

Chapter IV

Dangerous Existences

"I alone have evoked the lucid insight these wretched beings possess into the fatality of their condition, a fatality such that it would be useless to react against it".

Dostoivsky

Katherine Mansfield seldom denies the authentic feminine states of mind; namely the angry and the alienated ones as specified by Elaine Showalter, in her study of women novelists entitled A Literature of Their Own, albeit to be pinned down to the gender-biased angle of vision does not seem several notches up to her, on the ladder of artistic excellence. Subterfuge becomes a deceptive luxury she can no longer afford. A time comes when she bids farewell to the misleading world of appearances. Striving for self-discovery is basically related to artistic adventure. In Mansfield's case, the pain and anxiety of her struggle is infused with a deep sense of sin. She does not recoil from confessing that she had actually acted her sins and then put them away. It had not always been a conscious exercise but often her consciousness had felt the essence of essential evil. Destruction and a deep sense of waste were the resultant emotions.

Mansfield's rendezvous with Francis Carco, conjugal lies and deliberate deceptions with her brother had never been acquiesced in the depths of her consciousness. Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay entitled "Experience", aims to shed some light on the dark continent of human experience that would substantiate our point : "The individual is always mistaken", Emerson asserts. He further clarifies - "He designed many things, and drew in other persons as co-adjutors, quarrelled with some or all, blundered much, and something is done; all are a little advanced, but the individual as always mistaken" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Journals*, 280). Mansfield's realization of her terrible mistakes looms over a spate of dark stories. With her brother Chummie's death in an explosion in 1915, the necessity of exposure of her hidden life became pronounced. Submerged life becomes the author's prerequisite in a series of stories of frightening depths, where the perceptible is penetrated with Dostoiivskian self-search.

Francophobia is closely linked with Mansfield's agonies. "I simply loathe and abominate the French bourgeoisie", she declares (O'Sullivan & Scott, II, 52).

While working on "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" Mansfield never leaves out the war and her illness. These are the two afflictions agglomerated into her complicated torment. The devouring nature of the war synchronizes with her consumption:

"Its here in me the whole time, eating me away — and I am simply terrified by it ..."⁷ (O'Sullivan & Scott, II, 54). Writing amidst the pandemonium must have been a bizzare occupation. Mansfield confides to Murry the two kick-offs of the writing game and a deep sense of hopelessness. "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" was completed in frantic urgency as she reveals in a letter to Murry : "My work excites me so tremendously that I almost feel insane at night and I have been at it with hardly a break all day" (O'Sullivan & Scott, II, 55). The story is her cry against corruption in exposing betrayal and duplicity to the extent of apparent vulgarity. A precarious living and corruption are important thematic motives in the story. Love is robbed of its dignity in a continuous war of attrition.

Ill with consumption and what was later diagnosed as gonorrhoea, Mansfield's rage is directed towards herself. Murry felt her urgencies and said that she was dragging deep into her consciousness, "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" and a few other dangerous stories strive to enact a mirror-like thematic structure where reality is inverted. Mansfield peeps at her own inverted image through "Je ne Parle pas Francais ". Like Dostoivsky's Memoirs from the Underground, the story is a record of the artist's soul-shattering experience. In Dostoivsky's case, the winter of 1863-64 had been decisive. His letters of this period speak of mental agony. To his brother M.M. Dostoivsky, he confided on 5th March 1864 ; "Now I must tell you that I have been worse than I ever expected" (Jessie Coulson, Dostoievsky ; A Self Portrait,

