Clarice Lispector and Katherine Mansfield explore the areas of feminine thought and experience with great sensitivity, and many similarities in content and outlook may be detected in their fiction. It is impossible to verify that Lispector was consciously influenced by Mansfield. But the young Brazilian writer’s discovery of the mysterious, delicate stories of the New Zealand author was clearly an event of paramount importance in her life. In an interview with Olga Berelli, Lispector stated:

Adulta, trabalhando como jornalista, levou um susto quando, ao receber o primeiro ordenado, entrou numa livraria e descobriu o livro Felicidade, de Katherine Mansfield. Exclamou então; ‘Isto sou eu!’

From this remark a strong sense of identification between Lispector and Mansfield can be derived, suggesting that they shared certain views and assumptions. Mansfield’s early death curtailed the completion of her feminist vision; she showed brilliant insights in her stories, but lacked the in-depth exploration and mature artistry of Lispector. Lispector delved even further than Mansfield into the depths of feminine intuitiveness and imagination to reveal profound psychological and emotional complexities. While Mansfield’s inquiry was abruptly cut off, Lispector’s was allowed to grow and attain a greater richness and penetration. An examination of Lispector’s fiction in the light of Mansfield’s work contributes to a greater understanding of the Brazilian writer’s aims and accomplishments.

In her fiction, Lispector investigates the susceptibility and tenderness of women with a fine delicacy, subtly highlighting feminine motives, fears, and doubts. The root of the problems faced by the female protagonists is evident in the title of the volume of short stories Family Ties. The word “ties” has a double significance: the ties liberate women from the isolation of individual existence and link them to the world, but they are also restrictive because, in being tied to others, women are prevented from probing their own individual existence. Similarly, Mansfield reveals the struggle of the woman to gain self-fulfillment in the confines of the family, thereby exposing the ambivalent feelings of the closest of human relationships. In “The Wind Blows,” Mansfield describes a young girl’s hatred of her oppressive mother, and in “The Daughters of the Late Colonel,” she reveals the sadness and relief of two spinster daughters at the death of their tyrannical father.

Mansfield scrutinizes the hatred seething beneath the calm, regulated surface of family life, and this same quality is evidenced in Lispector’s “Happy Birthday.” The grandmother seizes a knife and cuts her birthday cake with “the
grip of a murderess,”³ She heartily despises her children; her motherhood is like a chain choking her:

How could she have given life to those grinning, spineless and indulgent creatures? The rancor groaned in her empty breast. A bunch of communists, that’s what they were—communists. She looked at them with senile scorn. They looked like a nest of jostling rats, and this was her family. Irrepressible, she turned her head away and with unsuspected force, she spat on the floor. (FT, 80)

The grandmother resents the restrictive nature of her family’s ties, which prevent her from her own self-fulfillment; she feels victimised and full of hate. In Mansfield’s Prelude and “At the Bay,” Linda Burnell possesses secret loathing for her “lumps of children,”⁴ her baby son and husband. Linda views herself as a sacrifice to male brutality and thinks of Stanley as a “Newfoundland dog”: “If only he wouldn’t jump at her so, and bark so loudly, and watch her with such eager, loving eyes. ... There were times when he was frightening—really frightening. When she had just not screamed at the top of her voice: ‘You are killing me.’ And at those times she had longed to the most coarse, hateful things” (Bliss, 62). Similarly, the woman in Lispector’s “The Daydreams of a Drunk Woman” regards her children as “villains” and detests her husband’s animal lust:

When he bent over to kiss her, her capriciousness crackled like a dry leaf.

‘Don’t paw me!’

‘What the devil’s the matter with you?’

... Obstinate, she would not have known what to reply, and she felt so touchy and aloof that she did not even know where to find a suitable reply. She suddenly lost her temper. ‘Go to hell...prowling around me like some old tomcat.’ (FT, 29)

The women in Mansfield and Lispector’s fiction have ambivalent feelings concerning marriage. At times, they experience satisfaction and contentment in matrimony, but at others disenchantment, resignation, and nausea. Such feelings strain the stability of the marriage, and this instability is a significant theme in the work of both writers.

