

A Multitude of People and Yet a Solitude: A Comparative and Contrastive Study of Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' and Murakami's 'Kino'

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Abstract

Loneliness and isolation are major themes in modern fiction. Fiction writers have dealt with themes in different works irrespective of place, culture, age, and time. While writers have presented these themes in their works, they have also shown that human beings cannot live alone. The present study explores the themes of solitude and isolation in the works of the writers Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) and Haruki Murakami (1949- till present) in their short stories 'Miss Brill' and 'Kino.' Though the two writers belong to two different countries, namely New Zealand and Japan, they have dealt with a recurrent motif in contemporary fiction— loneliness and isolation. The study will give an insight into how loneliness and isolation have been presented in the works of these two writers by analysing the themes and making a comparative and contrastive study between the two short stories 'Miss Brill and 'Kino.'

Keywords: *Isolation, loneliness, Modernism, connection, short stories.*

Introduction

Loneliness, isolation, and solitude are not new in literature. 'A multitude of people and yet a solitude' is a quotation from Charles Dickens's famous novel 'A Tale of Two Cities' (1859). People tend to be in a multitude of people, yet they suffer from loneliness and isolation. Modern fiction portrays these themes through genres such as novels and short stories. Loneliness has been defined as a negative emotion representing a feeling of a lack or loss of meaningful social relationships (Ratcliffe et al.,2021). Feeling alone and isolated are the dominant emotions inside the modern man. Thus, the theme of isolation and loneliness is a common theme in modern fiction. Although modern men claim to be connected more strongly than ever, they are detached. According to Letourneau, when an author explores the theme of loneliness or isolation as a literary theme, the results are painful and heartbreaking. Loneliness and isolation can be a result of choice or result of particular circumstances. In both cases, both physical and emotional loneliness can be a traumatic experience for people who feel cut off from the people around them.

Isolation and loneliness are two of the most dominant themes of modern fiction, as both are related to the psyche of human beings. The past is stored in one's mind and influences the present, emphasizing the individual's loneliness. Loneliness makes a man estranged

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from one's surroundings (Kheirkha & Pishkar, 2018). Yet the desire to communicate is also a deeply embedded human instinct, and the desire to escape loneliness is one of the chief human preoccupations (Daiches, 1960). According to Abram's 'A Glossary of Literary Terms' (1999), writers such as James Joyce (1882-1941), T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), J.D. Salinger (1919-2010), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) were the pioneers who broke away from the traditional forms and concepts in literature and paved the way for the new trends. The catastrophes of World War I and World War II had shaken peoples' faith in the Western world, and writers moved away from the traditional literary modes to express and 'represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world.' Therefore, Hemingway's old man in 'Old Man at the Bridge' (1938), the lonely American wife in 'Cat in the Rain' (1925), Woolf's characters in 'Mrs. Dalloway' (1925), Septimus, Lucrezia, and Clarissa all deal with inherent isolation. Similarly, Salinger's teenage protagonist Holden Caulfield in the book 'Catcher in the Rye' (1951) and Nabokov's characters Humbert and Lolita in the book 'Lolita' (1955) all suffer from alienation and isolation from the people and society.

However, among the mentioned writers who have contributed to the themes of isolation and loneliness, the works of Katherine Mansfield and Haruki Murakami are noteworthy in the current world of literature. Hence, this study explores the pangs of loneliness portrayed in the short story of Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' (1920) and Haruki Murakami's 'Kino' (2014).

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) is one of the most highly regarded short story writers of the 20th century. A contemporary of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence, she played her part in shaping modernism by experimenting with style, subject matter, and theme in a body of work that redefined the genre. She was considered the pioneer of the modern English short story. Her short stories are widely known for themes such as disappointments, gender roles and expectations, class divisions, loneliness, isolation, and death. Mansfield's literary techniques align with those of other modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, to whom she is often compared. She concentrates on creating character and mood rather than plot. Hence, the themes of loneliness and isolation dominate her short stories through the characters she creates.

