



Exploration of Social Structures in "*The Doll's House*" by Katherine Mansfield: A Liberal Feminist Analysis

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Abstract

The goal of this research paper is to analyse social roles depicted in Katherine Mansfield's short story "*The Doll's House*". In the paper, Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory forms the lens through which the researcher investigates the social roles present in the short story. The paper is a qualitative research paper based on a short story and seeks to analyze the text in details in order to make meaning out of it. The research focuses on the role of character relations and social expectations and norms tangent to the story to reinforce gender subordination. Using Friedan's arguments on the "feminine mystique" and the call for the women's liberation movement, the research aims at bringing out further aspects of gender relations and the lessons that can be gained from them for the study of the socially constructed structures. Besides enhancing the hermeneutics of Mansfield's work, the current approach also affirms the significance of feminism in the scrutiny of literary material. In sum, it leads to the theories of post-1990s second-wave feminism and offers further analysis for Mansfield's texts.

Keywords: Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Social Structures, *The Doll's House*, Katherine Mansfield

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield was born in 1888 as Kathleen Mansfield Beauchamp in New Zealand. She is considered one of the pioneers of modernist prose and poetry. Her work focuses on experimental realism, psychological realism, and socio-cultural irony. She has written about questions of identity, relationships, and interactions, portraying the rich tapestry of the early twentieth-century life.

"*The Doll's House*" is one of Mansfield's best known and most praised short stories. It was published in 1922. The play is based on the Burnell sisters who are gifted with a beautiful doll house, and their relations with the poor Kelveys sisters. The text itself can be described as a social satire and a commentary on social hierarchy and prejudice. Mansfield captures life as it is marked by social inequality and discriminative measures through class division and demarcation of children. In the story, there is a symbol in the doll's house. Nevertheless, for the Burnell children, it is a subject of wonder and identity, which, however, turns into a means of applying social ostracism. The detailed description of the house, and the little lamp inside it, contrasts with the rites the children perform – excluding the Kelveys from their play and their home, reflecting the societal hierarchy and class prejudices of the time. Utilizing child characters, Mansfield successfully emphasizes the cold and unjust world lurking behind the proverbial façade by presenting it through innocent eyes.

Betty Friedan came up with a Liberal Feminism Theory in her book "The Feminine Mystique" published in 1963. This theory has remained relevant in the development of the present day feminism. Thus, Friedan's theory is concerned with social and psychological pressure a male-dominated society puts on women, which includes confining them into their homes and denying them a chance to develop into responsible adults both personally and professionally. Her '*feminine mystique*' is a societal construct of feminine roles that trapped women into domestic and maternal roles alone, thus making many of them frustrated. According to Friedan, the demand was for equal opportunity, and the methods she proposed to achieve this involved transforming education, employment, and legal frameworks. She postulated that the advancement of a society equals the eradication of obstructions that hinder women from attaining their ambitions. Her work created grounds for the second wave of the feminist movement as she emphasized the significance of the economic freedom and the professional success of women.

Altogether, the researcher uses the liberal feminist viewpoint of Betty Friedan to explain the "*The Doll's House*" by Katherine Mansfield because this perspective will help reveal gender patterns and the role of social system in the story. The concept of 'feminine mystique' and Friedan's assertion on equal opportunities can be employed to analyze how Mansfield's narrative subscribed to or subverted the dominant norms of her age. In general, this approach serves not only to enhance the interpretation of the text in question but also to highlight that feminist theories remain topical and can be used to discuss and address current social issues and inequalities.

