



## Foucault's Resistance and Sartre's Transcendence in *At the Bay and Bliss* by Katherine Mansfield

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### Abstract

In a couple of her stories, Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) dealt with female characters who feel trapped and got bored of their roles as loving mothers and wives, yet feel obliged to play their roles, though reluctantly; then as a result of their dissatisfaction, signs of resistance are observable. As prototypes of Foucauldian subjects they exercise power by being assertive and resisting the dominant patriarchal discourse. They balk at motherhood and conjugal life, at devoting themselves entirely to the prescribed role society has imposed, namely to be sacrificial, ignorant of themselves and catering to their husband and children's needs but they cannot totally break free of them as Nora did in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). During the time Mansfield wrote her stories a typical woman was expected to play a sacrificial role, ignore her own needs and desires and lead a routine-like life, but as Sartre held individuals "are not exclusively characterized by fixed and given characteristics [that is, by their facticity], but are also constituted in some way by what Sartre calls their possibilities-by what they are aiming at, or beginning, or projecting themselves toward" (Howells, 2006, p.108). The present article aims to present the female protagonists of these two short stories as Foucauldian and Sartrean subjects resisting and transcending their predetermined roles.

**Key words:** Resistance; Transcendence; Foucauldian subjects; Sartrean subjects

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### INTRODUCTION

Foucault and Sartre had the same idea about individuals' responsibility toward creating a self-made identity rather than following a prescribed path. Though they had differing views toward the extent to which individuals are free (Sartre maintained individuals are free and Foucault held they are free within the limitations they can surpass) they both agree on the possibility of transcending the facticity of one's life. What they encourage people to do is not considering their current condition fixed and unchangeable, and instead trying to make the most of it according to their own will. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra declared the death of God, all absolute meanings died with it, as well. There is no absolute meaning to cling to, no universal truth to be discovered, no right and wrong to be followed. Everyone is responsible to provide his/her life with self-created meanings.

### 1. A FOUCAULDIAN VIEW OF POWER AND RESISTANCE

As Sara (2005, pp.34-35) mentioned "Power is often conceptualized as the capacity of powerful agents to realize their will over the will of powerless people and the ability to force them to do things which they do not wish to do." What Foucault conceives of power opposed the traditional negative definition of power by being an external force coming from above which is constraining, prohibitive, oppressing and repressing and is only enacted

on inferiors who are incapable of reacting, resisting or reversing it. Foucault held

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produce discourse. (Gordon, 1980, p.59)

Power is both constraining and liberating, it is ubiquitous, it is not a property to be held or possessed only by a few, it is an activity, a strategy, a technique that is exercised, neither does it belong to just the authorities, it exists even in all our daily interactions. How power functions, are of utmost importance to him, not what it is and where it comes from, what concerns him is how it operates through brainwashing and manipulation.

According to Foucault living and thinking outside and free of the network of power relations is unattainable because we have internalized the codes and norms of our society, we are trained and disciplined to think in a certain way, no matter how hard we struggle to get away, the shackles of power will still remain with us. This does not mean we are only passive receptors of power, incapable of reversing or resisting it; to Foucault resistance is the accompaniment of power; there are possibilities of resistance and reversal but not breaking free of it. We are both the effects and instruments of power relations, as much as we can receive it we can exert it on others; these forces are multiple coming from many sides having different forms and effects. Power is also intentional, that is to say the exercise of power is directed toward reaching a specific goal. There are many practices by which we can exercise power in which the most important one is "the care of the self".

Resisting Normalizing power aids subjects in self-formation. Subjectivity a "sociohistorical phenomena" (p.7) is not a pre-given entity, it is rather a construct, it is not an a priori it is a constitution by power relations. Though subjects are not wholly free to form their subjectivity, they are neither totally products of external forces and impositions, to put it differently individuals are free within limitations and the freedom they possess may not always end up in progress, satisfaction or liberation, overall in betterment but at least it has not been an imposition from outside, it was a genuine act of will from inside which is a characteristic of a Foucauldian subject.

