



## A Marxist Humanist Study of The Selected Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield

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### Abstract

Marxist-humanism is significant and pertinent theory which critiques the exploitation of lower classes by bourgeois classes and lays emphasis on the value of individual in present-day class-conscious societies. In the Marxist-humanist vision of human society, the freedom of a human being is the most important aspect of social existence which should not be usurped by elite classes. This research paper scrutinizes the Marxist-Humanist strains delineated in the thematic dimensions of the three selected short stories *The Doll's House*, *The Garden Party*, and *Life of Ma Parker* by Katherine Mansfield. The nature of this paper is qualitative, and the researcher has attempted to unravel the process of dehumanization of the bourgeois sections of society which results in the alienation of the lower classes. Mansfield's short stories have not been previously explored from a Marxist-humanist perspective and the present research contributes to the available research studies on Katherine Mansfield's short stories.

**Keywords:** Marxist-humanism, dehumanization, freedom, bourgeois class, lower class, alienation

### Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is an innovative modern fiction writer and considered a pioneer of the modern short stories. She was a contemporary writer of Virginia Woolf, D H. Lawrence, James Joyce and as such their contemporary most of her writings reflect the issues of feminism, socialism, realism, and Freud's psychology. In her short stories, she has produced diverse characters, however, her writing style is very regular as most of her characters are women or children, suffering from everyday life. As Malcolm Cowley argues that her characters are always so accurate that they perfectly fit in the situation and expose themselves with a great effect (as cited in Greenwood, 1965). She has the ability to understand the nuances of emotional experiences and to mold them in a wholeness which is her god-gifted talent. Her short stories are a perfect amalgamation of experiences of the common people, their thoughts and emotions which can be felt by the readers of all ages.

Katherine Mansfield is chiefly remembered for her short stories, and she has produced a major collection of short stories. Her famous collections of short stories include *In a German pension*, *Bliss and Other Stories*, *The Garden Party and Other Stories*, *The Dover's Nest and Other Stories*, *Something childish and Other Stories*, *The Short stories*



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of *Katherine Mansfield* and many more. These short stories reflect the pertinent issues of class consciousness, miseries of the poor people, hypocrisy and maltreatment of the lower class, women empowerment, loss of innocence and humanity, lack of compassion, alienation, and loneliness. As she belonged to the bourgeois class, most of her works tackle with the loss of humanity in her own class.

The writer is best known for her short stories and so many of them have been widely discussed with different theoretical lenses. Being a feminist writer, her short stories have been analyzed with feministic views which unearth Mansfield's view of feminism. She emphasizes the role of women, their rights and position in the society (Cooper, 2008, pp. 104-110). She was influenced by the Freudian's notions of psychology, and most of her works reflect these ideas which have been analyzed by this psychoanalytical theory (Lina & Shanshan, 2019, p.23). These stories have been researched with the view of post colonialism (Fitriana, 2015, pp. 30-37), class-consciousness, and the influence of socio-economical state (Pasupulla et al. 2021, p. 1138). Her works have also been discussed linguistically where the researcher studies her narrative language and narrative structure of her stories (Huang & Feng, 2020, p.73).

The present work differs from the available academic research study in the Marxist Humanist study of the three selected short stories. The present research explores the Marxist Humanist aspects of the selected short stories *The Doll's House*, *The Garden Party* and *Life of Ma Parker*. Her short stories have not been previously studied from a Marxist-humanist perspective and the present research, by doing so, will contribute to the available research studies on her short stories. The research is conducted to address the following issues:

Firstly, how do Katherine Mansfield's short stories delineate Marxist Humanist aspects?

Secondly, what are the Marxist humanist thematic strains portrayed in Katherine Mansfield's short stories?

And thirdly, how the loss of humanity leads to a sense of alienation in the lower class?

