



High Impact Factor 8.1458

ISSN



Vol. 9, No. 1

CLRI Feb 2022



Double-blind  
peer reviewed



Referred Journal



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GENERAL IMPACT FACTOR

## The Case of an Absent Patriarch: A Study of Internalised Oppression in Katherine Mansfield's Story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel"

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the dynamics of internalized oppression in context of Katherine Mansfield's story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel". By studying this story, the author furthers the understanding of the complex patterns of the process of oppression.

This analysis includes a study of how the Oppressed internalise self-subjugation and how Oppression persists due to this. The author makes use of Audre Lorde's ideas on Oppression and Jeremy Bentham's concept of a Panopticon as understood by Michael Foucault.

**Keywords:** Internalised oppression patriarchy Katherine Mansfield Lorde late colonel.

## Introduction

The Pinner Sisters of Katherine Mansfield's story "The Daughters of the Late Colonel" are a classic example of internalised oppression. This kind of oppression becomes manifested due to the dominating presence of the patriarchal figure of Late Colonel during his lifetime and the prevalence of his fear even in his absence, that is, after his death. Josephine and Constantia are victims of so rigid a system of subjugation that even after the death of their father, the eponymous Colonel of the story, they act as though they are constantly being watched by him all the time. Constantia's alert posture even as she lies on the bed is symbolic of a body and a mind that are constantly conscious of being observed. Their state reveals the dangers of unrestrained power- power which does not cease to exercise its control and fear even after the death of the oppressor. Mansfield's representation of her heroines as two indecisive spinsters is an evidence of patriarchy that takes such deep roots in the minds of many Oppressed that it instils in them a permanent fear. This fear is echoed in the rhetorical question, "Do you think father would mind?" The state of the two orphaned sisters is also a proof of the detrimental consequences of women's total dependence on the man of the house. Mansfield's Jug and Con are incapable of voicing their own feelings and even comprehending their own needs and desires. They are at a total loss of purpose and direction in the days following their father's death. This state is reminiscent of the fate of Beckett's tragic tramps, Vladimir and Estragon. Their attempts to

put off decisions and the delay in making even the simplest choices as Jug says "We can decide tomorrow." Is a noteworthy aspect of their behaviour. In Con's repeated insistence to "put it off for another day" and even the last remark made by Josephine in the story saying "I've forgotten too" as a response to Constantia's complaint that she herself can't seem to articulate her thoughts, mirrors the oft-repeated but never acted upon remark of Beckett's tramps, who despite saying "Let's go." Fail to act upon it. This lack of action compounded by the inability to decide, makes the Pinner Sisters the most unfortunate victims of a subordination they have directed against themselves.

### **The Voluntary Isolation of Josephine and Constantia**

This toxic dependency roots from what can be called a consequence of benevolent patriarchy. The Colonel kept his motherless daughters confined to the house and barely allowed them to make social bonds. He was the one who had the last word, his dictum became the law of the land, or of the Pinner house in this case. He decided even the most minor things like what was to be cooked to the most major things like not allowing his daughters to venture into romantic relationships. And so, the demise of the Colonel renders his daughters completely lost and incapable of carrying on even their basic life routine. Also, their inability to socialize even after their father's death is as much a consequence of grief as of this internalised oppression, which according to Lorde, manifests itself in "voluntary isolation" (Lorde).

But what makes a curious and amusingly unfortunate subject of interest is the fear that the patriarch leaves behind. Jug and Con are terrified at the very idea of having buried their dead father "without asking his permission". Even the patriarch's absence seems to be demanding attention and dictating rules. The constant need of permission, validation or approval heard in Josephine's remark that "father will never forgive us for this- never!" is a proof of how authoritative is the patriarch's nod. They fear paying a visit to his

room, the sanctuary of a patriarch that was to remain undisturbed and untrampled. This reveals the dynamics of internalised oppression at work. Both Josephine and Constantia continue to oppress their own selves using the method of their father. This phenomenon of the oppressed group using the tools of the oppressing group against itself is Internalised Oppression. In this case the Oppressed continue to use their master's tools against themselves, and this, as Audre Lorde stated, will never dismantle the master's house. It is this internalised oppression that forms the illusion that an individual or group is not free to be controlled by one's own self. Liebow writes, "If women are surrounded by people who view them as subordinate, incapable, or lacking control over their actions, women are likely to come to understand themselves in a similar way, even if subconsciously" (Liebow 713). The Pinner Sisters might be very much capable of being decisive and socially active, but the process of acculturation that they are a part of instils in them the idea that they are unworthy of wielding power. This becomes a case of the Oppressed ensuring the continued existence of oppression.

Josephine's "moment of absolute terror" as her father's coffin is lowered into the grave can be interpreted as a brief moment of the realisation of her freedom. This brief moment, however fleeting, can be interpreted as the moment of the realisation of a possibility of absolute freedom. As the speaker says, "The giggle mounted..." the reader is given a glimpse of the fear as it has manifested itself in form of self-subjugation within both the spinsters. The mounting of a giggle thus becomes symbolic of a possibility of a breakaway from this pattern. But her act of suppressing the giggle, or the clenching of hands. Speaks of the attempt to remind oneself to conform to the established patterns of behaviour. This fear of the patriarchal norms speaks of the exaggerated conformity which is a determinant of how strongly and deeply the subjugation has been internalised. Paulo Freire states, "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom" (Freire 47). This statement is proved true by Mansfield's story.

