

The boundless ocean of silence: an alternative to language in Katherine Mansfield's "Doll's house"

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The present article studies the strategic use of silence in Katherine Mansfield's narrative as against the traditional perception that her stories are a passive reproduction of acquiescent women. It departs from the textual analysis of "The Doll's House" and the theoretical principles of important poststructuralist and postmodernist critics, such as Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva, Althusser, Lechte or Hutcheon, who challenge the mimetic quality of language to reveal the powerful ideological intention that hides behind it. This study illustrates Mansfield's two different stances as regards her peculiar use of silence as a strategy.

El presente artículo ofrece un análisis del uso estratégico del silencio en la narrativa de Katherine Mansfield frente a la percepción tradicional de que sus relatos constituyen una reproducción pasiva de mujeres acquiescentes. Este estudio parte del análisis textual del relato "The Doll's House" y de los principios teóricos de importantes críticos post-estructuralistas y postmodernistas tales como Barthes, Lacan, Kristeva, Althusser, Lechte or Hutcheon, que cuestionan el mimetismo del lenguaje para mostrar la poderosa intención ideológica que se esconde tras su aparente inocencia. El resultado final es ilustrar la doble perspectiva de Mansfield con respecto a su uso peculiar del silencio como estrategia.

KEY WORDS: *silence as strategy, Kristeva, symbolic/semiotic, Mansfield, "Doll's House", language and ideology*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *silencio como estrategia, Kristeva, orden simbólico/semiótico, Mansfield, "Doll's House", lenguaje e ideología*

LANGUAGE AND IDEOLOGY

Language is never an innocent, see-through means of communication for Katherine Mansfield. In her stories, one has frequently the impression that much more is implied than said. Although she uses language to narrate her fiction, silence and reading between the lines become mighty weapons to confront the reader with hidden meanings. Mansfield confessed to Garnett Trowell that words are “bitter sweet,” “only ripples on the surface —of a boundless, untried ocean” (*Collected Letters* 67). She always approached language with suspicion, sharing the ideas of the poststructuralist linguistic debate that emerged some years later, and offered silence as a powerful counterattack. The present article explores and illustrates this subversive strategy that has often been underrated in Mansfield’s fiction.

With the arrival of poststructuralism, the traditional conception that language is a transparent tool that provides a mimetic and inoffensive representation of an already existing world is seriously questioned. This new perspective presupposes that language does not reflect reality, but creates it. Thus, not only does this instrument construct the human subject, but, beyond that, it hides the invincible social apparatus and its ideology. Louis Althusser theorises this idea in his article “Ideology and the State” (1969). Pam Morris clarifies that:

[Language] continually “reproduces” reality as a hierarchy of values which sustains the interests of dominant power. Language is the means by which these hierarchical values seem to us natural and true. It is in the interest of power to impose this ideological perception of reality as the only possible one, the unitary “Truth”. (137)

Following Sapir and Whorf’s theories, Roland Barthes (*El placer* 118; “Death of Author” 229) and Jacques Lacan (96) break radically with the perception of language as a naïve vehicle of communication. They consider it “oppressive” and conclude that it is language that speaks, not the author, so that we only exist and acquire our identity through it. Other important, more recent philosophers who comply with Barthes and Lacan are John Lechte (67) and François Raffoul (67).

Speaking about women, Sara Ahmed (79) coins the term “catachresis” —a label with no meaning— to refer to the place that the human subject occupies within language. According to this view, when making use of language, we do not express ourselves, since this instrument constructs our “missing” identity behind the appearance of an existence. Language and society, therefore, work hand in hand and act as a filter in the creation of human subjectivity. Barthes’s statement about human personality cannot be more pessimistic, for, in his opinion, if freedom is the capacity to escape from restrictive power, it only exists outside language and, unfortunately, this instrument does not have an exterior (121). Nevertheless, the present article aims to prove the efficacy of an apparently ineffective technique, silence, as a way to expose linguistic despotism.

