

“Marginal Person” and “Imagined Communities” in *Miss Brill*

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Mansfield, revered as the progenitor of New Zealand literature, distinguishes herself with a distinctive linguistic flair and narrative technique that resonate through her works. Taking her short story *Miss Brill* as the research object and Bakhtin's thought of Marginalization in the system of philosophical anthropology as the theoretical basis, this paper reveals Miss Brill's inner world as a marginal person through a detailed analysis of her marginal position in three dimensions of body, clothing and language, as well as an in-depth interpretation of her “Epiphany” moment. At the same time, the novel adopts an internal focus narrative perspective, interprets Miss Brill's helpless struggle to integrate into the “Imagined Communities” but finally hopes to become disillusioned, and reveals the tendency of society to ignore and exclude marginalized groups.

Keywords: *Miss Brill, Imagined communities, Marginalization, Internal focus narrative perspective, Epiphany.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield was nurtured amidst the country's resplendent natural beauty and within the framework of Victorian-era cultural practices (Song, 2000). Her narratives did not chronicle the epic tales that raise tempestuous waves; instead, she excelled at extracting the mundane yet often overlooked details from everyday events and scenes, capturing the subtlest shifts in her characters' inner lives with a perceptive and delicate touch. With a particular penchant for portraying women, she illuminated their nuanced and sensitive psyches, reflecting her keen interest in feminine identity and societal standing. Yet, her life was also shadowed by solitude and infirmity, experiences that profoundly shaped her creative output. The emotional wounds she endured, the yoke of her colonial identity, and the anxieties stemming from a life of wandering found rich expression in the narratives she wove and the characters she brought to life. When we study the short story *Miss Brill*, it is inevitable that we project Mansfield's life onto the protagonist, Miss Brill, and see her journey as a reflection of Mansfield's own life.

Miss Brill, belonging to the lower-middle class and relying on teaching English to children and

reading newspapers to the elderly for her livelihood, is not accepted by the mainstream upper class. In the park, she observes the people around her in solitude, her heart filled with fear and helplessness regarding loneliness, disillusionment, and aging. Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, introduces the concept of the “imagined communities” to elucidate the formation and characteristics of nations and nationalism. He posits that a nation is essentially a modern form of imagination, which is not fictitious but rather fosters a sense of identification and belonging among people to a communal entity. This implies that, although members of a nation may never have met, they collectively form an imagined community through shared language, culture, history, and symbols (Anderson, 1983). In this short story, the scenes described are both what Miss Brill sees through her eyes and what is generated from her personal imagination and feelings. The loneliness and helplessness of being in a foreign land lead Miss Brill to fantasize about integrating into French society, attempting to mask differences and contradictions with a sense of imagined unity and commonality. However, the eventual shattering of this illusion reflects the harshness and ruthlessness

of the real world, revealing the impossibility of covering up differences and contradictions with mere imagination. And this aligns with Bakhtin's thought of "marginalization". Bakhtin believed that human existence is inherently the most profound form of communication, with people always situated at the boundaries, or "margins" (Bakhtin, 1998). In his philosophical anthropology, a complete 'self' is constituted by three levels: spiritual personality, body, clothing, language and culture. The spiritual personality communicates with others and the world through the body and linguistic cultural clothing, which are the very margins of communication (Zhou & Sun, 2011).

If Mansfield experienced the hardships of life in her writing career, then her Miss Brill is a more tragic image, because she constantly constructs an idealized social vision for herself and imagines herself at the center of society. In reality, however, she was never really recognized by society. Miss Brill's story is filled with intense longing and fantasy as she lives in a world she believes revolves around her, yet she remains on the edge of real social acceptance.

2. THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND MISS BRILL'S BODY MARGINALIZATION

Anderson's Imagined Communities Theory posits that nations or communities are forged through shared cultural imaginings and symbolic identifications that surpass geographical, blood, and biological constraints, allowing individuals to feel part of a larger collective with a shared history and future. In this process, "imagination" plays a pivotal role, enabling members of the community to transcend the limitations of reality and co-create an idealized group identity (Anderson, 1983). In *Miss Brill*, the protagonist, Miss Brill, embodies the quintessential outsider, living in France as a foreigner, her marginal status providing the rationale for her imagination, leading her subconsciously to believe she is part of French society. Her body serves as a crucial medium for her interaction with the outside world, simultaneously reflecting her peripheral status.

