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**The Fractured Psyche: Unveiling the Impact of Hysteria on
Bertha's Mental Landscape in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"**



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Abstract

Katherine Mansfield's short story entitled "Bliss" is one of her modernist short stories that represents the impacts of the psychological condition named hysteria on women of 20th-century England. It discusses the broader social and gender dynamics that contribute to women's repression, focusing on the expectations of femininity and the limitations placed on their expression of desire and inner turmoil. While the story has been analyzed by many critics several times and almost from every angle, little scholarship can be found on analyzing "Bliss" from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's theory of hysteria. Hence, the research aims to analyze the character of Bertha in the light of Freud's theory of hysteria. This research is based on a qualitative study where textual analysis is done for the substantiation of the research arguments. Freud's insight into hysteria and his theory of hysteria provide the theoretical framework for this research. The paper explores the character of Bertha as a victim of hysteria. It reveals how Bertha and women of the 20th century are silenced in English society. It also reflects people's attitude towards same gender relationships and how people are unable to express homosexuality openly. Through an exploration of the social and gender dynamics that contribute to Bertha's repression, the analysis reveals how societal expectations of femininity, marriage, and domesticity create a psychological burden for women, limiting their ability to express their desires and emotions. By presenting Bertha's hysteria as both a personal struggle and a reflection of the collective experiences of women in her time, the paper underscores how *Bliss* critiques the repressive social structures of early 20th-century England.

Key terms: Hysteria, Societal Constraints and Expectations, Social and Gender Dynamics, Repression of Feelings, Homosexuality

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Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is a short story writer, a famous critic, a poet, and an important figure in the modernist movement. She is praised all over the world, and her works have been translated into 25 languages. Wagenknecht (1928) praises her for her profound wisdom and insight, almost like Shakespeare, which allows her to investigate the deepest aspects of the human soul. "Bliss" is one of her modernist short stories in which she represents the social norms and beliefs of the early 20th c, especially in 1918. It reflects people's attitudes towards same-sex relationships in Britain. This story is not only about Bertha, but it also gives glimpses of women in early 20th c England. In 20th c Britain, women could not express their emotions and feelings. They cannot discuss homosexuality openly. Women are expected to conform to societal norms and beliefs to maintain their social status. They are not allowed to work outside the home or to raise their own children. They used to keep a nurse for the upbringing of their children. They are not allowed to have homosexual affairs. These restrictions are imposed by society on women, and Bertha, the protagonist of "Bliss", seems to conform to these restrictions to maintain her social position. Homosexuality remained illegal in Britain until 1967. "Bliss" represents the suppression of same-sex affairs in Britain during this period. Through Bertha's character, Mansfield highlights the need for social change and urges people to break such societal restrictions to live freely.

Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss" has a multifaceted plot and invites exploration from various themes such as homosexuality and desire, women's roles and social constraint, and isolation and loneliness. S. Brady (2011) gives the image of Bertha, whose role is often hidden or rejected, and a critical perspective of motherhood in the Edwardian era. Brady states that Mansfield depicts the complexities and anxieties of the Edwardian era through the character of Bertha. She argues that Bertha finds herself alienated from her

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own daughter, and her role of being a mother is given to a caregiver. Mansfield shows that Bertha really loves her daughter, but “why is she so distanced (both physically and emotionally) from her own child?” (S. Brady 2011). Moreover, Yanmin and Jia (2020) analyze “Bliss” through Lanser’s authorial voice, which is a narrative situation that is heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential. Choe (2023) talks about the bourgeoisie class in “Bliss” in terms of their consumption habits. According to this article, when the story begins, Bertha experiences extreme happiness, but as the story progresses, readers come to know that her happiness is tied to her material objects and to the comfort of the bourgeoisie class.

Sadeq Jarab (2012) writes about the perceived and actual happiness of Bertha. At the very start of the story, Bertha is in a state of bliss and feels extreme happiness with her life and her marriage to Harry. However, later, she comes to know about the deceptive and infidel nature of her husband in the form of his flirtation with Pearl Fulton. Furthermore, Saeed (2019) discusses the representation of alternative selves in Mansfield’s “Bliss” by using the techniques of modernist writers, such as stream of consciousness, and a feminist perspective. He further argues that Katherine Mansfield is influenced by the “Elan Vital” concept of Henri Bergson, a prominent philosopher. She focuses on subjective experiences and memory, concepts that resonate with the writers of the modernist era.