### **Statement of the Problem**

This research article will analyze the Marxist-humanist elements present in the three selected short stories *The Doll's House*, *The Garden Part* and *Life of Ma Parker* by Katherine Mansfield. The researchers aim to highlight the loss of humanity in the upper



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class which alienates the lower class from the society and usurps their freedom. The present research will explore the Marxist-Humanist elements in the selected short stories which is missed in the available research studies on the selected short stories.

### Literature Review

Katherine Mansfield is a proficient writer whose works mirror the conditions of the society. Many scholars have examined her work by various views. They have studied the feministic ideas in her works and the women's influence and their status in the society. Some critics argue that some of Mansfield's works fight for the position of female and their equal rights as in *Life of Ma Parker*. Cooper (2008) analyzed the short stories by feministic view and appraises that how the two different social positions i.e., man and woman contribute to the hierarchical inequality, which causes the isolation of individual, where the true self of women is hidden behind the men and their roles are forced to be hidden behind the mask. Her female character's hopelessness is manifested by their interior consciousness (Cooper, 2008, pp. 104-110).

Lina and Shanshan (2019) observe that how Katherine Mansfield unravels the psychology of her characters. They have analyzed her use of language, stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and shift of type and space. Being a feminist writer, she tries to expose the true self of a woman through stream of consciousness and their inner conscious which determines her characters. As in *Life of Ma Parker* her miseries and harsh life is represented by her recollection of memories by making the use of stream of consciousness. Her nostalgic character leads the reader to understand the bitterness of her life. (Lina & Shanshan, 2019, p.23).

The short stories have previously been analyzed with various angles as Huang and Feng (2020) estimate the narrative perspective, narrative language, narrative structure, character analyzation and themes. There is the study of narrative techniques of focalization and covert progression used by Mansfield in her short stories, where focalization is the technique through which the writer focalizes the certain qualities of the characters so that the reader can just pay attention to what the writer wants them to see, and covert progression comes parallel to the plot development and leads the reader to respond in a different and opposite way (Huang & Feng, 2020, p.73). Her short stories have been widely discussed with the linguistic view as well in which the researchers discuss that how a single word describes the whole character and the thoughts and mood of the writer. Mansfield as a modern writer successfully makes use of the word



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of *loneliness* in her short stories to describe the alienation in the modern society (Sargsyan et al. 2017).

Not just linguistically but many researchers have examined the selected short stories with the Marxist perspective by various Marxist theories and how the socio-economic state affects this class-consciousness (Pasupulla et al. p. 1138). The stories have been discussed with the Marxist view with the help of *The Base and Superstructure Model* given by Marx, where the society determines the consciousness of a human being rather than the reverse. The class in which human being is born determines his viewpoint and the binaries are already set, where the proletariat are considered exactly opposite of the bourgeois class. This economic state of human being is the base, and the superstructure is the cultural activities that depend on this base. The superstructure is mainly the government which tend to legitimize the capitalist system to justify their violent struggles of this social injustice (Bashir, Mir & Mehmood, 2020). However, this system is inevitable. The upper class has to be dependent on the lower class and the lower class knows that they are being exploited by the upper class, but they have no choice except to accept their fate and there is no chance of reconciliation between them (Ahmed, Aziz & Amin, 2020).

Marxism in return produces the effect of postcolonialism in these stories, which are thoroughly discussed with postcolonial theory, where the upper class tends to be dominant and settles as colonizers, where the lower class is treated as the colonized which has the lower position in colonialism. The dominant group has a full authority over the lower class who are the minorities. It gives rise to the concept of the otherness, where the lower class is considered to be completely "other" for the dominant class as they seem somewhat different from the upper class. They take their positions according to their social status which is called self-positioning. This self-positioning is caused by otherness which leads to oppression and alienation of the other (Fitriana, 2015, pp. 30-37).

The present-day study differs in Marxist- humanist aspects of the selected short stories of Katherine Mansfield. The researcher will explore these aspects in the selected short stories and will contribute to the available academic research studies on her short stories.

