Modernist Fiction and Self: Representing Women and Solitude in Selected Works by Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done
after registration for the degree of MPhil at Hong Kong Baptist University, and
has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any
other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: January 2015
Abstract

Solitude and self have been common topics for discussion and scrutiny by philosophers, scholars and writers. However, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century, with women’s enlightenment, that one notices women writers’ interest in understanding their selves in moments of solitude. Women who were conscious of drastic social changes often examined their lives and explored their selves in solitude. Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf represent women writers of their time who shared a common interest in portraying women’s quests for self in solitude. The present study shows how the solitary state is a significant precondition for modern women to reflect on their lives or explore their selves at a time when society was undergoing drastic changes.

A close study of Katherine Mansfield’s “Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding” (1910), “Kezia and Tui” (1916), “Prelude” (1918), “At the Bay” (1922), and “All Serene!” (1923) shows that Mansfield always offers her women characters punitive consequences in the endings because of their compromise with their mundane conditions even though they have gained some sense of the self through contemplation and meditation. In the case of Virginia Woolf, she situates her women characters in isolation and contemplation, and often presents her women characters as active seekers of self through meditation and alienation. Autonomy, authenticity, and vision define these women’s emerging self in such novels as Night and Day (1919), Orlando (1928), and To the Lighthouse (1927).

The present study reveals Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf as two exemplary women writers who examine women in moments of solitude through the interplay of social and psychological reality. Solitude is a recurrent condition and theme in their fiction that is often presented in “contrapuntal” manner (Dunbar ix). The contrast between women’s public and performative existence and their private and unmasked self characterises the fiction of Mansfield and Woolf, allowing the two writers to examine patriarchal oppression of women’s acquisition of self against the backdrop of modernity. Mansfield and Woolf’s treatment of solitude is particularly important as it sheds light on their shared views and friendship. Solitude is treated as a critical state, a condition, a private space, an attitude, or a refuge from performativity for women in their texts. Yet they have adopted distinct writing strategies in dealing with the subject owing to their difference in experience and literary outlook. Mansfield creates heroines who are more practical and modest in their approach to the subject of self-construction. Woolf creates women characters who often resort consciously to solitude to challenge and reflect upon gender norms, gain a better sense of their selves, and deploy various means to attain self-realisation.
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