

Chapter II

The Mansfield Woman : A Soul Adrift

The damsels in distress in Mansfield's early stories are not exactly an imaginary lot. Personal experience is neither completely distorted nor fully censored to suggest a terrible frankness. The consciousness of Mansfield's lone maidens is closely related to her own. Contempt for society and rejection of tradition, discipline and morals are the marked features of the young Mansfield. Oscar Wilde had been her mentor. As a master of epigram and an erotic personality he fascinated her and Kass Beauchamp lost no time in copying out shocking expressions from his works. In a journal entry for 23rd October 1907 Mansfield wrote : "I thank heaven that at present, though I am damnable, I am in love with nobody but myself" (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, intro, X). Independent and ambitious, she sounds much like Wilde, the perfect egocentric who devised his own flamboyant method of becoming famous, and, his no less individualistic way of becoming infamous. Like Wilde she has no patience with society. Fugitiveness holds a strong appeal for Mansfield. She is the warring emigrant never at peace with herself. Since she believed in no ideal life-style, she invented one of her own and took full advantage of the liberation of women during the inter-war period. Being a fervent believer in the sovereign power of her art, she embraced a career full of uncertainties. On distant shores, away from home, Mansfield chose a life (both private

and professional), the means and end of which were unknown to herself.

The utter corruption and vulnerability involved in such a continual struggle for recognition has invited tremendous critical outrage. Frank O'Connor in his study of the short story, The Lonely Voice, contends : "Therefore if I emphasise what seems to me the shoddy element it is almost by way of experiment. Most of her work seems to me that of a clever, spoiled, malicious woman" (130). The orgies of passion which must have disenchanted A. O'Connor are Mansfield's life experience and her creative inspiration. A journal entry for 18th March 1910 reads : "I purchase my brilliance with life" and afterwards, "I am unlike others because I have experienced all there is to experience" (Alpers, *Life*, 60). Mansfield's letter to Vera Beauchamp written in late March 1908, projects her proud self-image as the sworn enemy of mediocrity. Vera's firm belief that a great trouble would put her right is only a "rather cheap and distinctly simple philosophy" (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 42). Mansfield is interested in walking strange mystic paths where she can lean over a flower and suddenly have every veil torn inside. She insists on the conviction of experience.

Solitary women, socially maladjusted and temperamentally headstrong, preoccupy Mansfield in her early stories. They travel alone and are insecure, indecisive and uncertain. The young woman in "An Indiscreet Journey" is not sure of her destination.

Her inquiries with the collector are hampered by a communication gap.

'Does one go directly to X?' I asked the collector who dug at my tickets with a pair of forceps and handed it back again.

'No Mademoiselle you must change at X.Y.Z.'

'At - ?'

'X.Y.Z.'

Again I had not heard (Alpers, Stories, 180).

The out of touch colonial with alert suspicions is never sure. The moving train cuts off the conversation : "The train was on my side. It swung out of the station and soon we were passing the vegetable gardens, the tall blind houses to let, passing the servants beating carpets" (Alpers, Stories, 180). Successions of cities, towns and human activities give a transitory feeling, inseparable from a fleeting disordered life which is a collection of glimpses. The cold blue light on window panes, bright patches of fields or dump of houses like mushrooms are momentary impressions, distant and unknown to the foreigner. The little governess can only pause over the beautiful natural patchwork for a while. It remains out of her touch as ever. The moving compartment suggests everlasting motion, regardless of individual whims and feelings. A continual rejection of possibilities of association and self-identification is strongly felt.

A railway compartment is warm and comfortable. Harsh realities like war seem unbelievable inside it. A false sense of security confuses a lone woman traveller. She is alerted of war-time inconveniences. The lady sitting opposite to Mademoiselle in "An Indiscreet Journey", apprises her of expected difficulties in reaching her destination. She is a conniving woman intent on frightening mademoiselle out of her wits as the latter refuses to conform to the normal social conventions. The lady does not succeed however and the lone woman does not give up in spite of her harrowing experience. She is determined to reach her destination. In a letter to Murry dated 20th February 1915, Mansfield speaks of horror that is quite revealing in this context: "I seem to have just escaped the prison cells, Jaggle dearest, because I find this place is in the zone of armies and therefore forbidden to women" (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 149).