Similarly, Haruki Murakami's (1949- present) concept of loneliness and isolation dominates his short stories. Despite the claims that the world is connected, modern men have never been so isolated from one another. Being a contemporary of writers such as George Saunders (1958- till present), Jhumpa Lahiri (1967- present), and Paulo Coelho (1947- present), the themes of loneliness, alienation, and isolation play a vital role in his short stories. Most writers successfully depict the modern man's pain of isolation and loneliness. Being lonely results from the difficulties one faces in life, which sometimes forces a man to be isolated from society. Murakami is drawn to the abiding strangeness and unfathomability of life. His meandering, mesmerizing tales of profound alienation are driven by puzzling circumstances that neither his characters nor readers can crack. In his collection of short stories, 'Men Without Women' (2014), most perplexed middle-aged men in the seven plainspoken tales have lost the women in their lives — to other men or death. This lands them in a condition Murakami labels 'Men Without Women' — always in "a relentlessly frigid plural." (McAlpin, 2017). The recurring theme in most of Haruki Murakami's writings is loneliness and alienation. His characters are devoid of psychological peace. The protagonists in his short stories seem to define themselves in opposition to the women around them. Detached from their feelings and missing pieces of themselves, Murakami's lonely souls struggle to understand what has hit them (McAlpin, 2017).

Theoretical Background

According to Adam J. (2023), Modernism in literature is the act of rebellion against the norms on the writers' part. They refused to conform to the rules any longer. Instead, they sought new ways to convey ideas and new forms of expressing themselves. In their opinion, the old ways of writing simply could not reflect the rapid social change and a new generation born out of it. Hence, it is clear that the present age has shrunk in spirit, resulting in confusion, frustration, disillusionment, meaninglessness, and alienation. Saleem (2014) states that the alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of twentieth-century fiction. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), James Joyce (1882-1941), Franz Kafka (1883- 1924), Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Albert Camus (1913-1960) Tony Morrison (1931- 2019), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) have portrayed the conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles of modern man due to loneliness. Being one of the dominant characteristics of Modernism, the theme of loneliness and solitude plays a vital role in almost all genres and cultures. Modern man is the symbol of alienation in many respects. Even when people are among a multitude of people, loneliness and alienation haunt the modern man.

In a study by Taylor et al. (2023), loneliness is defined as a perceived/subjective condition in which an individual is dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of their social relationships. Social isolation is seen as a condition characterized by a lack of contact with other people and disengagement. Being alone or isolated comes to us only when we see ourselves devoid of close relationships or detached from others. According to Hawkley & Cacioppo (2010), humans depend on secure and social surroundings to thrive as a social species. When a man feels isolated or lonely, he needs to connect to others due to the perceived threats. People can live relatively solitary lives and not feel lonely, and conversely, they can live an ostensibly rich social life and feel lonely nevertheless. A study by Saleem (2014) states that alienation is a major theme of the human condition in the contemporary epoch. Therefore, the themes of alienation, loneliness, and isolation have been dealt with differently by various writers in modern literature.

Significance of the Study: The present study analyses the short story of Katherine Mansfield titled 'Miss Brill' and Haruki Murakami's 'Kino' based on the theme of loneliness, isolation, and alienation in the modern world. Though the two writers belong to two different countries, namely New Zealand and Japan, they have dealt with a recurrent motif in contemporary fiction — loneliness and isolation, which play a vital role in the works of most modern writers as it is a universal theme which haunts human beings irrespective of time, age, culture, and place.

Objectives of the study

The present study focuses on mainly two objectives:

1. How have the themes of loneliness and solitude been dealt with in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield and Haruki Murakami?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' and Haruki Murakami's 'Kino' regarding solitude and isolation?

Thematic analysis of 'Miss Brill.'

Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Miss Brill' explores the protagonist's mental functioning. According to Nayeypour (2017), readers can get acquainted with the workings of Miss Brill's mind and engage with how she thinks. On the surface level, the protagonist is presented to the readers as an everyday character who visits the park on Sundays. We only know a little about her background except that she is a middle-aged teacher who teaches English to children. There is nothing so interesting about her life. She observes people around her, listens to their conversations, reads their thoughts,

feelings, and intentions, and tries to form her impressions about them. There is not much background information given about why she has made it a routine to visit the park every Sunday. She does not get involved with people on a deeper level. She has a special seat where she is happy to observe her surroundings.

