

REVISITING SISTERHOOD: LESSONS FROM *THE DOLL'S HOUSE* FOR WOMEN TODAY

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Abstract: This paper explores the urgency of sisterhood in the context of women's lives in the digital era, particularly amidst the growing vulnerability of women to cyberbullying. In such conditions, women need a safe spaces that enable mutual support and the building of solidarity. However, the phenomenon shows that such solidarity often fails to materialize, and is instead replaced by acts of hostility among women, which in feminist discourse is known as twisted sisterhood. This research employs a feminist literary criticism approach, grounded in sisterhood theory, to analyze Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Doll's House* as the primary data, and connects the literary analysis with social phenomena through an intertextual approach. Secondary data, including studies on twisted sisterhood and media reports on cyberbullying among women, are utilized to establish the link between literary texts and social realities. Thus, this study not only analyzes literary texts as aesthetic works but also emphasizes the relevance of literature in interpreting the social issues faced by women today. The dynamics of sisterhood and twisted sisterhood are clearly reflected in the short story *The Doll's House* by Katherine Mansfield. The story portrays the relationships among female characters that are laden with social class tensions, prejudice, and the failure to foster solidarity, elements that can be reflected in contemporary social realities. This literary work serves as a mirror for readers, especially women, to reevaluate how women can either empower or hinder one another in their shared struggle against discrimination

Keywords: *Sisterhood; Twisted Sisterhood; Cyberbullying; The Doll's House; Short Story*

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House* represents the dynamic of woman relationships, which are often characterized by patterns of social exclusion and inclusion. The narrative illustrates how women tend to distance themselves from those of different social backgrounds, forming close bonds primarily with those who share similar privileges. This relational pattern

highlights the hierarchical nature of social constructs that shape female interactions, a phenomenon that remains relevant today, within the digital era.

Born in 1880, Katherine Mansfield lived during a time when rigid class structures and patriarchal norms dominated her society. Regardless of growing up in a privileged middle-class environment, Mansfield was acutely aware of the inequalities that shaped interactions between individuals, especially among women (Martin, 2021). These observations became a continuous theme in her works, including *The Doll's House*, which was published in 1923. The story reflects the rooted social hierarchies of her time, illustrating how exclusion and privilege were performed in everyday life, even among children. Despite being set in the early 20th century, the themes in *The Doll's House* remain highly relevant today. The narrative's exploration of exclusion and inclusion happens in contemporary digital hierarchies, where social dynamics are similarly shaped by visible markers of privilege, such as economic status or online personas. By examining Mansfield's critique of societal structures in her era, we can draw parallels to the digital age, where interpersonal interactions continue to be influenced by modern forms of exclusion and discrimination.

In today's era, where social interactions can occur without physical meetings, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships have undergone significant transformations. However, alongside technological growth, new challenges have emerged, particularly for women, who remain vulnerable within digital spaces. Women are excessively targeted in various forms of online discrimination, including *cyberbullying*, which is defined as harassment or intimidation conducted through the internet or digital communication platforms (Parks, 2013). Studies indicate that women, particularly young girls and adolescents, constitute the majority of victims in cyberbullying cases (Smith & Steffgen, 2013).

South Korea entertainment industry provides a noticeable example of this phenomenon. South Korea's female celebrities often experience far greater hatred and aggression compared to their male counterparts, even when accused of similar breach. As highlighted in a BBC report by Kelly Ng (2025) the online abuse directed at female celebrities has, in several cases, resulted in tragic consequences, including suicide. The article describes how internet trolling and widespread *hate comments* create an unbearable psychological burden for women in the industry, illustrating a deeply rooted gender bias in online discourse. In contrast, male

celebrities facing similar controversies often receive comparatively sympathetic treatment, showing a clear double standard in digital spaces. The decision to consider suicide due to massive hate comments was also experienced by Indonesian influencer Gita Savitri Devi, following her statement about choosing to be child-free (Abadi, 2025). Ironically, many of these hate comments came from women themselves. In the context of sisterhood, Gita's decision regarding her own body must be respected, as women have the right to make choices about their own body. Other women, in turn, have no right to dictate how another woman chooses to live. Sisterhood, in this regard, is about providing a safe space for women to live authentically, as long as their choices are not harmful or destructive to others.