While in the park, Miss Brill engages her sense of sight to absorb and interpret her surroundings. In the narrative, she sits quietly on her special seat, discreetly observing the passing crowds. Her attention is not only on the band but also on the conductor, noting even the smallest details such as his new jacket. She scrutinizes the two elderly

people sitting beside her and the groups of people strolling by, observing that "there was some-thing funny about nearly all of them. They were odd, silent, nearly all old". On one hand, this could be seen as Miss Brill exercising her "imagination", constructing a community in her subconscious where a simple social group is insufficient; it must be populated with individuals sharing her own characteristics to evoke a stronger sense of belonging. On the other hand, what readers witness is but a single day in Miss Brill's life, a day that may have been repeated countless times, with the same scenes playing over and over, inevitably leading to a sense of visual fatigue.

It is evident that Miss Brill constructs an idealized society of mutual affection and harmony through her physical senses of sight and sound, integrating herself into it. She is in dire need of social recognition and a sense of belonging, lacking a clear identity (Li, 2019). When we consider this, the issue of identity anxiety in the novel becomes apparent. "Identity anxiety" arises from "identity recognition", which primarily investigates the issues of self-awareness and belonging for individuals or groups within the context of socio-cultural backgrounds (Botton, 2004), referring to the self-identity choices made by individuals (or groups) at a specific time within a specific socio-cultural setting. The process of identity recognition, involving individuals (or groups) making self-identity decisions across different socio-cultural contexts, is often characterized as a "subjective experience where anxiety and hope, pain and joy coexist" (Tao, 2004). We term this unique state of identity recognition as hybrid identity. Identity anxiety emerges when this recognition process encounters obstacles that hinder the identity recognition behaviors of individuals (or groups).

In *Miss Brill*, the protagonist makes a living by teaching English to children and reading newspapers to the elderly in France. At the beginning of the story, she is full of enthusiasm for the outside world. The story highlights her cheerful and lively character through extensive descriptions of her actions and mental activities. She observes the park's environment and the passing crowds with meticulous attention, "Miss Brill always looked forward to conversation. She had become really quite expert, she thought, at listening as though she didn't listen, at sitting in other people's lives just a minute while they talked round her". Later in the narrative, we learn that last Sunday, an elderly British woman in a couple seemed perpetually dissatisfied with her glasses, and "Miss Brill had

wanted to shake her". The young girl's encounter with a soldier, the beautiful woman dropping flowers, the conversation between the man in gray and a woman—Miss Brill comments on all these scenes. Clearly, she has not integrated into the society around her but yearns to be a part of it, even hoping that the elderly person for whom she reads the newspaper will suddenly discover she is an actress. Miss Brill's endearing nature is both amusing and deeply sorrowful. When she imagines herself as part of the park scenery, she momentarily gains a sense of belonging, but the subsequent mockery from a young couple shatters her dreams. In reality, she has never received the collective and societal recognition that leads to social identity.

3. THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND MISS BRILL'S CLOTHING MARGINALIZATION

Miss Brill's choice of clothing serves as a multifaceted symbol, embodying not just her personal identity but also her complex relationship with the French society that she longs to be a part of, a society she perceives as an "imagined community". The fox fur scarf, which looks outdated, was a testament to her youth in the prime of her days. Her value for this scarf is reflected in her careful care of it, "She had taken it out of its box that afternoon, shaken out the moth-powder, given it a good brush, and rubbed the life back into the dim little eyes". And it is through such details that Mansfield illustrates Miss Brill's connection to her scarf as an extension of herself.

However, in the park, Miss Brill is subjected to merciless ridicule from a young couple, which makes her realize how shabby her scarf appears to others, like a "fried whiting". This disparity in clothing became an external marker of the differences between her and the French society, in another word, the "imagined community". It not only reflects Miss Brill's marginalization on a material level but also reveals her lack of a sense of social belonging. Her clothing becomes an expression of her relationship with society, the boundary of her interaction with it. She attempts to reach the center of society through this boundary, maintaining her dignity and identity through her scarf. In Anderson's theory, members of a community construct a sense of belonging through shared cultural symbols and memories (Fu, 2001). Miss Brill's fox fur scarf should have been a part of her shared cultural memory with French society, a reflection of her personal history and identity.

Wearing her beloved scarf is her insistence on self-identification, but in the eyes of modern society, such memories and cultural symbols have become outdated and no longer recognized. Her clothing becomes a sign of her disconnection from society; she cannot find her place within this "imagined community". At the same time, the scarf becomes an insurmountable chasm between her and society. She can neither integrate into society through it nor gain social recognition and acceptance. This marginalization in clothing is not only material but also spiritual, it should have been a bridge for dialogue with society, but this bridge is rendered shaky due to society's indifference and exclusion.