If, from a poststructuralist perspective, language is limiting for human beings regardless of their gender, from a feminist standpoint it is perceived as a tool completely alien to women (Marks and de Courtivron ix). Julia Kristeva supports this idea of the dissociation of women from the linguistic order when she concludes: “God generally speaks only to men [...]. Woman’s knowledge is corporal, aspiring to pleasure rather than tribal unity (the forbidden fruit seduces Eve’s senses of sight and *taste*)” (“About Chinese Women” 140). Kristeva verbalises the tradition that associates man with the rational order of knowledge and language, and woman with the irrationalism of nature and the body. She adds that silence is the domain of the stranger and the marginal figure (*Strangers* 15), so that women become an indisputable example of the oppressed, especially in the time span that Mansfield’s work covers.

However, according to such figures as Alice Jardine (116), we can trace a women’s linguistic realm that goes beyond the monolithism of patriarchal language. Coining a Lacanian term, Jardine calls it “*lalan-gue*” or “mother’s language.” This concept comes closer to the “semiotic” in Kristeva, which this critic defines as follows:

What I call “the semiotic” takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood [...]. In this state the child doesn’t yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the

term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed —and I call that “the symbolic.” (“Revolution” 133)

The symbolic order, linked with the patriarchal system and its annihilating tendency, is more alien to femininity, which ends up being associated with the semiotic realm that Kristeva theorises. This heterogeneous and incoherent domain is closely related to silence, since both elude the comprehensibility that language supplies. The association of the semiotic realm with *lalangue* has led to the consideration of silence as a constitutive part of the literature written by women. Kate Fullbrook (55) states that in many modernist women writers, such as Mansfield, Richardson, Stein or Woolf, the indirect character of their fiction is linked with the unknown, the silenced, and the hidden, as aspects inherent to women’s condition.

Therefore, it is not a matter of perceiving silence as a negative trait in women’s writing, but, on the contrary, as a subversive weapon. We have to acknowledge that they use it —not reproduce it in an innocent and passive way— exposing its destroying side on women and attracting the readers’ attention to patriarchal tyranny. Manuela Palacios González theorises this strategic use of silence:

[S]ilence as a strategy for resistance can only be envisaged as a first stage in the production of alternative ideologies. It is difficult to imagine how it can win other individuals and increase its power if it is not in circulation. In spite of its limitations and of our awareness that silence is the effect of power, it may be considered as a potential temporary strategy for the destabilization of hegemonic interests. (203)

It is, thus, a weapon to destabilise those values that have been anchored in our cultural knowledge for ages and a first step towards an alternative of change.

MANSFIELD'S STRATEGY OF SILENCE

The premise of this article about Mansfield's strategy of silence is shared by other critics, although some of them only recognise the ubiquitous presence of silence in her work and do not attach a subversive intention to it. Clare Hanson (61) considers that "Katherine Mansfield expresses her anger at the way in which she and her readers are not only confined to a female ghetto but also patronized and robbed of effective speech—for effective speech is that which promotes response, dialogue or action, not silence." In my opinion, Mansfield's anger is highly camouflaged, which is why she only portrays seemingly acquiescent women, but, as we will see, her intention is satirical and her use of silence strategic. Since language constitutes a powerful and unavoidable instrument, Mansfield, like the majority of modernist women writers, parodies its use or displays linguistic absence as a double-edged sword.

The catachresis of language—i.e. the semantic void that it hides—is alluded to by the author on several occasions, as when she considers language as "beating about the bush," or perceives words as "so restricting," "pebbles thrown into a bottomless sea—they create ripples on the surface of a *great depth*," "only ripples on the surface—of a boundless, untried ocean" (*Collected Letters* 189, 59, 67). This perception of the limitation of language leads Mansfield to use constantly in her stories two often contradictory levels of signification, which result in her oblique style. She herself encourages the reader to "read between the lines" (Mansfield *Collected Letters* 60). On the one hand, we can trace an "official" reading that derives from "common sense," which permits us to see the writer as an accomplice of the dominant system, taking for granted its social values and rules. This explains why Mansfield has often been conceived as a feminine writer pigeonholed in the portrayal of truthful pictures of the women of her time. On the other hand, however, a more intuitive reading will make us discover a deeper level of signification. It is through this second approach to the text that we find a silent world pregnant with meanings and possibilities, a world that has to be inferred by the reader.

