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The Psychological Character of Rosemary Fell in Katherine Mansfield's Short Story Entitled "A Cup of Tea"

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the psychological character of the upper class woman in Katherine Mansfield's short story entitled "A Cup of Tea". The analysis is based on the concept of narcissism, Maslow's concept of esteem needs, and consumerism. The method of literary analysis is a contextual one focusing on the intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The result shows that the female character has a low self-esteem with narcissistic grandiosity. Such psychological character always needs attention, appreciation, and praises from other people that are obtained by following upper class exclusive and consumptive way of life. It can be concluded that a narcissistic upper class female often hides vulnerable self-esteem by camouflaging it with glamorous appearance full of self-confidence.

Keywords: narcissism, esteem needs, consumerism, upper class

1. Introduction

Someone's appearance or performance is not always compatible with his/her psychological state. A short story written by Katherine Mansfield entitled "A Cup of Tea"^[1] portrays this situation. The female main character, Rosemary Fell, is an upper class woman whose rich husband adores her. Her high taste and her husband's wealth make her different from other upper class females. Her unexpected meeting with the poor Miss Smith begging for a price of a cup of tea in the cold winter while Rosemary Fell is having a shopping spree gives her an idea. Wanting to be better than other exclusive upper class females, she brings the poor Miss Smith home and wants to personally treat her in her luxurious room. Her impulsive action to be friendly with a poor person astonishes her adoring husband. Stopping her wife's impetuous deed that is not in line with their upper class life, her husband exaggeratedly admires the beauty of Miss Smith. Sharp jealousy leads Rosemary Fell to quickly dispose her new 'friend' to retain her husband's total attention. Based on the story, Rosemary Fell's psychological character is challenging to analyze.

Some concepts are needed to support the analysis on the psychological character of the female character; namely, the concept of self-esteem, narcissism, and consumerism. Self-esteem belongs to the domain of Maslow's concept of basic needs of human beings. Maslow proposes five hierarchical needs (Maslow, 1943: 58).^[2] Self-esteem needs, the fourth needs, are basically the needs to get appraisals and honor for themselves (Maslow, 1943: 27). According to Brown and Marshall, self-esteem is closely linked to vanity and humiliation (2001: 14).^[3] However, self-esteem needs can be categorized into two kinds. The first one tends to be an internal achievement in the form of self-fulfillment to be worthy based on one's own capacity (Maslow, 1943: 28). Meanwhile, the second type of self-esteem tends to seek external acknowledgment in the form of obtaining fame from the people around him/her (Maslow, 1943: 28). The second type of self-esteem needs can be called as a low self-esteem needs characterized by "external fame" (Maslow, 1954: 46).^[4] This low self-esteem always demands "gratifiers ... to still the need" (Maslow, 1954: 100). People with low self-esteem will crave for becoming the center of attention, admiration, and love. People with low self-esteem will yearn for the fulfillment of their wishes (Maslow, 1954: 71).

The second concept used to support the analysis is about narcissism. According to Walder (1925)^[5], a narcissistic person has the following characteristics: "feeling superior to others, preoccupied with themselves ... lack of empathy" (quoted by Levy, Ellison, Reynoso, 2011: 5).^[6] Narcissism can be divided into two kinds, 'narcissistic grandiosity' and 'narcissistic vulnerability'. According to Pincus and Roche, 'narcissistic grandiosity' has the following characteristics: "needs for validation and admiration" (2011: 32).^[7] Someone suffering the 'narcissistic grandiosity' will be very sensitive to "ego threat" (2011: 32). Meanwhile, someone with 'narcissistic vulnerability' will show the inability to feel pleasure and to socialize (2011: 33).

The third concept borrowed to support the analysis is about consumerism. In general, consumerism has a negative sense and is defined as "excessively preoccupied with consumption" (Gabriel and Lang, 1995: 3)^[8] as quoted by Steven (1998: 4).^[9] However, consumerism can also mean someone who constructs his/her identity "through consumption" (Lodziak, 2002: 24).^[10] Steven clarifies that "consumption is an act, consumerism is a way of life" (1998: 4). He also states that the emergence of the consumer society is triggered by industrialization (1998: 6).

2. Methods

The analysis on the psychological character of the female main character in Katherine Mansfield's "A Cup of Tea" uses the contextual method of literary analysis. This method focuses on the intrinsic aspects of character, conflict, and setting supported by the extrinsic aspects in the form of the concept concerning self-esteem, narcissism, and consumerism. The analysis is also a qualitative in nature.

