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The Memory Gardens: The Evocative Flora In The Short Stories Of Katherine Mansfield

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This paper will examine a hitherto overlooked aspect of Katherine Mansfield's fiction—flowers, trees and shrubs. Gardens form an important backdrop in a surprisingly large number of short stories written by her. Indeed, the garden is the centerpiece in the famous short story, *The Garden Party. Prelude, Bliss, At the Bay* are other well- known stories where the garden and the flowers, shrubs and trees in it not only form a backdrop but are inextricably intertwined with the mood of the narrator. They are imbued with suggestion and emotion and form an important subtext for the story.

The short story, *Prelude*, illustrates the point beautifully. The Burnell family has recently shifted from the town house to the bigger country house. Each member of the family views the huge garden surrounding it in different ways. Character development takes place through each member's perspective on the garden.

For Kezia's Aunt Beryl, the garden is eroticized. She is a young woman, waiting for her Prince Charming and the garden is mysterious, dark and rich with possibilities:

Standing in a pool of sunlight, Beryl Fairfield undressed herself…the window was wide open; it was warm and somewhere out there in the garden a young man, dark and slender, with mocking eyes, tiptoed among the bushes, and gathered the flowers into a big bouquet and slipped under her window and held it up to her. She saw herself bending forward. He thrust his head among the bright waxy flowers, sly and laughing. "No, no", said Beryl. She turned from the window and dropped the nightgown over her head. 1

For Kezia, the most imaginative of the three little Burnell girls, the big new garden is at first a terrifying place. However, Kezia discovers that there is a civilized, cultivated side to the garden as well. Here the description of flowers is a naturalist's listing of the sheer variety present in the garden. It simply cannot be taken as a child's observation. The adult Katherine Mansfield starts looking at the long-ago garden and in that garden of the mind she sees a magical sight:

The camellias were in bloom, white and crimson and pink and white striped with flashing leaves. You could not see a leaf in the syringe bushes for the white clusters. The roses were in flower…there were clumps of fairy bells, and all kinds of geraniums, and there were little trees of verbena and bluish lavender bushes and a bed of pelargoniums with velvet eyes and leaves like moths' wings. There was a bed of nothing but mignonette and another of nothing but pansies—borders of double and single daisies and all kinds of little tufty plants she had never seen before. The red-hot pokers were taller than she; the Japanese sun-flowers grew in a tiny jungle…(33)

This is a systematic cataloguing of the variety of flora in the garden. The four year old Kezia could not have possibly known all these names.

Her self-absorbed, perpetually unwell mother is indifferent to the garden except towards the Aloe. The Aloe is almost human for her, imbued with all the human characteristics, as is clear from the description of the 'cruel' leaves and the 'blind' stem. Linda's exhaustion with the reproductive process is reinforced a few passages later when she is walking in the garden one night with her mother. Holding her doting husband responsible for her frequent pregnancies, Linda seeks protection, but knows that there is no way out. She is engulfed by the task of child-bearing and rearing:

"*What am I guarding myself so preciously for? I shall go on having children and Stanly will go on making money and the children and the garden will grow bigger and bigger with whole fleets of aloes in them for me to choose from."* (54)

In stark contrast to the dreamy Linda, who is seeking an escape from her biological role, is her placid and efficient mother, Kezia's beloved granma. Looking at her silent mother next to her, Linda asks, "What have you been thinking about? Tell me." The ever-practical, house-proud grandmother replies:

"*I haven't really been thinking of anything. I wondered as we passed the orchard what the fruit trees were like and whether we should be able to make much jam this autumn. There are splendid healthy currant bushes in the vegetable garden. I noticed them today. I should like to see those pantry shelves thoroughly well-stocked with our own jam."* (55)

For the grandmother, the garden is not rich with suggestions or romance or creativity. It is rich with potential for future jam!

Equally untroubled with fanciful imaginings is her son-in-law, Stanley Burnell—the owner of this big house and garden. He looks upon the huge garden as a status symbol—the bigger the garden, the bigger his reputation in society.

In just one short story can be seen the overweening importance of the garden and flower imagery in Katherine Mansfield's fiction and the role that this imagery plays in the development of character. It was this emphasis on characterization rather than on the traditional elaboration of the plot that made Katherine Mansfield one of the pioneers of the modern short story. Her open-ended stories are an important indication of her modernist sensibility.