In “Bliss”, Katherine Mansfield uses the pear tree as a symbol to represent the stages of Bertha's self-realization. Al-Jabbar (2013) focuses on Bertha’s journey of self-realization within a triangular relationship, highlighting the multi-dimensional symbols of the pear tree that are naivety and bliss, deception and reality, and societal oppression. Initially, Bertha associates her extreme happiness and fulfillment with the pear tree, which symbolizes her perceived joy and the happiness she feels. However, this initial symbolic representation of

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the pear tree is delusional and naive about her life and marriage. Abdurrahman, Hamad, and Hazem (2022) interpret "Bliss". This interpretation, based on Fairclough's textual level, reveals Mansfield's particular use of vocabulary through which she expresses herself. She uses transitivity, which indicates that men use pauses, silences, and other techniques to influence conversation and to show how vocabulary choices reflect the dominance of men and the oppression of women in a gender dynamic society.

Hafström (2015) interprets Bertha's sense of space in "Bliss" by using Yi-Fu Tuan's theoretical framework on the concepts of space and place. Bertha's sense of place is deeply connected with her inner and outer realities, representing her restricted life within a patriarchal society. The setting of the story, which is Bertha's home, apparently projects an image of fulfillment and satisfaction. However, this apparently perfect home is also a prison, enclosing her in the roles of mother and wife and also constraining her inner feelings and desires. Another trend in interpreting "Bliss" is through the lens of Freud's psychoanalysis. Depala (2020) focuses on the suppression of Bertha's instinctual desires, id, and ego. From the very start, Bertha's feelings of joy in running and dancing like a child reflect the instinctual part of the mind, which is the id, without any care for societal constraints. This feeling of childhood freedom contrasts with her real age. On the other hand, Bertha is seen to fulfill her societal role as a mother and housewife. She tries to conform to societal expectations by suppressing her inner instinctual desire for childhood freedom. Mansfield's portrayal of Bertha's scattered thoughts and behavior shows the ego's efforts to balance the id's desires.

There are several other works done on the short story "Bliss". Previous studies show that Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" has been analyzed by many critics repeatedly and from almost every angle. Since the purpose of the research is to fill the gap present in the existing body of knowledge, the

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researcher finds that the short story "Bliss" carries an important element, which is hysteria, but the approach based on hysteria has very little evidence available in the works of various critics. The purpose of this research is to fill this gap by finding out various aspects due to which Bertha appears to be a hysterical person, and to analyze how Mansfield represents this psychological condition and its impact on the protagonist Bertha.

Theoretical Framework:

Hysteria, a condition caused by excessive, repressed, and uncontrollable emotions, which led to destructive or irrational behavior, was one of the first pivotal clinical topics Freud studied. He highlighted the role of psychological influence in its development. He proposed the idea that the unconscious mind played a very important role in the development of hysteria and that hysterical patients expressed their repressed feelings, desires, and memories of the unconscious mind through its symptoms. Freud elaborated on the theory of hysteria in his book *Studies on Hysteria*; "Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnants and the memory symbol of certain experiences" (Freud and Breuer, 1995, p.7).

Freud and Breuer present some main causes of hysteria in their collaborative book, *Studies on Hysteria*. One of them is intrapsychic conflict, which refers to conflicting struggles or desires within an individual's mind. These conflicting desires occur within the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind and are so distressful that the person's mind cannot fully disjoin them in their conscious part of the mind. They put forward some main types of hysteria. One of them is defense hysteria, which refers to a protective response against insufferable memories. This type of hysteria arises as a defense mechanism to protect the person from unbearable desires or conflicts. In defense hysteria, the individual defends himself by unconsciously converting his depressed memories, desires, and conflicts into physical symptoms like conversion and

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dissociative symptoms.

