

# Bertha's Intuitive Quest: Recognizing the Feminine Self

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## **Abstract**

This article puts light on the unmasking of Bertha's unawake self in Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss" published in 1918. Mansfield unlocks the shackled and entangled experiences of sexuality and femininity in the narration of the story. The phases of development of Bertha's conscience are metaphorically parallel to the way the story unfolds. The setting of the story too plays a dominant role in the projection of her cocooned self. The unrecognized personality in Bertha is reflected when she comes across Miss Fulton, her acquaintance as a foil in the form of a mask prepared beneath. The contradictions and dilemmas in her mind are concretized when she confronts the typical feminine essence in Fulton which later she finds to have attracted her husband, Harry. Furthermore, several instances in the story establish the gradual realization of Bertha. Her quest for a self is her inward struggle to set herself free from the stereotypical constraints of the society she lives in. Mansfield breaks the paradigm of seeing women through the patriarchal gaze. Hence, Bertha remains the insipient sojourner who never knowingly dares to rebel or submit to the worldly customs.

**Keywords:** quest, epiphany, submerged conscience, illusion

Modernism shows a radical break from the typical Victorian form of expressions in literature. This new form of expression reflects the crisis and the changes in the society relating to human consciousness. This movement also registers the changes in position of women and a high degree of aesthetic self-consciousness. Katherine Mansfield was greatly inspired to show the female protagonist's predicament and her ultimate transformation when she came in close contact with the modernist writers like D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, and other great English writers of the early twentieth century. As a modern writer, Mansfield's object is not to show the extraneous triumph of the condition of women in a patriarchal society but to reflect on their inner selves. Therefore, experiences of disintegration and fragmentation in the female characters are shown in her stories. That has made Mansfield stand apart from the stereotypical perception about women. The moment of crisis arises in Mansfield's stories for a short period of time when the central characters pass from a stage of innocence to personal and social consciousness. Her attempt to strike at the very basis of the thoughts and reflections of women is the focus of this paper. Mansfield's "Bliss" is a short story which encapsulates glimpses of Bertha's life. The experiences of Bertha lead her to find her inner self. In the development of the story, only the usage of certain words like "spark," "Bliss," "absolute Bliss" lays the foundation of the silent quest in her soul. Bertha's tacit compliance, that is the numbness of her "self," disallows her so long to see the reality of her existence. No quick transitions or unpredictable changes that form an identity of an individual have been shown in the benign form of her conscious self.

The co-existence of a binary self (one, the unfelt and the other, emerging) is laid as the underlying

self-generated beginning of an inward journey that helps the readers experience the exploration of Bertha's being. She is a modern housewife who goes through a discovery of her "true self" that affirms her existence. The illusionary world seemed to her more pleasant than the harsh reality. Later in the story, she no longer deceives herself by declining the reality and taking shelter from her false beliefs. The narrator constructs the short story using elaborate figurative devices such as imagery, symbols, paradox, anaphora, irony, and other narrative techniques to expose the journey she undergoes from the state of innocence to experience.

Mansfield starts the text with Bertha's restlessness through her "dancing steps," "running instead of walking," "to bowl a hoop," "throwing up something in the air, catching it again," and "laughing at nothing." These swift physical movements inexplicably mark Bertha's triumph over reality and the inner world of her mind, finally leading to an ironical encounter of her present unresolved "being" with her disillusioned self. Hence, the blooming pear tree is juxtaposed with the betrayed and desolated Bertha whose former naïve and unconscious notion of being in a bliss(ful) life/state is disastrously realized by her husband's deception of her.

Mansfield weaves the developments of the story so intricately that the representation of self appears to be intertwined in the very plot. The characters in her stories do not really conform to the conventional modes of living and rather attempt to find a new way of seeing unresolved things. The lived and undisclosed experiences of Bertha thus take her to a quintessential discovery of a "self" that has long been falling through her misconceptions. Mansfield (1927) in an interview affirms, "I want, by understanding myself, to understand others. I want to be all that I am capable of becoming." Hence, the embezzled Bertha in the last scene becomes the mouthpiece of Mansfield in showcasing the utter stagnancy of the position of a woman in her surroundings. The undisclosed attributes of reality in the self and the mundane yet decorative, fake and illusionary happiness in the form of "Bliss" are eventually illuminated. The understanding of Bertha is thus, paradoxically, hopeless, as it takes her apparently nowhere.