This sensibility however, did not stop her from using the garden imagery in the traditional manner. Such is Katherine Mansfield's strong attachment to the gardens of the mind that she can re-create a garden even in a story that has no garden. A story like *The Singing Lesson* is set in a class room inside a cold stone building. However, flowers, gardens and their warm and positive associations are never far from the mind, thanks to the very evocative language. The protagonist, aptly named Miss Meadows, is a singing teacher who has just received a letter of rejection from her fiancé. Basil (a plant name again!) has broken off their engagement. Miss Meadows, devastated by Basil's cruelty is in a black mood. She totally ignores the yellow chrysanthemums proffered by her favourite student, Mary Beazley, and in a voice of ice tells the girls to sing, appropriately enough, 'A Lament'. The young, mournful voices begin:

"Fast! Ah, too Fast Fade the Ro-o-ses of Pleasure;
Soon Autumn yields unto Wi-i-nter Drear."(346)

The singing lesson is interrupted, however, by a telegram from Basil which tells her to ignore the letter. The engagement is very much on…the cold wind over the garden recedes. The clouds pass. Everything is warm and sunny in Miss Meadows' life again. The garden blooms. How does Katherine Mansfield re-create the garden again in this cold stone building?

On the wings of hope, of love, of joy, Miss Meadows sped back to the music hall, up the aisle, up the steps, over to the piano.

"Page thirty-two, Mary", she said, "Page thirty-two," and picking up the yellow chrysanthemum, she held it to her lips to hide her smile. Then she turned to the girls, rapped with her baton: "Page thirty-two girls. Page thirty-two."

"We come here to-day with Flowers o'laden
With baskets of Fruit and Ribbons to boot,
To-oo Congratulate…"

"Stop! Stop!" cried Miss Meadows. "This is awful. This is dreadful." And she beamed at her girls. "What's the matter with you all? Think, girls, think of what you are singing. Use your imagination. With ***Flowers****o'erladen.* ***Baskets*** *of fruit and* ***Ribbons*** *to boot. And* ***Congratulate****." And this time Miss Meadows' voice sounded over all the other voices—full, deep, glowing with expression.*(350)

The garden of the mind is perfect again.

Katherine Mansfield's gardens of the mind are also associated with memory, nostalgia, recalling of things past, the 'do you remember?' stories. In the story, *A Dill Pickle*, the girl chances upon her lover of long ago at a café. While greeting her courteously, he asks her:

"*Do you remember that first afternoon we spent together at Kew Gardens? You were so surprised because I did not know the names of any flowers. I am just as ignorant for all your telling me. But whenever it is very fine and warm, and I see some bright colours—its awfully strange—I hear your voice saying, ' Geranium, marigold and verbena.' And I feel those three words are all I recall of some forgotten, heavenly language…you remember that afternoon?"*

"Oh, yes, very well."(169)

In a letter to her sister Chaddie, Katherine Mansfield wrote, "*Oh, how I love flowers! It is strange we should all Beauchamps have this passion for flowers."*2

For Katherine Mansfield, flowers stand for luxury, extravagance, transient beauty—a necessity for the soul. The young shop girl in the story, *The Tiredness of Rosabel,* forfeits a hearty supper in favour of splurging on a bunch of violets. The shop girl (rather romantically named Rosabel, rather than Alice or Martha or Kate) dreams of a life of luxury and extravagance. In her fantasy, Rosabel enters her pink and white bedroom with roses everywhere in dull silver vases. She is getting ready for an evening out:

The butler opened the door. Harvey was waiting. They drove away together…that was life, thought Rosabel! On the way to the Carlton they stopped at Gerard's. Harry bought her great sprays of Parma violets…filled her hands with them. (517)

Earlier in the evening, the real Rosabel had spent her precious money on a bunch of violets that she could ill-afford. The flowers are the cheapest way to fulfil her fantasy. For Rosabel, ability to spend on flowers, abundant and expensive flowers, suggests luxury. Therefore, in her equation, abundant flowers or the lack thereof suggests a class difference.

However, Mansfield is quite clear that appreciation of flowers indicates a class difference of the mind rather than birth. People like Stanley Burnell and Kezia's grandmother, born into the upper class, still lack the appreciation of flowers and their romantic associations. On the other hand, there is Rosabel—a princess born in a poor family—who is disastrously attached to expensive florist's flowers. There is a scene in *The Garden Party* where one of the workmen bends down to pluck a sprig of lavender and sniffs it appreciatively:

When Laura saw that gesture she forgot all about the Karakas in her wonder at him caring for things like that---caring for the smell of lavender. How many men that she knew would have done such a thing? (247)

Apart from class distinction, a love and appreciation of flora also marks a demarcating line between the ambitious doers of the world and the romantic dreamers. In the story, *At the Bay*, Linda is sitting (aptly enough) in the garden when her brother-in-law Jonathan strolls in and begins chatting to her:

Looking at him as he lay there, Linda thought again how attractive he was. It was strange to think that he was only an ordinary clerk, that Stanley earned twice as much money as he. What was the matter with him? He had no ambition…and yet one felt he was gifted, exceptional. The new fire blazed in Jonathan and yet a moment later it had fallen in and there was nothing but ashes. (236)

Jonathan likens his city job to a prison:

"*I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling…I've only one night or one day, and there's this vast, dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored*." (237)

In the contest between the Jonathans and Stanley Burnells of the world, the latter win hands down. This Utilitarian and materialistic world has no patience to stand and stare at the transient beauty of flowers in unexplored gardens.

In Chekov's *Cherry Orchard*, the hopelessly impractical and romantic LyubovAndreevna mourns the cutting of the cherry trees. Lopakhin, the former peasant, advises her to sell off the cherry orchard to developers who would build on the land summer houses for the rich and thus save her from bankruptcy. She cannot bring herself to order the cutting of the trees that she associates with her childhood, her memories, her mother. Ultimately though, the materialistic world overwhelms her. Lopakhin becomes the owner of the cherry orchard and the cutting of the cherry trees begins even before LyubovAndreevna leaves the scene. She departs to an uncertain future--- a refugee, a failure, a loser in this competitive world. In both the stories—Katherine Mansfield's *At the Bay* and Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the verdict is unequivocal—there is no place in this Utilitarian world for the LyubovAndreevnas and the Jonathans. The future belongs to the Lopakhins and the Stanley Burnells. The LyubovAndreevnas and the Jonathans are banished to Siberia. This is the poignant truth of modern life, of the Industrial world, of the developed society.

Change is inevitable. And change, so fast and so swift in this modern world, is best exemplified by Katherine Mansfield through her garden imagery. Whenever she reverts to her childhood for reference, the gardens come alive in her stories. They are touched with nostalgia and poignancy. Is it any surprise that a collection of stories like *Bliss* and *The Garden Party*, which are New Zealand stories of her childhood have plentiful references to gardens and that a collection like *A German Pension*, is stark and solitary, with not a single flower or garden making an appearance? Equally grim are the stories of London. The dark, urban landscape of these stories, speak of loneliness and privation.

It will not be an exaggeration to state that the plentiful references to plants and gardens in Katherine Mansfield's fiction is her way to return to her past, a nostalgia trip wherein she thinks of herself as a plant too! Writing to a young South African woman she reviewed kindly and helped get into print, and who is desperate, as the young Mansfield had been, to leave home and get to London, she said:

I came to London at eighteen…but for the past four or five years I have been ill and have lived…always remote, always cut off…it's only in those years I've really been able to work and always my thoughts and feelings go back to New Zealand—rediscovering it, finding beauty in it, re-living it…really, I'm sure it does a writer no good to be transplanted—does harm. (331)

The gardens of Katherine Mansfield's mind, steeped in nostalgia, describe a country left behind, a past innocent and unreachable. The future that she had tried to build in London, and the country that she had rejected in such a hurry have filled her with regret, very unconscious and subliminal. In a 1922 letter to her friend Ida Baker, Katherine Mansfield wrote:

How hard it is to escape from places! However carefully one goes, they hold you—you leave little bits of yourself fluttering on the fences…little rags and shreds of your very life. (312)

The recurrent delving into memory to mine the garden scenes of her childhood indicates her bewildered realization that she was hasty in rejecting one way of life and was unable to replace it with a meaningful substitute. A shattered health, a tottering marriage, a perilous financial position, a pseudo-intellectual scene in London – these were the replacements for a sheltered childhood. She rejected her father's materialistic, bourgeois world and set out bravely to carve her own world. The bohemian life that she adopted eagerly however, was bereft of gardens and equally, if not more, false. Her tragedy was that she saw things too clearly, and this left her vulnerable and defenceless. Like Bertha in the story *Bliss*, who finds that her perfect life in London, her marriage, her friends are all a sham, Katherine Mansfield could only look out of the window at the lovely pear tree and cry, " Oh, what is going to happen now?" But like Bertha in the story, Katherine Mansfield too observed to her bewilderment that the "Pear tree was as lovely as ever and as full of flower and as still…"

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[1]. Katherine Mansfield, The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield, London, Penguin Books, 1981, p 22. (All quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in the body of the text.)

[2]. The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, ed. Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott, Oxford University Press, 2008, p 200. (All letter extracts are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in the body of the text.)

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