1.1. Limitations of Research

The study is confined to a specific short story entitled "*The Doll's House*" authored by Katherine Mansfield. Although this provides an excellent level of detail and specialization, it might not be the best way to cover all aspects of social and gender relevance in the body of her work. Thus, the conclusions drawn may not be valid for all Mansfield's stories or for the literature of the period. However, the use of Liberal Feminist Theory by Betty Friedan is interpretative by its very nature. Some scholars may focus on one aspect of Friedan's work more than others and therefore come to different conclusions. The research is therefore sensitive to the researcher's bias when analyzing Friedan's theory and when interpreting Mansfield's text. In addition, The story was published early in the twentieth century, while Friedan's work came to light in the middle of the twentieth century. The societal settings of these periods are not the same, which could make Friedan's theories less easily translatable to

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Mansfield's era. These historical differences have to be taken into account in the research, which may make the process more challenging. Furthermore, the study is limited to Liberal Feminist Theory as described by Betty Friedan only. This approach may fail to incorporate aspects from other Feminist theories like Radical Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, or Marxist Feminism that can add more dimensions to the interpretation. Moreover, this story embraces certain cultural and social contexts of the given time and country, which cannot be thoroughly understood and interpreted from the perspective of modern feminism. This means that there could be historical inaccuracies in the analysis and this could lead to missing out on some contextual nuances. Finally, literary criticism is subjective and two critics may have different analysis of the same text. The conclusions made from this research are therefore subject to debate and there could be other interpretations and critical approaches to this study.

In this regard, the study is open and honest about the limitations and the possibilities for future research and discussion.

1.2. Significance of Research

The study enriches the literary analysis of "*The Doll's House*" by Katherine Mansfield with a new perspective. The analysis contributes to the understanding of social and gender roles within the text and enhances the current scholarly dialogue concerning Mansfield's work by employing Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory. Furthermore, the analysis of "*The Doll's House*" based on Liberal Feminist Theory proves the efficiency and applicability of the feminist theories as methodological approaches in the field of literary works' interpretation. Consequently, the present study demonstrates the usefulness of Friedan's ideas to analyse and evaluate literature and, therefore, expand the field of feminist literary criticism. In addition, this research reveals how humanities studies incorporate literature and feminist theory. This approach not only enriches the analysis of the text but also illustrates how literature can be useful in the investigation of social and gender concerns. Furthermore, in its analysis of social relations and gender roles in "*The Doll's House*," the study raises awareness of the cultural prejudices and constraints of Mansfield's era. This analysis can help enhance the understanding of social processes of the past and their effects on people, promoting historical and sociological research. Moreover, studies indicate that Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory is still highly applicable in studying and evaluating texts, both past and present. Such a connection highlights the continued relevance of the feminist theories in managing gender disparities in different settings. Finally, the result of this research may be useful for educators who are interested in teaching literature and gender studies. Thus, through a close examination of "*The Doll's House*" from a feminist perspective, the study demonstrates a set of guidelines and strategies that may be incorporated into academic curriculum to enhance students' understanding of Feminism and Literary Critique.

In conclusion, this study help to shed more light on Katherine Mansfield's "*The Doll's House*" and further confirms the relevance and usefulness of Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory in the literary analysis. It benefits several disciplines in academia and fosters continuous deliberation and scholarship in both literature and gender studies.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What elements of '*The Doll's House*' exhibit relations of power and oppression in terms of gender?
2. In what manner do characters communicate and/or how did some societal roles derived from this story "*The Doll's House*" reflect what Betty Friedan had highlighted in "The Feminine Mystique"?

1.4. Research Objectives

- To examine ways that different social relations presented in "*The Doll's House*" as oppressive towards women.
- To analyze the extent of the characters' violations of societal conventions in "*The Doll's House*" when it comes to gender representation and the expectations they set for women, as per Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique".