In response to this reality, expanding collective solidarity and the principles of *sisterhood* becomes increasingly urgent. For that reason, continual digital misogyny underscores the ongoing struggle for women to secure safe spaces, even in online environments. Having long endured systemic oppression under patriarchal structures and misogynistic cultural norms, women now face evolving challenges in their path for safety and equality in the digital sphere. The ideals movement by third-wave feminism that is to build strong solidarity against woman oppression remains relevant in addressing these modern challenges. This resistance is reflected in the character of Kezia from Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House*, who confront social hierarchies to foster inclusion and empathy. Kezia's rebellion serves as a symbolic reminder that *sisterhood* must persist as a mechanism of resistance, particularly in the face of gendered digital violence, ensuring that women support and protect one another in both physical and virtual spaces.

The dynamic of sisterhood in today's era was further discussed by Kelly Valen on her influential work, *The Twisted Sisterhood: Unraveling the Dark Legacy of Female Friendships*. She explored the complexities and contradictions within female relationships, highlighting how women often become both victims and perpetrators of exclusion, judgment, and rivalry almost in every aspect of life, as worker, student, even as mom. Valen terms this phenomenon as "twisted sisterhood". She illustrates the obstacles feminism faces in creating safe and inclusive spaces for women, often due to the behaviors of women themselves. For women reader, this gives a critical reality: that is while feminist movements seek to break patriarchal structures, the persistence of internalized societal norms and competition among women can

hinder the very solidarity necessary for progress.

Building on this perspective, the researcher seeks to explore the lessons that can be drawn from *The Doll's House* in relation to contemporary issues affecting women today. By applying a feminist critical framework, this research examines the relationships between female characters in the story through the lens of *sisterhood* and connects these dynamics to broader social narratives about women's experiences. The analysis was supported by secondary texts, including media articles and academic journals that discuss gender issues, allowing for a deeper understanding of how literature and real-world gendered experiences intersect.

Some secondary data forming the basis of the intertextual analysis include newspaper articles, scientific journals, and renowned books discussing sisterhood. First, an article by Kelly Ng (Ng, 2025) provides insights into the vulnerability of women in the digital world and underscores the need for a stronger and more extensive sisterhood movement. Second, research conducted by Muttaqin & Ambarwati (2020) on cyberbullying experienced by women strengthens the analysis of one key aspect often targeted in discrimination against women. Third, the influential book by Valen (2010), which first introduced the term twisted sisterhood, highlights the reality that in various aspects of life, women often undermine one another, hindering the progress of the sisterhood movement. Fourth, Sandberg's work (2013) focuses on women's interactions in the professional setting, reinforcing the analysis of the diverse aspects where sisterhood is needed. Finally, the book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (Wiseman, 2016) serves as a valuable source for examining the dynamics of teenage girls' interactions, offering insights that align closely with the themes Mansfield explores in her short story *The Doll's House*.

Therefore, those insights invite reflection on the trajectory of feminism and raises important questions about its achievements and limitations. How far has the movement come in fostering genuine unity among women? What lessons can be drawn from literature written by women, such as *The Doll's House*, which strongly critiques social hierarchies and indicate the need for inclusivity? These works serve as both a mirror to societal challenges and a guide for building a more empathetic and supportive framework for *sisterhood*. By engaging with such narratives, we are reminded that the path to true solidarity requires not only external

advocacy but also introspection and a willingness to address the dynamics within female relationships themselves.

METHOD

This study employed feminist literary criticism (Sugihastuti, 2013) as the primary framework for analyzing the representation of female characters in literary works. This perspective facilitates an exploration of how women are portrayed within texts, encompassing aspects such as characterization, plot development, and embedded discourse.

The analytical process involved the application of close reading, requiring thorough and repeated engagement with the text to identify narrative patterns, character portrayals, and feminist themes. Through this technique, both implicit and explicit meanings become more significant, revealing the structural elements that shape the overarching narrative (Kramnick, 2023) . An intertextual approach further enhanced the analysis by integrating secondary sources from mass media and academic journals. Secondary sources, including media representations and feminist theoretical works, provide additional layers of analysis. By establishing connections between literature and external discourses, this method highlights how portrayals of women in fiction offer valuable insights into real-world experiences. Beyond serving as an artistic medium, literature becomes a reflective tool that enables women to better understand their identities, roles, and societal challenges.

