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PAGES: 26-33

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/388347>

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF CHARACTER AND NATURE IN KATHERINE MANSFIELD'S "PRELUDE"

Özge GÜVENÇ*

ABSTRACT

Katherine Mansfield's contribution to the development of short story genre is related to her use of nature imagery, through which the characters are revealed. Many of her stories use the garden as setting and dwell on the difference between the outer and inner space, focusing specifically on the experience of female characters. In her short story "Prelude", which recounts the story of the Burnell family's move from town to a new house with a garden in the country, Mansfield emphasizes the interrelatedness of character and nature. Through the juxtaposition of wild nature with nature created by human beings, particularly the garden and the aloe tree in this story, she shows the inner states of her characters as well as the different relationships between the individual and the place s/he lives in. Ecofeminism, which correlates issues of nature and environment to the situation of women, emphasizes that characters cannot be thought in isolation from their physical surroundings. Hence, in this paper I will analyze Mansfield's story "Prelude" from an ecofeminist perspective by highlighting the analogy between nature/woman and culture/man to show how the writer puts more emphasis on the former of the dualisms through the valorization of women and nature.

Key Words: Katherine Mansfield, "Prelude", ecofeminism, nature/culture, male/female

KATHERINE MANSFIELD'İN "PRELUDE" ADLI ÖYKÜSÜNDE KARAKTER-DOĞA İLİŞKİSİ

ÖZ

Katherine Mansfield, karakterlerin iç dünyasını doğa imgeleriyle ilişkilendiren anlatım tarzıyla kısa öykü türünün gelişimine önemli katkıda bulunmuştur. Öykülerinin çoğu bahçede geçmekte ve özellikle kadın karakterlerin deneyimlerine odaklanarak, iç ve dış mekan farkını ortaya koymaktadır. Burnell ailesinin şehirden kasabaya yolculuğunu ve bahçeli bir eve taşınmasını konu alan "Prelude" adlı öyküsünde Mansfield, insan ve doğa arasındaki ilişki üzerinde durmuştur. Yazar vahşi doğa ile insan eliyle oluşturulan doğayı karşı karşıya getirerek, özellikle de bahçe ve sarısabır ağacı ile insanların ilişkisine odaklanarak, karakterlerin iç dünyasını yansıtmış ve çevreyle olan bağlantılarını gözler önüne sermiştir. Bu makalenin amacı, Mansfield'in "Prelude" adlı öyküsünü ekofeminist açıdan inceleyerek, yazarın doğa/kültür ve kadın/erkek karşıtlıklarına dayanan ataerkil toplum yapısını nasıl eleştirdiğini ve bu ikilemde doğa ve kadını nasıl yücelttiğini göstermektir.

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Derleme, Derleme, Gönderim Tarihi:16.04.2015 Kabul Tarihi:12.12.2017

Anahtar Kelimeler: Katherine Mansfield, “Prelude”, ekofeminizm, doğa/kültür, erkek/kadın

Introduction

Born into a socially well-known middle-class family in colonial New Zealand in 1888, Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp Murry was considered to be one of the most prominent short story writers of the twentieth century in England. Writing under the pen name of Katherine Mansfield, she contributed to the development of short story. Sydney Janet Kaplan states that Mansfield’s stories do “not rely on plot for their organization – narratives centered on mood, rhythm, and sensory impressions” (1991, p. 82). Like most modernist writers, rather than the narration of events in a chronological order, Mansfield concentrates on a single moment in everyday life by entering into the characters’ minds, depicting their conflicts, changes and inner thoughts. Her personal contribution to the development of short story writing is related to her use of imagery and metaphor to convey meaning and expand the moment. Particularly, “Prelude” involves long descriptions of nature with an emphasis on the juxtaposition of wild nature and man-made nature as well as flower, plant and animal imagery. For this aim, this paper will make use of ecocriticism, which emphasizes the interrelatedness of man and nature as well as ecofeminist theory, to propose how Mansfield demonstrates the subordination of women, children, and nature.

Ecocriticism is a recent field of literary study that combines literary criticism and the environmental issues through the analysis of various nature depictions in relation to human beings in literary texts. To make it clear, Cheryl Glotfelty states that the idea of “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). It covers a variety of subjects related to environmental, cultural, and social studies as well as the natural sciences. He reveals the idea of interrelatedness between physical world and humanity as follows: “despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xix).