The sentence structure of "Bliss" corresponds with Bertha's mental stages. The cohesive clinging of the dispersed images, experiences, symbols in Mansfield's narrative paves the way to the formation of a newer dynamic structure in contrast to an organic one. Bertha's psychological mobility surmounts the progression to a state of maturity. This interpretation is also evident as "internal and cerebral narrative" in Feenstra's *Circling the Self* (72). The exaggeration of the emotion, namely "Bliss" or ecstasy, of Bertha ironically emphasizes the inwardly metamorphosed mind that brings the transcendental gloom of the tragic understanding. It can be felt that the repetitive exclamation marks (!) in the text create a sense of anticipation and expository queries that connect to the intuitive details of the blissful state. As if the "Rattling" (Mansfield 1) is the silent awakening from the "unbearable/tight clasp" (Mansfield 1) of the dormant but stark reality.

This internal evolutionary state of Bertha's being can also be related to the following excerpt from Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*:

In claiming herself sovereign, he (man) comes up against (rencontre) the complicity of woman herself: because she is also an existent, she has the tendency for transcendence and her project is not repetition but transcendence toward a different future; in the heart of her being she finds the confirmation of masculine pretensions. (64)

Bertha feels that her romantic illusions overflow. Her fantasies form her romantic illusions though the "Bliss" in her finds no appropriate exposure. From the narrative technique it is apparent that

the journey she makes inwardly takes her eventually into materializing the sense of being. The juxtaposition of her feeling and expressing emotions, fears, thoughts, participating in the social events are created out of these stereotypical conventions of the society. Bertha gets stuck finding no possibility to break the shackles of society. This stagnancy makes her unable to seek/realize “the self”/her true identity/who she is, what she wants, how much she wants, or how far she can go with her choice. The immobility in a way puts her into an unknowing cycle around which she keeps whirling. As she says,

Really – really – she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money.... (Mansfield 4)

Bertha's incompleteness of expressions and the irregularity of her gestures display the dilemma that she constantly bears in her soul. She has internalized the codes and norms of the society, the expressions and gestures from her acquaintances as well as experiences. She is conditioned to repress real emotions and feelings though it is somewhat innate and through these inexpressive and unsought gestures she suddenly diagnoses her absurdity. Neaman suggests that by engaging in her role as “the good wife and mother, [Bertha] observes the conventions of social responsibility which pinion her whims and moods” (250).

Bertha's benign experiences are articulated in the fiction. Her epiphanic moments intensify her greater understanding and acceptance of the presence of a contradictory self. D'Hoker, cited in Feenstra, states this moment of Bertha as the “ordinary reality is transcended in these moments and the moment achieves the perfection and timelessness of art” (66). Bertha is unable to relate the outer world with her personal experiences which crystallizes her to an utter obliviousness of the reality of life. Both Bertha and Fulton are the narrative projections of Mansfield. The objective correlation of these projections is related to the interconnectedness of their selves with the blooming pear tree and the silver moonshine respectively. The extensive manifestations of some exuberant colors are apparent in the fruit tray: blue, purple, white, green, yellow, pink. The colorlessly colorful decoration of fruits foreshadows her void. The suppressed domination in Bertha and her lack of assertiveness are indicated through the way she takes the supremacy in certain trifling household chores like arranging the dinner table.

Bertha's ideology prevents the blossoming of her emotions and intellect. It is evident in the party when the true faces of Harry and Fulton are revealed to Bertha as her internality confronts and comes in conflict with the socially constructed inhibitions. The moment when it is felt and grasped becomes the epiphany of Bertha's perception. It intensifies the deeper level of understanding and accepting the contradictory self. The finer details, like arranging the fruits, setting the flowers, etc., in the storyline are laid out chronologically to poke at the eventual intense inert psychological awakening and give the narrative linearity. Modern awakening is most often defined as “The combination of revolt against Victorian fathers, recognition of the artist's alienation, pursuit of the contemporary in language, psychology and behavior, creation of dynamic forms in which to contain a newly awakened sense of present reality” (Kaplan 6). The devastating blow that Bertha receives from her former unfelt experiences enables her to shed the “romantic, fantasized clothing” about her husband Harry.

Beauvoir suggests that individuals would be able to accept their respective incompleteness and in so doing also accept that this is sufficient for recognizing “the self” and “the other” in mutual

reciprocity (60). Bertha lacked freedom of expression and she did not have any definite moral connection with the patriarchal prerogatives of freedom. An individual surpasses the confinements by expanding the will and knowledge of the self. Beauvoir disregards the male superiority in terms of the hegemony and masculine subjectivity. Instead, according to the critic the masculine subject carves out the definitive path of the female entity towards freedom.