123). Full of anxiety for his sick wife and his own illness, Dostoiivsky struggled to complete Memoirs from the Underground. Marya Dmitrievna, his first wife died on 15th April 1864, before the second part of the Memoirs could be published. No less harrowing was his brother Misha's death in July, the same year. Dostoiivsky was trying to make concrete the realities of human condition in a series of extreme and defining crises, a striving that is equally intense in Mansfield's case. It became one of Dostoiivsky's strongest convictions that human nature is not essentially good. Man may choose evil knowing it to be evil. According to him human evolution is a confirmed record of man's irrationality. Nobody could feel this better than Dostoiivsky, whose happiness was not only marred by his love for Suslova (his mistress) but also by a passion for the gaming table. The obstacle in the way of Mansfield's bliss is her murky past, revealed in the perversity and malevolence of "Je ne Parle Pas Francais". The chief impulse that drove Dostoiivsky to the gaming table was a yearning for unnatural emotions. His nerves became agitated in the process and he placed himself in an excited state of self-imposed doom. Mansfield's receptive attitude accounted for much of her nightmarish experience. Mouse's fate in "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" is undeniably Mansfield's own fate caught between the claws of worldly evil. Her choosing Dick Harmon or trusting Raoul Duquette are arbitrary choices for which she is doomed.

Christian eschatology is severely repudiated in "Je ne Parle Pas Francais". Diseased pride asserts itself easily. Raoul Duquette does not believe in the human soul. He believes that "... people are like portmanteaux" (Alpers, Stories, 277). The loss of faith is imbued with a bitterness against life. Life is a trespasser to Raoul, the diseased underground man. He has an instinctual eagerness to strike back. He shapes his life by his rebellious intellect as George Steiner observes in his study Tolstoy or Dostoevsky : "The man from the lower depths possesses intelligence without power, desire without means" (215). Raoul Duquette puts out his tongue not merely at the reader but also himself. "I have made it a rule of my life never to regret and never to look back. Regret is an appalling waste of energy" (Alpers, Stories, 280), he asserts. Applying his personal logic to art Duquette concedes : "Art can't and won't stand poverty" (Alpers, Stories, 280). Raoul's galling life vision springs from his past. A dark uncanny childhood of unknown fears has bred a creeping sickness in Mansfield's archetype. If he refuses remedies, it is out of malice. He prefers to conceal his past of baser instincts. With his bygone days safely hidden, Raoul can proudly speak of his artistic mission.

I am going to write about things that have never been touched before. I am going to make a name for myself as a writer of the submerged world. But not as others have done before me. Oh, no ! very naively, with a sort of tender humour and from the inside, as though it were all quite simple, quite natural. I see my way perfectly.

Nobody has ever done it as I shall do it because none of the others have lived my experiences. (Alpers, *Stories*, 282).

The dirty and sad little cafe in "Je ne Parle Pas Francais", with its mean, shabby atmosphere represents an arch-Dostoivskian background to which the weather is the appropriate key. Raoul repeatedly visits this place of his morbid triumph; "where I had the old bitch by the throat for once and did what I pleased with her" (Alpers, *Stories*, 278). The dusk and the snow outside prefigure a painful malady that has poisoned Raoul. His dissipated life, twisted personality lend a tang to his art by sharpening his dramatic point of view. Here is a tantalizing instance of his capacity to look at himself from the outside : "I am like a little woman in a cafe who has to introduce herself with a handful of photographs. 'Me in my chemise, coming out of an eggshell' ..."

(Alpers, *Stories*, 283). Such shocking revelations were perhaps too revolting for an unprepared reading public of the time, when Lawrence's novel The Rainbow was being suppressed. Raoul's cynical outbursts against love and sex were partially toned down at the insistence of Michael Sadlier. Mansfield, primarily agreeing to the omissions at Murry's insistence, regretted afterwards. It was like having the eyes off a story. The vulgarity is an indispensable part of it though it can be shocking beyond belief. Raoul makes full use of his arsenal of invective, being aware of his crippling inhumanity. The mien, the jeering tone, the mingling of the arrogant and abject may be observed in him. Like the underground man, he talks endlessly

to himself, advancing to the vocabulary of the unconscious.

The underground man is a product of the subconscious hell that seethes in the depths of man's soul. Duality of emotions, E.H. Carr observes in his study of Dostoiivsky, is a prominent feature not only in the Memoirs but also his novels. The double in Mansfield's story is introduced to diagnose a disease. Raoul has a penchant for filthiness and is proud of it, yet he is a confirmed egoist. The sadistic and masochistic are alternate manifestations of his double self. Self-scrutiny is his asset that assists in the process of self-definition. "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" marks a stage in the evolution of the artist's thought. The irrational chaos of human nature opens a chasm where things are revealed in a new light. Raoul Duquette dramatises through his voice, the many tongued confusion of Mansfield's consciousness.

