Chapter III

The Feminine Experience

"One is not born, but becomes a woman" — Simone de Beauvoir

The stereotype of women in Katherine Mansfield's Bavarian sketches and some early stories have been created not to identify them culturally as negative objects but to launch a fierce polemic against a patriarchal order. They are modelled on characters Mansfield saw around her when she lay sick in a pension house at Worishofen. Their day to day living made a strong impression on her mind. She never failed to notice their frustrations though her own preoccupation was with larger problems, i.e. struggle for a kind of self-confidence that would end the terrible physical and mental confusion. The marginal and subordinate role of women in rural German society becomes the focal point in Mansfield's early German stories. As an ambitious, creative and adventurous woman she has no patience with the gender-biased social order, the anxiety and rage being rooted in her own sexual harassments and loss of girlhood.

Men's interests and needs have to be served, according to the prevailing concepts of the omnipresent patriarchal bias of our civilization. Frau Brechenmacher, for example, tired and exhausted after the day's work, dresses in the dark to attend a wedding feast with her husband. Herr Brechenmacher, naturally, has taken the lamp, leaving his wife in the dark to manage herself. The Frau has spruced up her husband's uniform, ironed

his shirt and polished his boots. She is conditioned to derogate her own sex and cooperate in her own subordination: "Dressing in the dark was nothing to Frau Brechenmacher" (Alpers, Stories, 43). Her nerve-shattering mindlessness becomes odious when she calls her daughter to watch her superbly dressed father. Frau Brechenmacher's mind is frozen like the ground outside. Her man does not wait for her and she runs after him like an obedient dog. At the party the disgraceful history of the bride is discussed to the Frau's discomfiture. She does not find a fund of amusement in the story and the sordid present dawns on her. She has five babies and twice as much money; but her dreams are lost. The coldness outside, the white and forsaken road instill a sense of despair that matches with the Frau's desolation.

The reproductive role of women and their sexual identification is a major thematic motif for Katherine Mansfield. Frau Binzer in "A Birthday", informs her son of his pregnant wife's condition in the morning. Old and exhausted with the night vigil, she lets out her exasperation when she grudges his night's sleep. His mother and wife are supposed to perform without demur the domestic and sexual duties which he expects from them. Anna, Andrea Binzer's wife has three children in four years. Her photograph, taken before her marriage, looks like an unknown stranger to Binzer. Her sole identity he recognizes is that of a mother and she does not look like a mother in that picture. No one could feel the humiliation of an ill-used female better than Mansfield, after her stormy affair with Garnet Trowell and

the miscarriage she suffered. Perpetual pregnancies have wrecked the constitution of the Frau in "The Child Who Was Tired". Her husband cannot stand the whimperings of his own children. Ironically when he says : "Swine of a day — swine's life ..." (Alpers, Stories, 23), he has spoken his doom.

The self-righteous male's usual ebullience and unashamed self-assertion are never eclipsed by female discomfort. Herr Rat in "Germans At Meet" appears unabashed by the crowd around him. " 'As for me, I have had all I wanted from women without marriage' ", he confesses (Alpers, Stories, 28). A woman on the other hand is identified by her knowledge of domestic detail. " 'How can a woman expect to keep her husband if she does not know his favourite food after three years?' ", the widow asks the narrator in the same story (Alpers, Stories, 31). Insensitivity becomes ridiculous at such moments. Women are caught up in a social context where they are never the subject. The Frau in "At Lehmann's" has grown so big in her pregnancy that her husband tells her to stay indoors as she looks 'unappetizing'. The term 'unappetizing' implies a degree of dehumanization, quite within the limits of male impertinence that is acceptable to society. The Frau does not dare to disturb her husband, but moans at his frightful indifference. She has been tutored to accept a life of depravity.

It is not often that the reader encounters a character like Frau Kellermann in "The Advanced Lady". She openly admits a woman's inability to exhibit love in family circles and blames family life for that drawback. The Advanced Lady goes a step forward to pinpoint the self-sacrifice of a woman as the greatest error in life. The distinctly feminine fervour ushers a certain uneasiness. The masculine element feels uneasy at these angry vibrations and ultimately succeeds in changing the topic.