A young woman journeying by herself often becomes an object of ridicule for others. Her innocence is maligned by curiosity and disapproval. Mademoiselle in "An Indiscreet Journey" smarts a strange insulting relish from the gloating remark of her co-passenger. The tone of a waiter wrecks the lady's security in "The Lost Battle". It makes her feel that something hostile is being plotted against her and that even inanimate objects like a chair or a table are in the know. At the waiter's exit, the woman feels relieved as if she has been rescued from a shipwreck

or a burning house. An impertinent waiter swoops past the little governess and nearly chuckles at her insecurity. Madame in "Being a Truthful Adventure", derives a sly, hypocritical pleasure from the narrator's evasive manner : "She was extremely friendly and seemed to find a fund of secret amusement in the fact; she looked at me as though expecting me to break into delighted laughter" (Alpers, Stories, 97). Madame is not obliged by a gesture of mute submission or a friendly smile. The young woman has no patience with her French cordiality. With her unladylike ravenous appetite she mindlessly eats in front of the waiter in a room hung with mirrors. A lone woman is expected to be accustomed to such improprieties.

Hotel rooms are vividly described in Mansfield's stories, as the reader is continuously reminded of their temporariness. The first person narrator climbs into a bed of slippery fine linen in her hotel room to be deflated by the sound of a banging door. To her disgust, she discovers next door bedrooms invaded by unfamiliar voices. The silly prattle of a couple is overheard. Masculine snorts and female groans accompanied by private talk call for an immediate action : "There was only one thing to be done. I coughed and cleared my throat in that unpleasant and obtrusive way of strange people in next door bedrooms. It acted like a charm ..." (Alpers, Stories, 99). There is an almost cynical satisfaction in that act. The solitary woman values her remoteness and makes a desperate attempt to maintain her privacy.

The concierge is an image of St. Anne in "An Indiscreet Journey". She reminds the narrator of her journey ahead : "You have only just got time. There is a bowl of milk on the writing table" (Alpers, Stories, 179). Robed in her old Burberry coat, the undisputed traveller runs down the steps, paying no attention to the concierge's warnings. Uninterrupted intervals are rare in hotel rooms. The little governess enters a dark, ugly bedroom to be watched curiously by an unknown waiter. The sense of unfamiliarity is heightened by such entrances and exits. In "The Lost Battle" the lone maid feigns happiness with the books and flowers. The momentary illusion is crushed by the untimely entry of a red-haired boy. There is an absolute breach of privacy in the story, containing subjective allusions. The homely ambience can never be created in hotels. Alleged interference does nothing to allay the discomfort of the estranged lady. To Dorothy Brett, Mansfield had written in May 1918 about having spent nine-tenths of her life arriving at strange hotels. A letter to Ottoline Morrell dated 24th May 1918 expresses similiar disgust. Disapproval of bought pleasures is pronounced. Professional hospitality often makes importunities explicit. There is no time to pause over an avenue of gold and red trees. Sensitivity will at once be tampered with an untimely intrusion. Mansfield's maidens are secretive and self-effacing. The boatman in "Being a Truthful Adventure" sincerely wishes to guide the young lady, but she will find things out for herself, unaided and alone. Mademoiselle in

"An Indiscreet Journey" frantically rushes out of her compartment before her fellow passengers have any idea of her identity. The narrator in "Being a Truthful Adventure" is not particularly elated at an unexpected meeting with her school friend. With a fake excuse, she makes her exit. The solitary women find a peculiar pleasure in wandering through strange cities with adolescent wonder, but the fear of recognition never leaves them. Afraid of intimacy, they have a precognition of the social rebuff. Nevertheless, for ^{the} sake of appearances, a lone maiden falsified her situation. "My husband is a professor at the Conservatoire ..." (Alpers, Stories, 149) or "My large box is at the station ..." (Alpers, Stories, 97)—statements of this kind exemplify these loners' penchant for fibbing. Depressed by hard use and misadventure, young women are in their element only in solitude. Even in the privacy of her room, Mansfield's solitary affronts her anti-self:

In the mirror she saw again that strange watchful creature who had been her companion on the journey, that woman with white cheeks and dark eyes and lips whose secret she shared, but whose air of stealthy desperation baffled and frightened her, and seemed somehow quite out of her control (Alpers, Stories, 201).

A sea-voyage has its own peculiar sensation. Doubts and uncertainties of Mansfield's consciousness merge with natural forces, and the disorder of life is absorbed in endless time. Nobody knows the young lady in the cabin. She sinks into

oblivion, knowing all the people to the point of indifference: "You do not believe in dry land any more — you are caught in the pendulum itself ..." (Alpers, *Stories*, 95). The Maidens are both inhibited and irritable. Garrulousness of co-passengers disconcerts them, the resentment being rooted in their colonial detachment. They are persona-non-grata because of their malicious wit, indulging more in sarcasm than in persiflage. The displaced woman invents a name for almost all the characters around her. The Mole, the Enthusiast and Negative provide her with amusement in "The Journey to Bruges".