Dick Harmon and Raoul Duquette both ill use Mouse, the central female character in "Je ne Parle Pas Francais". Dick has succeeded in bringing her to Paris, a city of unknown horrors. The city lies with its social injustices, its fake sexual conventions and its cruel display of wealth. Mansfield's Paris is much like the Dostoiivskian metropolis or an inferno to be more precise, where reconciliation or grace cannot exist. Dick abandons Mouse in the strange city and goes back to England at the beckoning of his mother. His Oedipus-complex is explicit in his letter

to her. Dick's mother fixation prevents fulfilment in love. He suffers from a congenital mental disease and is condemned. Like Raoul, Dick perpetrates actions which nothing can extenuate. He can never be the strong, solid man on whom Mouse can rely. There is a detestable feminine dependency in Dick's character, wrought with considerable artistic disgust. At the idea of Raoul's departure, he seems to faint. His wretchedness at these points becomes unseemly.

Mouse, as her name suggests, is meek and frightened, longing for a hole to shelter herself. She seems to be a little creature who cannot apprehend what is done to her and is destined to beat her little heart with her tiny fist in the dark, cold corner. The city strives against her, intent upon her life. Her muff is her only protection against unknown horrors. Mouse is enraged at Dick's nerve-shattering inability but controls herself. It is not understandable why she has made the blunder of coming to Paris with him as he is unsteady and never master of himself. Dick leaves Mouse alone on the pretext of posting a letter to his mother and does not return. She makes the second fatal mistake in breaking down in front of Raoul. Raoul, as is expected of an urban rake, takes full advantage of her insecurity. " 'Do feel that I am your friend' " (Alpers, *Stories*, 298), Raoul tells Mouse. He wants her to use him. Ironically it is he who uses her, deliberately with a diabolic cunning. His hypocrisies are a cover for his sole aim of seduction. Raoul succeeds in his mission abominably : "I succeeded. She came out of her hole ...

timid ... but she came out" (Alpers, *Stories*, 298). He is represented as a satyr, boisterous and lustful. His language and gestures, like the satyr are often obscene. His blatant effronteries have something overmastering that works the reader up to a state of moral indignation. "Je ne Parle Pas Francais" is not merely amatory literature. Sexuality in the story is not procreative but poised against a hard mechanical world represented by Paris. Mouse's affirmative physical reality is corrupted both by Raoul and Dick. Dick's clumsiness is juxtaposed against Raoul's corruptive pride. Raoul obeys his passions clinging to the notions of selfhood. Both of them lack the essential solidity of character and a constructive enlightening consciousness. Mouse's condemnation is an obvious hazard as she has come into contact with them. A deep sense of waste permeates the story.

Disillusionment and lost hopes are the dominating motives in "A Dill pickle". Mansfield's past relationship with Francis Heinemann during the New Age period comes up in the story. The story takes up for review neither the beginning nor the continuation of a relationship. Vera sees her friend after six years. Six years have acquired spatial qualities with the time-lapse. Vera has matured and now when she looks back in retrospect, she cannot fail to notice her indifference. Her efforts at finer intimacy have been killed. The rapture and mood of their previous meetings are wholly extinguished by the passage of time. The chill outside synchronizes with the cold inside. It galls Vera bitterly to

think of past pleasures. She hears stories of the Black Sea with the anguish of a famished child. Her friend's realistic description of the sea is pregnant with psychological import. In a swoon, Vera loses herself to the outstanding ambience for a while. In the mysterious out of doors, she is awoken from her slumber by the coachman's voice, urging her to taste a dill pickle. She has never eaten a dill pickle but can imagine it "the greenish glass jar with a red chili like a parrot's beak glimmering through" (Alpers, *Stories*, 274). Its piquant taste is not new to her; life has the same flavour, if not more sour. In fear of being caught, Vera prepares to leave. Her friend's mockery of the past confirms the point of her exit.

