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### Chided Children's Quest for Contentment in Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House* - A Study

Dr.S. Deepa  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Guru Nanak College (Autonomous)  
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, INDIA

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#### Abstract

Katherine Mansfield signalled the emergence of modernism through her innovative style of writing during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Her short stories are well-known for depicting the inner life and emotions of the characters filled with sympathy and profound comprehension. Most of the recurring themes in her stories are childhood memories, loneliness and the complexity of human relationships. The chosen short story "The Doll's House" for study also focuses on children's world but, it ventures to approach this short story from a different perspective. This story is approached through the lens of class consciousness. The author effectively brings out the class distinction that exists between the upper and lower class strata. Even the children are not exempted from class consciousness. They are restricted and attuned to this class distinction. Through the character of Kezia, this paper tries to trace the journey of a child from the innocent world to the symbolic world of experience provided by the class distinction. This paper further deal with the existing prejudice in the society pertaining to these class distinctions.

**Key words:** Class consciousness, Class distinctions, Social prejudice, Impact of class distinction on children

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New Zealand literature established a rich literary tradition of its own, with short story writers, poets and novelists. The literature of New Zealand is the youngest literature and significant one among the white commonwealth literature. The origin of literature in New Zealand was essentially English. It is different to segregate some of the early New Zealand writings from those of English or Australian. Some writers felt it is necessary to record their own identity as a New Zealand writer. The twentieth century writers like Jessie Mackey, Blanche Baughan and William Satchell wrote their themes with New Zealand identity. These writers also showed a concern with history, landscape, society and human relationship.

New Zealand writers mainly focused on poetry and short story rather than novel or drama. The main reason is that New Zealand is considered to be a lower inhabited country. People can give good response for the publication of poetry or a short- story anthology with a significant editorial influence. The main bearers of short- story writing tradition in New Zealand writing are Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson, Maurice Duggan, Vincent O'Sulli Van, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace. Katherine Mansfield is considered as a first significant short story writer in New Zealand. She was educated in London and settled down in Europe at the age of twenty. She married the eminent English critic John Middleton Murry in 1918. She had an instinct for writing and attained utmost popularity as a short-story writer. She is an autobiographical writer and her best stories are the ones which depict her childhood in New Zealand. She was the revolutionary short story writer, born on 14 October 1888 in Wellington. Her parents are Annie and Harold Beauchamp, her father working as a clerk in the importing company and eventually he became the chairman of the Bank of New Zealand. Her short story was first published in a magazine

called *The Lone Hand* when she was nine years old. After the completion of her school education, she was sent to Queen's College, London. Her stories are a complete break from the English short story tradition. Many publishers rejected her stories and were uninteresting to publish them. In this state of depression, she married George Bowden, whom she left the very next day. Her misery and wretchedness were reflected in the first part of her work called, *In a German Pension*(1911).

She developed the talent of writing short story in a genuine manner and published volumes like *Bliss and other Stories* (1920), *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922), *The Dove's Nest and Other Stories* (1923), and *Something Childish* (1924). Her range of subjects had become wider like marriage, people of London, family relationships and little ironic episodes about society. In these stories the writer probes the truth of experience on different levels of life in social class. Katherine Mansfield was not a rebel, but an innovator. She neither revolted against her predecessors nor broke with them. She worked by herself in her field of short story writing. In both the theme and technique, Katherine Mansfield had an enormous influence on a generation of writers attempting to see things clearly and artistically express them with fidelity and insight. She is indeed, a rare creative artist with a unique vision and voice in the writing of short stories.

Modern short stories plots are about the psychological reaction of the protagonist to a particular incident or incidents. Katherine Mansfield is also a modern short story writer like D. H. Lawrence. In her short stories one can find psychology playing a vital role as in the stories of D. H. Lawrence. Katherine Mansfield is known for her unique portrayal of children in her stories. She remembers about her own childhood and portrays children as children, showing them in their own eyes and the eyes of other children. Unlike most other writers, she uses children creatively to teach a good lesson to adults. The displacement of the plot is the chief element in modern short story and it is different from the story generally written before 1910. Though plot is important for action, there is not much of space for plot in the modern short stories. The psychological reaction of the protagonist and the consequent incidents are important in modern short story.