The strain takes its psychological toll upon the female protagonists. Mansfield probes the neurotic mind of Linda Burnell, and reveals her painful uncertainty, fear and sadness. Linda loves, respects, and admires Stanley for his devotion, tenderness, and thoughtfulness, and yet she also distrusts and hates him. In her mind, she connects sex with death and thinks: “How absurd life was—it was laughable, simply laughable. And why this mania of hers to keep alive at all?” (Bliss, 63). In the short story “Bliss,” Mansfield explores Bertha’s febrile state and unearthly neuroticism when she discovers that her husband has been unfaithful to her. She feels “absolute bliss!—as though you’d suddenly swallowed a bright piece of the late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe” (Bliss, 115). Lispector achieves more complex, profounder insights into the psyche of women and creates more complicated characters. She goes much further than Mansfield in her depiction of feminine sensibility and the neurotic state. This is particularly evident
in Laura’s manic state in Lispector’s “The Imitation of the Rose.” The author investigates Laura’s extremely fragile state of being as she recovers from a nervous breakdown, and plumbs her subconscious depths with great penetration. Laura attempts to gain a triumph over self for her husband Armando and herself. In her striving for perfection, her quest to be like the rose, the symbol of perfection, Laura loses her sanity. The climax of the story takes place when Laura realises the imperfection of the world, the fact that the rose’s life is ephemeral, that it withers and dies. As the roses are removed, Laura feels that something significant has disappeared:

Indeed, like some great loss. An absence that flooded into her like a light. And also around the mark left by the roses the dust was disappearing. The center of fatigue opened itself into a circle that grew larger. As if she had not ironed a single shirt for Armando. And in the clearing they had left, one missed those roses.

“Where are my roses?” she moaned without pain, smoothing the pleats of her skirt.

Like lemon juice dripping into dark tea and the dark tea becoming completely clear, her exhaustion gradually became clearer. Without, however, any tiredness. Just as the firefly alights. (FT, 69)

The roses apparently enter her psyche and take possession of her. In her loss of mind, she experiences a state of luminous tranquillity: “the serenity of a firefly that is alight” (FT, 71). She attains superhuman perfection, “an almost perfect solitude” (FT, 71). In the isolation of her insanity, she achieves an exclusive and enlightening psychological experience.

Lispector develops the perspective of the neurotic feminine mind in “Buffalo.” The author exposes the tortured mind of a woman rejected by her lover. In the zoological garden, she tries to give birth to a new self, whose existence is rooted in susteining hate, rather than feminine love:

Rising from her womb, there came once more, imploring and in a slow wave, the urge to destroy. Her eyes moistened, grateful and black, in something near to happiness. It was not yet hatred; as yet it was only the tortured will to hate possessing her like some desire, the promise of a cruel flowering, a torment as of love, the craving for hatred promising itself sacred blood and triumph, and the spurned female had spiritualised herself in great expectancy. (FT, 152)

The woman selects the buffalo for his virility and dominance as a model of hatred and self-contained existence. She uses her creative female powers negatively in order to destroy and cause pain; however, she achieves a state of purity and tranquillity in her hatred, a spiritual luminosity. Lispector plumbs the unreasonable depths of the woman’s psyche and explores its vital and deathly energies. She extends Mansfield’s perspective of the neurotic female mind, and the positive and negative forces operating within it, to include the intuitive side, the irrationalities and inexplicable ebb and flow of feminine emotions.

As in the short stories of Mansfield, there is an opposition in Lispector’s fiction between male and female worlds. This antithesis is presented in “The
Daughters of the Late Colonel" and also appears in "At the Bay." In the former, the Colonel oppresses his girls, and, in the latter, Stanley tyrannises the women of the household who celebrate his departure: "Oh, the relief, the difference it made to have the man out of the house. Their very voices were changed as they called to one another; they sounded warm and loving as if they shared a secret. ... There was no man to disturb them; the whole perfect day was theirs." Men are unable to fathom the intuitive mind of women in Mansfield and Lispector. Armando is terrified by "his wife's shamelessness as she sat there unburdened and serene" (FT, 31); the drunk woman's husband cannot comprehend "her secret core that seemed like a pregnancy" (FT, 31); and Tony is frustrated by Catherine's ability to "find her own moments--alone" (FT, 123) in the short story "Family Ties."