The dying of a relationship is the theme of "A Dill Pickle". Vera's friend is incomprehensive of her disorderly enthusiasms. The inherent smallness of a love affair and its tyrannical money-centric dimensions are apt at killing it. Vera waits till her friend hands her back the glove, full of detachment. She hurries without bidding him goodbye almost stealthily, to avoid the futile theorizing and bothering about money. The characters of Vera and her friend are darkened with excessive honesty. They affirm Mansfield's conviction that life is fragmented and is continually renewed.

Aged spinsters in abject misery possibly represent a defoliated life of wasted passions in Katherine Mansfield's stories. Remote from matrimonial prospects, they lead a dreary life on which restrained sexuality leaves a lasting effect. They

lack conviviality. No warmth of feeling unites these maids organically to life. It is life in the void they portray, a life not really existing, disconnected from the vital and substantial world. Miss Brill always has a foreboding of hopelessness. The Jardine Publiques with its bands playing and the hackneyed human drama suddenly strikes the chords in Miss Brill. She becomes aware of her meaningless performance everyday. Miss Brill has become a stupid old thing, a hindrance to others' intimacy.

Sunday after Sunday she notices odd silent faces on the benches, "as though they'd just come out from dark little rooms or even cupboards" (Alpers, *Stories*, 375). Cupboards suggest double confinement, a room within a room. Dark little rooms have suggestions of cellars. Cellars in the Dostoiivskian architecture of symbolism give a strong image of space beneath floorboards. The mind's descent to its depths makes external reality sound unsubstantial. Miss Brill never hears these people speak. They are, like her, inhabitants of the underworld. Her little dark room is a veritable cage from which she cannot escape. The voice crying inside the box is her own maimed identity.

Ellen in "The Lady's Maid" is a confirmed spinster like Miss Brill. She cuts off her hair, her most prized possession. With the loss of her hair, Ellen loses her identity. One further point needs to be made. Ellen loses physical contact with the world outside. She lives a life that is not really her own. Her world comprises the one and inevitable 'My lady'. She has virtually made a donkey-ride of her life. The fact that her

dreams are laden with donkeys has suggestions of her denial of every rational human satisfaction. Performing menial duties to her mistress, she slides into absolute servitude like a washerman's donkey, stupid but obedient. What alarms the reader is the recurrent use of animal imagery designed to dehumanize Ellen. The sense of animality affects Ellen's consciousness.

The daughters of the late Colonel are hypnotized as they move about in a drugged atmosphere. Josephine and Constantiana continue to live in a hollow after their father's death. Peering through the murk, they are in a trance, uncertain of everything. With bleak marital prospects, they are in a consequence so edgy that at the slightest stir they go overboard. Obsessive reference to 'Mouse' is not without significance in "The Daughters of the Late Colonel". Josephine and Constantiana are two little mice, timid and cowardly. They grope for their holes in dark depths. Afraid of exposure they are pacified in darkness. Nurse Andrews shocks them by her gluttony but she stands as a superb contrast to their lack of appetite and sickness. Having been devitalized by their living father, they live with his shadow after his death. The two sisters always anticipate intrusion. When Mr. Farolles, a clergy, suggests a communion, they become terrified but as usual their response is dilatory and not clear at all. Whether at the cemetery or in the house they are torn to pieces by assuming untimely invasions of the dead man. Their points of contact with the vital world are few. Josephine and Constantiana are in a constant phobia of confronting the dead, a condition

not conducive to healthy living. Their father's amazing power to destroy the remnants of their self-awareness is an illusion which inhabits them. Constantania's efforts to dissimulate her thoughts end in dismal retreat. The strain surfaces on the countenances of the two sisters. They lose the sense of time and live dubiously, dwarfed by the past.

