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Katherine Mansfield as (Post)colonial-Modernist

In this lecture I aim to argue that the modernist New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield, although usually known for her modernist experimentation in short fiction, both in her work and her short life, bridged the contradictory and seemingly unconnected vectors of (post) Colonialism and modernism. Mansfield, I believe, should be positioned in this way because her earliest identity structures were formed within colonial society, and her very creative patterns convey the radical ambiguities of the white settler subject who is similar yet separate from subjects of the metropolitan centre, as much as demonstrating modernist stylization and narrative techniques.

Connections between (post)colonial and modernist movements can be made because modernism was the aesthetic language of revolt,¹ Simon Gikandi, e.g., says it was

Primarily [...] in the language and structure of modernism that a postcolonial experience came to be articulated and imagined in literary form. The archive of early postcolonial writing in Africa, the Caribbean, and India is dominated and defined by writers whose political or cultural projects were enabled by modernism even when the ideologies of the latter were at odds with the project of decolonisation.²

Gikandi suggests that modernism precedes postcolonial writing, whereas I will argue in relation to Mansfield, that her modernist experimentation followed writing which demonstrated preoccupations now associated with the postcolonial; i.e. her modernism is not only an 'anticipatory discourse' of the

¹ Toral Jatin Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*, (Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 69; citing Gikandi

² 'Modernism in the World,' *Modernism/Modernity* 13.3 (2006), 419-24 (420)

postcolonial, (i.e. the NZ writing of the 1960s to 1970s, and the Maori Renaissance), but crucial concepts of post/colonialism (albeit in an earlier stage) preceded her modernism. Like James Joyce in his relation with postcolonial Ireland, her rebellion against her society which led to her departure from NZ in 1908, preceded and informed her aesthetic experimentation with modernism. SO I think we can go further than Elleke Boehmer does in her description of Mansfield as a modernist artist as outsider and a colonial outsider as modernist, in examining the postcolonial as a pressure point in her work, going beyond her colonial identity.

Mansfield, writing before the beginnings of the national literary tradition existed in 1930s) perceived and prised apart the contradictions and problematic identity structures of colonial society along lines of class, gender and ethnicity. For example we can discern the repressed voices of the colonised 'other', the Maori, in her fiction as a distinct layering of the conscious mind, voices that will become agential and self authorizing much later in NZ, in the v early prose poem published in Dec. 1907 (in the Melbourne *Native Companion* under the pseudonym of Julian Mark), 'In the Botanical Gardens', where a hostile emanation coming from the native bush evokes a sense of guilt in the white settler at their intrusion, a ghostly force which comes back to haunt those who have stolen their native heritage:

Bending down, I drink a little of the water. Oh! Is it magic? Shall I looking intently, see vague forms lurking in the shadow, staring at me malevolently, the thief of their birthright? Shall I, down the hillside, through the bush, ever in the shadow, see a great company moving toward me, their faces averted, wreathed with green garlands, passing, passing, following the little stream in silence, until it is sucked into the wide sea...

Born into a wealthy colonial family the Beauchamps, (her father became the governor of the Bank of NZ) Mansfield was doubly expatriated, i.e. aged about 14 in 1906, she visited England for three years with her family, going to school there and becoming conscious of her peripheral, relatively insignificant cultural status as a colonial. She returned permanently to England in 1908 at the age of 20, and soon was in the avant garde of modernism, especially in 1912 when she began working for the radical little magazine *Rhythm*. Modernism as an international movement of European artists, writers, composers, attracted itinerants, expatriates, and *Rhythm* was strongly influenced by Parisian bohemian circles, publishing stories by Francis Carco, and Tristan Dereme, artistic studies by Picasso (then just thirty), and Modigliani, and articles on Claude Debussy, Vincent Van Gough, the philosophy of Bergson, the Fauvists. , Having already absorbed the influences of colonial culture, Mansfield from now on occupied new and complex positioning between artistic traditions of the metropolitan centres of Paris and London, and her homeland, which would develop in tandem with changes in her life; this has been described as a movement back and forth along a continuum from colonial to decolonization to postcolonial .

