

Sounds in the Silence: Exploring the Articulation of Identity in Mansfield's Female Characters

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THIS PAPER examines Katherine Mansfield's use of speech and multiple voices in constructing female identities in *The Garden Party*, *Bliss* and *The Daughters of the Late Colonel*.¹ Through consideration of silences, hesitations and false starts in female characters' speech, it explores their importance as a site of active linguistic resistance to restrictive expectations of gendered behaviour. Given the heated public discourses around the nature of femininity raging in the early twentieth-century, the ability to adapt the 'self' which a woman presented to others could be seen as both survival strategy and a form of defence. By moving between selves and creating a façade or masquerade of femininity, protection from negative consequences of deviating from gender norms is afforded to women; it is from this perspective multiplicity of voice will be considered. The paper focuses on assumptions about female language use, their incorporation into expectations of normative gender performance and Mansfield's subversion of these assumptions and expectations to articulate the diversity of female identities.

Social and ideological discourses form a foundation upon which the concept of self-identity is built; as people are buffeted by the Brownian motion of society, notions and performance of identity alters. The process of self-construction results 'not from a combination of internal or external factors that combine to build "true" selves, but from processes of interpretation mediated by... continual interaction with others.'² The self is conceived of as fluid and dynamic: multiplicity of identity is positioned as a normal psychological mechanism, challenging the contention that psychological abnormality is at the root of Katherine Mansfield's 'multiple identifications.'³ Modern literature questioned the nature of human identity, particularly the instability, fluidity and discontinuity surrounding notions of selfhood.⁴ Formal innovations in narrative developed as new techniques were sought to express the fragmentary qualities of personality. Perhaps the most destabilising aspect of this change in perspective is the lack of solid foundations upon which identities can safely rest.

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¹All references to these short stories refer to the following volume: Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth Editions, 2006) [hereafter *CS*].

²Chris Brickell, 'The Sociological Construction of Gender and Sexuality,' *The Sociological Review* 54 (2006): 102.

³Brigid Brophy, 1966, quoted in Andrew Bennett, 'Hating Katherine Mansfield,' *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 7:3 (2002): 9.

⁴Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 84.

The birth of sociolinguistics as a discipline coincided with the high Modernist period. Drawing inspiration from the works of Saussure, Otto Jespersen published his pioneering work, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, in 1922. Amongst other subjects, Jespersen undertook to survey 'Women's Language.' Statements such as 'women... break off without finishing their sentences, because they start talking without having thought out what they are going to say,' although unfounded, have perpetuated a myth of female linguistic incompetence.⁵ I consider his work important in the analysis of the speech of Mansfield's characters because it is indicative of contemporary beliefs about language use by women. By reading these texts in tandem, it is possible to see a playful dexterity at work. Mansfield seems to reinforce linguistic preconceptions on the surface of her stories while subverting them at a paradigmatic level, exposing a fundamental inability of communication resulting from assumptions of female linguistic incompetence.

Jespersen places masculine language use as the norm; women's language is therefore positioned as deviant by default. By labelling his chapter on female language use simply 'The Woman', Jespersen signals his belief that biological sex is the basis of deviance, allying his arguments with contemporary beliefs that feminine psychology and behaviour were inextricably linked to reproduction. Women's 'influence on linguistic development' is caused by their 'instinctive shrinking from coarse... expressions and preference for... veiled and indirect expressions.'⁶ A paradox becomes apparent—it is not possible to positively contribute to a language by failing to actually *use* language. Other typical manifestations of women's speech include a 'fondness... for hyperbole' and misuse of adverbs of intensity, both of which occur in *Bliss*; although they undermine the literal sense of Bertha's speech. The repetition of 'really—really' holds undercurrents of an attempt to convince herself, as does the contradictory collocation 'absolutely satisfactory' (*CS*, 73). The intensifiers, while misapplied, demonstrate Bertha's need to believe that her confined existence will suffice.

Jespersen claimed women's duties 'demanded no deep thought' therefore female brains were 'less evolved' than male, thus incapable of profound thought. Women were said to be unable to see multiple signification of words; they are 'slow to see any point in a pun and scarcely ever perpetuate one themselves,' situating women as linguistically passive. A 'disinclination to invent,' Jespersen declared, was 'undoubtedly one of the "human secondary sexual characters,"' therefore skilful use of language was an aberration in a woman.⁷ While Mansfield's female characters frequently struggle to define themselves through language, Mansfield herself adroitly manipulates language, enabling the characters' silences and lack of fluency to speak of the tensions faced by women endeavouring to build a sense of self, thus confounding claims of linguistic deficiencies.

Philosophers and linguists have identified language as a 'crucial resource for identity construction,' considering language as a fundamental tool for shaping comprehension of ourselves, the world and society.⁸ The speech of Mansfield's characters can be seen

⁵Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, 13th edn (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1922), 149.