Interestingly, most people she comes across in the park appear 'old' to her- as if she unconsciously wants to detach herself from that group of people. Moreover, she observes them minutely. She notices how they dress up when it is said, 'a big old woman, sitting upright, with a roll of knitting on her embroidered apron' (Mansfield, p.1). She also remembers what the 'old' couple wore, especially the man, when she recalls 'he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots' (p.1). For example, when she overhears the old couple discussing the spectacles, she hears the old woman saying, "They'll always be sliding down my nose!" (p.2). Miss Brill shakes her head as if she finds the woman and their discussion silly.

It can be interpreted that when someone is alone and has nothing significant to do, then only a person can observe others so minutely and even remember what they wore a week before. At one point, it is also mentioned that she would get disappointed if people did not speak when it is said, 'Miss Brill always looked forward to the conversation', (p.1). It shows how lonely and alienated she feels when waiting to listen to others' conversations, whether they mean anything to her or not. She has chosen this way to feel connected to others around her and forget her loneliness. If a couple is not talking, she finds alternate ways when she thinks, 'Never mind, there was always the crowd to watch', (p.2). She has to watch something or listen to other people's conversations to pass the time and feel she belongs there. Everything around her seemed fascinating to her. 'How she loved sitting here, watching it all! It was like a play'(p.2).

According to Kaščáková, (2011) it is an indication of "the illusion of life" Miss Brill "constructs in her mind as a self-defence against the reality." She enters an imaginary conversation with the fur and addresses it as 'Dear little thing' as if the fur is a living being able to hear, feel, and respond. Her imaginative mind gives her the false impression that she can read other peoples' emotions, thoughts, and feelings. But the truth is she misreads the state of her mind and others' (Nayebpour, 2017).

It is pathetic how she thinks, 'Even she had a part and came every Sunday' (p.3). She claims, 'Yes, I have been an actress for a long time', (p.3). She even admits to an old man to whom she had read the newspaper. She is aware that, in some way, she is deceiving herself. Furthermore, she thinks somebody would notice if she were absent for one Sunday. She expects and hopes to be seen and missed by someone – a hidden longing to be associated with people. She perceives the people around her 'were odd, silent, nearly all old. 'The word 'old' is repeated several times throughout the story, showing her deep dislike for old people. Tragically, Miss Brill does not take her feelings seriously. She has immersed herself so much into other people's lives that it seems she has no separate existence. She is sure she is part of the things and the people she views around her, and there is a strong bond or connection with others. (Nayebpour, 2017)

However, her imaginative world shatters when a young boy calls her 'a stupid old thing'. She is immediately brought back to reality, reminding her of her age. Not only that, he clearly says, 'Who wants her?'(p.3). When she returns home that evening, things do not seem to be the same to her. Something inside her feels broken. She closes the box lid, keeping the necklet inside, but hears something cry. The cry stands for the emptiness she feels upon realizing she is old and lonely. It purges from within her, leaving her devastated.

Thematic Analysis of 'Kino'

However, 'Reading a Murakami short story is like waking from a dream. There are fleeting images, people from the past, an uncanny situation — someone said something

bizarre or fantastic happened' (Rosenthal, 2021). His stories portray the staggering loneliness of men. 'He understands a world of deep feeling among people who can't find words and images to match it' (Holmes, 2020). In a study by Mukherjee & Swamy (2019), Murakami makes his male characters vulnerable, weak, and prone to pain and sadness, unlike the writers whose male characters are strong and in control of their emotions.

'Kino' is one of the short stories from Murakami's book 'Men Without Women' (2014). Across seven tales, Haruki Murakami brings his powers of observation to bear on the lives of men who find themselves alone in their ways. Here are vanishing cats and smoky bars, lonely hearts and mysterious women, baseball and the Beatles, woven together to tell stories that speak to us all. According to Robson-Scott (2017), most stories touch on Murakami's familiar themes: loneliness, infidelity, time, and the strange ways people are intertwined. Women surround the men in 'Men Without Women'. Wives, girlfriends, friends, coworkers, mothers—women are their atmosphere. However, all seven stories in the collection deal with men who have lost women in their lives. Each of these men in the stories has lost either their lover or their wife and is shown how they react and cope with this loss (Mukherjee & Swamy, 2019). Hence, the protagonists become vulnerable characters. The book's title prepares the readers to plunge into a world of isolation, alienation, and solitude. Despite being with women, Murakami's men are without them (Holmes, 2020). 'Men Without Women' is best when it directly engages with its heroes' alienation and estrangement from women and themselves.

