

C H A P T E R - I I I

THE CONTEXT OF ADOLESCENT LOVE

A significant corollary of man-woman relationship in Katherine Mansfield is the relation between two women- lesbian relationship in a very deeper sense. Of course, the lesbian relationship occurs rather infrequently in Mansfield and more often than not, it occurs as a failed attempt. The story 'Bliss' is important in this context. This story is about a thirty-year old young woman, Bertha Young who is married to Harry Young and has a baby. There is a kind of inner energy in Bertha Young which gives her happiness and a sense of bliss. Bertha is highly conscious of her body as a receiver of energy and joy. Using her favourite image of mirror, Mansfield describes Bertha's epiphany and bliss :

But in her bosom there was still that bright glowing place - that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable. She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply. She hardly dared to look into the cold mirror- but she did look, and it gave her back a woman, radiant, with smiling, trembling lips, with big, dark eyes and an air of listening, waiting for something..... divine to happen that she knew must happen..... infallibly.¹

Imbued with a sense of Freedom and floating as it were on waves of bliss Bertha Young waits for something divine to happen. In the later part of the story Mansfield describes a series of incidents consequent upon Bertha's bliss and sense of freedom. The major focus of the story is on Bertha's attempt

to find an order of reality which would correspond to her identity based on her sense, however temporary, of freedom and bliss. Of course, as Bertha confesses to herself she is quite happy in her marital life. She is young; her husband loves her; they have an adorable baby and they don't have any financial problems. They have a fine house, a garden, and a cosmopolitan group of friends frequent their house. But in spite of this middle-class security, comfort and happiness, there is still in Bertha Young a craving for 'understanding', for a relationship which would be a perfect communion.

Katherine Mansfield describes this inner craving in terms of the symbol of the pear tree which provides a kind of objective co-relative to Bertha's desire for relationship based on "understanding" and communion :

At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. Berth couldn't help feeling, even from this distance, that it had not a single bud or a faded petal.²

At one of the parties thrown by her and her husband, Miss Pearl Fulton turns up. As Bertha Young welcomes her and leads to the dining room, she feels as though a kind of secret communion has taken place between them. She has a feeling that Miss Fulton Shares the sense of bliss with her. This feeling of strange secret understanding between

Miss Fulton and her takes Bertha to an almost celestial level of experience :

How long did they stand there? Both, as it were, caught in that circle of unearthly light, understanding each other perfectly, creatures of another world, and wondering what they were to do in this one with all this blissful treasure that, burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands?³

So strange is the effect of this bliss that Katherine Mansfield says, 'for the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband'. The end of the story, however, shows a strange shattering of this sense of bliss and communion. As the Youngs say good-bye to the departing guests, Bertha sees in the corner of the hall Miss Fulton in the arms of Harry. She also overhears their whispering and their passionate love-making. With this sudden and shocking discovery of her husband's extra-marital affair, Bertha's sense of celestial bliss and the sense of freedom are shattered to pieces. She becomes conscious of her double failure- her relationship with Harry has failed and so has her relationship with Miss Fulton. She now realizes that her sense of communion with Miss Fulton was an illusion. She comes to know that she didn't share her bliss with anyone. Totally disillusioned, Bertha Young is thrown back on the resources of her loneliness brought out in the last two sentences of the story :

"Your lovely pear tree-pear tree- pear tree!" Bertha simply ran over to the long windows. "Oh, what is going to happen now?" she cried. But the pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still.⁴

It seems then that Katherine Mansfield sees the dangers of inauthenticity and failure in marital relationships as well as in lesbian ones. What is more, similar dangers are described as existing in man-woman relationship outside marriage also. In a story called 'Psychology', Mansfield Portrays a friendship between two creative people- one a novelist and the other his woman friend, who is a playwright. They seem to cherish their friendship very much. They are old and mature enough to enjoy it without any "stupid emotional complications". Mansfield gives a beautiful description of this relationship in the initial part of the story :