⁶Jespersen, *Language*, 246.

⁷Jespersen, *Language*, 246.

⁸Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, 'Introduction: Twenty years after *Language and Woman's Place*', in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (London: Routledge, 1995), 15.

as a demonstration of identity construction; their only existence is through the words on the page. In creating characters and their language, Mansfield is communicating her understanding of the complexities of the process of social and personal identity construction.

The speeches of Mansfield's characters are littered with 'crass imperfections' such as hesitations and incomplete utterances.⁹ These so-called 'imperfections' are far from 'crass', but are instead an integral part of Mansfield's characterisations. The placement of gaps in speeches are eloquent illustrations of the limitations of female roles. Unfinished thoughts and utterances of Constantia and Josephine in *The Daughters of the Late Colonel* voice the sisters' inhibited existence with greater clarity than narrative exposition could; even their linguistic capacity has been limited by masculine autocracy. Many utterances which remain unfinished concern decisions, from disposing of the watch to the dismissal of Kate, indicating the sisters' impotence (*CS*, 225). Not only are they incapable of action, they are incapable even of the action of articulation. The sisters' one decisive accomplishment—locking the wardrobe—is essentially a decision to avoid having to make more decisions, thus negating any sense of agency. Hope for the sisters gaining ability to assert their identities is smothered, as illustrated below:

She wanted to say something to Josephine, something frightfully important, about—about the future and what...

“Don't you think perhaps—” she began.

But Josephine interrupted her. “I was wondering if now—” she murmured. They stopped; they waited for each other.

[...]

“I can't say what I was going to say, Jug, because I've forgotten what it was... that I was going to say.”

Josephine was silent for a moment. She stared at the big cloud where the sun had been. Then she replied shortly, “I've forgotten too.” (*CS*, 229)

If language is considered to be fundamental to both the articulation and the construction of a sense of self, this agonizing exchange reveals the extent of the erosion of identity suffered by the sisters. Constantia cannot find any words for the future, any words to signify progression towards a different identity. Unable to articulate their desires even to themselves, the sisters are bereft of the linguistic means with which to construct a different identity. Pathetic fallacy emphasises their loss as their brief glimpse of sunlight, a glimmer of hope, is over when it becomes painfully obvious that they cannot escape from their restricted identities. The daughters have internalised the father's opinion of their incompetency to such an extent that they have become their own oppressors, too terrified to allow 'subversive' notions of self-identity into their minds.

Theorists now refer to 'doing' or 'performing' gender, indicating that gendered behaviour is not a result of biological difference, but is shaped by social expectations and

⁹Bennett, 'Hating Katherine Mansfield,' 6.

assumptions.¹⁰ Negotiation with these is a constant factor in establishing a sense of self and place in the world. Mansfield herself performed a variety of roles or ‘selves’ throughout her life, changing her names, altering her speech and behaviour, leading friends to question which of these could be the ‘real’ Katherine.¹¹ Perhaps the question should have been whether anyone only has one ‘true’ self. Why insist that, because there are many, some must be false? Given Mansfield’s control over language, she was clearly aware of, and adept at, constructing personas. This skill is manifest in her portrayal of multiple identities and voices in her characters. In her notebooks, Mansfield struggles with her own multiplicitous sense of self, exclaiming, ‘true to oneself! Which self? Which of my many—well, really, that’s what it looks like coming to—hundreds of selves.’¹² Such awareness of the ineffable quality of personal identity gives Mansfield’s characters both their extraordinary depth and their provoking elusiveness. Andrew Bennett argues that, ‘highly conscious of personality as a mask, role, or performance, Mansfield inscribes this sense of the constructedness of the self, of personal identity, in her... prose.’¹³

Mansfield’s discernment of the formation of her own personal identities certainly resonates throughout her works. Performative identities can be seen clearly in the *The Garden Party*. Laura’s speech and actions alter according to the roles she performs, from taking a large bite of bread and butter ‘just like a work girl’ (*CS*, 199) to her conviction that ‘but all the same you had to cry’ for the dead (*CS*, 210). Laura has an awareness of her changing language, feeling ‘ashamed’ at how ‘fearfully affected’ ‘copying her mother’s voice’ sounded (*CS*, 198). In this respect, Laura has greater agency in identity construction than Con, Jug or Bertha, who use language that is not their own with a sense of unease but no real control. They are trapped within their roles, whereas Laura, with more perception regarding the function of language in identity performance, is able to exert some control over how she presents herself. This control is still restricted by gender assumptions. When Laura attempts to express thoughts of profundity, she is unable to articulate them. Her statement of ‘isn’t life...’ fails to convey her insight; Laurie does not bother to enquire into Laura’s meaning, dismissing her words patronisingly with ‘*isn’t* it, darling,’ a fashionably drawled response that effectively stalls further discussion of the issue while giving an illusory impression of comprehension (*CS*, 210). The condescension of the reply—Laurie’s tolerance of the ‘stammered’ utterance—indicates an assumption that Laura could not have anything of further significance to say, reflecting dominant beliefs regarding female intellectual capacity.