Bertha quickly moves from the dining room to the “nursery” where she asserts her authoritative self. Her restlessness is expressed through her failure to articulate promptly and her vacillation during the instructing of the governesses about the household chores. Getting embarrassed with her overt impulsiveness as she walks around the table, she feels the moments as celestial where Harry’s trifling over the matters of Fulton becomes very intolerable and incomprehensible. Inability to express how she feels is a result of her long, withdrawing, misunderstood concept of seeing things. Inertia that succumbs her to stoop down is something that Mansfield puts light on. Her discourse is tempered by social conditioning as she remains unable to shower affections on her baby even and getting stuck over the phone while talking to her husband at a time when she is intensely euphoric and ecstatic. The narrator’s repeated use of the word “fiddle” emphasizes the delusion, deception, and delirium that occur in Bertha’s life. Similarly, “fire,” “spark,” “glow,” and “flame” in the text represents the glimmer in her bosom that finally leads to her awareness.

Bertha encounters the tension between different aspects of the self which leads gradually to her “internal” authenticity and its comprehensiveness. She explores “an isolated self-identity” (Feenstra 65). She fails to understand the true nature of the relationship between her husband and Pearl Fulton. Bertha remains preoccupied with expressions of emotions as something spiritual. She naively perceives the incongruity of the extramarital affair of her husband and Fulton. The unconscious experiences lie scattered in Bertha’s conscience and the conscious occurrence remains unknowingly vague. Her inability to blend reality of “reduced and muted existence” (Feenstra 66) abstains her from the unification of her experiences. The narrator indicates Bertha’s helplessness in asserting her role of dominance as a mother using several instances in conversation.

Bertha wanted to ask if it wasn’t rather dangerous to let her clutch at a strange dog’s ear. *But she did not dare to.* She stood watching them, her hands by her side, like *the poor little girl in front of the rich girl with the doll.* (Mansfield 2; emphasis added)

The diverse roles of maternity, companionship, matronship, and friendship consequently merge towards a composed materialistic self. It seems that Bertha’s life is just a coagulation of some “wrong moment(s)” all dispersed due to lack of realization. At the end of “Bliss,” Bertha relates herself with the fully bloomed “pear tree” and her smile asserts the revelation of her previous incompatible state. The objective correlativity between the bloomed pear tree and a hollow unawake inner space in Bertha evokes the eventual in depth revelation. Her adherence to the expected social norms (keeps her away from seeing the world as it is) makes her discontent. While talking about her feelings, she repeatedly uses the term “absolute bliss” and the gust of emotion that overwhelms her seems to be threatening socially coded norms and behavior. She is disgusted, failing to express her feelings that hinder the destined roles of a wife and a mother. With these expressions of Bertha, “Oh is there no way to express it without being ‘drunk and disorderly?’” (Mansfield 1), the tension between the unrestricted freedom and socially defined individual self becomes vivid.

The social changes regarding the struggles of women for their rights around the 1920s in England had been a prevalent focus of many writers. Katherine Mansfield as a modernist short story writer was concerned with the trivial events and subtle changes in human behavior and the atmosphere. Hence, the characters are probed more deeply than the plot. The muted and silenced women in the domestic sphere of home thus remain the recurring themes in her writing though Mansfield never considered herself as a feminist writer. As D. L. He justly mentioned, "Many feminist movements offered Mansfield the materials and sources to depict the images of women, which on the other hand, furthered the development of feminism" (3).

Mansfield as a modernist short story writer portrays the characteristic moments of epiphany through several instances of life. The visionary glimpses eventually lead to the shaping of Bertha's illusive world. The selections of Bertha's life are the manifestations of the submerged conscience in her psyche and the finer instincts of apprehension. The narration of the story features fragmentation of her experiences which is actually the coexistence of the multiple consciousness. Mansfield's style of complexity is congruent to the layered psychological changes and developments of Bertha. Bertha repeatedly fails to express her emotions.

Discovering the true nature of Harry and Fulton's relationship puts light on Bertha's transformed dystopian view of life which once appeared to her as or shook her concept of "absolute bliss." Mansfield thus objectifies female subjective experiences with a newer awakening vision. The discrepancy between what she used to think about Harry and Miss Fulton, and later what is revealed to her, is intrinsically formulated as an implied advancement in her pursuit. Earlier notions of a "perfect wife" and "absolute bliss" determined and shaped her life in a stereotypical and monotonous frame/circle.