1. Modernism and Empire

Modernism is a movement situated within the historical, ideological and methodological framework of empire, generated at the turn of 20th, partly replicating the networks of Empire but also partly in response to the slow break up of Empire (as well as a reaction to modernity) . So colonialism in relation to modernism develops through the intersection of divergent currents in the

different spheres of culture and politics just before WWI, Crucially, modernism, which was fostered by migrant pathways and the flows of colonial subjects into Europe, bringing with them knowledge of cultural clash and difference under colonization, and introducing exotic, foreign cultures, depended on the societies at the periphery for its energy and radical formats.

Mansfield is one of many alienated, diasporic writers who introduced a sense of difference into cosmopolitan writing that was published at the centre of Empire, offering the possibility of cross-border dialogues in a transnational framework – giving the other a voice if not a presence -- to transfigure European representation. Like others such as Sam Slevon, Jean Rhys, Mulk Raj Anand , to name a few, she was a bifurcated, displaced figure who interacted with the culture at the heart of empire at time when transcendental systems of understanding were breaking down. Collectively their writing had the effect of intensifying the modernists focus on interiority, multiple subjectivities, fragments, forms, by stressing being on the fringes of history, marginalization in general.

Her early years straddled two important literary/cultural movements. Her first journey to England in 1903-06 introduced her to fin de siècle aestheticism and decadence, including the symbolists from France (Baudelaire, Mallarme) Fell in love with Oscar Wilde, identified with his ironic, distancing modes of discourse his cult of the artificial, and with sexual ambiguity. By 1911, after she returned to England, she was engaging with the new movement that flowed from continental Europe and making its mark in England through the avant garde little magazines for which she wrote, *The New Age* and then from 1912 with JMM who became her husband, she coedited *Rhythm* and later the *Blue*

Review. (Mag started with D H Lawrence, ?). She was absorbing diverse artistic influences, postimpressionism, expressionism, the rhythmist and fauvists. But her contribution to these early articulations of Modernist writing referred to her position at edge of empire, and drew on colonial experiences from her NZ past that were infused with the primitive, savage and exotic, key planks in the Modernism stylistic repertoire: Stories I have recommended you read, 'The Woman at the Store', 'Millie', 'Ole Underwood', were written in response to the manifesto of *Rhythm*, 'Before art can be human, it must learn to be brutal'. Hence the emphasis on the savage spirit of the land in 'The Woman at the Store', a leitmotif of this particular phase of her writing, while invocations 'the spirit of the place' appear in 'Old Tar', a story in which hauntings by the dispossessed 'other' create atmospheric destabilisation and undermine the settler's habitation.

Second World settler theory: Mansfield as white settler subject

Postcolonial theories of the white settler subject shed light on Mansfield's unstable cultural positioning, due to her rebellion against her bourgeois Wellington family, which propelled her to flee NZ, yet her sense of being an outsider upon arrival in England, a provisional and impermanent subject, apparent from comments such as 'I am the little colonial, come to look but not to linger'. Mansfield's radical state of dispossession /unbelonging recalls the ambivalence of the colonial presence, which is split between its appearance as original and authoritative, and its articulation as repetition and difference. In the words of Homi Bhabha, imitation, with the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry, fixed her as a 'partial [that is, incomplete] and 'virtual' presence'. The split or incomplete presence is overlaid by the white settler's inherent

ambivalence of emplacement, which according to Stephen Slemon and Alan Lawson, is due to living in relation to two prior sources of cultural authority and authenticity:ⁱ “the [...] originating world of Europe, the source of their principal cultural authority, and that of the First World [...] the First Nations, whose authority the settlers not only effaced and replaced but also desired.”ⁱⁱ

The settler’s interstitial, in-between state means that binaries of self/other, here/there, coloniser/ colonized are destabilised, as Mansfield deliberately exploits in her writing. The Pakeha / Maori opposition is assimilated into the European self /the same; the settler is both colonizing and imperialized. Subjectively experienced, inbetweenness, with its reduced ability **to resist** any object or discursive structure which is positioned as purely external to the self, fragments identity, creating a state of “alien inauthenticity”.ⁱⁱⁱ (Mansfield embraces this with her gifts for impersonation by claiming in art she aims to leap into the bounded outlines of things—famously claiming if I want to write about a duck I want to be that duck, about an apple I want to first be that apple)