Freud explains the concept of conversion in the rise of hysterical symptoms. Conversion refers to the process in which psychological conflicts, unconscious thoughts, and feelings change into somatic manifestations. Freud states that conversion takes place only when there are intrapsychic conflicts, distressing conflicts, desires, and repressed emotions within an individual's mind, and the mind cannot tolerate such unconscious conflicts or traumatic events. As a result, the mind pushes these painful thoughts and feelings from the conscious to the unconscious mind. Eventually, the unconscious mind transforms such conflicts into physical symptoms or behaviors, like conversion symptoms and conversion behaviors. Freud, later in his theory, includes the role of repressed sexual desires in the cause of hysteria. He believes that many psychological problems, including hysteria, are connected to sexual factors. Human beings are born with strong sexual desires. These desires are powerful drives that help in shaping our behavior and personality. These instincts are a basic part of human nature. Societal norms and beliefs, moral codes, and religious beliefs often do not allow women to express such instincts freely. They repress their sexual desires by pushing them from the conscious mind to the unconscious mind to conform to societal expectations. He suggests that repressed sexual desires can lead to psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, or hysteria.

Research Questions:

- i. How does Bertha's hysteria act as a coping mechanism for the restrictions and limitations imposed on her as a woman by 20th-century society?
- ii. What is the role of external and internal factors in the contribution of Bertha's experiences of hysteria in the light of early 20th-century society?

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Research Objectives:

- i. To discuss how Bertha's hysteria is a way for her to deal with and express the limitations placed on her by 20th-century society.
- ii. To analyze the effect of external and internal factors of the 20th c society on the depiction of Bertha's hysteria.

Methodology:

The current paper analyzed Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" by employing the method of textual analysis through close reading of the text. Data is collected through a qualitative method, where the text of the short story "Bliss" is the primary data source itself. Various passages and quotes are taken from the short story for analysis that are relevant to the paper. This research focuses on Freud's theory of hysteria, particularly conversion, repression, intrapsychic conflict, and defense hysteria. According to Freud, repressed memories and desires are pushed from the conscious part of the mind to the unconscious part, and then the body expresses them through physical symptoms. Using this idea, the paper draws attention to how Bertha cannot express her desires because of societal norms. She suppresses them and expresses them in her extreme and exaggerated emotions. Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* explains the way suppressed desires are forced into the unconscious and resurface in disguised forms. In Bliss, Bertha's unrecognized desire to Pearl reappears in her agitated movements, anxious laughing, and exaggerated delight, all of which are signs of conversion hysteria. Her constant accusation of being "too happy" serves as protective hysteria, concealing her suppressed urges beneath the veneer of socially acceptable joy, while her fight between concealed impulses and social roles demonstrates intrapsychic conflict.

Discussion and Analysis:

FROM REPRESSION TO HYSTERIA: AN INSIGHT INTO BERTHA'S DILEMMA

One of the main causes of Bertha's hysteria is that she is unable to express her inner desires, feelings, and struggles. Her inner feelings of joy and desires are kept suppressed because of the strict societal constraints and expectations of the 1920s. At the start of the story, Bertha is in a state of bliss. She experiences extreme happiness as Mansfield writes:

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss.... Oh, is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"?
(Mansfield, 1922, p.123)

She wishes to express her inner state but she is a grown woman. She does not know how to articulate these feelings within the restrictions of society. She suppresses them by engaging herself in other domestic activities. These suppressed emotions are hidden from the conscious mind and remain in the unconscious part which become the main cause of Bertha's hysteria.

In addition to Bertha's relation with her husband, Harry, represents the lack of emotional connection and articulation of her internal state. Harry represents a patriarchal man who is ignorant of Bertha's feelings. He engages himself in external significant activities while Bertha is trapped in performing domestic duties. He keeps himself busy in his own life, not giving time to Bertha, and unaware of her emotional experiences. Her inability to express her inner turmoil and desires to Harry is a reflection of the patriarchal system that expects male supremacy and female submission. Mansfield writes: "What had she to say? She'd nothing to say. She only wanted to get in touch with him for a moment"
(Mansfield, 1922, p.128).

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Despite her intense desires and emotions, she conforms to societal norms that limit her to the role of the ideal wife. Although their relationship is emotionally reserved, Bertha longs for deep affection and sincere praise from Harry. Bertha's deep desires and genuine devotion are evident from these lines: "Bertha, this is a truly amazing *soufflée!*" She is overwhelmed with joy and is on the verge of tears like a child being praised" (Mansfield, 1922, p.137). Bertha's euphoric joy at such a minor gesture highlights how she yearns for his affection and appreciation. Because of her confinement, Bertha is unable to explore or express her true self, which leads to a profound frustration and emotional distress that worsens her hysteria.