Conversations are overheard and commented on. A person's distinctive features or other characteristics are exaggerated or distorted. Caricature becomes an obsession with Mansfield's lone women. Mackintosh Cap in "Epilogue III : Bains Turcs" confides to the narrator in a scandalous manner : "One might at least cut one's nails in private, don't you think?" (Alpers, *Stories*, 149). Richard Aldington in his D. H. Lawrence, Portrait of a Genius But... mentions Mansfield's scandalmongering habits, which, incidentally are in full view in the same stories. In "Epilogue III : Bains Turcs" Mackintosh Cap's outrage is noticeable. It is the most reasonable reaction she can have after a grim married life. Her sallow face and sunken eyes are juxtaposed against the two fresh beauties who are independent. Seagull in "An Indiscreet Journey" is named after her hat; a black velvet toque with a seagull camped on top of it. The

contempt and disdain in such portrayals may seem gratuitous, but they point to the malaise of a dislocated victim standing in doubtful dignity.

The hoydenish manner of a girl travelling alone mantles confusion and nervousness. In "The Journey to Bruges" the young lady is not deliberately obtuse. She runs to the bookstall and on her return loses the porter to find that she has been running for the wrong train. Her violent haste is piqued by the impudent porter. Her frantic hurry amuses his lot. In "Being A Truthful Adventure" the narrator is refused a room at the hotel for her meagre luggage which exposes her impecuniousness. She refuses to be treated as a commodity and finally dispels the doubts of her hostess with a synchronous rebuff.

Women are a feeble lot in Mansfield's *Dame Seules* stories. The strength and predominance of men reduce them, overshadow them and finally unnerve them. Security and comfort are ephemeral pleasures which vanish as fast as they appear. The little governess is abused and laughed at. Her only foible is that she is petite, frail, and not well-off. These factors make her an easy victim of heathenish male passengers. One of the young men "bursting with the joke, pointed to the notice *Dames Seules* and the four bent down the better to see the one little girl in the corner" (Alpers, *Stories*, 168). The porter enjoys his share of male predominance over the frightened girl. Physical inability brings the little governess to an impasse. The porter tries to

exploit her by demanding an additional sum which she refuses. Even then she wonders whether he wants an extra franc just because she is a girl and is travelling alone. His sharp eyes prick her all over before he goes away. A curious sense of exposure is explicit. Arriving again with somebody else's luggage the porter tears off the dame's seyle notice. The girl's self-confidence is wrecked by this unprecedented attack which hurts her like a physical violation. As the four young men in the next carriage mock her and sing at the top of their voices, she feels offended, shocked, and out of place in the compartment. Visibly nervous, the little governess is restored by the old man who makes his presence felt amidst the din. Pacified, she settles down peacefully, unconscious of his actual intention. He insidiously worms his way into her confidence. She is made dizzy by the beer which he offers. Charmed with fairy tale wanderings and expensive food, she goes to his flat where he tries to seduce her. Dumbfounded, she succeeds in running down the broad road as if she had escaped from an Ogre's den.

Young girls are sirens. Men are irresistibly attracted to them, but the peculiarity of the infatuation lies in its purely contractual nature. It is not love but lust of an abominable kind with a large dose of sexual harassment. The disgruntled frown of a lone Mansfieldean maiden has a strong subjective relevance. Mansfield's inherent tendency to fall for frauds of the opposite sex often aggrieved her. She must have

been pretty gullible to fall for Floryan Sobieniowsky and many of his like. Sobieniowsky blackmailed her and was ultimately pacified with financial assistance from Ida Baker. The old man in "The Little Governess" is a rather dangerous fraud. He kisses the little governess as if to make up for the money he has spent on her. In "The Swing of the Pendulum", a stranger offers pecuniary aid to Viola. He actually makes the most indecent proposal a young man can make to a girl living in penury. "I'll give you two hundred marks if you'll kiss me", he says (Alpers, Stories, 87). There is a Faustian profanity in that offer. Viola recoups herself for the loss. Robbed of her dignity, she strikes back and physically confronts him.

Viola wins her battle by her tact and strength. She feels exhilarated by her victory; by having conquered the beast all by herself. Like D. H. Lawrence's "Tickets, please", the story presents violent action. The specific confrontation involves physical contact in both the stories. Lawrence's story is more intense because of Anne's involvement with John Thomas. Her terrible lust slowly changes to strange bitterness, and she is in torture when Thomas ultimately chooses her as his girl. The unknown possibilities of love are explored with the typical Lawrentian vigour. Lawrence's preoccupation with 'blood' is also noticeable. The girls have their blood up in a frenzy while roughing up Thomas. Viola does not love the stranger in "The Swing of the pendulum", so she does not long for physical contact

like Anne. Her fight is against male strength and impudence. Mansfield does not make a ceremony of it as Lawrence does. In Viola's case her victory calms her, and she can once again face life.