2. Literature Review

"*The Doll's House*" by Katherine Mansfield is well known for presenting the theme of the conflicting social systems and presents a target of the middle class and middle-class women in particular. Mansfield's use of narrative methods has been analyzed by scholars as a way of illustrating the existing social stratum and social discrimination of that time. Kaplan (2010) on the manner in which Mansfield has developed the relations between Burnell family and the Kelvey sisters to portray how social and class relations operate in the upper class society. In Kaplan's opinion, the story's characters and background represent the tendency typical for the early twentieth-century society that remains caste-like when it comes to shifting the status quo (Kaplan, 2010). Meyers (2015) also carries on a discussion of the symbolism of the doll's house in which the writer points out that the actual dwelling symbolizes the shallowness of one's societal roles and pretentiousness of the exterior appearance. The main object of the novel is just as detailed, the doll's house that resembled a real house yet the inside life is as limited as in a doll's house reflects the social expectations of forcibly confining a person in a specific role. Meyers said that Mansfield's take is that this critique is threaded through the narrative in a fine needlepoint, thus making the readers to ponder on the fairness and strictness of the sociopolitical structures (Meyers, 2015). Bearing in mind the hostile setting, Mansfield reduces the theme of social status differentiation to elementary children's games.

The behavioral outlook of the children in relation to the prejudice of their parents coupled with the nature in which class consciousness is instilled into young people, affirm how society hierarchies are made unchangeable by birth (Roberts, 2012). For Wilson (2014), the symbolical element of "*The Doll's House*"- at which Kezia is fascinated by the lamp- is the method used to reveal the oppressive and arbitrary aspects of the class structure. The lamp can again be interpreted as a symbol of beauty and humanity within the doll's house prison; nonetheless, it playfully stands opposite the doll's house itself symbolizing exclusion. Thus, Wilson is right stating that Mansfield was indeed critiquing what it means to be British or, at least, upper-class British with the help of symbolism.

'*The Feminine Mystique*' by Betty Friedan, published in 1963, is an important text of Liberal Feminist Theory where voiced discontent and frustration of women in the middle of the twentieth century was discussed because of lack of employment opportunities and women's roles in society. The idea of 'the feminine mystique' as defined by Friedan is the glorification of women as housewives and mothers who are prevented from gaining personal and professional satisfaction (Friedan, 1963). Friedan advocating for such opportunities is based on the textual understanding that the society's advancement requires eradicating the hurdles that hinder women. Her work has helped in the second wave feminism and dealing with changes on women rights in education, employment and laws (Horowitz, 2000). Friedan's critique of these roles does not only broach the social norms of the stratified society based on gender, but she also raises awareness of psychological detriment of these roles, and how, through the lack of purposeful activities not tied with domestic responsibilities, women suffer from an emptiness and confusion of identity.

Feminist literary criticism refers to a type of criticism that focuses on the role of gender and power in the texts that are analyzed. It has now been coined within different strands: one of them is Liberal Feminist Theory, the aim of which is to define the ways literature perpetuates patriarchal attitudes. Eagleton (2011) notes that feminist approaches aim at revealing the ways that gender inequalities are constructed within and against the texts and how some elements of the text resist such construction. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) raise the question of how literature reinforces or displaces such gender roles, analyzing the thematic roles of women characters and basing the description of power relationships on the key features of narrative. When analysing text from a Liberal Feminist Theory perspective, one analyses how characters negotiate and subvert the roles set out by patriarchal culture. For instance Showalter (1981) stress the need to point out moments when women characters take an active role and fight against stereotyped femininity thereby offering a critique of the established gender roles. This type of analysis aims at revealing hidden attitudes to gender and power which are encoded in the text (Showalter, 1981). According to the Liberal Feminist Theory when analyzing literary texts the focus should be made on how the characters may defy or conform to the societal roles and wants to be free. According to Fetterley (1978), the concern of a post-colonial feminist critic should be to explain how female characters are limited and on what strategies they use if to follow these limits or not. This approach underscores the individual woman's decision-making ability and the rejection of gender norms (Fetterley, 1978).

When referring to "*The Doll's House*," Liberal Feminist Theory can help explain how Mansfield exposes and ridicules the constraints that women and girls are subjected to. The relationships between the characters, especially females, shows how women are bound by norms within society and limited in their freedoms. In this way, the analysis can show how Mansfield's work responds to Friedan's criticisms and calls for parity between the gender (Jones, 2016).