Moreover, Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" also represents the suppression of the maternal role, which is an important factor in Bertha's emotional turmoil and hysteria. Although she wants to engage herself in her daughter's upbringing, Harry hires a nurse, Nanny, who performs a primary role in her daughter's life. Nanny discourages Bertha to not interacting with her daughter. She is even unable to protect her daughter from a dangerous dog or to speak freely with her without Nanny's consent. Mansfield writes: "Oh, Nanny, do let me finish giving her supper while you put the bath things away.It unsettles her; it's very likely to upset her" (Mansfield, 1922, p.127). This interaction represents Bertha's secondary role in her daughter's life and shows how she is excluded from her daughter's care. Nanny controls the child's routine and does not even allow Bertha to feed her child. She is not just physically restricted but also verbally and emotionally, as Nanny tells Bertha that her involvement upsets her child. Bertha further expresses her suppressed feelings and deep sense of alienation by saying, "Why do one need to have a baby if it has to be taken care of by a Nanny" (Mansfield, 1922, p.127). These repressed maternal identity and feelings contribute to her emotional turmoil and become the main cause of her hysteria.

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Further, repressed sexual desires are another crucial aspect of Bertha's psychological deterioration. Freud's theory of hysteria suggests that this repressed sexuality leads to hysteria. The text shows that Harry is always indifferent to Bertha's feelings and emotions and focuses only on his own interests. Their relationship lacks a deep connection. Despite her love for Harry, she has never desired to fulfill her sexual desires with him. This is cleared from the text when Mansfield states: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband. Oh, she'd loved him—him—she'd been in love with him, of course, in every other way, but just not in that way" (Mansfield, 1922, p.141). These lines show that Bertha always represses her emotional desires for Harry by separating her emotional love from physical intimacy.

In contrast, Bertha finds a new way of expressing her feelings in her affection with Pearl Fulton. Bertha meets Pearl Fulton at the club, a place where societal restrictions and expectations are slightly relaxed, which allows Bertha to fall in love with her, as Mansfield states, "The two of them had met at the club and Bertha had instantly fallen in love with her (Mansfield, 1922, p.129). Pearl Fulton is the symbol of self-sufficiency, freedom, and strength that Bertha always wanted in her relationship with Harry. Her feelings for Fulton are physical, which is apparent when Bertha holds her arm and experiences "the fire of bliss". Mansfield beautifully conveys the silent and unspoken connection between Bertha and Pearl. Pearl's uncommunicative attitude and Bertha's instant understanding of their mutual feelings represent the intensity of her repressed emotions, as Mansfield writes: "But Bertha had that knowing feeling, suddenly, as if the most awaited and intimate look had passed between her and Pearl (Mansfield, 1922, p.136).

Further, Bertha's hysteria becomes severe when she discovers the disloyalty of her husband, Harry. Harry's infidelity becomes clear: "And she notices . . . Harry with a coat in his arm that belongs to Pearl Fulton..... His lips

said: "I adore you," and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on his cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile" (Mansfield, 1922, p.143). This revelation breaks Bertha's trust and leads to her emotional breakdown, which contributes to her hysteria.

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF HYSTERIA ON BERTHA'S LIFE:

Hysteria has a deep effect on Bertha's emotional state. It intensifies Bertha's feelings inside her like a big storm, which becomes unbearable for her. It results in spontaneous actions and uncovering her emotional distress. Mansfield writes that "Bertha threw off her coat; she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment, and the cold air fell on her arms" (Mansfield, 1922, p.125). Despite wintry weather, Bertha, overpowered by her Feelings, takes off her coat, which represents her inner frustration and her desire to free herself from the overwhelming emotional constraints and restrictions. Her "throwing off her coat" represents her spontaneous and impulsive actions, which is the common effect of hysteria. Katherine Mansfield represents the mental distress of Bertha and her hopeless effort to communicate her inner self. She writes that Bertha feared breathing, for she was fearful of the affects her breath might cause, but still she took deep breaths also, she was afraid to look into the mirror, for she was afraid of what cold things she might encounter, and still she managed to look into it. This passage presents a compelling example of how hysteria emerges in her feelings, self-awareness, and thoughts. Although she does not want to breathe due to fear of inciting her emotions but she still breathes, which suggests the influence of hysteria on her thoughts and body. Mansfield uses this bodily reaction to represent the depth of Bertha's feelings, which have become so powerful that they dominate her actions and mind.