## 2. SARTRE'S FACTICITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

According to Sartre human beings are both facticity (all the attributes one has to include his/her birth place, gender, past and so on) and transcendence (the possibility of transcending the facticity due to be free). As he held "we

have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is." (Sartre, 1960, p.58) Sartre maintains that our body, birthplace, gender and past are undeniably parts of us and therefore unchangeable but it does not mean we are bound to them and are deprived of the opportunity or possibility of moving beyond them; they are also not indispensable parts of us since our facticity cannot determine our present actions for we are radically free in an indifferent, meaningless universe into which we were thrown, without a God from whom we can infer meaning; the loss of any absolute meanings leads us to create our own. That is why Sartre was labeled an atheist. Following Nietzsche's slogan of "God is dead" and so are all absolute meanings, we are abandoned guideless. Sartre, like Nietzsche, proposed we live in a universe which lacks any pre-given meanings, thus we are the only ones who can make life meaningful through creating values which we deem to be true, though we can never make sure they actually are, whatever project we choose we take the risk to stick to and bear full responsibility for. Howells held: "They are not exhaustively characterized by fixed and given characteristics (that is, by their facticity), but are also constituted in some way by what Sartre calls their possibilities-by what they are aiming at, or beginning, or projecting themselves toward" (p.108). Nietzsche and Sartre agree on the lack of any transcendental reality, and the fact that we are left alone to provide our lives with meanings to get rid of the nothingness we are associated with as a being-for-itself.

In his eminent book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1960, p.56) maintained: If we "affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity" we are in bad faith" that is if we think we cannot transcend our facticity we are in bad faith. Bad faith is a kind of believing in determinism and fixity of the human condition. Actually it is the attempt to "identify facticity with transcendence" (Webber, 2010, p.76) while Catalano (1974, p.82) stated: "Our consciousness is never perfectly identified with our facticities; we are more than our bodies, our past, or our environment". We are totally free beings and the price of being free to do whatever we wish to is taking sheer responsibility for our actions, but it is quite easier said than done, that is why plenty of people prefer to deceive themselves into believing they are confined in order to avoid accepting responsibilities for their actions. Individuals are well aware deep down that they are free beings but they tend to hide this fact since freedom entails anguish and the burden of this anguish is so much as lots of people would rather consider themselves confined. We all tend to conceive our traits as fixed and determinate. We feel obliged to pretend our actual character is fixed and to act accordingly. Sometimes that fixed character is the prescribed character society expects and we nourish.

A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limits

himself to his function as a grocer, just as the soldier at the attention makes himself into a soldier-thing... There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition. (Sartre, 1960, p.59)

Sartrean freedom is a given but the fact that we are ontologically free is not necessarily conducive to be free in effect and those who deny it are deceiving themselves and are suffering from bad faith for they are denying an integral aspect of their beings. Sartre maintains: "One who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or representing as truth a pleasing untruth" (p.49). Inasmuch as the fact of freedom is likely to be rejected by clinging to bad faith.

His ontology is elaborated upon in his book *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943) where he spoke of two kinds of beings: the for-itself or conscious being and the in-itself or unconscious being. The difference between them is the for-itself, which is associated with human beings, is conscious of its own being and likely to transform but the in-itself which is associated with objects is non-transformable and ignorant of its being. The for-itself lacks an identity or a fixed essence and is always in the process of transformation and becoming by choosing different projects for pursuing; Sartre's famous slogan "existence precedes essence" implies the lack of any predetermined essence for the for-itself. But the in-itself has a fixed identity and is incapable of being transformed or surpassing its given essence.

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### 3. DISCUSSION

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#### 3.1 *At the Bay*

Linda, the main female character, is a mother and wife but undevoted and reluctant. She is totally irresponsible toward her family and treats them indifferently. She is unwilling to have sexual intercourse with her husband and despises bearing children and leaves the duty of taking care of the children to her mother and sister. As Foucault held power is always accompanied by resistance. Though Linda has been imprisoned in a patriarchal society which exerts its power on women and inflicts oppression upon them, she does not remain passive and recipient of power, instead she exercises her own power by resisting the imposed roles which the patriarchal society has prescribed for women.

There are lots of incidents in the story which clarifies Linda's apathy and irresponsibility toward her family, for instance when Stanely, her husband, was complaining about his lost walking stick and questioning Linda about it, she was lying down indifferently and replied him vaguely "Stick, dear? What stick?" (Mansfield, n.d., p.5) Linda's indifference and inattention upsetted Stanely, so much as she left Linda without a farewell. As Stanely was leaving home, he was thinking about "the heartlessness of women! The way they took it for granted it was your

job to slave away for them while they didn't even take the trouble to see that your walking-stick wasn't lost." (Ibid., p.6) Stanely was so furious that his function is reduced to a bread-winner, he laments the fact that he had to undergo the drudgery in order to support his family and also his in-laws while instead of being appreciated is being ignored, mistreated and his absence is welcomed by the household; he is sacrificing himself and getting nothing in return.