The heightened awareness of the women in Mansfield and Lispector leads to experiences of a revelatory kind in their lives. The characters undergo a flowering of the self, which can be both destructive and constructive in nature. In a journal entry of 1920, Mansfield described such a flowering of the self:

a self which is continuous and permanent; which... thrusts a scaled bud through years of darkness until, one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and--we are alive--we are flowering for our moment upon the earth. this is the moment which, after all, we live for--the moment of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and least personal.6

Such moments of awareness, charged with epiphanic intensity, are threaded among quotidian occasions and experiences. The moments are timeless, and in them "the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up--out of life--one is 'held,' and then,--down, bright, broken, glittering onto the rocks, tossed back part of the ebb and flow."7 Clare Hanson points out that through the controlling symbol of the aloe, the author expresses a view which underlies all her major stories. The aloe, like life, is often harsh and cruel, offering for long periods nothing but "years of darkness"; however, the aloe is also capable of that rare flowering which justifies existence, "which, after all, we live for."8 In Prelude, the aloe becomes Linda's personal symbol. She envies the plant because it can flower only every hundred years, and it possesses long, sharp thorns which nobody, not even her "Newfoundland dog," could penetrate. It has an inexorable tenacity and yet also its own secret core of being like Linda, in that its cruel leaves seem to be concealing a secret (Bliss, 34). Linda's contemplation of the aloe leads to the revelation that life is absurd, "simply laughable" (Bliss, 63), in that it is both cruel and mysterious.

Lispector, whether consciously or unconsciously, explores Mansfield's theme of the epiphanic experience in much greater detail and intricacy in her short stories and novels. In "The Imitation of the Rose," Laura yearns for the perfection of the rose and experiences a supreme flowering of being when the flowers seemingly enter her psyche and "flooded into her like a light" (FT, 69); she is unburdened and unearthly, "flung up--out of life," to use Mansfield's expression in her journal. In "Daydreams," the besotted woman feels like a "beacon that sweeps through the dawn while one is asleep" (FT, 32) in her drunkenness; she becomes part of the eternal and abstruse flow of life. The woman contemplates the moon: "high and yellow gliding through the sky, poor thing. Gliding, gliding. ..high up, high up. The moon!" (FT, 36). And like Linda in Prelude, the woman senses that in the moonlight, she is "being strangely discovered in a flood of cold light" (Bliss, 40-1). In Lispector's novel An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Delights, Lori bathes
herself in the moonlight; she accepts "the mystery of being alive," and feels "cleansed and calm." 9 The moon is a symbol of the unexpressed desires of the women, their yearning to escape. In the short story "The Message," two adolescents explore a "sphinx-like" house. In amazement, they see that the house is "anguished." 10 It symbolizes something they will never comprehend, and the boy and girl gaze in fascination and horror at their discovery, which signals the end of their childhood. The characters in Mansfield and Lispector dream of fleeing from their daily existence, of breaking loose from their confines on earth. During their revelations, they realise that there is another timeless world, "a vast dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored." 11 The epiphany is an escape, a transient moment that the characters hold like a butterfly before it disappears forever; the experience can be both stimulating and disorienting.