Furthermore, Katherine Mansfield, in her short story "Bliss", explores how hysteria not only intensifies Bertha's feelings and emotional distress but also

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manipulates her perception of existence, provoking her to engage in a misleading sense of bliss and contentment. The story presents the example of a false sense of bliss and happiness when Bertha refuses the maid from turning on the light, as Mansfield states, "Shall I turn on the light, M'm?" "No, thank you. I can see quite well" (Mansfield, 1922, p.1250). Bertha's refusal represents the overwhelming impact of hysteria on her ability to accept the harsh realities of life. Light, in this context, is the symbol of truth, comprehensibility, and the bitter reality of her life, which she unconsciously wants to ignore.

Moreover, the behavior of Bertha is intensely affected due to her psychological problem of hysteria. Hysteria influences her relationship with the people and with the environment around her, and it is evident from her behavior, which is a reflection of her inner turmoil. Mansfield represents this effect of hysteria on Bertha when she tries to find solace in illogical objects and gestures. Mansfield writes that: "She went and lighted the fire in the drawing room; then, picking up the cushions..... As she was about to throw away the last one, she was surprised to find herself hugging the last one, passionately. But it did not put out the fire in her bosom" (Mansfield, 1922, p.130). Bertha's embracing of the cushion, which also surprises even her, shows her illogical behavior and emotional outbreak, which is the factor of hysteria.

In addition to the above effects of hysteria on Bertha, the line "I'm absurd. Absurd!" She sat up, but she felt quite dizzy, quite drunk" (Mansfield, 1922, p.131) shows another effect of hysteria on Bertha. This represents the instant surge of feelings and emotions faced by Bertha, which reveals her psychological distress and inner struggle. The word "absurd" and its repetition highlight her awareness that her feelings are illogical, but still, she is not in a position to repress them. Due to hysteria, she loses control of herself, both emotionally and physically, which is evident from the line when she feels dizzy and finds herself drunk.

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Moreover, the effect of hysteria on Bertha is further evident when Mansfield writes, "she tossed down on a couch and pressed her hands to her eyes. "I'm too happy-too happy!" she murmured" (Mansfield, 1922, p.131). Her repetition of the phrase "too happy" is not the true expression of her happiness, and it represents the extremity of her feelings and emotions, which is more than she can tolerate. It also represents her rising and intensifying hysteria, a condition in which emotions are so excessive that they become uncontrollable for a person. Mansfield portrays it as if she is not happy, and something is missing in her life.

Furthermore, Mansfield, in "Bliss", portrays the instant, abrupt, and instinctive actions of Bertha, her disorientation and enigma, and the intensity of her emotions, all are the effect of hysteria on her. At the end of the story, her repressed desires become so unbearable that she tries her best to express them with her actions. Mansfield writes: "Bertha instantly went to the window and asked herself, 'Oh, what is going to happen now?' she cried" (Mansfield, 1922, p.144). The instant and impulsive running of Bertha on the way to the window suggests her loss of control, which is a sign of hysteria. This impulsiveness is not merely a superficial and external reaction, but it is the result of her inner conflict. The running of Bertha towards the window also suggests her effort to liberate herself from the suffocation and entrapment of her emotions.

Conclusion:

Bertha, the pivotal character of the story in order to meet the expectations of society, like many other women of the early 20th century, suppresses her genuine emotions and true feelings. As she does not find a proper way to express herself, she distracts herself by projecting her attention to domestic chores and social life. This repression of her feelings led to hysteria. Katherine Mansfield, through the struggles of Bertha, shows how patriarchal

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dominance led to the psychological turmoil of Bertha. Her role as a mother is also shadowed by the nanny, who has limited her care and attention towards her own daughter. Additionally, her sexual disconnectedness with Harry, her inability to express homosexual feelings to a club fellow, Pearl Fulton, and her husband cheating her for the same fellow she is attracted to further deepens her psychological conflict. Katherine Mansfield not only brings to the spotlight the causes of hysteria, but she also points out its drastic effects that make a person insecure and carry one away from their loved ones. Bertha's behavior mirrors the inner disturbance that is caused by repressing desires due to social expectations. To match society's standards, Bertha gave herself to the parasite of hysteria that hollowed her from inside.

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