

Cultural Displacement and Life Extermination in Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*

Aseel Hatif Jassam^{a*} and Hadeel Hatif Jassam^b

^aDepartment of English and Literature, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University, Baghdad, Iraq

^bDepartment of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala, Diyala, Iraq

*Corresponding Author: aseelhatif2017@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq,

Abstract

Literally, displacement is a word that refers to one's physical transition from one place to another either voluntarily or involuntarily. Usually, the movement of an individual or a group of individuals from the original place to a periphery, where they come to suffer from psychological illnesses, is made by force. It is in that periphery that they happen to feel that they are displaced, marginalized, deserted, banished, disoriented, alienated, imprisoned, and above all and terminally defeated. The research will focus on the emotional impact that dislocation and disjunction have on the protagonists of Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. Feeling Lost and disconnected, both fatalistic protagonists retreat, symbolically putting an end to their life.

Keywords: displacement, retreat, illusion, war, colonialism

Introduction

The research deals with two modern short stories that revolve around the idea of war and colonialism. These two short stories are Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. Both writers reflect their experiences in their writings, depicting how one's position in one place rather than the other will affect one's feelings and sense of identity. Both the old man and Miss Brill feel that they are out of their place, suffer from excessive loneliness and alienation, and ultimately come to lose, symbolically speaking, any desire to live. The ending of these two short stories is heartbreaking, with both defeated protagonists shunning their sordid world where they find themselves in and accepting their fate.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this research paper is to present what is meant by cultural displacement. It also sheds light on the psychological impact of different forms of imperialism on the protagonists of both Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. Moreover, it touches on the historical and autobiographical soundings of such kind of displacement in the sense that it will unfold the horrifying effects of war and colonization that both Hemingway and Mansfield had experienced respectively.

Methodology and Research Questions

The research studies Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* and Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. Reading these two short stories, many questions are to be raised. The research paper will answer these questions by tracing back in depth the writers' psyche and investigating the kind of identity that both Ernest Hemingway and Katherine Mansfield have adopted in life. In fact, both suffer a lot from emotional and societal diseases for identifying themselves with one place rather than another, so this paper will pinpoint the reasons behind such feelings with regard to modern theories of criticism: psychological and postcolonial criticism. The paper will answer the following questions: What is Hemingway's identity? Why does he believe in fatalism? What are his perceptions and philosophies about life? How colonized people view themselves? Why does Mansfield feel nostalgic towards Scotland? Who in these stories is the "other"? Where does she find herself more alienated and why? Is there any change in the protagonists' views by the end of these two stories?

Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge*:

A Post-world War Tragic Story of Complete Resignation

Hemingway (1899-1961) is one of the twentieth century American writers who manages to present truthful documents on different wars and their aftermaths. He had been an eye witness of many deadly wars and does succeed in recording the bloody and devastating effects of wars on society, whether physically or emotionally, in his post-war fiction. For Hemingway, fiction is much more important than journalism. He is of the opinion that a talented writer hasn't to waste his "talent writing journalism when [he] could be writing fiction instead." (Hemingway, 2003)

Hemingway's wartime experiences enable him to observe many details that shape and furnish most of his war fiction. In fact, his work as a correspondent to report on the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) for the North American Newspaper Alliance from Madrid helps him to produce twenty dispatches on war and its destructive effect on humanity. Because of these dispatches, he is criticized for having supported forcefully and sided "so strongly with the Republic against the Nationalist" (Ibid.) Using his imaginative power, he transforms the recorded details of these dispatches into his fiction" in a way that none of his factual reporting ever could" (Benson, 1990) Hemingway's works of art, unlike his journalistic ones, bring readers and the audience to know how his characters feel and why. Involved emotionally and imaginatively in the events of Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge*, readers can never forget the feelings of concern and the imaginative portrait of an aged refugee who is too tired to walk further and escape from his enemy. In Hemingway's works, war is presented as a disease that will weaken the characters both physically and mentally. He himself isn't apart from this: he is wounded many times and is obliged to choose, when the Cold War erupted, "between his beloved, Finca Vigia and his country." Reflecting on his sad feelings due to the disastrous results of the Battle of the Ebro in 1938, Hemingway writes:

There is no man alive today who has not cried at a war if he was at it long enough. Sometimes it is after a battle, sometimes it is when someone that you love is killed, sometimes it is from great injustice to another, sometimes it is at the disbanding of a corps or a unit that has endured and accomplished together and now will never be together again. But all men at war cry sometimes, from Napoleon, the greatest butcher, down.

(Hemingway 2003)

In order to transfer his feelings following the offensive of the Spanish Republic that ended disastrously on the Ebro and which he documents in a snippet, Hemingway sets his pen to *Old Man at the Bridge*, submitting the dispatch as a short story to a magazine rather than a journalistic article. Setting it in the backdrop of the bloodiest Spanish Civil War on Easter Sunday of 1938, Hemingway opens his short story with a displaced, aged, and disorient man who has left, on feet and unwillingly, his native town, San Carlos which is under artillery. Tired, having already walked twelve kilometers, the old man stops at a pontoon bridge across the Ebro River that many refugees are crossing so as to flee the war zone and reach Barcelona, the secure passage that is suggested by the scout and the narrator of the story to the old man to lead and which the old man objects to follow, saying, with complete resignation and full of despair, that he knows no way to Barcelona. In fact, the short story is made credible with Hemingway's reference to these geographical names.

Hemingway doesn't identify himself with his hometown, Oak Park, Illinois, the place where his father commits suicide. He finds in Spain the lure to uproot himself from Illinois which reminds him of everything unpleasant and sad memories as his father's suicide. Spending forty years in Spain, he gets strongly connected to it that it becomes difficult to guess what his identity is. In a letter he writes in 1956, Hemingway writes "In spite of having been on the Republican side, I am considered a Spanish author who happened to be in America"(Marin, 2010)

With this idea in his mind, Hemingway writes *Old Man at the Bridge*, showing how the war has a brutal effect on society. Through this story, he presents an old and helpless man whom war has uprooted and forced him to leave his pets behind. These pets _ a cat, four pigeons, and two goats_ are everything to him. They represent his family, yet he is forced to abandon them. Though the old man is described by Hemingway as a man 'without politics' or as having no part to play in war or any political affiliation and even does not care which side will be the triumphant, he will be one of its casualties. In a moment when his life is put in the hands of others, the old man seems to be much concerned about the life of his animals, wondering whether they will be able to survive the damage. The old man is of the point that the cat can take care of itself and survive, but he is not certain if the other animals_ the pigeons and the two goats_ will be able to escape death. The scout refers to the possibility of the survival of pigeons_ that Hemingway at the end of the story refers to as doves, the emblems of peace in wartime _if the old man has left the cage unlocked and the door open. Even though there is a faint probability that they will manage to survive by flying away, Hemingway shows, death will be certain and inevitable for with their flying away, peace will fly too and all innocent people, who neither back war nor participate in it, will be its victims. The irony is that these innocent people are sacrificed on Easter Sunday, the day on which people are supposed to celebrate the rebirth of Jesus Christ. In a nihilistic tone and to support his "fatalistic vision of life," (Ibid.) that he shares with people and discovers in Spain, Hemingway ironically sets this story on the day of Jesus' Resurrection to show that life is meaningless and death is inevitable and will be impending everyone at any time. The war beats and defeats the old man for it makes him lose everything_ his physical energy, native land, his animals and ultimately his life, the last thing he is concerned about.

It is in Spain and precisely in its bullrings that Hemingway finds that life and death are intermingled. Hemingway's fictional works reflect his conceptions of existence, usually through his reference to a bridge that he presents as a symbol of "the thin line separating life and death." (Ibid.) In *Old Man at the Bridge*, the bridge is presented as the final

bridge that separate the old man from his old life. Losing everything he loves, the disconnected man stays at the bridge, recalling his pets and awaiting his tragic destiny.