Early on Mansfield demonstrates the multiple selves and self positionings associated with the white settler through her affiliations to the dual sources of the settler’s authority and authenticity. On one hand, an English musical family in Wellington, whose two sons, the Trowell brothers, Garnet and Arnold, she fell in love with (on different occasions) becoming pregnant to one of them, after arriving in London. On the other was her half-Maori schoolfriend, Maata Mahupuku, to whom she was sexually attracted. Through her experiences of desire and longing in sexual encounters, and in particular in the relationship with Maata (about whom she wanted to write a novel), Mansfield mapped out her ‘exotic’, ‘unbelonging’, colonial identity in her transition from ‘home’ into exile.

3. Early Sketches and Vignettes

The vignette, 'A Summer Idylle' (1906), written before she left NZ, shows Mansfield rejecting conventional concepts of plot and narrative for structures of doubling and repetition, for fragmented or discontinuous narrative, imagery and symbol, turning to dream, reverie and disconnected modes of consciousness in preference to the continuous narrative of realism. 'A Summer Idylle' challenges colonial narrative structures, while also pointing to Mansfield's inherently problematic sense of belonging. Mansfield reproduces the attraction and awakening of sexual desire between two women—one half Maori, the other Pakeha -- as a dialectic exploration of self and other. She draws on a Maori legend about the risks of forbidden love in which the heroine, Hinemoa, swims out to an island on the middle of Lake Rotorua, to meet her beloved, Tutenekai. The Pakeha female (the Maori name for the European) narrator, is called Hinemoa (after the figure in the legend) and the Maori 'other' is called Marina (with explicit maritime associations traceable to European classical legend). The names and ethnicities are reversed (the Maori given an Anglo-Celtic name, the New Zealander a Maori name), so destabilising ethnic stereotypes and the Eurocentric colonial norms of self and other. They may be two halves of the one person, but they are also culturally distinct.

In Mansfield's interpretation of the Maori legend, the girls' dive into the sea and swim to the island inaugurated by the worldly Marina is a symbolic sexual initiation of the virginal Hinemoa. Other differences between them (as Hinemoa sees them) are highlighted through Marina's ingestion of exotic native vegetable, by contrast to the eucharistic overtones of Hinemoa's breaking bread in white fingers:

... Marina laughed. 'Hinemoa eat a koumara.'

'No, I don't like them. They're blue – they're too unnatural. Give me some bread.'

Marina handed her a piece, then helped herself to a koumara, which she ate delicately, looking at Hinemoa with a strange half-smile expanding over her face.

'I eat it for that reason' she said. 'I eat it because it is blue.'

'Yes.' said Hinemoa, breaking the bread in her white fingers.

This story can be read along racial, gendered lines as a celebration of the other (as foreign exotic) and a dismissal of the heteronormative (and implication of family and patriarchal society) in the celebration of female, lesbian desire. Mansfield plays with the colonial binaries: Marina's 'koumara' emphasises her indigenous 'belonging' in this Pacific paradise.^{iv} Hinemoa's distaste for the vegetable unnatural because it is blue and her preference for bread symbolizes western rituals of eating and marks her out as exotic (either sexually or ethnically or both) in the eyes of the Maori Marina.

These ethnic reversals might be approached from Mansfield's dismissal of the white settler (her own class and ethnic group) because of a lack of cultural authority and authenticity, at one point in her journals. In a trip in 1907, organized by her father, through the rugged and remote Urewera ranges, she encountered Maori tribes who had little prior contact with civilisation: when she and her travelling companions were met by some newly arrived English people she wrote: "It is splendid to see once again real English people—I am so tired and sick of the third rate article—give me the Maori and the [English] tourist but nothing between".^v The 'third rate article' includes her touring companions, the rural Pakeha they encountered, and by extension Mansfield's bourgeois, 'vulgar' family in Wellington. Mansfield denies her position occupying the 'nothing between' space of colonialism. In Gramscian terms she rejects her interpellation as a colonial subject and resists incorporation into this system of representation because of her wish to 'other' herself, and write herself into existence into writing as 'different' (i.e. as the hybridised Marina/Maori –not Hinemoa/Pakeha). Modernism as technique and experimentation is cultivated not just to position her among the avant garde, but serves this essential part of her destiny: it is

will be a method/ generic mode by which to build this 'local/national' voice and bring it into the orbit of already established cultures in northern hemisphere.