For the special thrilling quality of their friendship was in their complete surrender. Like two open cities in the midst of some vast plain their two minds lay open to each other. And it was'nt as if he rode into hers like a conqueror, armed to the eyebrows and seeing nothing but a gay silken flutter- nor did she enter his like a queen walking soft on petals. No, they were eager, serious travellers, absorbed in understanding what was to be seen and discovering what was hidden- making the most of this extra-ordinary absolute chance which made it possible for him to be utterly truthful to her and for her to be utterly sincere with him.⁵

But as the narrative unfolds we find that this description refers only to the surface aspects. In its deep structure the relationship between these two characters shows several cracks. One major reason obviously is that they are not sure whether this friendship really involves a genuine understanding between the secret selves hidden beneath the surface:

"You've hurt me; you've hurt me ! We've failed!" said her secret self while she handed him his hat and stick, smiling gaily. She wouldn't give him a moment for another word, but ran along the passage and open the big outer door.⁶

Given this absence of harmony between "secret selves" the two artists see themselves "as two little grinning puppets jiggling away in nothingness". They are not sure of their speech, much less of their silence. The entire conversation between these two characters is marked by hesitant pauses, silence and speech which does not communicate much.

At first it would seem out of place to discuss child characters in Mansfield in a work which is exclusively concerned with the theme of man-woman relationship. There is, however, a significant propriety in relating children in the stories of Katherine Mansfield to the theme of man-woman relationship. Ample evidence of this relevance is found in the following passage from Mansfield's The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield. This is what Mansfield says about her relationship with Middleton

Murry in one of her letters :

We had been children to each other, openly confessed children, telling each other everything, and each depending equally upon the other. Before that, I had been the man and he had been the woman, and he had been called upon to make no real efforts. He had never really "supported" me. When we first met, in fact, it was I who kept him..... Then this illness, getting worse and worse, and turning me into a woman..... He stood it marvellously. It helped very much because it was a "romantic" disease (his love of a "romantic appearance" is immensely real) and also being "children" together gave us a practically unlimited chance to play of life - not to live. It was child love.⁷

Similarly, another corroborating evidence is available in Middleton Murry's autobiography. Murry says here that in his early relationship with Katherine Mansfield he was "a strange creature". He further says that there was little of the "conquering male" in him. He goes on to describe this relation in the following words :

Anyhow, it is true that I did not want to be Katherine's lover, or if I did, I was conscious that I did. And the way I suppressed my unconscious desire, if it needed supressing, was to be very clear and positive, as I was, that sex spoiled love..... It was marvellous to me to have Katherine as my companion. I could talk to her intimately in a way I had never talked to anyone before, we trusted one another.....

We were on the threshold of a new country.⁸

This autobiographical evidence, which seems to emphasize the a-sexual, that is, child-like aspect of their love is helpful because it enables us to understand some of the stories of Mansfield which deal with adolescent, romantic love in which children abound. It explains in other words the child-like behaviour of some of her lovers and, equally significantly, her use of fantasy a literary strategy. Witness for instance, a story such as 'Something Childish but Very Natural'. The story is about a love affair between two children in their teens, Henry and Edna. They meet on a train journey and fall in love with each other. Both are characterized by a certain degree of naivety and wonder - naivety because they are totally unaware of the ways of the world and wonder because their adventurous love infuses in them a sense of the marvellous in human existence. Their love has an idyllic dimension. The young lovers constitute a paradise like the world of their own - cut off from the demands of the practical world. Accordingly, the recurrent symbols in the story are : garden, bowers, flowers, clouds, birds, trees etc. Katherine Mansfield's use of the myth of the original Garden is quite obvious here. Henry answers Edna, 'We wouldn't be children any more'. But their childhood is something which they cannot escape. That's why Edna wishes that they were not so young and when Edna reminds him of the reality principle by saying that they don't have money to

organize their life as they wanted it, Henry replies by saying emphatically that 'money is more or less accidental'. With his declaration about the accidental nature of money, the young lovers are lifted out of the bonds of the practical world. They are now privileged beings who can create an alternative order of reality in terms of dream and fantasy. This is how Henry fantasizes Edna about their dream cottage which he describes room by room :