Ecocriticism accepts a holistic worldview in which neither the physical world nor humanity can be thought in isolation. In relation to this, Serpil Oppermann states that “literary studies become, not distinct from environment, but an integral part of it by contextualizing the ecological concepts of wholeness, interconnections and interrelatedness of all organisms, human and nonhuman alike” (1999, p. 37). Ecocriticism emphasizes the fact that the setting of a literary work and its characters should be discussed in relation to one another.

The places in literary works such as wild nature and man-made nature give an important insight about the culture of a society and the identities of individuals. Robert Kern asserts that “all texts are literally and/or imaginatively situated in a place, and in the sense that their authors, consciously or not, inscribe within them a certain relation to their place” (2003, p. 259). From the viewpoint of ecocriticism, reading nature imagery, metaphors, symbols and landscape descriptions plays a crucial role in understanding the

type of relationship between the individual and the place he lives in. William Howarth, in his essay "Ecocriticism in Context", argues that "ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through the encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity" (2000, p. 163).

Unlike the Western ideology based on cartesian dualisms that "perceive humans as radically separate from and superior to nonhuman nature" (Armbruster, 1998, p. 429), ecocriticism attempts to "reconceptualize this value-hierarchical dualism of culture versus nature" (Hartmann, 2006, p. 91). Recognizing the concepts of both culture/nature and human/nonhuman as interdependent entities helps to reconstruct an ecocritical understanding of the Western dualisms. Throughout history, women have been associated with nature due to their maternal power of reproductivity. Similar to humanity's domination of nature, feminism discusses women's subordination in patriarchy. To eliminate the oppression of women in patriarchal society and the exploitation of nonhuman nature in Western thought, a new literary criticism called ecofeminism emerged in the early 1970s. "Within ecofeminist thought, the domination and degradation of the nonhuman environment is regarded as a feminist issue while, conversely, sexism and various other forms of oppression and discrimination are seen as inseparable from the environmental debate" (Hartmann, 2006, p. 93). Ecofeminists try to get rid of the differences between culture and nature as well as men and women by reversing the hierarchical structure of the male/female and culture/nature dualism through the valorization of the women and nature as well as by reinforcing the fact that human beings should be evaluated in relation to their physical environments.

Nature and Animal Imagery in "Prelude"

"Prelude" is a story about the Burnells family's move from town to a new house with a garden in the country. Stanley, the father, who is responsible for the welfare of his family, is a stereotypical dominating male figure representing patriarchy. The other characters in the family are all three generations of women including Stanley's wife Linda, Linda's mother Mrs Fairfield, Linda's sister Beryl and Linda and Stanley's three little daughters namely Kezia, Lottie and Isabel. Mansfield shows women's struggle to find their identities and man's egotistic and materialistic attitude to life through setting and the use of nature imagery. Julia van Gunsteren states that Katherine Mansfield "uses setting as a functional structural element in her stories [for] the juxtaposition of nature and the character's emotions" (1990, p. 144). Nature plays an important role in revealing the characters' inner thoughts. For the children, for example, this departure into the unknown wild nature is somewhat frightful. Kezia describes the moment of change as follows: "Now everything familiar was left behind. Now the big dray rattled into unknown country, along new roads with high clay banks on either side, up steep, steep hills, down into bushy valleys, through wide shallow rivers" (Mansfield, 1981, p. 17). This move away from the city into the country provides an opportunity for the characters to question their identities and their relationships with one another.

For Katherine Mansfield, "the setting not only provides the outer framework for the action, but is an integral part of it" (Ronning, 1989, p. 127). The garden, in "Prelude", for instance, is the focal point through which the characters' consciousness

are revealed. In the first morning of their new life, Kezia goes out to explore the garden which is divided into two distinct parts separated by

the big iron gates . . . On one side they all led into a tangle of tall dark trees and strange bushes with flat velvet leaves and feathery cream flowers that buzzed with flies when you shook them – this was the frightening side, and no garden at all. The little paths here were wet and clayey with tree roots spanned across them like the marks of big fowls' feet. But on the other side of the drive there was a high box border and the paths has box edges and all of them led into a deeper and deeper tangle of flowers . . . (Mansfield, p. 32).

