the same in the western Europe.

Throughout K.M. and other women’s writings we are reminded how the sexist society put women as inferior to men. It is not our purpose to infer that there is a problem of women being different from men. The issue appears when that difference is connected to women in relation to men. It is in that way the social inequalities and imperative discourses affect our daily lives, giving advantages to one over another.

Hence, it is through Literature that we can ponder more critically about the aspects that perpetuates all over history and consider that the social order is an incomplete hold of ideologies and institutions, since it is in continual change. Thus, we apprehend that women writers, as the New Zealander, are likely to be read and emphasized even more in the future and with a distinct understanding of what they have been trying to say about the female conditions in various regions, classes, and epochs.
References