3. Results

In terms of worldly life, Rosemary Fell owns everything dreamt by other females. Her husband, Philip, dotes on her and they are more than very rich (Mansfield, 1977: 61). She also has two children. Rosemary Fell's life is a combination of wealth and high taste. When she shops, she goes abroad or visits the high-class shops (Mansfield, 1977: 61-62). Her not too beautiful countenance is compensated with other good qualities: "Rosemary Fell was not exactly beautiful ... She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, exquisitely well dress, amazingly well read" (Mansfield, 1977: 61). In short, Rosemary Fell is a top socialite who follows fashions, books, arts, and parties. Supported by her intelligence, her upper class circle consists of selected people. Brain, wealth, and good taste are Rosemary Fell's characteristics.

Rosemary Fell also likes becoming the center of attention. She also likes shopping and buying decorative items in large quantities. Her narcissistic and consumptive tendencies can be seen when she goes to buy flowers. She buys expensive flowers such as roses and tulips in large quantities. She enjoys being attended and served with full attention to herself only. She also takes pleasure in giving opinion even though it is about inessential item and feels satisfied when the attendant obeys her every word (Mansfield, 1977: 62). In the flower shop, Rosemary Fell's desire to be the only one admired and obeyed is satisfied.

However, behind this over-confident appearance, Rosemary Fell has a fragile self-esteem. She needs to be assured from time to time about her worthiness. This can be detected in her question to her husband: "Do you like me?" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). Knowing too well about her wife, Philip immediately gratifies her with what she wants to hear: "'I like you awfully" he said, and he held her tighter. "Kiss me"'" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). Her husband's answer appeases her crave for assurance, however since she has a low self-esteem, she wants a real proof of husband's love. She needs concrete confirmation in the form of physical action indicating love, that is, the act of kissing. Her low self-esteem drives her to find another concrete assurance of her husband's love for her only. She puts her husband's love to another test. This time it is related to her consumptive attitude: "I saw a fascinating little box today. It cost twenty-eight guineas. May I have it?" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). Her adoring husband's answer satisfies her effort to sustain her low self-esteem: "You may, little wasteful one," said he" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). She does not care that her husband considers her as an immature person as implied by his words 'little wasteful one' to address her. What is important for Rosemary Fell is the gratification from her husband that makes her happy and proud of herself.

4. Discussion

Rosemary Fell, the female main character of Katherine Mansfield's *A Cup of Tea*, is a unique character. Her dazzling appearance hides certain psychological traits. The following discussion will focus on her inner attributes.

4.1 Rosemary Fell's Consumptive Tendency

The wealth of the adoring husband supports Rosemary Fell's consumptive tendency. One of her favorite shop to spend her money is an antique shop at Curzon Street: "It was a shop she liked. For one thing, one usually had it to oneself" (Mansfield, 1977: 62). Here, her inner drive to spend much money on things which are not essential but very expensive finds its outlet. She feels alive when she is shopping. Her enjoyment of spending a big sum of money is sophisticatedly exploited by the owner of the antique shop. He presents the only one antique item in the form of a cute little box which is richly decorated and tantalizes her to own it. The consumptive Rosemary Fell cannot refuse such temptation: "She loved it; it was a great duck. She must have it" (Mansfield, 1977: 62). Her momentarily brake for her consumptive desire is her uncomfortable feeling about her husband's response to the expensive price. However, finally her consumptive drive is appeased by her adoring and rich husband as has been shown in the previous discussion.

4.2 Rosemary Fell's Narcissistic Tendency

Rosemary Fell's narcissistic tendency is closely related to her consumptive desire. Her narcissistic grandiosity is implied in the following quotation: "the man who kept it was ridiculously fond of serving her. He beamed whenever she came in. He clasped his hands; he was so gratified he could scarcely speak" (Mansfield, 1977: 62). The excessive serving attitude of the antique shop's owner satisfies her narcissistic grandiosity. She feels admired, respected, flattered, and important. As a person with a narcissistic grandiosity she always needs admiration and respect even though these attitude is driven by the purpose of getting profit from selling expensive antique item as practiced by the owner of the antique shop.

4.3 Rosemary Fell's Low Self-Esteem

Rosemary Fell's vulnerable self-esteem is carefully camouflaged by a fascinating appearance full of self-confidence. However, unconsciously she always needs external acknowledgment to feel worthy. So far, to keep feeling worthy she often associates with people who produces the feeling of being very special and important such as the flower shop's attendance and the antique shop's owner. Those places also make her feel authoritative and thus boost her self-esteem. However, her low self-esteem is easily broken down, as can be seen when she leaves the antique shop: "horrible moments in life, when one emerges from shelter and looks out, and it's awful" (Mansfield, 1977: 63). She does not feel safe and worthy outside the expensive antique shop. It means she always needs outside protection and admiration to keep her low self-esteem. Her insecurity, once she steps out from the protective boundary, is brilliantly portrayed in the following quotation: "Rosemary felt a strange pang ... she wished she had the little box, too, to cling to" (Mansfield, 1977: 63). It obviously indicates her need for outside object to help strengthen her vulnerable self-esteem. Holding an expensive object will help Rosemary Fell to feel worthy.