The story 'Kino' (2014) focuses on the personal loss of the protagonist Kino. The story revolves around the main character, Kino, coming to terms with the feelings he has not allowed himself to feel. The scene opens with Kino working at the bar, doing his regular tasks. As the narrator continues, we get glimpses of Kino's past. Before working at the bar, Kino was a salesman at a company selling sporting equipment and traveled a lot while working. One day, he came back from work and found his wife in an illicit relationship with another man (his colleague). Kino did not make a tantrum upon discovering that his wife was unfaithful. Instead of fighting or arguing, he silently shut the door and left, and the next day, he left his job. Kino thought that he was the cause of the darkness around him. He forced himself into a solitary life.

The theme of loss, loneliness and solitude permeates the whole story. It emphasizes the importance of the individual and how social constructs enable the human tendency to suppress emotions, resulting in social alienation and disillusionment. Later, upon meeting Kino, when his wife asks him if he was hurt, he replies, 'I'm human, after all. I was hurt,' (Murakami, p.181). However, the next instant, the narrator reveals Kino's inner feelings when he says, 'But that wasn't true. Half of it, at least, was a lie.' He admits that he should have been hurt, but he wasn't. The narrator goes on with

When I should have real pain, I stifled it. I didn't want to take it on, so I avoided facing up to it. Which is why my heart is so empty now. The snakes have grabbed that spot and are trying to hide their coldly beating hearts there (Murakami, p.181).

The readers wonder why he does not react, never asks his wife anything, or fails to show his anger or emotions. He knows his failure to show his feelings but makes no effort to reconcile with his wife.

Murakami's men without women withdraw into lonely rooms in their imaginations, and there they wait for a signal: the beating heart, the warm hand, the icy moon, anything (Holmes, 2020). As Kamita prescribes, Kino's remedy is to isolate himself far away for a long time. Via this isolation, he realizes how closed off from the world he was in mind and heart, how he had allowed several pains to bury him away. It can be interpreted that he was never really involved with life. There is a supernatural stranger, a snake invasion, a woman with cigarette burns all over her body, and an old willow tree. Somehow, they are all connected, as is Kino's final realization that, yes, he was deeply hurt by his ex-

wife's affair, though he had felt nothing much at the time. 'Don't look away, look right at it.' (p.184), a voice whispered in his ear. 'This is what your heart looks like', (p.184). Moreover, Kino, like the other men without women, is grateful for being able to weep, and for silence, and for demons who leave him alone, but only for a while.

Similarities and differences between Miss Brill and Kino

When looking into the characters of Miss Brill and Kino, we see several commonalities between the two protagonists. The first similarity that catches the readers' attention is that both Mansfield and Murakami have titled their individual stories after the protagonists' names, making it evident that the stories will revolve around only the two main characters. The titles themselves, standing alone, prepare the readers to be familiar with the theme of alienation and isolation. Both characters belong to the Modern era, pervaded by loneliness and isolation. People surround them, but they have no such strong connection with anyone. Miss Brill and Kino are middle-aged people presented as living in solitude. Miss Brill has taken consolation in delving herself into the lives of others, and Kino has accepted his fate of running the bar, which, in one way, makes him serve people. The strongest similarity between the two characters is their urge to connect to people. Miss Brill satisfies her thirst by imagining she is part of something while Kino gets into a physical relationship with a woman he barely knows.