3. Research Methodology

This research paper adopts liberal feminism in its analysis of "*The Doll's House*" by Katherine Mansfield. The paper uses descriptive qualitative research method. Thus, the paper employs textual analysis in order to examine the social relations and gender relations in the short story. The paper employs Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory as the theoretical framework for the study. The main source for this analysis is Katherine Mansfield's "*The Doll's House*." To get an understanding of the themes, characters, and plot of the story, a close reading of the text has been done. Furthermore, concrete parts of the short story, including passages and interactions, have been singled out for analysis. The following passages has been chosen with regard to the topics of social roles and gender roles. Moreover, close reading of these passages has also been performed in order to reveal the way the text discusses and subverts the culture and gender expectations. The relationships within characters, strategies of storytelling, and motifs have been considered. Finally, conclusions and arguments have been made from the data analysis of the textual and theoretical materials. This synthesis has shown how "*The Doll's House*" is a liberal feminist play, as it both promotes and subverts the ideals of the society.

4. Discussion & Analysis

Katherine Mansfield's story "*The Doll's House*" strongly reveals the nature of social hierarchy and effectively embodies feminine injustice by using many stylistic techniques and presenting characters' behaviors. Thus, the basic plot of the story is the relations between the members of the Burnell family and the two Kelvey sisters, examine the themes of the restricted social classes of the epoch as well as prejudices.

Mansfield makes it clear from the start that the Burnell family is economically well-off and from the upper working / lower middle class. The first two statements portray children waiting to receive a doll's house for it

represents the affluent society. Through the use of language in the novel, the Burnell sisters Isabel and Kezia are introduced as *‘Two prettier dolls you could not find’*. This is where the two sisters can be set apart in as far as beauty to do business is concerned and what is affiliated with it in society. The detailed description of these two pre-eminent characters also emphasizes the role of the external appearance and status in the world where the story takes place. On the other hand, two main female characters are presented as Lil Kelvey and Else Kelvey who are sisters. They are described as *‘the daughters of a washerwoman’*. This clearly brings out the social class and low ranking of their family as butchers and the disgraceful nature of their job. The first impression that the Burnell children have about the Kelveys means everything; the poor are stared at and almost looked down on, this was a clear way of showing that the two families are worlds apart. This is further perpetuated through children in school where they pick their playmates at different levels in school. Whenever Burnell kids decide to divulge information to one another regarding the doll’s house, they are sure to leave the Kelvey sisters out of such discussions. This exclusion is, in fact, systemic and not a one-off event; it gives an indication of the kind of society that we live in, where certain people are considered worthy of being included while others are deemed unfit to join such groupings. The Burnell children never spoke to the Kelveys, which demonstrates how the hatred towards the Burnell children was deeply instilled and settlers would not recognize social equality with them. Moreover, Mansfield relies on the character of Mrs. Hay, who is the Burnell children’s aunt to highlight more on the community’s perceived treatment of the Kelveys. From the moment, that Mrs. Hay is informed that the Burnell children have been playing with the Kelvey sisters she looks appalled. She immediately tells the children not to go near the Kelveys, calling them *‘the common little things’*. This together with Mrs. Kelvey’s response to Sayward’s demands shows how the societal structure deemed people of low class unworthy and unacceptable to mix with those of a higher class. These social injustices can be attributed to poor financial endowment and lack of propeller to create better living standards for their families while the doll’s house itself becomes another important symbol. It is painted with all the opulence and fine detail with intricate furnishings and painted miniatures; the embodiment of elegance, the achievement of which is epitomized by the homely and potential affluent life the Burnell children hope to attain. The physical description of the doll’s house as being *‘perfect’*, *‘beautiful’* highlights extreme contrast between the outside beauty and the perceived dull and lowly life the Kelveys lead. This contrast is peculiar because Mansfield employs it to reject the norms that have come to dominate the society in all regards, ranging from the superficial pursuit of money to the more fundamental disregard for the human being.