Katherine Mansfield's Miss Brill: A Story of a Colonialist's Loss of Cultural Identity

Published in the 1920s and set in the Post-World War I in France, Katherine Mansfield's short story, *Miss Brill* is also meant to show the psychological impact, not of war, but of colonization on society. Unlike Hemingway who has uprooted himself from Illinois to feel at home in Spain that he identifies himself with, Mansfield feels, when in Britain, that she is out of place and an exilee' or to use her own words, a "little colonial walking in the London garden patch_ allowed to look, perhaps, but not to linger"(Smith,2015) The fact that she is able to look at the beautiful geranium of London garden and not to stay there for a long time for contemplation shows how much she has felt rootlessness in England and why she writes her stories under her pen name. Having experienced the feelings of being lost, rootless, marginalized, exiled, and alienated, she as a colonial modernist short story writer uses literature as an outlet to release these adverse feelings that have controlled her when she is in England, the place where she feels disconnected to in spite of the fact that she has spent half of her life in. Of her cold relationship with England, Mansfield says" we have nothing to say to each other; we are always meeting as strangers"(Blake, 2001)

What contributes to Mansfield's feelings of detachment and marginalization is her inability to uproot herself from and forget about the past represented by her homeland, New Zealand, the colonial periphery where she has spent her childhood years. Anxious and for fear of not being recognized among the universal writers of her time, she leaves the colony and moves to London, the metropolis, just to feel more and more marginalized and fragmented. Her sense of being an outsider_ in the sense that she isn't in London and her chance of recognition is limited in New Zealand_ continues even when she goes to London and marries, in 1918, John Middleton Murry, a poor English writer who makes her life more distressing and uneasy. Occupying a low social status, Murry also fails to be part of the upper-class English literary world. Furthermore, their marriage seems to be incompatible for the great disparity in social status of her second husband and wife _ a matter that complicates her desire to feel at home: "I don't like Jack's family. I could never bear to have them live with us"(Ibid.)

Fear-ridden that she will not be accepted in her newly chosen home, England, it is then not surprising that she, in a letter in 1917 to her future husband, Murry, sends him the following injunction: " It's a terrible thing to be alone...yes it is ... but don't lower your mask until you have another mask prepared beneath... as terrible as you like... but a mask."(Bryant, 2018) Mansfield is of the point that one needs to prepare a mask to wear whenever necessary to hide an identity he /she feels he/ she will be in danger if he/ she has revealed. In addition, she is of the conviction that one's "other side" (Smith, 2015) needs sometimes to be masked_ the very idea that she works on when writing *Miss Brill*: just as masks are important to hide one's past, identity, and origin, so too are clothes in role-playing and deceiving both the wearer and the observer.

Mansfield's different pseudonyms are intended to mask her identity as a colonial New Zealander. Suffering from tuberculosis, she is prevented from visiting New Zealand. Though she lives in a state of exile in France where she dies in 1923, Mansfield manages to recreate and relive her memories at New Zealand through writing. A year before she dies, she, in a letter to Sarah Gertrude Millin, writes:" I think the only way to live as a writer is to draw upon one's real familiar life _ to find the treasure in that... our secret life, the life we return to over and over again, the 'do you remember' life is always the past."(Schneidmesser, 2018) Not accepted by her new world, England to which she

moves to achieve fame, she, in a nostalgic tone, recalls her homeland that she associates with the past. To move from past to present and again to the past, she comes to "live in a state in-betweenness," (Ibid.) a state that she shares with her protagonist, Miss Brill.