Miss Emily Grierson in William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily" resembles the daughters of the late Colonel in her isolation. When the city tax collectors come to see her, she advises them to talk to Colonel Sartoris, a man long dead and buried. The lapse of distinction between life and death is an important symptom of Miss Emily's sickness as well as the two sisters in Mansfield's story. The realms of appearance and reality merge in their vision. Josephine and Constantania in "The daughters of the Late Colonel" are so absorbed in their hovering flights that the maid's inquiry brings them back to the trammels of routine with a bump. They can hardly take it in, but as usual they cannot dismiss her in spite of her impertinence. "That just on this one subject I've never been able to quite make up my mind", (Alpers, *Stories*, 399) Constantania meekly confesses. She has, in fact, not made up her mind on any subject. Distanced from her, Faulkner's Miss Emily is proud and decisive in spite of her schizophrenia. She inspires awe in other people and is never ready to accept the world on others' terms. Confidence and pride are totally absent in Mansfield's daughters of the late Colonel, though they have striking similarities with Faulkner's Miss Emily.

Mansfield's story does not end in horror like Faulkner's. There is a possibility of redemption that is suggested in the denouement. With sunlight flashing over the photographs of the dead and chirping sparrows, there is a resurgence of hope. For the first time in their lives, Josephine and Constantania forget to be dictated. The Buddha with its mysterious smile assists in their rehabilitation. Their lives so far had been spectral; they had been beautifully out of touch and at the same time conscious of their disconnection. In cosmic manifestations they grope for self-assurance. Sunrays and moonbeams affect them physically. The soft intimacy of the night and the iridescent moonlight have a physical effect on Constantania. The pale big moon urged her to reach out. She is charged with a strange potency only in close proximity with nature : "It was only when she came out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm that she really felt herself" (Alpers, Stories, 402). Exposure, as indicated by 'coming out', becomes a precondition for self-discovery. Contact with the inwardness and reticence of cosmic rhythms, against the hard insentience of the outer world is essential for self-scrutiny. Unravelling the tangle of consciousness, Constantania finds herself sinking into a strange oblivion. She is uncertain of the future but waits in confused apprehension. The force of universal symbolism evolved in the story was an unconscious exercise. It was two years after the publication of "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" that Mansfield read Cosmic Anatomy and expatiated her views:

To get even a glimpse of the relations of things — to follow that relation and find it remains true through the ages enlarges my mind as nothing else does. It's only a greater view of psychology. It helps me with my writing, for instance, to know that hot + bun may mean Taurus, Pradhana and substance. No, that's not really what absorbs me; it's that reactions to certain causes and effects have always been the same. It wasn't for nothing that Constantiana chose the moon

(Alpers, Life, 354)

Mansfield seemed satisfied with her story, as her letter to William Gerhardie, written after the story's publication, confirms. She recognized the beauty hidden in the lives of the two sisters' and had no reservations about admitting it. To Hardy's request to write more about the sisters she modestly acknowledged her inability. There was nothing more to write about them. The story, according to her own artistic standards, was complete in itself.

"Poison", completed in November 1920, is a story about promiscuous love. Princess Bibesco's love letters to Murry occasioned Mansfield's strange melancholia. Murry's evasiveness on the subject angered her and she called him a liar privately. Not content with having posted a letter to the love-smitten princess, she wrote "Poison", a story of love jinxed by letters. In an undated letter of November 1920, Mansfield tried to make her intentions clear which Mr. Alpers cites in his collection of her stories (Commentary, 565). "Poison" is told in retrospect. Twenty four is an impressionable age for a man. His passionate

love for the pearl-studded Beatrice is more ideal than real. She is an epitome of elegance and beauty. Married twice, it is striking that she does not wear a wedding ring. She has an air of ghastly freedom about her albeit she is the enchantress, smiling in a provocative manner. Beatrice seems intent on an ethereal flight and is apt at puzzling her lover by her numerous guises. He gropes for self-assurance in her love. She soothes him with her deceptive magic. The bliss is shattered by the postman's footsteps on the gravel. Her heavenly grace disappears in a moment. The chronic schizophreniac comes out and talks of her hurried life of conspiracies. When her lover asks her whether she has poisoned anybody, his gesture becomes striking and explosive, unleashed by the hallucinatory, equivocal air. The hysterical atmosphere thickens in the denouement : "The drink tasted chill, bitter, queer" (Alpers, Stories, 382). The indomitable lover has ultimately been poisoned by the dangerous woman. There is an air of unpredictability in the creation of Beatrice. She moves between two worlds, the real world and the world of penumbral shadows. Having little to lose, she is feral, with a streak of vicious cunning. Mansfield has conjured up powers of darkness in the story and it becomes harrowing. Cruel artistic malice reaches a paroxysm in the creation of Beatrice. She is a study in sin.