The analysis followed several stages based on a qualitative research design. First, the researcher conducted a close reading of *The Doll's House*, identifying its intrinsic elements and formulating an interpretation of the female narrative that emerged from the interactions among these literary components. This initial stage focused on examining character relationships, themes, and symbols that shaped the representation of women in the story. Following this, the researcher expanded the analysis by engaging with secondary texts beyond the literary work. These included feminist writings, studies on female representation in mass media, and existing research on women's positioning in the digital sphere. This comparative approach allowed for a broader contextualization of the narrative within contemporary discussions on gender and social hierarchy. The final stage of the analysis presented findings in a structured manner, beginning with an examination of the literary elements within the short

story and their connection to broader narratives beyond the text. The approach underscored how literature functioned as a reflective medium, offering readers—particularly women—insight into their position within social realities. Ultimately, the study highlighted the role of literary works in fostering critical awareness of gender dynamics and social exclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In her short story *The Doll's House*, Katherine Mansfield explores the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion among the female characters. The narrative introduces figures such as Isabel and her peers, who restrict their social interactions to those of similar status, in contrast to Kezia, who is more open to forming friendships across social boundaries. The story presents two distinct groups of female characters: those, the Burnells and gang, with economic privilege and higher social status, and the Kelvey sisters, who represent the marginalized lower class.

While discussions of discrimination against women often focus on gender-based oppression, Mansfield highlights that gender is not the sole determinant of women's suffering. Instead, she illustrates how class and social status intersect to shape experiences of discrimination. Furthermore, *The Doll's House* challenges the common assumption that men, influenced by patriarchal ideologies, are the primary agents of women's oppression. Mansfield's narrative suggests that women themselves can also perpetuate exclusion and discrimination against other women.

This theme aligns with the concerns later emphasized by third-wave feminists, hundreds years after the publication of *The Doll's House*, advanced the discourse on *sisterhood* as a means of fostering solidarity among women. Mansfield's work thus demonstrates the enduring relevance of literature in reflecting and critiquing social realities. Literature and social discourse are interconnected, mutually reinforcing the narratives surrounding women's experiences. *The Doll's House* serves as a valuable text for examining inter-female relationships, urging readers to revisit, reflect upon, and critically engage with the concept of *sisterhood*.

1. Female Characters in *The Doll's House*

The short story *The Doll's House* focuses on the Burnell family, particularly their three daughters, Isabel, Kezia, and Lottie, who receive a luxurious doll's house as a gift. This gift

becomes a symbol of social segregation, further reinforced by the dynamics of female relationships within the story. The plot revolves around how the doll's house becomes an object of social status among the schoolchildren. As the eldest child, Isabel immediately takes control over how and who is allowed to see the doll's house. The symbolism in the story is particularly strong, especially in how the doll's house represents a tool of social exclusion, distinguishing children from the upper and lower classes. The Kelvey sisters, Lil and Else, are daughters of a washerwoman and a father with a bad reputation. They live in economic hardship, clearly evident from their shabby clothing and marginalized way of life. While Isabel and her friends enjoy the exclusivity of the doll's house, the Kelvey sisters are treated as outsiders, deemed unworthy of even looking at or approaching the object.

Characterization of Woman in *The Doll's House*:

- a. Isabel Burnell is the eldest daughter of the Burnell family, who takes control over the doll's house and uses her authority to determine who is allowed to see it. She represents the social system that maintains hierarchy based on class distinction.
- b. Kezia Burnell is the youngest daughter and the only character who shows empathy toward the Kelvey sisters. She becomes a symbol of resistance against social norms that restrict relationships among women.
- c. Lil dan Else Kelvey Lil represent the oppressed class in the story. Lil, as the older sister, understands the boundaries imposed on them and tends to submit to the social rules that oppress her. Else, the younger sister, is more passive but ultimately expresses a small moment of awareness and happiness when she finally gets a chance to see the doll's house..
- d. Aunt Beryl is the character who reinforces the dominance of the upper class. She not only upholds the structure of social exclusion but also acts as a guardian of the status quo, harshly expelling the Kelvey sisters when Kezia invites them.
- e. Lena Logan is one of Isabel Burnell's friends who exhibits a sense of superiority over the Kelvey sisters. She actively participates in mocking and humiliating them, illustrating that social exclusion is not only learned from adults but also internalized from a young age.