Gender became the subject of intense scrutiny in the early twentieth century, reflecting ‘a near obsessive pre-occupation with femininity’ in society.¹⁴ As no woman could adhere to all dogmatic pronouncements on correct behaviour, thought, appear-

¹⁰Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1999), 26; Suzanne Romaine, *Communicating Gender* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), 2.

¹¹Katherine Mansfield, *The Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. John Middleton Murry, Vol. 1 (London: Constable, 1928), 73.

¹²Katherine Mansfield, quoted in Andrew Bennett, *Katherine Mansfield* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House, 2004), 16.

¹³Bennett, *Mansfield*, 10.

¹⁴Marianne Dekoven, ‘Modernism and Gender,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2nd edn, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 212.

ance and language use expected in order to be adjudged feminine, recourse to masks and silences may be considered a sensible and pragmatic reaction. Joan Rivere discusses intelligent women who felt it necessary to mask their intellect when in male company. This suggests male assumptions regarding female incapacity were false, based on the ‘performances’ women felt compelled to give; that there were many fluid ‘selves’ which women could switch between dependent on audience and context, whether or not this switching was a conscious choice.¹⁵ Rivere asserted that ‘womanliness... could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.’¹⁶ The pathos in Mansfield’s work is rooted in the pain felt by women denied the opportunity to remove the mask.

Through her use of free indirect form, Mansfield shows the internal process of articulating identity in a restrictive environment. Bertha’s ‘words and expressions were not and could not be hers. They were ... quoted by her, borrowed... she’d none of her own.’¹⁷ This leaves an uncanny sense of discomfort in the spaces between the language used and her actuality, as if she has no true sense of herself. Language use is intertwined with identity construction—if Bertha has no words of her own, she has no means with which to build a self.¹⁸ In *Laura and Bertha* the performance of several social roles is seen, but there is always the feeling of other unarticulated selves flitting between the gaps in their speech.

Mansfield articulates identity construction in her characters, intertwined with their deployment of masks; her fictional constructs thus resist interpretation much as their ‘real’ counterparts do. Some critics, most notably Andrew Bennett, feel this resistance to be a result of Mansfield’s personal multiplicities, locating difficulties in interpreting her characters in her ‘fear—or hatred—of certainty, of identity itself,’ an explanation which trivialises the complexities of Mansfield’s explorations of the multiplicities of identity and identification.¹⁹ Bennett connects certainty with identity, however it appears that there is no easily definable certainty when it comes to personal identity. To ascribe Mansfield’s impetus for presenting multiplicitous identity to powerfully negative emotions is to dismiss the importance of the insight into constructions of self-identity which her work imparts. Yes, the fluidity and unsettling instabilities created can lead to a feeling of discomfort in the reader; I would argue that these feelings are shaped by Mansfield’s stripping away of the communal delusion of a comforting unity of self rather than a resonance of ‘hatreds’. Mansfield’s work illustrates Cora Kaplan’s estimation that ‘the instability of “femininity” as female identity... points to the fractured and fluctuant condition of all consciously held identity, the impossibility of a will-full, unified and cohered subject.’²⁰ If this argument holds true it would certainly explain a dislike of her work—by demonstrating the composition of the female self as containing multiple identities, Mansfield is also undermining the sense of stability the reader holds in their own identity.

¹⁵Joan Rivere, ‘Womanliness as Masquerade,’ *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929), 304–5.

¹⁶Rivere, ‘Womanliness,’ 306.

¹⁷Letter from Mansfield to John Middleton Murry, 14 March 1918. Quoted in Bennett, *Mansfield*, 81.

¹⁸Romaine, *Communicating Gender*, 15.

¹⁹Bennett, ‘Hating Katherine Mansfield,’ 5.

²⁰Cora Kaplan, ‘Speaking/Writing/Feminism’ in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 246.

By presenting female characters who both question and demonstrate inadequacy of accepted gender roles, Mansfield challenged dominant patriarchal ideologies. ‘Understanding of a feminine identity is produced within signification, through the repeated performance of words and actions which we code as “feminine,”’ however Mansfield demonstrates that performing a feminine identity is not enough to create a self-identity.²¹ In *Bliss*, Bertha, who claims that ‘she had everything’ a woman should desire, has absolutely nothing. Her husband cheats, motherhood is usurped by Nurse, her ‘thrilling’ friends are insubstantial, and her sexuality is denied. Bertha’s poignant cry of ‘Oh what will happen now?’ (*CS*, 80) when the façade of perfection is shattered meets silence. Despite her behaviour conforming to the expectations of society, Bertha has nothing, not even the language to shape comprehension. Through Bertha, Mansfield criticises limitations of female roles, demonstrating their insufficiency to provide a sense of self. As Bertha’s sense of self is based on her attainment of these roles, when they are exposed as a façade, Bertha is left with a false identity and no resources to create a different one.