The vulnerable self-esteem of Rosemary Fell accidentally gets a strengthening outlet in the figure of Miss Smith. Their accidental meeting is used by Rosemary Fell to boost her vulnerable emptiness. Miss Smith's condition is perfect for Rosemary Fell's purpose. She is poor, unkempt, starving, and shivering with cold while begging for the price of a cup of tea to warm her. Their opposite condition inspires Rosemary Fell: "It was like something out of a novel by Dostoevski, ... Supposing she took the girl home? ... It would be thrilling ... to the amazement of her friends" (Mansfield, 1977: 64). Rosemary Fell wants to act like a generous rescuer. She aims to get an admiring response from her upper class friends. Her imagining it as a fictional story indicates her inability to see a person's misery as a real happening.

Rosemary Fell is out of touch with the harshness of real life experienced by Miss Smith. She romanticizes Miss Smith's suffering. For Rosemary Fell, Miss Smith's destitute situation is like a fairy story in which Rosemary Fell positions herself as one of the "fairy godmothers" (Mansfield, 1977: 64-65). In helping Miss Smith she wants to uplift herself. Miss Smith is just a stepping stone to make Rosemary Fell feel worthy. She expects Miss Smith's deep gratitude. Rosemary Fell also perceives her action to Miss Smith as a past time game for rich person like herself (Mansfield, 1977: 65). She needs playful distraction with her as the benefactor to reap admiration, respect, and gratitude to gratify her low self-esteem.

Not sincere and serious in her intention to help Miss Smith, Rosemary Fell is not sensitive to the weak condition of Miss Smith. In her luxurious house attended by several servants, she does not hurriedly give the hungry Miss Smith something warm to drink and eat. She offers Miss Smith to smoke, instead. After uttering her timid groan, finally Miss Smith gets what she really needs (Mansfield, 1977: 66). This pitiful situation for Miss Smith in Rosemary Fell's house is basically caused by Rosemary Fell's self-centered focus. Rosemary Fell's focus is not to make Miss Smith free from cold, thirst, and hunger when she brings her to her mansion. Her focus is to get gratitude, wonder, admiration, and respect from the poor Miss Smith to spur her self-esteem that is easily broken. Rosemary Fell needs to have people stare at her full of amazement.

Even though her husband adores her and always approves her narcissistic and consumptive drives, he does not agree with her bringing home and associating with a person outside their upper class circle. Knowing that her wife can be very stubborn in her decision, he uses a very effective way to stop her action: "She's absolutely lovely. Look again, my child ..." (Mansfield, 1977: 68). Philip's tactic of praising the beauty of Miss Smith proves to be a potent strategy. It directly attacks Rosemary Fell's vulnerable spot. Her low self-esteem is shattered. She feels a sharp stab of jealousy when her husband praises another woman which she considers far below her in every aspect. She needs all the praises for herself. She craves for her husband total attention, love, and praises. She is not willing to share it, even a little bit, with another person at all. In her jealousy she does not realize that her husband just teases her and considers her as an immature person in his using the words 'my child' to address her.

Rosemary Fell's insecurity, a manifestation of low self-esteem, is quickly overcome by getting rid of Miss Smith that she considers now as her rival, as soon as possible. Giving a small sum of money to dispose Miss Smith from her house is the only way that Rosemary Fell knows (Mansfield, 1977: 68). However, her insecurity persists. She is afraid that her husband's attention to her is distracted and thus reduced. She tries to win her husband's full attention again through the only way that she knows and masters so well: "Rosemary had just done her hair, darkened her eyes a little, and put on her pearls" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). She refreshes her appearance, adding make up to support her feminine charms. Because she is a person with a low self-esteem, she wants real assurance of her worthiness, as can be seen in the following quotation: "'Philip,' ... 'am I pretty?'" (Mansfield, 1977: 69). However, her husband does not give a clear verbal answer to ensure Rosemary Fell of her worthiness in the eyes of her husband. In not giving a direct answer to her wife, Philip makes Rosemary Fell feels dissatisfied and more dependent on him for assurance. Thus, Rosemary Fell will try very hard to earn her husband's praises.

5. Conclusions

The female main character in Katherine Mansfield's short story entitled "A Cup of Tea", Rosemary Fell, is a female owing many benefits in her life. She has a wealthy, adoring husband and they live in an upper class society. Her smartness, her high taste in fashions, her wide knowledge on books, and her qualified friends cover her countenance which cannot be considered very beautiful. However, behind these prominent aspects, Rosemary Fell is a female with a low self-esteem. It drives her to always find assurance of her worthiness from other people, mainly her husband. Her insecurity is camouflaged by her consumptive and narcissistic behavior. Her spending a lot of money to buy decorative things generates admiration, respect, gratitude, and wonder from other people that gratify her narcissistic grandiosity. All these are much needed to boost her low self-esteem.

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