As Miss Brill "unclasped the neck let quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying". We are drawn into a scene that resonates deeply with Bakhtin's "theory of Carnivalization", a concept that challenges the traditional boundaries between the audience and the performer, transforming life into a stage where everyone has a role to play (Bakhtin, 2010). The spirit of Carnivalization is a temporary suspension of social norms and subversion of the established order, allowing for a brief period where all can participate and perform without the constraints of their everyday identities. Bakhtin posits that the Carnivalization is where the marginalized can temporarily invert the social hierarchy and assert their presence. However, for Miss Brill, this inversion is a fleeting illusion, her experience is a poignant commentary on the transient nature of the Carnivalization and the harsh awakening that follows. The scarf, a symbol of her imagined inclusion, becomes a tangible reminder of her exclusion and a relic of a performance that she can no longer sustain. At the same time, the removal of the scarf is a symbolic act, signaling the end of Miss Brill's personal Carnivalization and the painful recognition that she has always been on the periphery, never truly a part of the collective performance that constitutes the tapestry of life. "When she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying", a line that evokes a sense of loss and the quiet despair of her inner world. The continuation of the Carnivalization around her, but indifferent to her departure. People are all equals in the Carnivalization, but for Miss Brill, this equality is a cruel irony, as she is left to grapple with her isolation.

4. THE IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND MISS BRILL'S LANGUAGE MARGINALIZATION

The novel does not begin with a fixed event or scene; instead, the plot unfolds as Miss Brill describes her surroundings, and the environment within the story is revealed through the observations of the protagonist. Readers cannot discern whether the story follows a chronological or spatial order; the plot seems to be a "random" assembly and interweaving of different parts. The French scholar Genette uses the concept of "Focalization" to analyze different narrative perspectives. He categorizes focalization into three types: "zero focalization", "internal focalization" and "external focalization" (Genette, 2013). Internal focalization, also known as the narrator's participatory perspective, is a narrative viewpoint where the focalizer observes and perceives the world through the eyes of a character within the story. The narrator relies on their own sensory consciousness to feel and experience only the information that is seen or felt, or the psychological changes and streams of consciousness that arise. For other characters, they remain external, inferring their mental activities based on conjecture. In this mode, the narrator seems to reside within a character, observing, listening, and feeling through their consciousness and senses (Wilson, 2011).

The author does not provide any descriptions of Miss Brill's appearance or clothing; as readers progress through the text, they only begin to sense from the subtleties that she might be a woman past her youth, and it is not until the end, through the conversation of two young people, that they learn she is an elderly woman. This narrative mode differs from the "omniscient perspective" or "God's-eye view", which Genette refers to as "zero focalization"; instead, it employs an internal focalization perspective, yet the novel is interspersed with third-person indirect discourse. " 'But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?' asked the boy". 'Why does she come here at all-who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home', which brings out Miss Brill's characteristic as a social being, in that she cannot immerse herself entirely in her own imagination, nor can she escape the judgments of others. This writing approach also reflects to a certain extent Miss Brill's status as an outsider, revealing the fact that she has never been accepted by this community. The novel devotes a significant amount of space to portraying Miss Brill's

character through the depiction of her first-person internal monologue, "But even the band seemed to know what she was feeling and played more softly and tenderly, and the drum beat 'The Brute! The Brute!' over and over. What would she do? What was going to happen now? But as Miss Brill wondered, the ermine toque turned, raised her hand as though she'd seen someone else, muchnicer, just over there, and pattered away". Through the author's depiction of Miss Brill's mental activities, her image gradually becomes full and three-dimensional in the readers' minds. She is a lovable person, observant of life's details, and yearns for communication and connection with the outside world. At the same time, the novel also uses second-person narrative, directly addressing the reader to close the distance with the protagonist, "The air was motionless, but when you opened your mouth there was just a faint chill, like a chill from a glass of iced water before you sip". This guides the reader to follow the protagonist's senses and thoughts, allowing a deeper sensation and understanding of Miss Brill's life. The author freely switches between fixed third-person narrative and first-person internal monologue, interspersed with zero focalization for the depiction of the external environment in the novel. This multi-angle viewpoint allows readers to capture the story from various perspectives and interpret the text from multiple angles and in all dimensions, all converging to reflect the same theme: the protagonist's lonely and unanchored life.