Linda's lack of interest in her husband is patent by how she feels relieved as Stanely left home, she shouted: "He's gone'... Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house... There was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs." (Ibid.) This sense of pleasure inducing by Stanely's absence has also infected their servant: "Oh, these men! said she, and she plunged the teapot into the bowl and held it under the water even after it had stopped bubbling, as if it too was a man and drowning was too good for them." (Ibid.) Linda is bored with her role, of catering to Stanely's needs, of calming him down and providing him with comfort so that he can go to work and support the family financially, yet she feels obliged to play it. She feels she is sacrificing herself by giving priority to Stanely's needs and forgetting her own's: "Her whole life was spent in rescuing him, and restoring him, and calming him down, and listening to his story. And what was left of her time was spent in the dread of having children" (Ibid., p.13).

Linda's aversion to child bearing which was considered to be "the common lot of women" (Ibid.) was a kind of resistance to the imposed role of a mother. Linda was not a common, devoted and sacrificial stereotyped woman, she was an assertive one challenging the predetermined role ascribed to her:

She was broken, made weak, her courage was gone, through child-bearing. And what made it doubly hard to bear was, she did not love her children. It was useless pretending. Even if she had had the strength she never would have nursed and played with the little girls. (Ibid.)

Being entangled in the complex network of power relations, Linda ventured to exercise her own power; though she is a receiver of power, she endeavors to be an agent of power as well, by resisting what society demands of her. Linda cannot love her children since "a cold breath had chilled her through and through on each of those awful jour-neys; she had no warmth left to give them" (Ibid.). Her lack of interest in her kids is a result of her aversion and apprehension of child-bearing. She has been silenced and objectified all through her life; her sense of individuality has been crushed, her identity is an imposed one; Linda does not care about her maternal responsibilities, she is playing the role of the mother which is expected of her very poorly for she had had no interest of becoming one. She felt so detached from her son that "she hardly held him in her arms. She was so indifferent about him that as he lay there... Linda glanced down." As he was looking at his mother dearly Linda

faced him and uttered: "I don't like babies." (Ibid.), as he was smiling she added: "Why do you keep on smiling?" she said severely. "If you knew what I was thinking about. You wouldn't" (Ibid.).

As far as Sartre is concerned, Linda can be both an example of bad faith and a Sartrean subject, but none thoroughly. Linda is an example of Sartrean subject for she does not feel bound by her role as a mother and wife and endeavors to transcend her prescribed roles. Though they are parts of her facticity, she does not consider them fixed and unchangeable. On the contrary her resistance and effort to transcend the ascribed role is laudable, while she does not have the temerity to break the bonds of marriage, she dares to question and resist them, though unable to transcend fully. According to Sartre (1960, p.58) "We have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."

Linda is a character who endeavors to resist other's domination and embrace freedom thereby she rejects being an object in the hands of the other. But she cannot be deemed a total Sartrean subject as Nora was; she abandoned her husband and children altogether to live on her own. She totally balked at her roles as a mother and wife, what Linda is not capable of; while we cannot claim she is suffering from bad faith since she does not associate her facticity with transcendence, that is she does not consider herself to be an in-itself or an unchangeable object in the hands of others and avoid attempting to free or rise above her current status.

Like Linda, Mrs. Stubbs is also a character who prefers her freedom to her conjugal life; though she admits she loved her husband, she maintains: "freedom's best!" (p.19) Jonathan is another example of bad faith. He feels trapped within his work:

To spend all the best years of one's life sitting on a stool from nine to five, scratching in somebody's ledger! It's a queer use to make of one's ... one and only life, isn't it?... what is the difference between my life and that of an ordinary prisoner? The only difference I can see is that I put myself in jail and nobody's ever going to let me out. (p.24)

To him in his current situation is a self-made prison, however no matter how dissatisfied he is with it, he feels unable to come out of it. He is in bad faith for he considers this situation fixed and unchangeable and never tries to transcend it: "I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling, do everything on God's earth, in fact, except fly out again" (Ibid.).