Kezia's description of the garden underlines the distinction between wild nature and the domestic one. The wild side with tangled dark trees and strange bushes is fearful whereas the man-made side with borders and flowers is more comforting for the children. From the ecocritical perspective, Mansfield demonstrates what meanings the characters attribute to the garden and how they are affected by it. Stanley as the representative of the male dominance, considers the garden and the new house as means of investment. In a conversation with his wife Linda, Stanley says that "land about here is bound to become more and more valuable in about ten years time" (Mansfield, p. 23). He is not a bad father or husband but he is not aware of the feelings of women in the house because his only concern is his business. The land, the house, and the garden are his possessions. He even goes to the extent of saying that "weather like this set a final seal on his bargain. He felt, somehow, that he has bought the lovely day, too – got it chucked in dirt cheap with the house and ground" (Mansfield, p. 25). His perspective of the garden, the land and the house is based on materialism. Unlike Stanley, Mrs Fairfield, the traditional woman whose satisfaction derives from running the household, looks through the kitchen window "to a big grass patch that led down to the vegetable garden and the rhubarb beds . . . [and] a grape vine" (Mansfield, p. 28). While her interest is in the fruitfulness of the garden, Linda has nothing to do with the garden since it is within the limits of the domestic sphere. Because of the social and cultural burdens imposed upon her, she not only isolates herself from her children and her husband but also dreams of running away from confinement. Similarly, Beryl lives in her subjective world of desperate loneliness but unlike Linda, the only thing she wants is to find a husband and have a house of her own. That is why, when she looks through the window, she sees "somewhere out there in the garden a young man . . . tiptoed among the bushes, and gathered the flowers into a big bouquet, and slipped under her window and held it up to her" (Mansfield, p. 22). Mansfield uses the garden as a functional setting to explore the characters' inner thoughts and unfulfilled desires.

With respect to ecofeminist theory, Karen J. Warren explains that "all systems of domination are justified and maintained by oppressive conceptual frameworks" (1997, p. 195). Such frameworks entail "value hierarchical dualisms" which perceive reason, culture, male, mind superior to matter, nature, female, and body. It also reinforces "the logic of domination" to legitimate the domination of women and nature in Western societies. Within this system, women are considered as the representatives of subordinated "other" and their activities are restricted to the domestic sphere. Throughout history, women have been associated with nature in contrast to men's

identification with culture. Lucinda Joy Peach ascribes woman/nature connection to “woman’s body and its functions [which] seem to place her closer to nature” (1998, p. 30). This connection between nature and women shows how they are exploited by male in hierarchal thinking. Through the representations of the aloe tree in “Prelude”, Mansfield demonstrates how the characters differ from one another. For Stanley, it has no significance because he never realizes its existence. “On his way home from the office” (Mansfield, p. 34) in the buggy, for instance, Stanley passes through the wild nature in a hurry without any notice of his physical environment. Kate Fullbrook claims that “the Burnells’ rural utopia will be structured by the cultural patterns they have already internalised” (1986, p. 71). Therefore, as the embodiment of culture, Stanley’s attitude to nature is indifferent so long as it has no material value whereas women’s connection to nature is multidimensional related to their different states of minds.

Unlike Stanley’s disregard of the aloe tree, Linda attributes various meanings to it in terms of her sexual role as a child bearing entity and female strength. When Kezia asks Linda what the aloe tree is, she simply tells its name and that it only flowers “once every hundred years” (Mansfield, p. 34). The only moment of conversation and intimate connection between Linda and Kezia comes to the fore while talking about the aloe tree, which shows the interrelation of woman and nature. First, the aloe is depicted from Kezia’s perspective as “a huge plant with thick, grey-green, thorny leaves” with “a tall stout stem” (Mansfield, p. 34). Since Kezia is “the Wordsworthian child who wonders at the world and who is alternately shocked and delighted by her explorations” (Fullbrook, 1986, p. 68), she is trying to understand the significance of the aloe in nature. Unlike her excitement in the discovery of the aloe, Linda describes it as “the fat swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem” (Mansfield, p. 34) and “those buds” (Mansfield, p. 52) which refer to women’s ability to procreate. Mansfield suggests “the woman’s obsession with pregnancy and her need to be protected from it” (Dada-Büchel, 1998, p. 235) through Linda’s identification with the aloe tree. Linda mentions its roots like “claws” standing “as if no wind could ever shake it” (Mansfield, p. 34) which refer to female strength. According to Marvin Magalaner, “the swelling becomes as much sexual as maternal, and [Linda’s] admiration for the thorny leaves of the aloe as protection against violation is a lament for the shield she herself lacks” (1971, p. 31). Linda also dreams of escaping from the garden through the help of the aloe tree, which could be interpreted as her desire to escape from the boundaries of man-constructed world and the traditional roles of women. She is torn between her conventional roles and her desires for freedom because her individual nature is hardly compatible with those of culture. Mrs Fairfield’s nurturant role, on the other hand, helps to keep the house in order. Similarly, she also wonders “whether [they] should be able to make much jam this autumn” (Mansfield, p. 55) and thinks that as humans they should benefit from its fruitfulness.