The Daughters of the Late Colonel presents two women who have spent their lives under the dominion of an autocratic male presence. Like Bertha, they have adhered to expected functions of ‘womanhood’ and are shown to be imprisoned by these. The sisters have been prevented from developing their own identities as women. Even their speech is childlike, suggesting that they have never been able to develop adult autonomy. A sense of fear permeates the story, fear of consequences for breaking rules, even when no one exists to enforce these. Con and Jug are the result of constant submission to male demands, a stark reminder of the consequences of such submission.

Mansfield’s choice to contend with domestic concerns in her writing exposes the narrow confines within which female identity was expected to remain. None of the characters under discussion are able to directly articulate, and therefore comprehend, the situations they are faced with. The limit of their language truly is the limit of their world. As Mansfield painstakingly constructs dialogues through which ideas of self and society are formed, these limitations become frustratingly clear: her characters are caught in webs of half-finished utterances and broken thoughts. Her ‘fascination with superficiality, with the way in which social worlds are constructed through surfaces’ only highlights the internal tensions of endeavouring to develop a sense of identity in these social worlds.²²

Women were instructed in explicit terms through a multiplicity of discourse to focus on the superficial—to the extent that major concerns were raised in medical circles of the literal loss of reproductive function if ‘vital nutrients’ were diverted from wombs to brains by such subversive activities as political activism or higher education. While ‘men had a sex, women were a sex.’²³ Everything revolved around the womb, to the extent that one could be forgiven for perceiving women to be perambulating uteruses, with a brain so dedicated to biological concerns it was incapable of rational thought. Awareness in the medical profession of the hermaphroditic qualities of a foetus at a certain stage of development not only formed the basis of Freud’s theories of psychosexual development, but also led to concerns that adult humans could revert to androgyny

²¹Mary Eagleton, ‘Locating the Subject’ in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 342.

²²Bennett, *Mansfield*, 28.

²³Lisa Carstens, ‘Unbecoming Women: Sex Reversal in the Scientific Discourse on Female Deviance in Britain, 1880–1920,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20:1 (2011): 69.

by failing to behave in a gendered fashion. At the height of the Modernist period, 'mainstream science in Britain genuinely entertained the possibility that patterns of social behaviour could trigger physiological sex reversal, particularly in women.'²⁴ An explosion of writing regarding how a 'true' woman should behave filled not only the media, but leading medical publications such as the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet* also.²⁵ In this climate, failing to adhere to gender roles would not simply be breaking social codes, but could be perceived as wilfully perverting the very laws of nature. Mansfield's persistent presentation of female characters questioning the capacity of rigid gender expectations to allow for the development of independent selfhood is not only subversive, but radical.

Because women were regarded as less evolved than men, it was assumed that their intellect was that of children; attempts to prove differently were met with accusations of a desire to be male. Joan Rivere stated that 'exhibition of [a woman's] intellectual proficiency ... signified an exhibition of herself in possession of the father's penis, having castrated him.'²⁶ Such thinking indicated that any desire for, or demonstration of, intellectual ability would be interpreted as abnormal, and thus punished. The linguistic 'deficiencies' shown by Mansfield's women can therefore be interpreted as a learned indicator of femininity, a performance of gender, not as an indicator that women are innately unable to utilise language effectively. Indeed, by showing that women use language to shift between various presentations of identity, Mansfield is exhibiting female control of language.

A possible criticism could be levelled at Mansfield in that the speech of her female characters seems to reinforce stereotypical beliefs about the limited linguistic capabilities of women. It is possible to read a scathing contempt for the characters that Mansfield presents in her work; Con and Jug can be seen as caricatured old maids, Laura's unthinking condescension emphasises the superficiality of her class, while Bertha seems the epitome of a silly, spoiled suburban housewife. Their inconsequential conversation fails to convey profound philosophical ponderings; they seldom use impressively weighty vocabulary. But through their hesitations, their unfinished utterances and failures of communication, Mansfield reveals the consequences of being denied agency to create their own identities. Mansfield explores the interrelationship between thought and speech, and how these two modes correspond to establish a sense of self. Mansfield's perceptive and acutely painful depiction of her female characters' struggle to articulate themselves highlights how intensely dissonance between thought and speech can stifle consciousness of self amid the myriad of shoulds, oughts, musts and cant's, both social and linguistic, that proscribed the developing sense of what a self could be.

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²⁴Carstens, 'Unbecoming Women,' 74.

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