### **Research Methodology**

The study of the research will be qualitative and inductive. The selected short stories will be analyzed for its thematic strains of Marxist humanism present within the



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text and the textual analysis will be carried out with the help of books, articles, journals, and the related material present on the internet. The paper will highlight the loss of humanity in the dominant class which in turn becomes the cause of alienation of the lower class. The process will be done in the light of Marxist humanist theories of Sartre and Althusser.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Marxism is a very wide literary theory which focuses on the behavior of dominant class to the lower class in a class-conscious society. And to understand Marxist Humanism one must have some knowledge about the concept of Humanism. Humanism refers to the notion that man is of great importance and he is the center of this universe. Individuals collectively form a society but, in that society, every single human being is important in the functioning of this society. It considers human beings as a central aspect of a society, and stresses that human beings are entirely dependent on themselves. They are the writer of their own destiny and only they have the power to change it. Marxist Humanism is the amalgamation of these two notions as they cannot be separated from each other. It stresses on the human beings as a central aspect of a Marxist society. It sees a man from a different perspective where it is important to highlight man's tragic elements and his problematics, which may include his miseries and poverty. It proposes that due to these flaws how he has been alienated by the class-conscious society and the essence of humanity has been lost in the elite class during this process of class struggle.

The selected short stories will be examined in the light of Sartre, and Althusser's Marxist Humanist theories. Jean Paul Sartre was a French philosopher, novelist, playwright, and a literary critic. His theories are very much influenced by Hegel and Marx. He reappraised the theory of master/slave relationship given by Hegel. For Sartre, humans are responsible for themselves. Only they can deal with their own situation appropriately. He demonstrates this class-conscious society as a battlefield, where the proletariat and the bourgeois class are struggling for their survival. The upper class is dominant, and it manipulates the lower class which in turns threatens its freedom. He stresses that humans are the center of this society. They have the freedom to do whatever they want to and to be whatever they want to be, and no individual has the right to usurp this freedom of the other (Kakkori & Huttenen, 2010). And this class-conscious society is made by the humans themselves. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre says that the people like to be privileged and they love the power to affect the



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nothingness, which causes the latter to be alienated from the society, which according to Marx (as cited in Greenwood, 1965), is a form of dehumanization.

Louis Althusser is one of the most influential Marxists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He has presented the Marxist theories with a new vision. According to him, the real world is operating on the two basic apparatuses. Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus. He considers the former one, the more potent as the powerful social class enforce their control by manipulating the ideology of the subjugated class, which is a ritual in the institutions. ISAs include all the private domains under which come institutions, churches, family, newspapers, political system, and culture etc. They work by imposing their ideology on the lower class. They manipulate the lower class by imposing their ideology on them which makes them think in certain ways. They intoxicate them by teaching them beliefs which they as a class must follow. In short, it is a form of psychological domination i.e., the lower class willingly acts in these ways to be a good citizen otherwise they will not survive in a class-conscious society. The Repressive State Apparatus on the contrary works in a different mechanism, using the public sector i.e., government, police, and army resort to excessive violence to make the people follow their orders. However, according to Althusser (as cited in La Pensée, 1970), the former apparatus is stronger than the latter one in the capitalist system.

### **Text Analysis**

The three selected short stories *The Doll's House*, *The Garden Party* and *Life of Ma Parker* revolve around the same theme, which is the loss of humanity and how society is involved in domestication of human beings according to their class. As a result of this loss of humanity, the hypocritical bourgeois class manipulates the lower class only to gain their benefits and exploit them. They establish certain ideologies according to their class and these ideologies pass over in their next generations. In *Life of Ma Parker*, the "Literary man" emerges as a common figure of the product of these rituals in society. It relates to Marx's claim that the basic essence of humanity has been lost in the process of this class consciousness (as cited in Locop 2019). The "literary gentleman" suggests an ironic name since he is portrayed as a very cultured man, who is always busy writing something, but his knowledge seems to be very superficial. He knows about a lot of things but not other people's feelings and emotions. At the beginning of the short story, it becomes very evident when the story commences that Ma Parker has lost her grandson. The "literary man" gets very awkward as he does not seem to know what he should say to console her. He is brought up in the status- quo society where he is not