One of the most powerful female characters presented in the novel is Kezia Burnell who fights against these stereotypical perceptions because of her relations with the Kelvey sisters. It is essential to clarify that Kezia is not as avaricious and devoid of empathy as her sisters and cousins; she actually cares about the Kelveys. An important action that she performs, which is against the norms of the society, is when she invited the Kelveys to see the doll’s house at first hand. This paper floods Kezia’s desire to initiate the Kelveys as the only empathetic gesture that may transcend class division to symbolize resistance against gendered antagonisms. Yet, Mansfield does not portray the hero’s actions as bringing a significant shift at the societal level. The story also has a sad note towards conclusion where the Kelveys’ short-lived lot of happiness and acceptance is cut short by the elder sister’s interference. This ending is symbolic: it demonstrates the inability to overcome social injustice and change the existing culture.

Overall, *‘The Doll’s House’* by Mansfield effectively captures how the structure of society during the early twentieth century maintains and embodies the oppressive male social order. Consequently, Mansfield’s use of characterization, imagery, and symbolism portrays the predominant English norms of classism and prejudice, which oppress the less privileged and prevent them from attaining a better life. The story provides a compelling view on how social relations continue to shape people’s experiences, and underlines the need to establish care, support, and collective action against gendered discrimination.

4.1. Characters' Interactions and Societal Norms Align with Betty Friedan's Critique

Women in the American society during the pre-1960s were restricted to assume limited roles and were expected to be homemakers and caretakers to their children and husbands. This is evidenced by the presentation of the feminine mystique by Betty Friedan in her book published in 1963 of which the societal characters and their interaction as presented in Katherine Mansfield’s *‘The Doll’s House’* is in alignment with Friedan’s critique.

In *‘The Doll’s House’*, Mansfield employs these themes while focusing on the society of early twentieth century New Zealand where gender-based roles and expectations play a pivotal role in shaping both personal actions and societal relations. It will also become evident from the textual references used to analyze the story how the characters’ behaviors and expectations accord with Friedan’s argument in the following ways. Looking at the representation of the Burnell family and their circle, which forms the primary context where the novel takes place, one can note that it perfectly exemplifies the feminine mystique as conceptualized by Friedan. Isabel and Kezia Burnell sisters are depicted as polite young ladies who are expected to fully deify the standards of ‘beauty’ of their generation. Mansfield calls them *‘Two prettier dolls you couldn’t find’ and immediately locates their status based on beauty and physical attractiveness’*. This idealization of femininity echoes Friedan’s *‘feminine mystique’* which suggests that women serve little purpose other than being wives and mothers, and are with judged according to their capacity to meet the standards of societal beauty and perform home-making duties. However, like most

young women in their generation, the Burnell sisters' engagements with other people proscribe the roles dictated by the feminine mystique. This aspect of the story reveals the social discrimination based on class and perceived social status and reminds the reader that despite being friends and classmates, the Burnell children have no right to interact with the Kelvey sisters, particularly Lil Kelvey. When the Burnell children are talking about the doll's house at school, they decided not to include the Kelvey sisters in the conversation despite the fact that it does not make any sense and this shows that there are certain laws which are supposed to govern society and make decisions on who is allowed and who is not based on factors that cannot be reasonably justified.

Other character like Mrs. Hay also depicts and supports such norms and expectations of society to the young people. The change of attitude and the way Mrs. Hay disciplines the Burnell children when she finds out that they have been in contact with the Kelvey sisters are negative. She warns the children not to interact with the Kelveys, calling them 'common little things.' This response is a perfect illustration of the existing class bias and contributes to the exacerbation of the notion that one's status dictates the need for their social acceptance and eligibility for the company of the so-called respectable members of society, thus echoing Friedan's argument as to the ways in which societal norms frustrate women's potential for full social participation outside. Moreover, the doll's house itself represents the conception of feminine mystique and socially imposed restrictions on women. Toril's description of the doll's house, the furniture, and the tiny art treasures as detailed as in reality highlights the dream of the domestic sphere women are conditioned to pursue. He notes that it stands for an embodiment of the home and family, which are supposed to be the source of women's happiness and calling. This idealization of domesticity, as illustrated in the story by the author improves Friedan's assertion that women are socially conditioned to adhere to the cultural norms of the domestic female, instead of allowing them to be agents who seek personal and professional achievement. Kezia Burnell turns out to be the main black swan character whose definite actions go against the policies of the feminine mystique. While all the other sisters and cousins show mean and rude behavior towards the Kelvey sisters especially Lil Kelvey, Kezia shows a bit of concern and interest on them. Her ability to invite the Kelveys to come and see the doll's house for themselves is another minor revolt against the conventional reality. Mansfield presents Kezia's offer of sponge as a scenario of shared human concern for another outside one's social class indicating the potential for coming out of the entrapment that the feminine mystique has put in place.