Nevertheless, this silence in Mansfield is not pure silence. We should speak of suggestions and semiotic forces, heterogeneous and

multi-faceted in the way that Kristeva uses them, and, thus, of an implicit voice more than of a generalised silence. It is silence in that this second voice is not perceptible, but just intuited. Mansfield is in favour of the semiotic order and its endless possibilities, which she associates with the feminine inner richness that has been asphyxiated by the patriarchal system and its more powerful linguistic weapon. Hence, silence, or in my perception, the second reading of Mansfield's stories, is finally related to the feminine realm of desire, muted by the dominant culture. David Coad states that:

As for the speaking and writing of feminine desire, Mansfield tends to point to the difficulty in finding an appropriate language for its expression. Both characters and author are faced with an aporetic hesitation: silence becomes more meaningful than discourse, the gaps and interstices of the text become pregnant with latent desire. (234)

Although, in her introduction to the Spanish edition of Mansfield's stories, Ana María Moix (15) speaks of the hurtful silence that remains at the end of her narrative, I prefer to retain Moix's later perception that Mansfield manages to show without explicit description and to communicate without using digression or naming the fact; she points at facts by means of sensations, atmosphere, and ellipsis. Armine Kotin Mortimer (49) does not delve into this concept, but she claims that, in Mansfield's fiction, the discourse of desire is silenced, this being one of the aspects that her narrative has to sacrifice. It is true that feminine desire is seldom verbalised in her stories, but it is a reward, not a sacrifice. We face a powerful subversive strategy, since the awareness of the reader is indisputable.

"THE DOLL'S HOUSE"

In "The Doll's House" silence is associated with luminosity and becomes an ally to visionary figures who escape from the limitations of the dominant system. The Burnells' daughters —Isabel, Kezia and Lottie— are given a large doll's house as a present. Next day, they talk about it at school to show off before the other girls. All of them are al-

lowed to see it, except for the little Kelveys —Lil and Else—, who are segregated because they are the daughters of a washerwoman and belong to an inferior social caste. Kezia rebels against social norms and shows the house secretly to the Kelveys. She is caught by her aunt Beryl, who expels the Kelveys from the house as if they were animals, and reprimands Kezia for her daring action. In the story, there is a marked division between two points of view: the general opinion of the community, linked with the use of language, versus the silent, marginal viewpoint of those who, for one reason or another, are excluded from the dominant system —Kezia and the Kelveys. This dichotomy produces the two previously mentioned signifying levels that occur in Mansfield's narrative.

The story constantly plays with power relations: the superiority of the elder sister (Isabel) over the younger ones (Lottie and Kezia), which gives her privilege over the display of the doll's house; the dominance of adults over children, as when Beryl reprimands Kezia for showing the house to the Kelveys and makes use of her authority to expel them from the place; the supremacy of middle over working classes, Protestantism over Catholicism, the Burnells versus the Kelveys; and, implicitly, masculine over feminine superiority, symbolised by the oppression of women, who are condemned to confinement in dolls' houses. Systematically, Mansfield inverts this hierarchy through silence, proving that the least favoured items of these dichotomies are the most illuminating and visionary ones, despite their rejection of language. Social and class criticism prevails in the story, as we can observe in the Burnells' elitism: "For the fact was, the school the Burnell children went to was not at all the kind of place their parents would have chosen if there had been any choice. But there was none. It was the only school for miles," and, therefore, children of different social classes "were forced to mix together" (Mansfield *Collected Stories* 385). However, the line had to be drawn somewhere, and it was at the Kelveys, to whom the rest of children did not even speak. Social discrimination is pervasive throughout the story in the rejection of these girls.

The voice of the community prevails and represents ideology, hidden behind language, which most subjects have internalised and accept as natural. This general voice is observed in the constant judge-

ment that people make about the Kelveys. The lexical choice shows the social prejudice of the community: "Lil Kelvey came up to her desk with a bunch of dreadfully common-looking flowers;" "they were the daughters of a washerwoman and a gaolbird. Very nice company for other people's children! And they looked it;" "What a little guy [Lil] looked! It was impossible not to laugh;" her smile was "silly, shame-faced" (386-8). The opinion of the community pervades the story, while the little Kelveys' thoughts are inaccessible. Thus, after one of the girls insults Lil, the narrative voice informs that "[s]he didn't seem to mind the question at all" (388). All is just guesswork with the Kelveys, since the only evident point of view in the story is that of the privileged girls.