- f. Emmie Cole is another member of Isabel's group who displays an exclusive attitude toward the Kelvey sisters. Although not as aggressive as Lena in ridiculing them, she still conforms to the social norms established by her group and avoids interacting with children from lower social backgrounds.
- g. Jessie May is also part of Isabel's group and shares similar traits with Emmie Cole. She takes a passive stance in social exclusion but does not resist or challenge it.

Through the interactions among female characters in *The Doll's House*, Katherine Mansfield constructs a narrative that reflects the complexity of social relationships among women. The story highlights how women are not only victims of discrimination caused by patriarchal social systems but also frequently act as agents in reinforcing social exclusion against other women. This dynamic is evident in how characters such as Isabel Burnell and her friends deliberately distance the Kelvey sisters from their social environment solely due to class differences. They mimic behaviors inherited from previous generations, demonstrating that exclusion of certain groups is not only driven by norms created by men but also perpetuated by women themselves. On the other hand, Kezia emerges as a symbol of resistance against these social norms, offering inclusion to the Kelvey sisters despite facing pressure from her own family.

The narrative underscores that the struggle to build *sisterhood* is not always straightforward. Female solidarity does not automatically form simply due to shared gender identity; it is often hindered by other factors such as social class, economic status, and inherited norms. Mansfield illustrates that women can be both enforcers and victims of social exclusion, either consciously or unconsciously.

2. Exclusive Sisterhood

The theme of exclusion within sisterhood also known as twisted sisterhood is evident in Katherine Mansfield's *The Doll's House*, particularly through the friendships among Isabel Burnell, Lena Logan, Emmie Cole, and Jessie May—characters who belong to a privileged economic class. Isabel, in particular, exhibits a dominant and authoritarian nature, positioning herself as the leader by virtue of being the eldest. She assumes the authority to introduce the doll's house to her peers, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical structure even within biological sisterhood:

"I'm to tell," said Isabel, "because I'm the eldest. And you two can join in after. But I'm to tell first." (Mansfield, 1923, p. 28)

This assertion reveals that hierarchy can emerge even within familial relationships, with younger siblings, such as Kezia and Lottie, recognizing the implicit boundaries of their roles. Moreover, this hierarchy is not merely personal but socially reinforced, as Isabel's claim to authority is legitimized by parental endorsement:

"And I'm to choose who's to come and see it first. Mother said I might."
(Mansfield, 1923, p. 28)

The intersection of age-based hierarchy and economic status further delineates the limitations of sisterhood within the narrative. The Burnell sisters and their social circle represent girls from affluent backgrounds, while the Kelvey sisters symbolize the marginalized lower class. Their socioeconomic disparity is visually emphasized through clothing; the Kelvey sisters, dressed in secondhand garments obtained from their mother's work as a washerwoman, become targets of ridicule and exclusion. Isabel and her peers exemplify the queen bee and wannabe phenomenon (Wiseman, 2016). This phenomenon often occurs, particularly among teenage girls and school children. Thus, it is a matter of special concern because creating safe spaces for women must start as early as possible. Women who grow accustomed to exclusionary attitudes during adolescence are more likely to become adult women who oppress other women in various settings, such as the workplace. Even worse, they may become mothers who pass on these attitudes to their daughters, perpetuating a cycle that is difficult to break.

In the story, Isabel assumes the role of the queen bee, perceiving herself as superior and seeking validation through material possessions, such as the doll's house, about which she boasts incessantly. She establishes herself as the center of attention, while Lena Logan, Jessie May, and Emmie Cole function as wannabes, striving for her approval. To reinforce and maintain their social hierarchy, they establish exclusionary boundaries by othering the Kelvey sisters, designating them as social inferiors. In this context, the Kelvey sisters become the target of systemic exclusion, underscoring how sisterhood can be undermined by intra-gender power dynamics.