Mansfield's *Miss Brill* (1922) is set in France after the outbreak of World War I. Both Hemingway and Mansfield have their own perceptions about home. As stated before, Hemingway doesn't feel himself attached to his homeland and instead he does feel himself at home in Spain, Mansfield, though attached more to New Zealand, has left it to London with the hope of fleeing limitations of the colony. The irony is that it is in London that she confronts more predicaments. Her sense of belonging to a colony affects her psyche a great deal. She knows what it is to live in a colony or a periphery. Generally, a periphery is any environment, but in a certain context, it means a secondary place where one feels limited and inferior. Mansfield's protagonists look at things "from the periphery" (Bryant, 2018) for her stories are usually set in places different from the ones her protagonists come from. As a result, they are often portrayed as being aliens, living in an exile in spite of their countless and restless efforts to feel one with their surroundings.

Mansfield's *Miss Brill* opens with Miss Brill, an old and unmarried English woman, who, it seems, leads a completely secluded life having failed to have any meaningful relationship, talking to her fox fur coat she has taken from box so as to wear it and not be disturbed by the "chill she somehow senses in the motionless air" (Song, 2009) The opening is so suggestive for it reveals something about her feelings as it starts and foreshadows menacing outcomes. The chilling weather is associated with the lack of communication. Bereft of a family and having failed to have and develop social relationships with her pupils, Miss Brill, glad to have her fur in, decides to set off every Sunday afternoon to the park so as to listen to a band played by young people, read a magazine for an old man who, it appears, doesn't care for her presence or even give an ear to what she reads, and above all eavesdrop on the conversations of those around her and criticize what they wear. Though her intention is to escape alienation, she has become more alienated and there lies the irony. Miss Brill gains nothing from her frequent visits to the park every Sunday _ the day of the week that is associated with merriment and which signify cultural attachment_ but a realization that she has no place in the world.

It is in the park that she imagines herself enacting a very significant role in life:

Oh, how fascinating it was! How she enjoyed it! How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play... They were all on the stage. They were only the audience, not only looking on; they were acting. Even she had a part and came every Sunday. No doubt somebody would have noticed if she hadn't been there; she was part of the performance after all.

(Mansfield, 1922)

Though she doesn't take part in the conversation of people surrounding her and has just observed how they look, what they wear and what they are talking about, Miss Brill thinks that she is playing a role as crucial as that of an actor when it is time to ascend the stage to present an elaborate performance:

She was on the stage. She thought of the old invalid gentleman to whom she read the newspaper for four afternoons a week while he slept in the garden... If he'd been dead she might have noticed for weeks; she wouldn't have minded. But suddenly he

knew he was having a paper read to him by an actress! An actress!

(Ibid)

The quotation above shows how Miss Brill has lived in a fantasy world where she imagines herself as not a spectator, but as a vital participant, moving from the margin sordid world, represented by her dark room that looks like a cupboard_ the 'secret' that her last epiphany unfolds as she comes to realize that she is not desired, loved, and even part of the surroundings after being compared to a 'fried whiting' and mortified by a young couple for sitting near them and wearing her beloved fox fur, another symbol of her identity, old age that is "ludicrous to the young," (Smith, 2015) and her other side_ to a world where she imagines herself temporarily central and connected to her surroundings. With such a delusion falling apart, she, rejected and dismissed by society, again restores to her dark room, (Mansfield's colony) displacing herself from the cruel world and burying herself alive with her fur coat she, at the end, hears crying the moments she puts it back in the box.

The ending is so paradoxical: though the short story opens with Miss Brill first happy to address her fur as her dear friend who as if it has been absent and "has just arrived from a trip,"(Ozen, 2017) it ends with her feeling completely desperate, putting it, without looking, in the box, an emblem of her dark room that she, feeling old, out-of-date, and isolated,"(Ibid.) has imprisoned herself in. Overhearing the insulting remarks of the beautiful couple and identifying herself and her role in the world by the way others perceive her, Miss Brill _ as her name suggests limitation in the sense that brill is "the name of a European flatfish."(Bryant, 2018) _ has retreated to her dark room, putting an end to the life of the crying fur, whose nose she has already dabbed 'black sealing wax' on for getting loose (destroyed) with the passage of time and by extension her own life. Like her fur, she "has clearly taken some blows from reality,"(Ibid.) in the sense that her attempts to be part of the world around her tend to be futile and her story ends where it begins with Miss Brill feeling that she is "nobody but an old woman, loneliness-stricken, poor, and miserable." (Song, 2009)