In the internal focus narrative mode, the novel provides only the information that the focal character-narrator should offer, with all narration restricted within the perspective of this focal character. The narrator's role in storytelling, commenting, and communicating is clearly manifested in the work (Wang, 2015). At this level, what Miss Brill hears, sees, and thinks seems to be the author's arrangement, but in fact, they are all her own choices. "..... and the others on the benches-they would come in with a kind of accompaniment-something low, that scarcely rose or fell, something so beautiful--moving...and Miss Brill's eyes filled with tears and she looked smiling at all the other members of the company". The novel transitions from third-person direct discourse about Miss Brill's imagination of the elderly person for whom she reads the newspaper discovering she is an actress to a zero focalization narrative mode. The reader's focus shifts with the protagonist's consciousness, effectively avoiding the intrusion of the author's subjective perspective into the plot,

and naturally immersing the reader into the protagonist's life. At the same time, through the transformation of narrative perspectives, the author can objectively present Miss Brill's inner world, bridging the distance between the reader and her, achieving resonance.

5. THE EPIPHANY OF A LONELY MIND

The term "Epiphany" is originally a Christian term, but as an early technique of stream of consciousness fiction, Joyce, Woolf, and Mansfield all used the term to refer to a sudden revelation of the truth, as if it were a flash of inspiration. It was in 1944 in the work *Stephen's Hero* that Joyce used Stephen's words to explain "spiritual Epiphany" (Joyce, 1963), that is, "at some point a person will wake up, see his own situation clearly, and realize the true meaning of life" (Head, 1992). Therefore, Joyce's "spiritual Epiphany" mainly reveals the main character's sudden awakening to the actual situation he finds himself in through describing an external situation and a series of events. This Epiphany is the inevitable result of the story or the development of events, and its development is linear.

In *Miss Brill*, Mansfield vividly shows the whole process of Miss Brill's disillusionment through "Spiritual Epiphany". She is eager to listen to other people's conversations to feel the vigour of life, looking for the warmth of life. One Sunday, she notices that the people sitting on the benches or on the green chairs were as motionless as statues. To her eyes, these old people seems funny, outdated, out of step with the cheerful atmosphere around them, and out of step with the sense of superiority she is filled with, but the irony is that her prejudice against them is a mirror image of her own situation. "Two young girls in red came by and two young soldiers in blue met them, and they laughed and paired and went off arm in arm. Two peasant women with funny straw hats passed, gravely, leading beautiful smoke-colored donkey. A cold, pale nun hurried by. A beautiful woman came along and dropped her bunch of violets.....". When Miss Brill sees all this, her heart is filled with joy, and only then does she realize what has made it all so exciting: the people are all on the stage. "They were all on the stage. They weren't only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday", but "she'd never thought of it like that before". Here, she watches the activities of others, listens to their

conversations, and imagines her relationship with them. She suddenly realizes that what she sees is just like a play, and she is not only an actor, but also an indispensable member of the park group. In this imagination, her loneliness is dispelling and she finds the joy of life, which is her first "Epiphany".

However, this "Epiphany" only exists in Miss Brill illusory imagination and will eventually disappear due to the impact of reality. Mansfield describes in detail the inner activities of Miss Brill at this moment, she imagines herself as an "actress", and the park is the stage, she has contact with strangers around the stage, and she finds a sense of belonging and the value of self-existence in her lonely life. "Miss Brill nearly laughed out loud". She thinks that if the sick old gentleman knows that it is an actress reading the newspaper to him, she is sure that "two points of light quivered in the old eyes". And these inner activities become the fantasy before Miss Brill's second Epiphany. The climax of a novel is often the character's sudden realization of the meaning of something at a particular moment, which is often produced when a character sees an object or a scene or hears something. Miss Brill hears the taunts of two young men and realizes she is old and ugly, and finally realizes that no one needs her, sending Miss Brill back to reality from her own fantasy and imagination, with a deep and sober realization that her performance does not mean as much to others as their performance means to her. Just as the film uses close-ups to give the audience clues about an actor's state of mind, Mansfield uses epiphanies to focus Miss Brill's attention on a meaningful symbol that allows the reader to connect emotionally with the character. At the end of the novel, Miss Brill's awakening to her pitiful and pathetic life situation is in stark contrast to the cheerful mood at the beginning of the article. This Epiphany not only sends her to the brink of despair, but also makes her feel the misery of the world. It is not difficult to see that the author renders the atmosphere through the instant spiritual Epiphany, which makes the novel reach the climax. Readers are absorbed in the novel and the characters in the novel share the same sadness and fate, making these "meaningful moments" become the center of the structure of modern short stories.

6. CONCLUSION

Miss Brill, who desperately wants to fit in but has never been accepted. Every observation she

makes about the people who come and go in the park is a silent conversation with the society in which she lives. It is not only a story of individual loneliness and disillusionment, but also a mirror of society at the time, revealing the plight of people living on the margins. Miss Brill struggles not only for recognition, but also for the essence of belonging, a wish that remains unfulfilled at the end of the story.

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