Mansfield and Lispector’s female characters are conscious of the mysterious absurdity of life, of vitality and death, especially during their moments of heightened awareness. Mansfield hints at a relation between the human and non-human world, of the life within the objects around characters, a sentence which Lispector explores more deeply. In Linda’s bedroom in Prelude, objects "swell with some mysterious important content.... How often had she seen the tassel fringe of her quilt change into a funny procession of dancers with priests attending" (Bliss, 24). In Lispector’s "Daydreams," objects in the bedroom, as well as the woman herself, swell and take on "the appearance of flesh, the foot of the bed, the window, the suit her husband had thrown off, and everything became rather painful. Meanwhile, she was becoming larger, more unsteady, swollen and gigantic... someone could plunge into and swim around without knowing that it was an eye" (FT, 34). In "Family Ties," inanimate objects are anthropomorphised and have emotional faculties: "everything around her was so tender and alive, the dirty street, the old tram cars, orange peel on the pavements—strength flowed to and fro in her heart with a heavy richness" (FT, 119). And in An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Delights, the fruits and vegetables at the marketplace have their own mysterious life for Lori. She notices "the pure, purplish blood" seeping from a crushed beet; the skin of a potato is "dark and soft like that of a newborn child." Lori enters a "new realism"; she discovers the "living neutrality of things which were alive, although they did not think." Thrilled by the look and feel of the produce, Lori’s joy is like that of a religious experience, and she "compared herself to the fruit and, scorning her outward appearance, she consumed her inner self brimming over as she was with the juice of life" (AA, 89-91). The female protagonists of both writers are interested in the relation between the animate and inanimate worlds, and, in their imaginations, objects possess a secret, vibrating life of their own; however, on account of their feminine intuition, the women are also aware of the imminence of death, the terror lurking beneath the order of life.

The ambivalent quality of life is evident in Mansfield’s "Revelations," where the neurotic woman is conscious both of the "vibrating, exciting flying world" (Bliss, 263) belonging to her, and of "how terrifying Life was.... How dreadful. It is the loneliness which is so appalling" (Bliss, 267). Similarly, the woman in Lispector’s fiction are aware of the violence within apparent harmony, of the dangerous quality of existence. Anna’s revelation in "Love" makes her acknowledge the dual nature of life. She is disoriented by the sight of a blind man chewing gum, and as a result of this encounter loses all track of time and space. The man inexplicably destroys the order she has established in her life, and she is now fully aware of the indifferent, chaotic nature of existence. Anna is nauseated by the lack of pity and compassion in the world and wanders around the botanical
The trees were laden, and the world was so rich that it was rotting. Anna reflected that there were children and grown men suffering hunger, the nausea reached her throat as if she were pregnant and abandoned. The moral of the garden was something different. Now that the blind man had guided her to it, she trembled on the threshold of a dark, fascinating world where monstrous water lilies floated. The small flowers scattered on the grass did not appear to be yellow or pink, but the color of inferior gold and scarlet. Their decay was profound, perfumed. But all these oppressive things she watched.... The garden was so beautiful that she feared hell. (FT, 43-4)

Anna is aware of both the fecundity and the decay in the garden, of life and death, perfection and imperfection. Anna’s epiphany has made her realise the diabolic quality of existence in the blind man and in the garden; she recognises the beauty and terror of life. Her revelation has been a “cruel flowering” of the self in that she now apprehends the dual nature of life. Mansfield touches upon the idea of the dark fascination of life in her short stories, but Luspect or enlarges upon her perspective of life as a tragi-comedy in its mystery and absurdity. Anna becomes aware of the colossal power around her and also of her fragile existence as a separate individual: “Life was vulnerable. She loved the world, she loved all things created, she loved with loathing” (FT, 44). The heavenly and hellish aspects of her life have become clear to her. She possesses a deep love of life, joy in her own sense of being; however, at the same time, she detests the power of the life around her.

In an interview with A.R. Orage, Mansfield stated that she wanted to write about characters who would embody a “creative attitude.” She imagined characters who would have a vigor that would “initiate and create new attitudes” in readers, rather than merely instruct them in old ones or gratify settled prejudices. Mansfield’s dynamism and creation of new attitudes is not so much evident in her presentation of the role of women, but rather in her perspective of the mind of the woman. However, she avoids feminist polemic and shows her female characters experiencing their flowering of self as mothers and wives. Luspect or pursued similar aims in her fiction. She created new insights into the feminine psyche, possibly drawing on her reading of Mansfield, and like Mansfield did not deal with feminist polemic. As women, wives, and mothers, Luspect or’s characters are “unconsciously attuned to the incomprehensible, eternal flow of life,” and the preservation of the species is all important to them. Luspect or examined women as human beings as anguished as men.

NOTAS


3. Clarice Lispector, Family Ties (London and Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 78. All further references to this work appear in the text parenthetically.