Conclusion

Reading both Hemingway's Old Man at the Bridge and Mansfield's Miss Brill, one can conclude that both authors experience much ups and downs in life to the point that their writings come to reveal something about their troubled life which they relate with universal ills of post-modernism and post-colonialism. Accordingly, they use their fiction as an outlet to air the psychological pressure they suffer from and at the same time to recall nostalgically certain values they are lacking following wartimes or some other political and social upheavals. To flee from whatever force that holds him back, Hemingway has left intentionally his hometown because it reminds him of the sad memories and settles in Spain for a very long time that it becomes the land he strongly belongs to and where his identity lies. Feeling the importance of being at home, Hemingway sets his story in his new home, Spain so as to show how much its people are attached to it but are forced and to leave it or be the victims of war: Hemingway's old man has left his home destination, San Carlos to find himself on the bridge across Ebro River which he at the end will ultimately leave (death as an ultimate result of wars). Mansfield too suffers in the sense that she has felt the psychological burden of being an outsider both in her first and second homes_ a matter that makes her and her character feel the desperate need to belong to a world that has denied them such a right. Like Miss Brill, Mansfield feels herself marginalized, and loses privileges she as a citizen is supposed to celebrate.

References

- Arnold, Jordan. (2014). "Analysis of *Miss Brill*" Retrieved December 20, 2018, URL: <http://prezi.com/wacno8hjwnry/analysis-of-miss-brill>.
- Benson, Jackson. (1990). *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Blake, Anne. (2001). "Katherine Mansfield and the Rejection of England" in A. Blake (et al.), *England through Colonial Eyes in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (79-91) Houndmill, New York: Palgrave.
- Bryant Rajan, Kristin. (2018). Beneath the Performance: Identity in Katherine Mansfield's *'Miss Brill'* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*. Tinakori Critical Journal of Katherine Mansfield Society. Issue 2, 34-42. <http://www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/tinakori/Tinakori-Issue2-07-2018pdf>.
- Hemingway, Earnest. (2003). *Hemingway on War*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Mansfield, Katherine. (1920). "*Miss Brill*" Retrieved December 20, 2018. URL: www.katherinemansfieldsociety.org/assets/KM-Stories/MISS-BRILL1920.pdf.
- Marin Ruiz, R. (2010). "A Spanish Portrait: Spain and its Connections with the Thematic and Structural Dimensions of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*". *Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 8: 103-118. <http://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articula/3394896>.
- Nordquist, Richard. (2018). "Miss Brill's Fragile Fantasy: A Critical Essay about Katherine Mansfield's Short Story '*Miss Brill*'". Retrieved December 14, 2018. URL: <http://www.Thoughtco.com/>...>English>Grammar>Developing effective Essays>.
- Ozen Baykent, U. (2017). The Concept of Bergsonian Time in Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. *Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (2), 89-103. <http://www.beytulhikme.org/DergipdfDetay.asp?ID=1322>.
- Schneidensser, Lotta. (2018). "I want for one more to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the wild world: A Depiction of home in Katherine Mansfield's Later Stories. 14-24.
- Smith, Angela. (2015). "There is always the Other Side always: Katherine Mansfield's and Jean Rhys's Travellers in Europe" in Janka Kascakova and Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield and Continental Europe (142-154)*. Houndsmill: Palgrave and Macmillan.
- Song, Shenli. (2009). A Stylistic Analysis of *Miss Brill* by Katherine Mansfield. *Ccsenet Review of European Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 117-123. [.Dol:view<article<res<wwwccsenet.org](http://www.ccsenet.org).