Women are captured in brilliant erratic motion in some of Mansfield's later stories. Character delineation becomes intense and the theme of isolation accents the feminine identity. Linda Burnell in "Prelude" is exquisite and fragile. Forced into unwanted pregnancies, she cannot escape them even in her dreams. The fluffy ball she strokes becomes a baby. The strange metamorphosis horrifies her, though her father laughs at her. Linda is sick of her sole biological function. The prospect of sexual intimacy plagues her. She cannot innure herself to her husband's male aggressiveness. His firm, obedient body scares her and his amazing vigour seems to set him worlds apart. The dog image is deliberately introduced: "If only he wouldn't jump at her so and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes" (Alpers, Stories, 254). It is a pathetic trial of love that Linda experiences. She loves Stanley for his honesty and decency but has a horror of offering herself to him. There are all her feelings for him, sharp and defined, where hatred

is as real as the tenderness. Somnolence is her only refuge, as she is deflected from her actual intentions. Linda attempts to identify herself with the aloe, with its large protective thorns but in the process faces up to the grinding truth. She will go on having babies and Stanley will go on making more money till both of them are exhausted. Her only yearning is to have a room of her own, impregnated with mystery. Linda finds herself in a Waiting-For-Godot — like situation, to be listening with her wide open eyes, waiting for someone to come who just did not come.

The idea of woman is mistranslated in the materiality of existence. The patriarchal order is not merely idealistic. It constitutes a specific material oppression. Mrs. Fairfield in "Prelude" keeps her daughter's house nice and prim in return for her living. Stanley, her son-in-law shows scant respect to her when he inquires about his slippers. The old lady has lived so long under male dominance that she has forgotten her identity. She is fond of a grape-vine but only for its utility. Beaming with satisfaction at her refurbished kitchen, she characterizes the unselfconscious woman, oblivious of her status or purpose in life. Unlike her daughters, she is not fussy. Her geniality is invincible. Beryl Fairfield does not feel invigorated by the fresh air or the large house like her mother. In a moment of disgust and rage, her exasperated honest self catches out and castigates her assumed self given to role-playing. Beryl and Linda have invested a lot of energy in their self-conflicts and

the strain makes them irritable. Beryl, on her part, can only pity her mother who finds her life's satisfaction in shelling peas in a basin. She refuses to comply with what is expected from her, by an unrelenting society.

The women in the big country house rejoice at Stanley's absence, relieved to have the omnipotent male out of the house. Their tones change when they converse. Presence of men exert a pressure on them and they are glad to have them out. Alice, the servant-girl joins in the jubilation in "At the Bay". " 'Oh these men !' said she, and she plunged the teapot into the bowl and held it under water even after it had stopped bubbling, as if it too was a man and drowning was too good for them" (Alpers, Stories, 447). Here is a telling evidence of feminine vindictiveness generated by masculine repressiveness. D.H. Lawrence has offered a powerful expression of female revenge in "Tickets, Please", that is enlightening in this context. Annie's tete-a-tete with Nora Purdy holds the key to future action. To her proposal of roughing up John Thomas, Nora reacts with cool diplomacy. " 'I don't mind', said Nora. But as a matter of fact she was more vindictive than Annie" (Brooks & Penn Warren, 157).

Bitterness in Mansfield's feminine victims is often absorbed by nature. The world and the self exist in a symbiotic relationship in Linda's case. The physical world is present alright but the mind floats by its own volition. Dropping manuka

flowers incite a frisson of horror in Linda Burnell, as if her own fate is bound up with them. Delicacy and frailty are to be crumpled and there is no justification in her birth or that of a manuka flower. The elusive, fine female temperament is not easily approachable. Jonathan, the incurable romantic, feels the sense of rebellion smouldered in Linda; a rebellion that is strangled by worldly elements. He understands Linda because he, like her, senses life as an imprisonment. Jonathan is one of those extremely rare men who are able to feel the plight of women as despondent losers. Stanley hates Jonathan's idiocy as he is an earthly kind of a man and cannot come to terms with the latter's casualness. Linda likes Jonathan's nonchalance because like her, he is incompetent. In an exultant mood Linda asks Jonathan a maddening question : why doesn't he fly out? The answer is short : " 'Weak ... Weak. No stamina. No anchor. No guiding principle, let us call it' " (Alpers, Stories, 465). Jonathan's faded voice is soon quashed by the sound of Kelly's whips. The sound reverberates on Linda's sensitivity as she draws herself together to face her successful, robust husband.

Beside the angelic Linda Burnell is the arrogant woman. She has something to convey and will not be dissuaded by male or female intervention. Mrs Harry Kember shocks the reader in "At the Bay". There is nothing domestic or tame about her. She challenges the conventional feminine model by her lack of vanity and her slang. Herself the very reverse of a homemaker, she instigates others to follow her. No wonder, one of her friends,

Beryl Fairfield feels she is being poisoned by this woman. Mrs. Kember looks like a horrible caricature of her husband. It is artistic wrath that deforms her. Anger is the only positive signal of the feminine consciousness, as confirmed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their study entitled The Madwoman in the Attic.