"The Young Girl" is a product of Mansfield's hallucinations. Mrs. Raddick's young daughter is not permitted into the casino as she is merely seventeen. She does not mind that rebuff. Her indifference and weariness is striking, unusual for her age.

The fact that she does not care to take off her gloves at the tea-table or that she is not intent on observing things and bites her lips, point towards a malaise. The tiresome performance around her only confirms her alienation. Her glassy look suggests an opaqueness. She inhabits the void like Miss Brill or Raoul Duquette. She is not potentially venomous like Raoul or Beatrice but with her derisive rejection stands apart. Her sight is obstructed by her unsafe edge. She sees a hole in the air and looks through and through. It is useless for the young girl to react against such fatality.

"The Stranger", as its name suggests is the story of an outsider. The autobiographical element in the story has been much publicized, but the apocryphal part of it certainly juts out from Mansfield's personal experience. Harold and Anne Beauchamp's voyage and a passenger's death at sea was a distant event in October/November 1920, when Mansfield conceived the story. More recent was Anne's death and Harold's second marriage. Anne's intimacy with death is suggestive in a queer manner. She did not know the dying man but had shared a strange relationship with him, nurtured by physical contact : " 'It was heart'. A pause. 'Poor fellow !' she said. 'Quite young'. And she watched the fire flicker and fall. 'He died in my arms', said Janey" (Alpers, *Stories*, 372). To have held a complete stranger at the mysterious moment of death is an experience that Janey cannot overcome. She seems drugged by it. Her story deflates Hammond. By the time the story ends, his

breast is hollow. The stranger has completely shattered his eagerness towards physical intimacy:

The fire had gone red. Now it fell in with a sharp sound and the room was colder. Cold crept up his arms. The room was huge, immense, glittering. It filled his whole world. There was the great blind bed, with his coat flung across it like some headless man saying his prayers

(Alpers, Stories, 373).

Hammond affects a sense of degradation. His prurience has affected his vision. The new and ambiguous beauty in Janey's countenance is beyond his perception. As often in Dostoiivsky, one particular feeling is highlighted by Mansfield, namely longing for conjugal intimacy in Hammond's case, and then replaced by its direct opposite i.e. intrusion of a third unknown character to cause great resentment and vexation. The mute dead passenger exacerbates Hammond's edginess. His vision of himself is inverted and headless, inflamed with passion. Dead and gone, the stranger has succeeded in intriguing him against Janey. They would never be alone again. There is a cruel rejection of passionate advances in the story; a strong disapproval of conjugal bliss is furnished amidst the hallucinatory air. Hammond's sensible and rational self is compelled to do something utterly senseless. His is the hideous torment of a jealous husband though his opponent is a dead man. The irrationality and chaos of his consciousness has segregated him from mainstream life.

The dangerous existences that Mansfield's characters court are their only option as they are maladjusted in their society as

well as in their family. As they shrink from two concentric circles of existence, they look upon guilt and sin as a kind of free act which would enable them to step beyond the oppressive boundaries laid down by society and family. Engaged in a dangerous existence, the ultimate goal of such a character is the self, the dead honest self. None of Mansfield's protagonists are great men or women but the most dangerous ones are often exceptionally intelligent and intellectually strong, like Raoul Duquette or Beatrice. Hubris is their greatest impediment to their struggle for self discovery, though it is their most striking asset. Having forfeited the normal joys of life, they hasten to their doom, driven by infernal malice and arrogant pride. They claim to be deemed convinced and consistent egoists. They are projections of Mansfield's antinomian potential selves. Her dangerous characters yield to every contradiction with gay abandon. They deal with God and Devil at the same time and with equal ease.