In *The Doll's House* Katherine Mansfield pays more attention to the psychological aspect of the children and adults than the plot of the story. It also shows class consciousness social setup and how the upper class children are discouraged from talking to the lower class children in the society. The writer traces class consciousness through the character of Kezia and her journey from the innocent world to the symbolic world of experience. Mansfield tries to challenge the existing social class consciousness which was wreaking havoc on the social fabric through the portrayal of the character of Kelvey. The centre concept of this short story is the prejudice against poverty as well as the false appearance of the society. The story is also an example to the parents how to educate their children in the right way.

In this short story Katherine Mansfield shows how the grown-up people vitiate the minds of innocent children by making them conscious of class distinctions. Old Mrs. Hay sent doll's house to the Burnell children as a gift. Isabel, Lottie and Kezia are the three children of Brunell's family. They were delighted on seeing the doll's house. Kezia liked particularly the lamp on the dining table in that doll's house. The doll's house was kept beside the feed-room door because Aunt Beryl thought that the smell of the paint would make anyone ill. The doll's house was painted spinach green but the doors were bright yellow.

At school Isabel told everyone about the doll's house. She was the eldest and so she had the right to talk first. She, however did not mention the lamp. So Kezia pointed out that the lamp was the finest thing in the doll's house. The girls, Lil and Else listened to Isabel and Kezia from distance because they were the children of the washerwoman and nobody was allowed to talk to them. As there was only one school, all the children of the locality, rich or poor were admitted in the same school, but the children of the upper class were forbidden to talk to those of the working class.

Isabel invited two children everyday to see doll's house. Soon all the children were talking about the wonder. Poor Lil and Else heard everything but they knew that they were not to see the wonder. Lena Logan, upper class school student insulted Lil by asking her if she would become a servant when she grew up. Everybody enjoyed the cruel remark. That evening Kezia found Lil and Else coming up the road. She opened the gate and wanted to know if they would like to see the doll's house. Lil said that she

was forbidden to speak to girls like Lil and Else. But Kezia insisted. Else pulled the dress of her sister signifying that she wanted to see the wonder. So Lil yielded. Lil and Else followed Kezia. As they were watching the wonder, Aunt Beryl appeared and drove the poor girls away. She also scolded Kezia for talking to the washerwoman's daughters whose father was a prisoner. Lil and Else sat on a big red drainpipe. They had forgotten the arrogant lady and were only thinking of the doll's house. Else said softly "I seen the little lamp" (259). *The Doll's House* focuses on the child characters experience of the effects of the class system. It is clear that the upper class children except Kezia reproduce the adult's social attitudes and actions in the story.

The class distinctions are clearly evident in Katherine Mansfield's description of characters in their action, position in the society and talking between the characters in the story. The writer tells about the Burnell's children schooling that there is no other school nearer to the place. Their choices are very limited and so they have to choose the same school which doctor's daughter, storekeeper's daughter sitting together in the school without talking each other. These lines clearly give the picture of schooling:

For the fact was, the school the Burnell children went to was not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen if there had been any choice. But there was none. It was the only school for miles. And the consequence was all the children in the neighbourhood, the judge's little girls, the doctor's daughters, the store-keeper's children, the milkman's, were forced to mix together. Not to speak of there being an equal number of rude, rough little boys as well. But the line had to be drawn somewhere. (80-87)

The social positions of the Kelveys are troublesome; sometimes they are treated very lowly by the school friends and also by their teachers. The upper class children are threatened by their parents not to talk a single word to the low class children in school. In *The Doll's House* also Kezia asks her mother about Kelvey's but she scolds her to not to talk with them. In their school playtime, Isabel, the eldest of the Burnell children, was surrounded by whole students of the school. The girls of her class are interested to be her special friend. All the girls, come together, pressed up close to have a look at the doll's house, which was the centre attraction of all the eyes now. The only two who stayed outside the the group were the little Kelveys. Many of the children, including the Burnells, were not allowed to speak to them. The Kelveys were always shunned by everybody. When Kezia asked her mother, "Can't I ask the Kelveys just once?" (51). To which, the response is, "Certainly not, Kezia!" (53).