When we come to the differences between Miss Brill and Kino, we see that Mansfield has portrayed the loneliness of a middle-aged female character. In contrast, Murakami portrayed the lonely life of a middle-aged male character. The second difference is that we know nothing about Miss Brill's life or background except that she teaches English. The readers do not get to know what made her choose a secluded life or why she chose this certain park to connect with people. On the other hand, we get to know Kino's past life and that his wife's disloyalty has led him to choose this life. Third, Miss Brill finds solace in coming to the park and thinking she is part of something, while Kino takes no such interest in going to a public place to forget his loneliness. He makes no sincere effort to be part of anything. The fourth difference is in the personalities of both these characters. Miss Brill appears to be a fun and jolly woman who is light-hearted. She is conscious of her age and attempts to hide and forget it by visiting the park and observing people around her. On the contrary, Kino is a calm, quiet, and reserved man who does not communicate with others much and is not concerned about hiding his age. The fifth difference is that Miss Brill tries to react to people's behavior and conversations around her. She is not devoid of feelings or emotions. On the other hand, Kino is presented as someone who stifles his feelings and emotions. He is even unable to react when his wife betrays him. The sixth difference between these two protagonists is that Miss Brill is devastated at the end of the story, being humiliated by a young couple regarding her age and her being unwanted in the park. In contrast, from the beginning till the end, Kino thinks least about how society views him.

Discussion

It is ironic that modern man claims to be socially connected and views the world as a global village where one can connect with the other with the click of a button. However, when we explore a human's deep emotions and urges, we see that the desire to connect with human beings remains the same. Analysing the two short stories brings us to the fact that man cannot live alone. In a study by Muthanna (2018), Mansfield explores her protagonist's problematic and fragmental states of mind due to her lonely environment. She also depicts the mental destruction of human beings in the modern era through the character of Miss Brill. She tragically portrays the personality of Miss Brill, who appears to be a jolly woman who goes to the park on Sundays to spend time. On the surface level, she is like any other woman who enjoys sitting and relaxing in the park. However, when we probe deep into her personality, we see that she is a lonely middle-aged woman who

tries to connect with people whom she does not even know just to feel that she is part of something to fit into- to belong to. We can relate to men in the modern world who claim to be socially connected to known and unknown people, satisfying themselves with the belief that they have many friends.

Similarly, when Miss Brill is in the park, she is certain she is part of the things and the people she views around her, and there is a strong bond or connection with others (Nayebpour, 2017). In a study by Muthanna (2018), Mansfield depicts the mental destruction of modern man through the personality and nature of Miss Brill. She is self-conscious of her loneliness, but she cannot overcome her depressed mental state. When she confronts the truth through the eyes of others, her whole world changes for her and she is left more depressed and lonelier.

Haruki Murakami's presentation of the theme of loneliness and isolation is from a different angle. From the story's beginning, the protagonist Kino is portrayed as a lonely, calm, and quiet man who runs the bar. He observes people coming and going to the bar but takes no special interest in anyone. Kino is shown as a person who is in a state of loneliness in 'which you truly feel cut off from others because of your location or emotions, and its psychological toll can be devastating' (Letourneau, 2018). We only learn a little about what is going on in Kino's mind once the narrator lets us know about his past. Then, can we only understand the reason for his detachment and isolation from the people around him. The infidelity of his wife must have made him go through a heartbreak, though he accepts his fate calmly. He walks away from his house, his relationship, and his job, though the readers wonder why he is devoid of any feelings or emotions about his wife's infidelity or why he does not react.

However, the fact that he gets intimate with a woman who sometimes visits the bar shows that he is human, not devoid of feelings, emotions, and desires. It is not love, but he does not resist intimacy with the lady. He may not speak out about his loneliness and solitude, but his desire to connect with someone, a human being, is evident. Murakami has presented that modern man cannot express his feelings and emotions. Though he admits that he was severely hurt, it is a confession the reader sees rather than feels.

Conclusion

Alienated figures are common in most modern fiction. The protagonists are misfits either because of some defects in their character or nature or because of the society in which they live. It shows that men are reluctant to discuss emotional issues, which creates barriers to forming healthy relationships. Hence, the two stories 'Miss Brill' and 'Kino' successfully present the fragmented psyche of modern men who suffer deeply from solitude and loneliness. Loneliness and isolation can be a result of choice or result of particular circumstances. In both cases, both physical and emotional loneliness can be a traumatic experience for people who feel cut off from the people around them. Irrespective of time, age, place, and culture, both Mansfield and Murakami have probed deep into the protagonists' minds, who are willingly or unwillingly isolated and detached from their surroundings. Therefore, both stories shed light on loneliness and isolation and offer intriguing insights into the protagonists' characters, personalities, and relationships with others.

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