To emphasise this general opinion of the community, when Beryl surprises the girls, she compares the little Kelveys with animals, thereby insisting upon their social inferiority. Initially, they are associated with "two little stray cats" (390), which, we suppose, is a comparison coming from Kezia herself. In this case, she displays a mixed opinion: the community's which compares them with animals, and her own rebellious desire, reflected in her pity for the girls. Nevertheless, once caught by Beryl, they are compared with chickens, first, and with little rats later. The narrative again adopts Beryl's and the community's standpoint, which becomes the dominant one in the story. This prevailing perception, however, does not entail that Mansfield stands for it. The pervasive voices of the community prove to be "spoken subjects," using Linda Hutcheon's words (169), since, although seeming to be the agents of their prejudice, they are just the victims of the ideological system. By means of the process of "interpellation" (Althusser), they end up believing in a self-identity, or "misrecognition," that is nothing but an example of catachresis. The clearest instance is Beryl, who is described as one of the dolls confined in the house, as we will see later.

Nevertheless, the verbalisation of the Kelveys' inferiority contrasts with their absolute silence. Throughout the story, neither Lil nor her little sister Else utter a single word. They are constantly alluded to with gestures that help us infer what they might be thinking, but we never know it with certainty. From the beginning, we are informed that Else "scarcely ever spoke," highlighting her rejection of

language. However, despite this verbal absence, Mansfield insists that “[t]he Kelveys never failed to understand each other” (386), thereby parodying the use of language and how mistaken we are in thinking that this tool necessarily leads to communication. The following descriptions show the rejection of language by the two little girls: “Lil, as usual, gave her silly, shamefaced smile, but our Else only looked;” the Kelveys “[were] always listening;” “Dead silence. But instead of answering, Lil only gave her silly, shamefaced smile;” “Lil gave her silly smile. Our Else stared;” “Suddenly there was a twitch, a tug at Lil’s skirt. She turned round. Our Else was looking at her with big, imploring eyes; she was frowning; she wanted to go. For a moment Lil looked at our Else very doubtfully. But then our Else twitched her skirt again. She started forward;” “There was a pause. Lil breathed loudly, almost snorted; our Else was still as stone” (386-90). In all these examples there is a predominance of the actions of smiling, in Lil, and looking, in Else, and a perceptible absence of language.

Mansfield uses images to suggest the second level of signification and to offer silence as an intelligent alternative to patriarchal ignorance. She presents the three dissident girls, Kezia and the Kelveys, as visionary figures that go beyond the ignorance of the other characters. The images that she selects are the light and the eyes, traditionally associated with knowledge. Kezia is presented as a perceptive child capable of grasping and criticising the social reality that surrounds her. After the vivid description of the doll’s house, full of colour and with stunning similarities to a real house, the narrator points out one flaw: “the smell of paint was quite enough to make anyone seriously ill, in Aunt Beryl’s opinion” (383). Mansfield intertextually alludes to Henrik Ibsen’s drama of the same title, where the protagonist, asphyxiated by the domestic surroundings, finally rebels against them to find her own freedom. Therefore, the harmful and poisonous smell of paint contrasts with the appealing and colourful appearance of the house, of the domestic idyllic life that women are covertly forced to accept. The implication is that the domestic realm and femininity are an artificial creation, like the doll’s house, tailored to attract women and confine them for life in a cage of design.

We suddenly hear the voice of the community: “But perfect, perfect little house! Who could possibly mind the smell. It was part of

the little joy, part of the newness” (383), which encourages the passive acceptance of this castrating atmosphere, whilst the subliminal message is the limiting effect of the domestic role for women. Kezia becomes the visionary who manages to dismantle the artificiality of the house. On the one hand, the possibility of opening it at the front and visualising all the rooms at once gives her an almost divine omniscience: “Perhaps it is the way God opens houses at the dead of night when He is taking a quiet turn with an angel” (384). Also, Kezia is obsessed with the little lamp —“what she liked frightfully, was the lamp”—, which she perceives as the only “real” element in all that artificiality. Thus, while the dolls in the house seem inappropriate, the lamp exudes realism:

The father and mother dolls, who sprawled very stiff as though they had fainted in the drawing-room, and their two little children asleep upstairs, were really too big for the doll’s house. They didn’t look as though they belonged. But the lamp was perfect. It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, “I live here.” The lamp was real. (384)

The suggestion is that the domestic realm is limiting for human beings, so that it is only accepted with reticence. This environment becomes small for individuals and it ends up suffocating them, hence the description of the dolls as “fainted.” The clearest example of a “fainted doll” inside the cage is Beryl. Her dissatisfaction with her surroundings is only implied in this story, while it is more evident in others like “Prelude” and “At the Bay.” We are informed that Beryl has received a letter from Willie Brent, who threatens to come for her if she does not meet him. We infer that she feels uncomfortable with this relationship that anticipates marriage and the subsequent domestic confinement. Therefore, she represents the clearest example of catachresis and “misrecognition,” finally proving her frustration and annihilation within the system.