In short, Mansfield's "*The Doll's House*" subtly intertwines the issues of social class, gender, and self-fulfillment, a superb paralleling Friedan's critique of the "feminine mystique." Using her characters and descriptions, Mansfield's short story demonstrates the irony of the female liberation through the prescribed wifely and motherly role and the imprisonment within the idealized and essentialized domestic sphere. The story contains multiple portrayals of enforcement of the feminine mystique and its restrictive mentality throughout interactions of characters and how audiences often perceive it, but it also contains elements of insight, seeking for change.

5. Conclusion

This research paper has analyzed social relations and gender roles in Katherine Mansfield's "*The Doll's House*" based on the concept of Liberal Feminist Theory by Betty Friedan. The analysis based on Friedan's critique of what she called the "feminine mystique" and her call for women's liberation has revealed more dimensions of how the story speaks to and subverts gender roles as well as inequalities. This aspect enabled the research to discuss how the characters and the societal norms portrayed in "*The Doll's House*" provide an idea of the confinement and oppression of women in the early twentieth-century through textual analysis. Its causative criticism of these structures is in tandem with Friedan who posited a need for better opportunities as well as the destruction of gender roles. Thus, the results of the study enrich the field of Mansfield's literary scholarship by illustrating the significance of feminist perspectives in literary research. This approach not only serves to help interpret the text at hand but also to stress the significance of complementary research that lies at the crossroads of literature and feminism. Furthermore, this work has revealed the sociological significance of Mansfield's narrative as a product of literature and a means of promoting social commentary. Thus, highlighting the issue of gender inequity in the story under analysis, the study is aimed at involving readers and scholars into the further discussion of the Gender Studies and their relation to present-day problems.

In short, this study supports the relevance of Betty Friedan's Liberal Feminist Theory in contemporary literary analysis. It encourages the analysis of more works of Mansfield and other pieces of literature under the perspective of feminism to reveal more about the connection between literature and social realities. This work not only deepens the understanding of "*The Doll's House*" but also continues the debate on gender equality and literature's purpose for portraying and destabilizing the values of society.

6. Recommendations for Future related Studies

- The future research could focus on analyzing Katherine Mansfield's other works using the different types of feminist analysis such as the Radical Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, and Ecofeminism, etc. This would allow an examination of the ways in which manifold feminist theories can be used to interpret and analyze gender and social aspects in works of literature.

- As for further research, the current author highly recommends that other scholars compare and contrast “*The Doll’s House*” with different modern literary pieces touching on the issue of structural society and gender roles. This might help explain how and when feminism developed as a concept and the progress that has been made since in literature by introducing the current generation of authors’ attitude towards it.
- Subsequent researchers should undertake psychoanalytic feminist analysis on Mansfield’s works because they offer a psychological insight into the characters’ gender roles and socialization roles. This approach can restrict the understanding to the signification of identity, desire and the unconscious.
- Future related studies should shift to interdisciplinary approaches where interdisciplinary of literature scholars, sociologists, psychological, and historical scholars. It was found that such collaborations can add methodological and theoretical value to the process and end up resulting in a much broader understanding of the general social reality and representations of gender in Mansfield’s works.

Following these suggestions for further research, more and more literature featuring Katherine Mansfield and the concepts of different feminist theories can be investigated more profoundly and comprehensively, which will contribute more to the development of gender and social science studies.

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