Thus the story becomes a case study of a patriarchal setup that refuses to free its hostages even after the demise of the patriarchal figure. Mansfield's depiction of the Pinner sisters as victims of internalised subordination also serves as a potential case study for the Panopticon system that Jeremy Bentham had proposed. Michael Foucault furthered the study of this system to reveal how it becomes a tool that ensures an automatic functioning of power even in the absence of the authority that wields the power. Hence a Foucauldian interpretation reveals the most terrifying side of this system of control where "each becomes to himself his own jailer" and such an internalised oppression ensures "automatic functioning of power" (Bartky 131).

This can also be paralleled to the totalitarianism in George Orwell's dystopian novel "Nineteenth Eighty-Four", where each sound is overheard and each movement is monitored by the all-watching eye of the Big Brother. This fear of constant surveillance ensures that the subjects act and behave in ways that are approved and deemed acceptable by the figure of the Oppressor. Mansfield represents her heroines trapped in the web of self-imposed subjugation. This evokes a picture of two birds in a cage, the door of which is left open, and yet there is no flight; the birds fail to soar heights and their wings remain unfurled. The metaphor of Bentham's Panopticon design becomes more relevant to this cage; Jug and Con are victims of self-imposed restraints. The fear of their father speaks of the authority and control that the late Colonel continues to exercise even from his grave.

The character of the Colonel is that of an intimidating figure. The sight of the Colonel "sitting in front of a roaring fire clasping his stick" with his stern gaze that 'he was famous for' makes Cyril nervous. His daughters fear him, his grandson Cyril dreads the cold look of his eyes and even Mr. Farolles hesitates and chooses not to sit in his chair. Thus the throne of the Oppressor remains unoccupied during his lifetime and he is not dethroned even after his

death. The stature or position of the Oppressor remains uncompromised, furthering the process of oppression.

The late patriarch's absence becomes as much and perhaps more terrifying than his presence. It is only after his demise that the true extent of his authority is revealed. His cold eyes seem to continue watching over the girls. The stern look on his face still seems to rest. This is the tragedy of a society that has so deeply internalised oppression that any hopes of breaking free are withheld by the fear of a possible, though invisible, presence. It is this fear of presence of the Oppressor even while he's absent, that is problematic. His presence is strongly felt even in his absence in what remains of him—the chest of drawers, his handkerchiefs and neckties and his shirts and pyjamas. The “bigger flakes of cold air” in his room seem to retain his coldness. The women dare not raise their voice beyond hushed whispers while going through the late colonel's belongings. The first immediate impulse of the sisters as they are alerted as soon as they hear the barrel-organ, is to silence the organ-grinder so as not to disturb their father. This can be equated to the attempts that they make, though unconsciously, to ensure that there is no disturbance in the established patterns of silence; there is no voice to disturb the patriarchal figure or the system of Patriarchy. This is evident of their state of self-imposed oppression—the oppression that becomes a duty to be fulfilled, a routine to be adhered to, a way of life to be led sincerely and religiously; and the Oppressor becomes a divine deity to be worshipped.

Also significant in the study of this case of internalised oppression is the inability of the sisters to express their own desires. While the ability to give voice to one's needs might seem a basic tendency that all humans are naturally capable of, the case of the Pinner Sisters reveals the process of subordination that they have been acculturated to, is far more detrimental than what it seems at first glance. The Spivakian question, “can the subaltern speak?” is echoed here and seems to be relevant to the situation. The dependence on the father has taken away their ability to articulate their desires and fears. They

do not seem capable to utter a single decisive word; the patriarchal system has deprived them of their “voice”.

Josephine hears the sound of the thumping of her father's stick. This image of hearing a dead man's stick thumping is a proof of the patriarch still being a threatening presence, or rather an absence. Even the absence of the oppressor does not make him any less powerful.

The question remains, is there a way to undo such deeply internalised patterns of oppression that have taken such deep roots in the society that they begin to seem faultless and normal, and are hence accepted without a doubt. According to Audre Lorde, “[T]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house ...” The sight of Josephine's face illuminated by sunlight gives hopes. So does the picture of Constantia on a moonlit night lying on the floor with her arms outstretched. While an overnight rooting out of such oppression seems a utopian dream, a mindful awareness can no doubt curb the problem. The need is to “engage in a process of rejecting internalized subordination as an everyday choice” ( Joseph and Williams). There is after all a possibility of coming “out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm”.

## Conclusion

The end of the story shows us a moment of possibilities- it is in this brief moment that the ominous silence is broken, the darkness of the tunnel lifted, the coldness evaded as the golden sun rays fall into the room brightening up a dull place, the music from the barrel organ fills the space and Con says, “I know something you do not know”. Here we see a glimpse of an illuminated house with warmth of the sun and music from the street. We also see a certain decidedness of purpose in Con's statement. Even the song of the birds chirping, the sight of Con on a full moon night, lying on the floor with arms outstretched carries a promise of liberation. The sight of Josephine's face brightened up by the light of the thieving sun from the window is a hopeful sight that has hope and promise in it. It points to a

certain possibility that the established patterns can be broken, the internalised fear gotten rid of and the self-imposed imprisonment overturned, the darkness evaded, the silence broken and oppression undone.

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