In the society, a teacher's purpose is not only to teach but also must treat everyone equally. This shows the change in times, how severe class distinction was back then. Although it is not so strong now because everyone is encouraged to treat everyone equally, it still goes on to some extent. The teacher's attitude towards these low social background students is different from other upper class students. The tone of the teacher itself changes when she talks to the lower class students in the school. These lines show clearly that:

Many of the children, including the Burnells, were not allowed even to speak to them. They walked past the Kelveys with their heads in the air, and as they set the fashion in all matters of behaviour, the Kelveys were shunned by everybody. Even the teacher had a special voice for them, and a special smile for the other children when Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with a bunch of dreadfully common-looking flowers (90-96).

The food habit of low class people is also very different from upper class people; the language is also different from other people. It is not a grammatically correct language. Their language usage is sometimes unique with lots of mistakes. The main reason for their mistakes is that nobody is there to correct them.

Lil gasped, and then she said, "Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us."  
"Oh, well," said Kezia. She didn't know what to reply. "It doesn't matter. You can come and see our doll's house all the same. Come on. Nobody's looking. (200)

The description of the lunch break of the school children is significant because this scene proved the different financial background of the peoples from upper and lower classes. All the children were sitting and eating their lunch but the lower class children sit separately; the upper class children eat

mutton sandwiches and lower class children eats jam with bread. The financial status of the families is stated here as:

Even the dinner hour was given up to talking about it. The little girls sat under the pines eating their thick mutton sandwiches and big slabs of johnny cake spread with butter. While always, as near as they could get, sat the Kelveys, our Else holding on to Lil, listening too, while they chewed their jam sandwiches out of a newspaper soaked with large red blobs (143).

Katherine Mansfield's choice of characters highlights the connection between Kezia and Else despite the class differences. The Doll's House focuses on the child characters experience of the effects of the class system. It is clear that the upper class children except Kezia reproduce the adult's social attitudes and actions. In school Kelveys were insulted by upper the class children especially by Lena Logan. The characters intensify the sense of the negative effects and shallowness of the class system. The little girls learn the unjust values from their parents. All the girls got an opportunity to see the doll's house, except the Kelvey sisters, as they belonged to a poor family. So everybody teased them. Being the daughter of washerwoman and jailbird, they were victims of the inferiority complex. Lena criticises them as a upcoming servant through this line: "Is it true you're going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?" shrilled Lena (177). At the end of the story, Aunt Beryl shouts at Kezia,

How dare you ask the little Kelveys into the courtyard?" said her cold, furious voice. "You know as well as I do, you're not allowed to talk to them. Run away, children, run away at once. And don't come back again," said Aunt Beryl. And she stepped into the yard and shooed them out as if they were chickens.  
"Off you go immediately!" she called, cold and proud. (236)

Aunt Beryl reveals herself as a cruel snob. Suddenly aunt Beryl come's there while these children enjoy the doll's house and ordered them to leave the house in an insulting manner. The Kelveys ran away from there with the feeling of shame but they were happy to have seen the house. At last they talked about the light in the doll's house sitting in big drainpipe. Through Kezia's action and thought Katherine Mansfield gives the hint of transcendence in the story. Continuously she is the one who insisted on little lamp among the girls. The upper class children see only the outward beauty of the Doll's house but it was only she who sees the real lamp in the house. She also discussed about the lamp in the school also but nobody pays attention. Kelveys are only impressed by the lamp and said "I seen the little lamp".

In *The Dolls House*, the vision of the lamp momentarily unites Kezia and Else spanning the social gulf which separates them. In the society people are respected and judged by their occupation but success lies only in the hard work and not in their class distinction or occupation. The writer has beautifully shown the attitude of the rich against the poor. Parents are the only responsible persons to create inequality among the society and also between the children. In this short story also Kezia is scolded because of her innocence and she didn't know to see the difference between the rich and poor. The chided children seek contentment by the glimpse of the doll's house. In short Mansfield is discussing the difficulties dealing with class-consciousness and social atrocities in this society. She clearly deals with the social hierarchy, and uses the children as an example of how this system continues because of the indoctrination by their parents. There is a symbol of hope at the end of the story through the little lamp. The light will come one day to the world brought by the younger generation and they will usher in society without any class distinction.

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