Apart from the imagery of plants and trees, Mansfield’s use of animal imagery also reflects the gender differences. As Warren states, “Children, by virtue of their position on the less-valued end of the adult/child dualism, will experience a parallel fate to women under patriarchy” (1997, p. 196). Hence, I will explain two important incidents in which Linda and Kezia’s fears and inner thoughts are revealed through the imagery of birds. To give an example, Linda’s swelling anxiety comes forward when she has a dream of walk “with her father through a green paddock sprinkled with

daisies” (Mansfield, p. 24). In her dream, she catches a “tiny bird” which turns out to be “a baby with a big naked head and a gaping bird-mouth, opening and shutting” (Mansfield, p. 24). This incident is significant in understanding Linda’s fear of pregnancy.

Kezia’s first encounter with cruelty as part of the daily practice of family life which leads to her fall from innocence is depicted in the duck-killing scene. Pat, the gardener, cuts the head of the duck for dinner in front of all children, including Kezia, her sisters as well as the neighbor’s sons Pip and Rag. While the boys are excited by the decapitated duck, Kezia is terrified and screams “Put her head back! Put her head back!” (Mansfield, p. 46) hysterically. She can only relieve herself from this cruel experience when she notices Pat’s earrings. Katherine Murphy Dickson states that this “distraction provides an escape from the reality of death for the child” (1998, p. 27). However, following the act of killing, Kezia observes her father’s “carving the duck, upon making a first-class job of it” as “the first of the home-products” (Mansfield, p. 50) for dinner. Through the eyes of Kezia, Mansfield shows how male figures demonstrate their power over the animals and the weak.

Apart from the imagery of birds which underline differences between men and women, dog imagery also suggests male dominance of women. Mansfield’s use of animal imagery also serves as a unifying element for the mother and the daughter in terms of their “dream patterns which are subsequently transferred to patterns of fear” (Magalaner, 1971, p. 32). To illustrate, Linda associates her husband with a dog to emphasize her feelings of love and hatred at the same time towards Stanley. Despite “all her love and respect and admiration she hated him” (Mansfield, p. 54) because she has been confined to her biological functions. Linda shows her discontent by saying, “if only he wouldn’t jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes. He was too strong for her; she had always hated things that rush at her, from a child” (Mansfield, p. 54). Similarly, Linda’s daughter, Kezia utters her fear of being chased by “rushing animals like dogs and parrots. . . even camels” with their swelling enormous heads. (Mansfield, p. 17). Through the depictions of the mother and the daughter, Mansfield shows female resentment against the male dominance in patriarchy. Rhoda B. Nathan states that “Mansfield is using the still uncomprehending Kezia as a bridge between natural childhood fear and the realized sexual anxiety experienced by her mother” (1988, p. 18). The lived experience of the mother and the daughter is reflected not only through their connection to their surrounding, particularly to the aloe tree, but also through their dreams in which they confront their fears in the form of dogs.

Conclusion

As a consequence, Katherine Mansfield, by focusing on the depiction of characters and their inner worlds on a single moment rather than following the traditional way of writing short stories based on chronological order of events, is considered one of the most prominent writers of the twentieth century. Her description of nature as well as her use of nature and animal imagery give insight into the alienated individuals’ experience, fears and unfulfilled desires. On the one hand, the fact that Mansfield deliberately sets her characters in the world of nature requires an ecocritical reading of the story because characters cannot be thought in isolation from their

physical surroundings; on the other hand, through the analogy between nature/women/children and culture/men, Mansfield's story could be analysed from an ecofeminist perspective since she puts more emphasis on the former of dualisms. Apart from her contribution to the development of contemporary short story writing in terms of structure, her power to represent the interrelatedness of human beings and nature secured her position in English Literature.

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Ç.Ü. Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, Cilt 26, Sayı 3, 2017, Sayfa 26-33

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