Kezia’s visionary character, as opposed to the rest of the children, is observed when Isabel is describing the house and skips the little lamp. With such a slip, Kezia’s reaction is not long-awaited: “‘The lamp’s best of all,’ cried Kezia. She thought Isabel wasn’t making half enough of the little lamp. But nobody paid any attention” (387). Like

Kezia, Else is another visionary. The references to the verb “look” and to the child’s eyes are repeated throughout the story. Little Else is described as having big eyes: “She was a tiny wishbone of a child, with cropped hair and enormous solemn eyes—a little white owl” (386). The fact that, just after this description, we are informed that she hardly uttered a word leads to the association of silence and the sense of sight with knowledge and illumination. The solemnity and dimensions of her eyes suggest this child’s width of perception, while her comparison with a white owl reveals her wisdom, even among the darkness of the dominant system. Once again, the magnitude of the eyes is underlined —“big, imploring eyes” (389)—, which contrasts with the smallness of those of the privileged girls; for example, Lena Logan, the girl who insults Lil, had “little eyes” (388). Symbolically, Mansfield contrasts the ignorance of the community with the silent knowledge of the social outcasts, who, in their marginality, are more predisposed to criticise the system that oppresses them. Like Kezia, Else manages to see the little lamp; at this point, she finally utters her first and only words, telling her sister Lil: “‘I seen the little lamp,’ she said softly. Then both were silent once more” (391). Mansfield closes the story with these words, coming back to silence. Even when Else speaks, she does it softly, as if she were scared of using language.

Mansfield claims for silence and the level of hidden meanings that lead to the semiotic realm castrated by patriarchy. She suggests the children’s thoughts by means of gestures, which are more clearly implied at the end: “Dreamily they looked over the hay paddocks, past the creek, to the group of wattles where Logan’s cows stood waiting to be milked. What were their thoughts?” (391). We feel the inner richness of these girls, like Kezia’s, but we only have an inkling of their thoughts, since they are more complex than words can express. For all this, the text urges us to read silence as a subversive strategy and to suspect appearances, including the seemingly objective viewpoint of the community. We are encouraged to distrust the patriarchal system and its linguistic instrument of communication. While, at the beginning of the story, Mansfield associates “the thick buttercups” with high social status represented by the Burnells’ daughters (384), at the end the Kelveys metaphorically achieve that same superior level, almost occupying an angelic status with the buttercups acting like haloes: “The Kelveys came nearer, and beside them walked their shad-

ows, very long, stretching right across the road with their heads in the buttercups” (389). From these words we infer that, if we pay attention to this second level of meaning, power distinctions melt away.

“THE BOUNDLESS OCEAN OF SILENCE”: CONCLUSION

The present article has departed from the the typical perception of Mansfield’s stories as depicting the ubiquitous presence of feminine silence as a passive reaction to patriarchal linguistic despotism. However, the analysis of her story “The Doll’s House” has proved that Mansfield’s use of silence is strategic. She appropriates a realm traditionally used to confine women and turns it into a powerful counterattack to make the reader realise that an alternative truth is possible. By means of silence, she shows that Kezia and especially the marginal Kelvey sisters hold a deeper and more significant truth than the prejudice inherent in the language of the omnipresent community. She links silence with light and the eyes, even making an indirect reference to goddess Atenea—the owl as a symbol of wisdom, with which the Kelveys and Kezia are identified. Instead of presenting silent characters as acquiescent victims of the powerful social system, they appear as visionary figures to the eyes of the reader, thus opening up a new layer of multiple signification. This layer is implicit and intangible, like the girls’ shadows at the end of the story, but as rich in meaning as the magnitude of the shadows projected on the flowers, as the boundless ocean of Mansfield’s imagination.

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