Mansfield's responsibility as a writer was ascertained in pretty circumstantial detail in depicting the phase of Bertha's life where the internal changes/changes in looking into one's own self taking place all around the world set critical standards that could adequately combat the outdated looks, ideas, and beliefs about family, society, man-woman relationships. Bertha finds herself stumbling in traditional values that haunt her efforts to grasp what is before her. The paradoxical feeling of "bliss" as portrayed in the story is the deliberate tool not to ridicule but to arouse compassion and humanity.

In the lexical and syntactical levels of the story, the idea of Bertha's repressed sexuality through eroticism, lesbianism, and sensuality is implied. The title of the short story is deceptively simple. Lexically, "bliss" stands for oblivious ecstasy which also refers to the spiritual happiness "typically that reached after death." The young Bertha, thirty years old, feels charged and outbursts of passionate sparks that "burn" in her bosom stimulate her fingers and toes. The running sensations create shivering responses in her feminine entity. The reader is led to seek the erotic implications of these unrelated quivering sensations and flickering emotional outbursts. Traditional criticism of the text already confirms the repressed sexuality of Bertha, the unconscious lesbian desire for Pearl, the symbolic illustrations of fascination and attractions through details of forms, colors and fruits (objects) with connotative meanings: "How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?" (Mansfield 1).

The imagery of the fiddle (violin) and the witty recurrence of the fidgeting playfulness are evidence of the explicit sexual elements in the text which is again supported by the reference to the feelings

that follow: “No, that about the fiddle is not quite what I mean,’ she thought, running up the steps and feeling in her bag for the key--....” It is also noticeable that there is no significant auditory image in the short story which shows the silent growth of Bertha’s (dumb) nature in terms of her introversion. The moments of internal change in the character and the development of the self determines the rhythmic growth of the story. The realistic experiences of Bertha are blended with the pictorial poetic venture of the story.

Beauvoir affirms in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that freedom begins with the self-recognition of not being a free subject in the present (60). Bertha remains unaware of the involuntary emergence of her cocooned and agitated self. She throws off her coat in a chilly, dusky dining room which allegorically reflects the metamorphosis of her former unquenched self. The dejected lady has an incessant reformatory quest for attaining a greater knowledge and perception of other selves. She gets to a higher existential understanding and achieves a state of being where she incorporates the corporeal and the divine. The sonder is envisioned in the profound last scene of the short story where lonely Bertha in the moonlit night is driven into the vast gulf of unawareness. She, however, holds fast to the somber reality that flourishes into the becoming of her (self).

The lucid and compact syntactical structure of the narration is parallel to the consequent and cohesive growth and discovery of Bertha. The dichotomy in Bertha leads to her inauthentic and unexplored existence. Mansfield maneuvers the duality in Bertha’s understandings which at times are a practical, imaginative, visionary and scrupulous way of seeing things. This inability to reconcile the dispersed personalities intensifies the aesthetic value of the short story. With the compatible self, Bertha’s apparent failure is a complex psychological phase towards developing her true self. The incongruent selves of Bertha overshadow the narrative creating a sense of unease. The culmination of these shattered pieces of her real life experiences occur when she deciphers the deception and hypocrisy of her husband and Fulton. The writer draws the minute details of human behaviors to explicate and suggest the greater intricate contexts in relation. The triangularity of relations, according to Aihong is “a strong feeling of division and discontinuity between male and female experiences” (101). Mansfield’s typical style of writing reveals the inarticulateness and the feeling of being nowhere that engender “positive femininity.” The story is implicitly depicting the realistic disparaging condition of women, where the societal constrictions and compulsions repress the feminine emotions like the repressed “bliss” in this story. The story portrays the real “life” experience of Bertha and also makes her different as a “Bright one” (Celtic meaning of Bertha) as her very name suggests. Mansfield’s long observant role of overseeing the typical patriarchal hegemony gives voice to the numerous contemporary modern interpretations. As in “Bliss,” the final question asked by Bertha, “Oh, what is going to happen now?” enkindles both the identification with and alienation from her blissful and sentimental impulses. The attempts have been made to expose the concern over the feminine behavior and feeling as Wheeler in *Knickerbocker* brings to light in “Bliss,” Mansfield’s “satire [is] modified by pathos and compassion which she employed for her knifelike criticisms of conventional relationships and social forms of behaviour, simultaneously revealing subtleties of behaviour and feeling” (8).

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