### 3.2 Bliss

The very prototype of assertive women is Bertha Young in *Bliss* who is in the illusion that she has a very fulfilling, perfect marriage and seems to be fully content with her life while the fact is she is pretending to be happy in order to save herself from facing the harsh reality:

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. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. (Mansfield, 2011, p.13)

It is somehow contradictory that she is in love with Harry but had not had any sexual feelings toward him until in the midst of the party when she felt an awakening in her sexual needs for her husband: "For the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband." (p.29) Throughout the story many times it is mentioned that they are "good pals" rather than a good couple. It is also contradictory that she is a total stranger to her so called "adorable baby". This has been unfolded when the nurse is holding the baby and Bertha "stood watching them, her hands by her side, like the poor little girl in front of the rich girl with the doll" (p.7). She does not have any affection or any motherly feelings toward her child, neither does she spend much time with her. In the middle of the story Bertha asks the nurse to let her hold the baby for some minutes; she whispered to the baby "You're nice-you're very nice! ... I'm fond of you. I like you" (p.8). She uttered these words as if it were the first time she noticed the presence of the baby. The moment of bliss which the title alludes to and is not going to last long refers to Bertha's awakening of a new feeling toward her family. It seems as if she sees them for the first time in her whole life and becomes aware of her roles as a loving mother and a devoted wife. But unfortunately the bliss of the title is not here to stay for long.

Bertha's avoidance of having sexual relationships with her husband or spending time with her baby or having any attachment to them are examples of resistance. She did not submit to the prescribed role of a typical woman who is like a servant to her family but defined her own sets of rules in family relations. Bertha is a very good example of a Foucauldian subject, resisting the normalization process society necessitated everyone to undergo and challenging the dominant patriarchal discourse rather than consenting to a predetermined role. Bertha is suffering from the objectified role of a mother and a wife society imposed on her, that is why she tries to disentangle herself from the conjugal life. She is not seeing herself as an object of her husband's desire that is why she gets away and does not give in to his sexual needs or care about her husband's desire. She is actually scared of the objectification sexual intercourse revolves around.

Bertha is also suffering from bad faith for she is totally aware of the reality that she is not leading a satisfactory life, that is she is not made for marital stuff and taking care of the baby lovingly, but tries to push it away to hide it from herself and deceives herself into thinking she is content. Sartre (1960, p.49) held: "... the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth...." She is evidently deceiving herself into believing she is satisfied

with her life, while the evidence shows the opposite. Tone of exaggeration pervades the story. According to Sartre all human beings are inclined to embrace bad faith in order to avoid the anguish freedom and taking responsibility for one's actions entail.

Bertha's husband, daughter and the nurse are her hell. Their relationships are full of conflicts simply because Bertha is in constant struggle to undo their dominations and dominate them and for the fact that she considers them obstacles to her own freedom but is denying that she has a problematic relationship with her family because she is afraid of considering herself a free being and taking actions to better her condition, in Bertha's case to get divorced and push aside the restrictions imposed by marriage which she detests and is not made for. Bertha does not dare to see the reality, she prefers to live in a cocoon of unreality; the illusory world seems more pleasant than the harsh reality. It is so much better to imagine you and your husband is in love than to see him cheating on you with your friend. As long as Bertha is deceiving herself and declining the reality and taking shelter in her dreamy world she is in bad faith. On the other hand because she is denying that she is a free being capable of transcending beyond the determined role society prescribed she is in bad faith, though to some extent she resisted this role, she is unable to transgress fully. As Daigle (2010, p.46) maintained: "I am in a position to transcend and surpass my situation. My situation is thus not entirely determining of my being". But Bertha to some extent does let her situation determine her choices for she is unable to totally break free of the marital life she feels to be entangled in and unpleasant with, unlike Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879) who dares to leave her family to start a new life according to her own wishes with no worries of what will happen next.

Our consciousness is never perfectly identified with our facticities; we are more than our body, our past, or our environment. And we know this. By the mere fact that we can contemplate our facticities and examine them as "objects," we know that we are identified with them. We can thus interpret our

relations to these "facts", and in this sense, we transcend them. (Catalano, 1974, p.82)

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## CONCLUSION

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As Sartrean and Foucauldian subjects, Mansfield's female characters in these short stories refuse to be bound by their facticity and endeavor to balk at the prescribed roles society assigned them. They wish to rise above their facticity and embrace transcendence; they exercise their own power instead of remaining passive and recipients of power and resist the dominant patriarchal discourse rather than letting it take the upper hand and define them. They avoid being normalized bodies, defined by "the other". That is why they are called authentic subjects, living authentic lives.

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