The implications of this exclusion certainly have a psychological effect on the Kelveys.

On several occasions, especially Lil as the oldest, shows low self-esteem. When getting taunts, she just keeps quiet, shows a shameful expression, as if consciously showing her inferior position.

Dead silence. But instead of answering, Lil only gave her silly, shamefaced smile. She didn't seem to mind the question at all. What a sell for Lena! The girls began to titter. (Mansfield, 1923, p. 34)

As if the Kelveys have internalized the social hierarchy within themselves, even when Kezia offers to see the dollhouse, Lil seems hesitant even though she really wants to see it. Lil even reminds Kezia that interacting with them is forbidden.

Lil gasped, then she said, "Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us." (Mansfield, 1923, p. 37)

From the interaction between the Burnells and the Kelveys, it can be understood that to wind up this hierarchical social pattern, it must not only start from those who feel superior, but also must come from the excluded party to not internalize the feeling of inferiority, to realize that the exclusion they experience is not because they are worthless. That all of it is just a pattern to dominate, something that should not exist in interactions between women. This phenomenon illustrates the ways in which sisterhood can fail due to internalized hierarchies among women. The tendency to assert superiority over other women disrupts the potential for solidarity, thereby perpetuating social discrimination. When women fail to support one another, the possibility of establishing safe and inclusive spaces diminishes significantly. The economic discrimination depicted in *The Doll's House* represents just one of many factors that render women vulnerable to social marginalization. It takes cooperation between two parties to form a solid movement.

Other than economic status, physical appearance often serves as a primary criterion for social inclusion or exclusion among women. In female social dynamics, outward presentation frequently dictates group membership, with shared aesthetics—such as fashion choices—functioning as a basis for social bonding. Conversely, deviations from aesthetic norms can lead to marginalization. This phenomenon extends beyond fictional narratives and is observable in contemporary digital culture. For instance, the study conducted by Muttaqin & Ambarwati (2020) on hate comments directed at Kekey, a famous content creator, highlights how departures from conventional beauty standards can prompt widespread exclusion and

online harassment. It has become an open secret, which is unfortunately also a legacy of patriarchy, that women's value extensively is associated with a constructed beauty standard. Consequently, when women do not fit that standard, they will become an easy target to be bullied. This happens a lot on social media. Kekey is just one example of a woman who is often criticized for not conforming to Indonesian beauty standards. Even more concerning is that the perpetrators are mostly women. Women, who should support and respect one another, often end up bringing each other down.

Mansfield's story and Kekey's experience underline that sisterhood can be confined by many factors, such as age, class, and even physical appearance. Women should be aware that as long as they are unable to see differences as a strength and refuse to challenge ideologies such as internalized misogyny, the ultimate goal of sisterhood will remain a distant dream. In such a case, women will continue to be divided.

3. Inclusive Sisterhood

Set in an early 20th-century patriarchal society, *The Doll's House* reflects the rigid class divisions that dictated social interactions, particularly among women. Kezia's defiance of these unwritten rules suggests an early form of resistance against classist and gendered restrictions.

"Mother," said Kezia, "can't I ask the Kelveys just once?"

"Certainly not, Kezia."

"But why not?"

"Run away, Kezia; you know quite well why not." (Mansfield, 1923, p. 33)

Despite belonging to an upper social class, Kezia extends an invitation to the Kelvey sisters, allowing them to see the doll's house—a privilege that had been denied to them by the rest of the community. Aware of the implicit social boundaries that prohibit the Kelveys from entering her home, Kezia nonetheless defies these restrictions by offering them friendship.

"You can come and see our doll's house if you want to," said Kezia, and she dragged one toe on the ground. But at that Lil turned red and shook her head quickly.

"Why not?" asked Kezia.

Lil gasped, then she said, "Your ma told our ma you wasn't to speak to us."