In Europe she probably saw herself as a hybrid, a metropolitan colonial, or a New Zealand European, not a colonial Pakeha New Zealander; but this too is oblique. Mansfield exploits being alien, anonymous not recognisable by nationality, accent or creed; (the NZ accent would have been hard to identify at that time) as appears in this encounter recorded in an early story (written c 1909 in Bavaria):

'Are you an American', said the Vegetable Lady, turning to me.

'No.'

'Then you are an Englishwoman?'

'Well, hardly—'

'You must be one of the two; you cannot help it. I have seen you walking alone several times. You wear your—'

I got up and climbed onto the swing. The air was sweet and cool, rushing past my body. Above, white clouds tailed delicately through the blue sky. From the pine forest streamed a wild perfume, the branches swayed together, rhythmically, sonorously. I felt so light, and free and happy—so childish! I wanted to poke my tongue out at the circle on the grass, who drawing close together were whispering meaningfully.

The refusal to state her nationality and her decision to remain anonymous provokes this epiphany, The broken off exchange with The Vegetable Lady, (in which she refuses to reveal herself, nationality or speech), confirms her position as the 'bit between' - now transposed to a European context as 'between' England and the USA', an unfixed anonymous place, but one which she will later inhabit and give voice to in her art. As NZ critic C.K. Stead says

She had no regional or metropolitan attachment, nor class allegiance, nor dialect, to place her among British writers. Yet the New Zealandness is hard to pin down. It has been laid over, concealed—deliberately. This is an essential part of Mansfield

Mansfield would draw on this ambivalence of emplacement, and the erasure of demarcations such as nationhood and class, in many stories about female travellers, who lack the usual reference points once they are abroad, disturbed by the unfamiliar and strange of exotic environments and people, and are exposed to those unfamiliar elements within that make them strangers to themselves.

4. 'The Ghostly Return' : the late stories, the spectral and uncanny

By 1915 Mansfield's art took a different direction catalysed by the tragic death of her beloved brother Leslie in a hand grenade accident in Belgium. Her deep grief culminated in a vow to write a new kind of prose for the purposes of elegy, to turn her art into a form of commemoration. This meant returning to the landscape of her childhood and voicing her experience of growing up in a new country:

Now – now I want to write recollections about my own country. [...] because in my thoughts I range with him over all the remembered places. [...] I long to renew them in writing. [...] I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the old world. It must be mysterious, as though floating—it must take the breath. [...] but all must be told with a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow, because you, my little sun of it, are set. You have dropped over the dazzling rim of the world.³

This turning point in her art is closely connected with the death wish, which runs throughout her work from her earliest stories, Now heightened by her intense identification with her brother as evidence in a writes a poem 'to LHB, in

³ Mansfield, *Notebooks* vol. 2, 32.

which she suggests he will offer her poisoned berries to eat—in an inversion of the eucharist.

By the remembered stream my brother stands
Waiting for me with berries in his hands
'These are my body. Sister, take and eat.' (*Notebooks 2*, 29)

Within two years Mansfield became aware of her own mortality with the knowledge that she had TB, She lived for only another 6 years, and in this time produced some of her most powerful work in stories set in New Zealand .

By contrast to her earlier stories with New Zealand settings like 'The Woman at the Store', that display alienating and distancing techniques and a dimension of postcolonial critique, Mansfield, in her last years, knowing time was running out, sought a homecoming through her art in the form of her imaginative re-emplacement in the society she had left. Her attempt to come to terms with her own mortality led her to seek ways of penetrating to the very truth of things, and a broadening of her understanding of life as being essentially interconnected with and inseparable from death; most famously embodied in the image of the dead man in 'The Garden Party', who seems beautiful and lifelike to Laura:

There lay a young man, fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming, Never wake him up again. His head was sunk in the pillow, His eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids.. what did garden parties, and baskets and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and the band was playing, this marvel had come to the lane.