"The room with the folding doors is yours".
Henry laughed. "It's a mixture - it isn't a room at all. It's full of your toys and there's a big blue chair in it where you sit curled up in front of the fire with the flames in your curls - because though we're married you refuse to put your hair up and only tuck it inside your coat for the church service. And there's a rug on the floor for me to lie on, because I'm so lazy. Euphemia - that's our servant - only comes in the day. After she's gone we go down to the kitchen and sit on the table and eat an apple, or perhaps we make some tea, just for the sake of hearing the kettle sing." 9

The Section VII of the story describes the dream sequence in which Henry is waiting for Edna. During this period of waiting he continues his dreaming and fantasizing. The ending of the story is ambiguous admitting of several interpretations, but the images of snake, shadows and spreading darkness point out the inherent limitations of the world of innocence, fantasy and dreams. The snake image as well as the image of darkness describe that the world of fantasy, however, attractive cannot

last long in the presence of all-pervasive reality. The gesture of communication on the last page of the story in which the little girl hands out to Henry a telegram which is just a folded paper brings out the emptiness of the communicative act. The comparison of the girl with a moth establishes the momentary nature of a dream world created for fantasy. Edna has all the purity of a small moth but at some stage or the other, the world of innocence must end and the demands of the world of experience must begin.

In her stories dealing with the polarities of innocence and experience Katherine Mansfield quite successfully uses the literary strategy of fantasy. Carl Jung's analysis of fantasy is of great interest here. Jung describes the nature of fantasy by saying :

It represents a complex that is distinguished from other complexes by the fact that it corresponds with no actual external state of affairs. Although a fantasm may originally be based upon the memory images of actual experiences, its content corresponds with no external reality.....¹⁰

Of particularly interest is Jung's distinction between active fantasy and passive fantasy. Active fantasy does not refer to dissociated psychic state. It implies a positive participation of consciousness. Passive fantasy, on the other hand, presupposes a considerable degree of dissociation. It is never the

expression of an individuality that has achieved unity.

Following Jung's analysis of fantasy one can say that Mansfield, with the participation of her creative consciousness in the world of reality, is an example of active fantasy. Hence comes the use of the fantastic in her stories. But fantasy as an indication of the various states of mind of her characters is a passive one. In other words, the fantastic in relation to the characters brings out their dislocated, dissociated identities. Henry and Edna in 'Something Childish But Very Natural'; Linda and Beryl in 'At The Bay'; Bertha Young in 'Bliss'; Monica in 'Revelations' and a host of other characters bear this out. By using the fantastic mode Mansfield vividly defines the problematic of selfhood- two selves, the real and the unreal, living in worlds tragically opposed to each other.

A story such as 'Pictures' inclines to some extent towards strong social realism, but at the same time it shows fantasy as a mode of wishfulfilment. The central character of this story Miss Ada Moss is a poor girl. Her room rent is in arrears and the landlady is clamouring for it. Miss Moss who loves dancing, hopes to get a job in a film company. When she goes to take her interview she finds that there is a general scramble for the job. She not only does not get the job but, much to her chagrin, is given a form to fill up in which there are questions as to whether she can aviate, high-dive, drive a car, back-jump, shoot etc. Frustrated in the world of actuality,

Miss Moss takes an easy recourse to the world of fantasy. Between desire and fulfilment, fantasy now acts as a happy, mediating presence. Miss Moss fantasizes herself as sitting in a posh hotel in the evening and being approached by a handsome gentleman seeking her expert advice about music :

A dark handsome gentleman in a fur coat comes in with a friend, and sits at my table, perhaps. 'No, old chap, I've searched London for a contralto and I can't find a soul. You see, the music is difficult; have a look at it'. And Miss Moss heard herself saying : "Excuse me, I happen to be a contralto, and I have sung that part of many times... Extraordinary! 'Come back to my studio and I'll try your voice now? Ten pounds a week...."¹¹

In contrast to this fantasy, when she enters a cafe and sits at a table, she meets a stout gentleman who, after some preliminarys, asks her if he could accompany her, if he could take her out. Realizing that she has to make the best of her bad lot, Miss Moss finally goes out with him. The story, thus, brings out the gap between desire and fantasy in man-woman relationship and emphasizes the process of wishfulfilment.