Mansfield's ineffectual angels are often bypassed in their pursuit of love. The story "In a Cafe" highlights the plight of a young girl who tries to find infinite happiness in the possibility of love. She gives her lover a bunch of violets as a token of love and dreamily walks in the cold outside. The great fire hugging her heart suddenly dims as she finds the trampled violets. Crestfallen, she kicks them into the gutter. Harry, in "The Tiredness of Rosabel", has a tantalizing but short dialogue with Rosabel. She deprecates his advances publicly but continues to be obsessed with him, being aware of the futility of her situation. Loneliness and poverty place Mansfield's young girls on the periphery rather than the mainstream life. The situation is made doubly worse by the self-righteous male's demoralization. Men have physical strength and money. Possession of money gives them the right to misbehaviour. Mansfield's lone women display an idolatrous love for money. They are often less refined than Hardy's Eustacia Vye. A sumptuous meal is for them a much sought-after comfort than other refinements. Rosabel is ready to sacrifice her soul for a good dinner. At the thought of food Viola feels a sharp twinge in her stomach squeezing it dry. Hunger is more pronounced than other aspirations probably because it is more immediate. Eustacia Vye was not starved even in her

worst days with Clym.

Money boosts the morale of Mansfield's young victims and the lack of it compels them to an undesirable living. There is a constant grudge against the life and energy that money deprives them. The importance thus attached to money is hackneyed in English literature, Robinson Crusoe being the earliest product of money-centric thinking. Fielding's Charles Grandison is financially secure and Jane Austen's intelligent heroines seldom pursue a man without money. In Mansfield's stories references to money are direct and unmasked. Viola is mortally afraid of her landlady as she has not paid her rent. Poverty is like a dream-mountain on which her feet are fast rooted. The little governess has dared to travel alone in desperate need. Rosabel goes to bed with ^{out} a dinner cuddling down in the darkness.

Money and the problem of an unsteady income in Katherine Mansfield's stories are infused with subjective undertones. Financial difficulties were a hindrance to creative work. Mansfield's letters often speak of the unrelenting pressure of a doubtful venture. To Murry she wrote in early 1914 about the constant worrying that seemed devouring : "A constant strain like that wears you out quicker than anything" (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 136). Letters of 1915 reveal a scrupulous exactness about money. To S.S. Koteliansky she could confide : "My God, what poverty ! ..." (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 153). Occasionally she is up in arms : "Damn this bloody money ... (O'Sullivan & Scott, I, 162)! plunged as she is into dire financial straits,

she feels that money is the greatest grinder. Mansfield shares this feeling with others as well.

Virginia Woolf and Mansfield shared a discreet friendship. The passionate Mansfield found Woolf ethereal, hovering over her subject. Surprisingly — it is the much professed dispassionate Woolf, who has time and again emphasized leisure and a little money as the greatest incentives for women writers. "With money and leisure women will occupy themselves more than has hitherto been possible with the craft of letters. They will make a fuller and more subtle use of the art of writing", Woolf concedes in her Granite and Rainbow (84). In A Room of One's Own, Woolf is more severe. The news of a legacy reached her the same night women were given the right to vote. "Of the two—the vote and the money — the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important", woolf openly admits (56). Secure in her home and her husband by her, Woolf stresses women's economic independence as she considers emancipation to be meaningless without it. Her vehemence is more pronounced in her essays and tracts than her journals. Mansfield's situation was the extreme opposite. Separated from her husband by disease and away from home, she was never ready to accept poverty. Colonial affluence had bred a certain self-consciousness that was never willing to accept penury.

For Katherine Mansfield's heroines, exposure means grappling with male curiosity and lust. They are not erudite. Inhibited and nervous, they learn slowly to be self-conscious. The role Mansfield allots to her young sirens is not that of the faceless domestic. Sooty kitchen roles are not for them. Grimace at household chores is not restrained. The unprotected, unguarded status of independent women is highlighted in Mansfield's stories. Strong emotions, a yearning for a great grip of life and instinctual behaviour characterize Mansfield's passionate quest. Women strive for significance despite disapproval. The feeling of misery and rage is gradually dissolved in reality. One has to find one's own way out and acceptance is not always easy. The indomitable optimism of youth sustains Viola, as well as Mansfield's other early heroines as they drift away in search of their true status in a male-dominated society.