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taught to see the pain of others especially someone who is inferior to him. As Sartre argues that values do not already exist in society, but they are created by human beings (Saarinen, 1983, p.193), the 'literary man' asks her about the funeral whether it was a success not knowing how harsh his words could be for the old woman who has just lost her grandson. And when she goes back to her work without responding to him, he interprets it as if she has overcome the loss.

Ma Parker has always had a hard life. All her life she was pushed back by everyone superior for belonging to the lower class. At the place where she worked for the very first time, she was not even allowed to read the letters of her family and was never allowed to go out. The cook there who was a "cruel woman" used to snatch away her letters from her as for her they made her dreamy. The hierarchy is set not just between the poor and rich but also in-between the poor people. She was also deprived of education as being a lower one. Even after enduring all these atrocities, she has not opened her heart to anyone because she is not allowed to do so and, she has no one in front of whom she could unburden herself. Not even the so-called "literary man" is able to understand her anxiety as if he has lost his conscience and the sense of humanity. Marx claims that such kinds of dominations institutionalized by patriarchy, woman disempowerment, and class discrimination are the real cause of individual dehumanization which leads them to marginalization suppressing them to the extent to not to let them realize their potential and abilities (Fuchs, 2021). This class-consciousness causes people to lose confidence in themselves so that they cannot realize their capacities and they cannot even resist it.

The old woman is very nostalgic, and her thought process is manifested using stream of consciousness. She recollects the memories of her grandson when she was ill. He is depicted as the one who wants to resist this culture of class domination and in the struggle to do that he dies. He often looks "offended" whenever he coughs as to tell his grandmother that it is her fault that they are living in such a way. As for Sartre (1966), humans are abandoned in this big world, and they are responsible for their own choices. They must make certain choices in certain situations "with other being-there in flesh and blood". It is their individual freedom that cannot be taken over by anyone in society. So, the little boy was offended by her as he holds her responsible for this and being unable to do anything for him. This shortage of material is the real cause of alienation and Sartre (1996) in his book *Critique* used the term "atomized" for these alienated



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people. For West (1982), the class societies deprived of humanity exploit the lower class, in turn, alienate them, and in this way, the exploited fail to have a good life and they are not able to realize their full potentials. The old woman is deprived of education and even a good job. It is the effect of this alienation that all her life she has put on the mask of satisfaction on her face to hide her distress. Subscribing to the role of typical mother that she was made to become in class-oriented society, she finds herself too weak and helpless to open herself in front of her children. The society around her behaves so callously remaining indifferent to her needs as if she were no human and her low class was a taboo. She cries in rain and her tears mix with rain. Her worries and woes make the heavens weep, but these are the humans who can make each other happy and this will happen when individuals are valued for the content of their character not class. Even in the end she is not able to put off her mask because she knows that there is no one who would care for her and that seals the exploitative and brutal character of class society.

In *The Garden Party* Mansfield portrays a hypocritical society where the family is involved in establishing the ideologies of their children. For Althusser (as cited in *La Pensée* 1970), the world is operating on two apparatuses, out of which one is Ideological State Apparatus, where different institutes, society or family is involved in establishing the ideologies. In this short story the mother is presented as taming her children. Laura is the protagonist of the short story who has not yet lost her conscience, sense of humanity, and innocence. The story commences with a beautiful morning and the preparations for a garden party is going on in the Sheridan house. The description of house is presented in a very delightful manner. Laura is seen as the one, copying her mother when she comes out in the garden to give instructions to the workers. She tries to copy her mother but after doing that she feels very much ashamed as if she has done something wrong. She admires the workmen that they are such nice humans. When one of them gives the idea to set up the marquee where it will act like something giving a slap in the eye, she begins to think that if it is a “respectful” thing for a workman to talk like that. She is confused in her ideas as if she is not yet properly domesticized by her mother in a particular class-conscious way. It relates to Marx’s claim that the social beings are manifested by their consciousness. The difference is not just made by the society, but it grows within the human beings. History of human beings is made according to the circumstances they encountered in the past. They like to be privileged





by the society. Laura has never seen such an encounter with a workman before which should make her think so. She is not yet a properly grown elite and a class-conscious girl.