To re-emplac herself within her childhood from such temporal and spatial distances, Mansfield draws not just on memory, but psychic and telepathic resources. Memories and visual images are accessed in ghostly spiritual

ways—in part she attributes these powers to her illness, but, according to recent researches on the occult and ghostly in Victorian cultural practices Mansfield may be described as a ‘spectral’ personality, hardwired to receive apparitions from beyond the boundary of the senses, partly due to a determination to prove that /there is no death/ that death can be overcome.

It often happens to me now that when I lie down for sleep [...] I feel wakeful and lying here in bed I begin to live over little scenes from life or imaginary scenes. Its not too much to say they are almost hallucinations: they are marvellously vivid. I lie on my right side & put my left hand up to my forehead as though I were praying. This seems to induce the state. Then for instance its 10.30 p.m. on a liner in mid ocean . . . [...] All these things are far realer, more in detail, richer than Life.

This is associated with a state of impersonality as though she herself was being possessed by the dead - one that collapses distinction between active/passive; subject/object/ writing and witnessing. About writing ‘At the Bay’ she says

It is so strange to bring the dead to life again. There's my grandmother with her pink knitting, there stalks my uncle over the grass. I feel as I write ‘you are not dead, my darlings. All is remembered. I bow down to you. I efface myself so that you may live again through me in your richness and beauty.’

Ghostliness evokes doubles, Freudian uncanny, or the unheimlich as being in the midst of the Heimlich, and Mansfield ‘s work shows how ‘natural’ death and how real the living ghosts are; her family lives again for her just as she wishes to live again in and through her art.

.Stories like ‘Prelude’, or ‘The Garden Party’ constantly register the defamiliarisation of the apparently familiar, surprise and shock at its sudden transformation. Or they focus on the doubleness within characters who are divided, disrupted ‘false’, who do not know themselves, such as Beryl in ‘At the Bay’. Tropes of hauntology and the uncanny appear in Beryl’s interweaving of fantasy with reality as lovers materialise in her room. ‘But, in spite of herself, Beryl saw so

plainly two people standing in the middle of her room. Her arms were around his neck; he held her. And now he whispered, “My beauty, my little beauty” (*Collected Fiction*, 2, 368). As Nicholas Royle states, the uncanny conveys ‘a sense of ghostliness, of strangeness, given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self’; its performative dimension appears in Beryl’s self-appellation, a calling into selfhood, as she names herself to the imagined other:^{vi}

[...] it’s as though, in the silence, somebody called your name, and you heard your name for the first time. ‘Beryl!’
‘Yes, I’m here. I’m Beryl. Who wants me?’
‘Beryl!’
‘Let me come.’ (*Collected Fiction* 2, 369)

Here the inseparability between the inner voice that calls out and the voice that replies registers the structure of the uncanny where identity is haunted from within.^{vii}

CONCLUSION: The intricate and multiple intersections between Mansfield’s modernism and her colonial/postcolonial orientations constitute a central strand in her work because it brings into focus the key points of connection between her life and art. She similarly provides a dualistic legacy in introducing the challenges to patriarchy, and cultural domination of the colony by the metropolitan homeland, the concern for the repressed colonized other, redefinitions of hegemonic formulations of nation, class and gender, all the concern of later postcolonial writers. On the other hand is the embrace of death in later stories, death as both domestic and intimate in the image of the dead man in ‘The Garden Party’, and with universal import as in famous late story ‘The Fly’, a response to the tragedy of WWI, and the destruction of a generation. More than Woolf and other writers, Mansfield was registering the end of empire, and the darkening of the mood of modernism in post WWI era when, according to David

Punter modernism “haunting and haunted by a site of war, the question of rebirth, of the progress of the ‘new’ seemed to be accompanied, as by ‘a dark, secret collaborator’, by the scene of death.”⁴

Although the (post)colonial-modernist framework does not offer a complete explanation of Mansfield’s work –she wrote many metropolitan modernist stories with no connection to NZ -- I believe we need to take this hyphenated categorization of Mansfield more into account when attempting to locate her within the literary canon, or to put it another way that the understanding of modernism as a movement should be revised to accommodate alienated colonial voices such as hers and the particular fragmentation of form that such radical outsidership gives rise to.

⁴ David Punter, “Hungry Ghosts and Foreign Bodies,” in *Gothic Modernisms*, ed. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (London: Palgrave, 2001), 11-28 at 13.

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