"Oh, well," said Kezia. She didn't know what to reply. "It doesn't matter. You can come and see our doll's house all the same. Come on. Nobody's looking." (Mansfield, 1923, pp. 36-37)

Kezia's attitude represents the necessity of dismantling exclusionary structures that persist in women's relationships. This becomes an even more difficult task because Kezia also has to convince Lil, who has internalized an inferior attitude. As a member of a privileged society, Kezia demonstrates the stand that is crucial in building the sisterhood movement. This is especially significant because it is often much more challenging to cultivate awareness among those with privileges, requiring them to let go of the comforts they have long taken for granted.

The interaction between Kezia and Lil once again reminds readers that through genuine sisterhood, women can create supportive networks that empower one another. The fact that Kezia did not inherit the same ideology as her sister and aunt highlights the possibility that the privileged are not always oppressive and that cooperation between those considered superior and inferior is possible. Unlike her sister, Kezia's identity is shaped differently. She embodies mutual respect and friendship—values that are essential in fostering sisterhood, particularly within the social environment of teenagers. Sisterhood is equally vital among young women in shaping a healthier social environment. During adolescence, peer relationships play a crucial role in identity formation. However, societal norms often encourage competition and rivalry among girls, leading to exclusionary behaviors, body shaming, and internalized misogyny (Vallen, 2010). By embracing sisterhood, young women can foster friendships built on mutual respect, encouragement, and emotional support, rather than engaging in harmful behaviors that reinforce sexist stereotypes. Creating inclusive and uplifting social circles enables girls to develop confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of self-worth.

In another realm, specifically, a professional setting, which represents a later stage in the lives of young women, a strong sense of sisterhood is also essential. As Sheryl Sandberg discusses in *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013) women should uplift and mentor each other rather than engage in competition that reinforces patriarchal structures. A strong sense of sisterhood in professional environments allows women to advocate for fair treatment, equal pay, and leadership opportunities, ultimately fostering a culture where success is shared rather than gatekept. Instead of internalizing societal pressures that pit women against one another, collective support ensures that more women can break through the proverbial glass ceiling (Sandberg, 2013).

As the only privileged character who embodies the attitude of sisterhood inclusion, Kezia serves as a role model for readers to internalize this inclusive perspective within themselves. She prompts readers to reflect on the ideologies they have adopted, examine the positions they occupy, and determine whether they are on the right path to fostering sisterhood or still lingering in a gray area within the movement. Mansfield's short story, therefore, acts as a space for reflection, particularly for female readers, allowing them to better understand the world women living in—both in physical and digital realm. Sisterhood is not merely an ideal; it is a transformative force that allows women to thrive, innovate, and reshape the world together. To create a safe space for women and address the issue of cyberbullying, the world needs more figures like Kezia. Kezia-like figures are needed in all aspects of life; as teenage girls, as career women, and even as mothers.

CONCLUSION

From this study, several key insights can be drawn from Katherine Mansfield's short story *The Doll's House* regarding the dynamics of sisterhood and its impact on women. *First*, Isabel Burnell and her group illustrate how exclusive and hierarchical sisterhood can reinforce social class discrimination. Isabel's dominant attitude reflects the *queen bee* phenomenon, where women engage in unhealthy competition that ultimately weakens solidarity. *Second*, The relationship between Kezia, Lottie, and Isabel demonstrates that hierarchy exists not only in broader society but also within sibling relationships. Kezia and Lottie's subordinate positions normalize inequality and reinforce existing social structures. *Third*, Kezia represents an inclusive sisterhood by challenging social boundaries through her actions toward the Kelvey family. This highlights that true sisterhood should be empowering and not limited by economic or social status. *Fourth*, Mansfield's narrative underscores the continued importance of sisterhood in modern settings, both in professional and social environments, women should support one another in achieving equality and leadership opportunities rather than being trapped in competition that reinforces patriarchal structures. *Fifth*, The story also reflects how social exclusion among teenagers can lead to *bullying*, both directly and through social media. Building a healthy sisterhood can create a more supportive environment and prevent misogynistic standards that harm women.

In conclusion, through *The Doll's House*, Mansfield demonstrates that sisterhood can

serve as a tool for solidarity or, conversely, reinforce social inequalities. Isabel and her group exemplify the negative effects of exclusive sisterhood, while Kezia shows how inclusive sisterhood can challenge injustice. In modern life, supporting fellow women remains essential for creating a safer and more empowering environment.

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