Artistic anger and disease is projected into detestable figures as women writers of fiction enact their deconstruction of patriarchal logic. They create dark doubles of themselves and their heroines. Gilbert and Gubar's logic is affirmed in Mansfield's remarkable story, "The Woman at the Store". The woman is dehumanized to a degree till she becomes devilish. Thin and ugly, she lives in a desolate wharehouse with a rat of a child and a mangy dog. Drunk with the travellers, she vows to have her husband lynched for child-murder. A typical New Zealand setting intensifies the horrifying atmosphere as the story slowly unfolds: "There is no twilight to our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque - it frightens..." (Alpers, Stories, 112). In this story Mansfield comes to terms with her own feelings of fragmentation. It would be axiomatic to say that the woman is an image of exasperation. The ideas of confinement, disease, health and escape are important in this context. Subjection of women is caused not by natural drawbacks but by socialization. While growing up a girl internalizes certain conventions which become second nature to her. The exquisite and

fragile Linda Burnell and the woman at the store are two faces of the same personality. Both of them long for an escape from unwanted pregnancies. Linda is privileged socially and economically while the woman stagnates in her penury. Linda is cared for by her mother and restored by her family. Her dreams include her father as the guardian angel. The woman aggravates her situation by rotting in that warehouse. She has no other alternative. Her past is tainted like her present. She is not spoiled by any unfathomable pa-man like Linda. The venom and hatred of her married life find expression in her little girl's repulsively vulgar drawings. With a lunatic's shrewdness, she has drawn the picture of her mother shooting her father with a rook rifle.

Katherine Mansfield's study of the woman-woman relationship is remarkable. Miss Pearl Fulton in 'Bliss' is an interesting find in this context. Bertha Young adores Miss Fulton's moon-beam fingers and guesses her moods exactly and instantly. The moon is silver and 'Pearl' has a suggestion of silvery white. Like the moon, Pearl Fulton is shrouded in mystery. Bertha does not know how she apprehends Miss Fulton; she cannot give a logical explanation of her actions. " 'I believe this does happen very, very rarely among women. Never between men ' ", is her summing up of the extraordinary friendship (Alpers, Stories, 312). Luce Irigaray's study of the feminine communication would further ascertain the accuracy of Bertha's assumption. According to Irigaray, femininity is bound up with a specific woman's language which she calls 'le parler femme'. It emerges spontaneously when

women speak together, but disappears again as soon as men are present" (Toril Moi, Sexual Textual Politics, 144). Irigaray, Moi observes, was determined to say nothing about 'le parler femme', simply because it could not be meta spoken. Verbal discourse is abandoned completely for more touching rituals in "Bliss". Miss Fulton's 'sign' is noticed only by Bertha and her cool, sleepy voice has a strange potency which cannot be communicated to the men:

> And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed - almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon. 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 ... (Alpers, Stories, 312).

At the seeming limits of the intra-feminine communication is the zone of silent communion, the vibrations of which, Irigaray confirms, are too high for the patriarchal hearing mechanism. Mansfield's strictly private friendship with Virginia Woolf answers to Irigaray's silent communion. Equally important is the fact that Mansfield rarely refers to Woolf in her diaries or journal. Alpers' reference to a 1918 entry in Mansfield's journal, portraying a parting between the two friends on the steps of 2, Portland Villas is an indispensable evidence of Mansfield's

preoccupation with what Irigaray calls the intra-feminine communication(Alpers, Life, 288).

Linda Burnell speaks to her mother in a special voice that women use at night; as if they spoke from some hollow cave in their sleep. Miss Fulton's voice is cool and sleepy when she inquires about Bertha's garden. The urgency for silence is remarkable. Somnolence hastens the secret communion. It is a prerequisite for such noctural ventures. Hollow caves suggest the secrets of Women's sexuality. Night is the appropriate time for women to reach out to each other. The night of the soul comprises the obscurity and confusion of the self. The soul gradually transforms to a fluid self for some fleeting moments. The self remains oblivious of time. Its fluidity matches with the flowing moonbeams till its natural resilience helps to overcome the crisis.

What concerns, Mansfield is not a woman's being a woman but her becoming so. This shift from being to becoming vis-a-vis the portrayal of the aspects of feminine experience in her stories has its raison d'etre in her interest in the frustrations of an average woman's existence in a male-dominated society. Mansfield thus explores woman not per se but what man has made of her. The diabolic and the angelic are the obverse and reverse of the same coin minted in an androcentric society. The mad woman is a voice of protest which the meek woman lacks. The voice is an echo of the feminine void. True female voices are rare, as they are quashed by society and too fine for its understanding.