'The Tiredness of Rosabel' has exactly the same pattern as 'Pictures'. It is about a poor sales girl who works in a hat-shop. Two of her customers on a certain day are; a young man has come to buy a hat for his beloved. Rosabel shows him several samples and by way of demonstration, herself puts on a hat to show how it looks. The young man, Harry, compliments

her on her beauty by saying 'you have damned pretty little figure'. With this compliment, the poor sales girl is carried into the land of fantasy and dream. She imagines herself in place of Harry's beloved and a tempting, fascinating world of fantasies opens up before her :

Suppose they changed places. Rosabel would drive home with him, of course, they were in love with each other, but not engaged, very nearly, and she would say - "I won't be one moment". He would wait in the brougham while he maid took the hat-box up the stairs, following Rosabel. Then the great, white and pink bedroom with roses everywhere in dull silver vases. She would sit down before the mirror and the little French maid would fasten her hat and find her a thin, fine veil and another pair of white suede gloves - a button had come off the gloves she had worn that morning. She had scented her furs and gloves and handkerchief, taken a big muff and run downstairs. The butler opened the door, Harry was waiting, they drove away together..... that was life, thought Rosabel! 12

Of course, this is not the real Rosabel. The real Rosabel is a poor salesgirl living in a poor room and sitting on the floor with her knees getting stiff. Throughout the story Katherine Mansfield creates a kind of light and shade effect in terms of this criss-cross pattern of fantasy and reality. One also notices that in both 'Pictures' and 'The Tiredness of Rosabel', the context of social class plays a crucial role. Both the heroines belong to the lower, working-class. As such, their

fantasy is closely related to wishfulfilment in terms of upward social status and wealth.

A story such as 'A Dill Pickle' acts out the complexity of man-woman relationship in the context of memory and nostalgia. It is about two lovers who meet after an interval of six years. Both of them now reexamine their relationship in the past from the vantage point of memory. At first they grow nostalgic, looking back upon incidents in their past life :

In the warmth, as it were, another memory unfolded. She saw herself sitting on a lawn. He lay beside her, and suddenly, after a long silence, he rolled over and put his head in her lap.

"I wish", he said, in a low, troubled voice, "I wish that I had taken poison and were about to die - here now ! " 13

One interesting feature of the story is that both the characters, Vera and her lover, totally immerse themselves in their past and do not talk about either about the present or about the future. Vera feels for a moment that it must have been a great period of happiness and "understanding" in her life. But that is only a momentary feeling. She can not help confessing that she is as alone as ever. Her onetime lover too, says the same thing about her. At the end of the story, we find that Vera suddenly leaves the hotel and goes away from him. The implication is that between the two lovers the past is a

tenuous connection generating memories frozen in time and space. It can only radiate a certain amount of nostalgia. It cannot be a meaningful connection either with the present or with their future. Hence, the rather abrupt conclusion of the story.

The story 'Miss Brill' charts the passage of a spinster from a spirit of ebullience to its shattering. Its about a servant who visits park on a Sunday evening. She has a sudden feeling of elation and freedom. She has a mysterious sense of being united with the world in terms of mutual understanding :

The tune lifted, lifted, the light shone; and it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company would begin singing. The young ones, the laughing ones who were moving together, they would begin, and the men's voices, very resolute and brave, would join them. And then she too, she too, and the others on the benches - they would come in with a kind of accompaniment - something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful - moving..... And Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the members of the company. Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought - though what they understood she didn't know.¹⁴

Immediately, however, this is shattered. A young boy and a girl lost in their whisperings of love, feel annoyed at her presence and describe her in comic terms as 'a stupid odd thing' and

make fun of the fur she has put on. The story enacts a pattern very common in Katherine Mansfield - fall from elation to crude reality.

We can thus compare ^{the} two groups of short stories in Mansfield. One deals with marital love and the second deals with premarital adolescent love. Marital love as already been discussed in Chapter II is full of bitterness, hatred, lack of understanding, because the social institution of marriage in many ways is responsible for the lack of communication between two partners. Compared to this, premarital adolescent love is honest and authentic. It is not corroded by institutional reality. But this adolescent love, however, free from institutional influence, is deeply rooted in dream and fantasy which the outer institutional world does not recognize. The naturalness of the human heart and passions as seen in the world of adolescence, dreams and fantasy ultimately succumbs to the inevitable pressures of reality.