Laura is very excited for the party but still it makes her feel shameful that they are doing a lot for just a party. She feels like she is doing something wrong, however she continues with it. Mansfield manifests her thought process as if she is struggling the ambiguous duality in her mind. She begins to like the workmen whom she deems to be very nice people. She thinks that they are much better than the men she knows and meets. She wants to make friends with them as she considers them humans too and she feels like she will get on with them much better. It seems like she is happy to see this outer world without this class-consciousness. She feels like she is one of them, like them a "work-girl". For Sartre (as cited in Kakkori & Huttenen, 2012), humans have freedom to choose whatever they want to be, no matter whatever the condition they are in. However, at some points, she has to believe her so called "logical mother" (*The Garden Party*). When Laura gets to know that there is a death in the stilts, she becomes so sad and asks her sister that if they are going to stop everything. However, she becomes very shocked when her sister denies that. She thinks that she is pretending to be ignorant but that is not the case with her. Her other siblings have fully adapted the class-conscious life. They know how to treat them and how to feel about them, but Laura is still innocent. She insists to stop the party over which her mother calls her "absurd". It is more shocking for Laura when she talks about the death to her mother and the first thing she asks her is whether it happened in their garden and sighs with relief when she comes to know that that is not the case. Laura's innocence amused her mother when she says that the poor people will feel bad if they would have a party. However, she gives her a beautiful hat which blurs Laura's sense of innocence and humanity. This hat is a symbol of wealth which blinds Laura, and she is not able to see the poor people's pain anymore. It acts as a tool which makes the people lose their sense of humanity. This accumulation of wealth results in social injustices which causes alienation in the society (Fuchs, 2021). West (1991) claims that Marx stresses on common life and sociality as a fundamental feature of human beings and alienation is another form of dehumanization and loss of humanity (Fuchs, 2021). After wearing the hat Laura forgets about the death in the poor. She enjoys the party to the fullest.



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However, after the party everyone teases Laura over the fact that she tried to put off the party and she feels embarrassed over it. Her mother represents the hypocritical people of this class conscious of the society. After the party she feels bad that there is so much leftover food. She gets an idea that they should give it to that poor house. She calls them “poor creatures”. As Marx states that the elite class manipulates the lower class in order to get benefits from them as they are dependent on the working class. But Laura’s conscience again wakes up and she considers it to be so wrong and thinks that she is very different from all of them. She does not want to go there but they insist her to go and on all her way she thinks about how successful the party was. She is very happy about it and there is no room for any other thought. But still, she keeps on having confusing thoughts that her dress is too fancy, and the people are looking at her. She wants to run away but feels forced to be in that house. She looks very awkward in that house. The people there are also aware of this class-distinction and wonder what that girl is doing there. Laura feels so bad to be there and her lost humanity and innocence comes back. She thinks that they were having a great party when this was happening in the neighbors. In embarrassment she just says, “forgive my hat” and runs away. She becomes clear that her class and status in the society has made her selfish for which she was taught since forever. In *Search for a Method*, Sartre says that human beings are not given this privilege by God, but it remains in their consciousness to have a power to affect nothingness. The people feel good to affect someone lesser than them and they put this ideology in their younger ones too.

In the short story *The Doll’s House*, even the doll’s house of the Burnells is presented as a fancy and aesthetic piece of art and is much more pleasant than the life of the little Kelveys. The description of two classes is on the binary position with each other. The doll’s house is so colorful and beautiful and on the other hand Kelveys’ clothes are made by the patches of curtains and tablecloths thrown by the elite class. The Kelveys’ mother works for the Burnells and other elite families. They are being exploited by them. For Althusser (as cited in *La Pensée* 1970), these class-conscious ideologies are set by the institutions and the families. Here the elite children are prohibited by the teachers to talk to the Kelveys and they also talk to them in a bitter tone. Ideologies are not just established within the upper class, but the lower class also know that they must not talk to the upper class. Even the Kelveys are not allowed to interact with other children especially The Burnells.



The Kelveys are a laughingstock for them. The other children make fun of their dressing style and for what they are. For them it was impossible not to laugh at them. They always talk about them in a harsh way and do not think about their emotions and feelings. The process of dehumanization is involved in the process of bringing up of the little elite girls. The loss of humanity is the cause of this alienation of the little Kelveys. They are alienated by the society for not being equal to them and this wealth accumulation by the upper class and alienation of the lower class are the forms of dehumanization (Fuchs, 2021). According to Reed Jr. (2002), these class hierarchies are formed by the effect of capitalist labor relations (Fuchs, 2021, p.272). In the short story Kezia is presented as the one who is not totally modified as a proper elite girl in this class-conscious society. She still has some sense of humanity left in her. She is still innocent and is somewhat different from the other malicious girls who are brought up in a sick environment where they just copy whatever their mothers do and tell them to do. They have lost their sense of humanity. Kezia in her innocence lets in the Kelveys to see their aesthetic doll's house but they are shooed out of the house immediately by her mother as if they are "chickens". The Kelveys feel very ashamed of this maltreatment and run out of the house in this embarrassment. They are embarrassed by this act of inhumanity. Fuchs (2021) argues that alienation is caused by the injustices in the society and these injustices in return prohibit the exploited to have a good life and they do not realize their abilities, and, in this way, they are condemned to live below humanity, and the same can also be seen in the short story that the Kelveys are alienated by the injustice of the Burnells. They are not able to act freely as if their freedom is taken over by the Burnells. For Marx, human nature itself is freedom and must be accepted as it is by the society because it is morally desirable, but alienation is a form of inhumanity, and it must be condemned as it is morally undesirable (Fuchs, 2021).

### Conclusion

This research is limited to the three short stories *The Doll's House*, *The Garden Party* and *Life of Ma Parker* by Katherine Mansfield. The researcher has attempted to investigate the Marxist-Humanist elements present in the selected short stories. In *Life of Ma Parker* the "literary man" is a microcosmic representation of all those people who are deprived of humanity and are unable to understand the harsh realities of the proletariat class which are, in fact, created by them. It answers the first two questions as it unravels the Marxist-humanist thematic strains delineated in the three selected short stories. His inhumanity and inability to understand the miseries and plight of the old



woman alienates her from the society. It makes her put a mask of calmness on her face to hide her true feelings. At the end she lessens her burden by crying in the rain so that no one can see and mock her.

In *The Garden Party* and *The Doll's House*, Laura and Kezia represent a little innocence that is left in this class-ridden society. They both are brought up in a society where they are not allowed to talk to the members of lower class and their wealth becomes a tool to blur their sense of humanity. However, as far Sartre (1996), humans have freedom to choose their paths and they are responsible for their acts. They can do freely whatever they want to. So, Laura and Kezia try to break the shackles of this class-consciousness at some points in the story. Laura feels pity for the incident that happened to her poor neighbors and tries to stop the party but fails to do so. Kezia also feels bad for they did not show the doll's house to the little Kelveys and lets them in to show them. But both girls are either scolded or mocked by their families which shows the dehumanization of their class. This answers the third question of how this dehumanization leads to a sense of alienation in the lower class.



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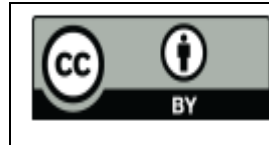


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