



## WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE SELECT WORKS OF ALICE MUNRO

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### ABSTRACT



Around the world women is considered as the creator of mankind, yet she is not given a proper place by her male counterpart. Her status is suppressed and she was treated inferior in the male chauvinistic society. So they fight for their proper rights to be equal with men. It was portrayed by many women writers with feministic perspective across the globe. Alice Munro is one such women writer who challenges the male domination through her women characters, who are the victims of men-centric world. They have to struggle within the family and outside of it. Their quest for identity and liberation is frequently portrayed throughout her works. She inspires the other women writers in particular and the world of women at large. She is very much influenced by her own life experience and the experiences of women around her.

Alice Munro is considered as the Canadian's 'writer's writer' and the most acclaimed feminist short story writer who has been awarded Nobel Prize in literature for 2013. She is the 13<sup>th</sup> woman and 110<sup>th</sup> Noble Laureate to win the prestigious award. Her literary genius is marked with clarity and psychological realism. The Canadian women writers have a particular purpose of making women "critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structure." (Howells 4) And try to attract the attention of the readers towards the problems of women. They replicate the feministic perspective and reflect the trials, troubles and tribulations of girls and women. Munro is praised by Peter England, the Permanent Secretary for Royal Swedish Academy as "the master of the contemporary story, whose texts often feature depictions of everyday but decisive events, epiphanies of a kind that illuminate the surrounding story and let existential questions appear in a flash of lightning . . . She has taken an art form, the short story, which has tended to come a little bit in the shadow behind the novel, and she has cultivated it almost to perfection."

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Munro was born in 1931 in a small town called Ontario in Canada. The wretched conditions of women living in Ontario, Jubilee and West Hanratty and its landscapes are reflected in her works. "The feminist quest includes the search for freedom of imagination and expression through the medium of art; it confronts society not only as a woman but also as a female artist." (Rasporich 32) Her father Robert Eric Lloyd is a silver fox farmer, who sells the skin of white foxes and her mother Carl Lloyd is a school teacher. She married James Munro in 1951 and Jerald Frellan in 1976. Her stories have all the characteristics of the novel including the depth, knowledge and accuracy. She chose short story as a suitable and powerful weapon to portray suffering of women and the male dominated society. The characters in her stories are often girls and women with seemingly unexceptional lives, who struggle with problems ranging from sexual abuse and stifling marriages to repressed love and the ravages of aging. She has revolutionized the art of writing short stories. Her debut *Dance of the Happy Shades* attained universal acclaim and won her the Governor General's Literary Award in 1968, the Canadian highest literary prize. It is followed by the success of *Girls and Women* in 1971. She is awarded with Governor General's Literary Award for the second time in 1978 for her interlinked stories entitled *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which was published with other name as *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* in the United States. She was awarded with the same prize for the third time in 1986 for *The Progress of Love*. She is the only person to receive Governor General's Literary Award for three times in Canada. She likes omniscient narration, which provides her with the universal appeal. Her greatness lies in her talent but she says that she could attain success in her field because she has no talent in any other field. She admits that she is not intelligent and just a house wife.

All the great writers in the world literature have used their childhood experiences as the inspiration for their stories. Munro is not an exception to it and she says that she cannot write about the contemporary events except her childhood and the plight of women around her. Munro gave a telephonic interview to Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation (CBC), Victoria, British Columbia in which she says, "It seems impossible. It is splendid and I am unable to describe my ecstasy. The award would make people see that the short story as an important art; not just something you played around with until you get a novel written." Her stories are the best examples for philosophy, complexness and emotions of life. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper opines, "Ms. Munro is a giant in Canadian literature and this Nobel Prize further solidifies Canada's place among the ranks of countries with the best writers in the world. I am certain that Ms. Munro's tremendous body of work and this premier accomplishment will serve to inspire Canadian writers of all ranks to pursue literary excellence and their passion for the written word."

Munro's characters are familiar and common to readers across the globe, each one holds its own surprises, who are her neighbors and relatives. Her stories deal with predicament of women but she never claim that she is a feminist because she confess that she doesn't know the theories behind feminism. She says that the writers can write anything about their parents but they cannot write about their children because they are visitors to the writers during their stay at the old age homes. Her short stories, because of their richness, have often been called "novels in miniature," a notion she rejects. Her stories are considered as 'long short stories' because they exceed the traditional structure of the short story both in narrative time because they are frequently non-linear and word count also exceed the normalcy. Her themes have been growing with her age and experience. The themes of her early stories are woven around the teenage girls' mental status and their behavior in the society. The themes of the middle period deals with the middle aged women and their love affairs and problems. Her later stories deal with her own experiences and the experiences of old age people and their loneliness.

Munro's popular character Del Jordan in *Lives of Girls and Women* tries to overcome the psychological, sociological and physical hurdles in order to get liberated from male prejudiced society. She throws light on the emotional and intellectual growth of Del and comprehends her ambitions in life.

Del represents the pathetic conditions of girls and women who experiences sexual humiliations in the male dominated society. "God was made by man. Man at a lower and blood thirstier stage of his development than he is at now, we hope. Man made God in his own image." (Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* 189) She feels shy by the lustful feelings of Mr. Chamberlain who misbehaved with Del by offering a glass of whisky is a clear cut example for the sexual exploitation of women in the society. She tries very hard to protest the physical assault on her but she could not get succeed.

He rubbed against the damp underarm of my blouse and then inside the loose armhole of the jumper I was wearing. He rubbed quick, hard against the cotton over my breast. So hard he pushed the yielding flesh up, flattened it. And at once withdrew It was like a slap, to leave me stung. (Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* 176-177)

Del was even brutally humiliated by Mr. Chamberlain. He used to pat and pinch on the private areas of Del and she was shocked to see the brutal process of masturbation in which Mr. Chamberlain was involved to create embarrassment to her. She was vexed with behavior of male counter parts and tries to spend most of her time in reading books and magazines. She gets relief in reading historical novels, modern books and she gets pleasure in reading the books written by Somerset Maugham. "I was happy in the library. Walls of printed pages., evidence of so many created words – this was a comfort to me." (Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* 130) She strongly believes that both men and women are equal in the society and wanted to liberate her from the shackles of the male dominated society. She wants to perform the masculine duties and says, "men are supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. (Munro in *Lives of Girls and Women* 147)

In *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the character Rose is portrayed with her failure in marriage, humiliating love affairs and routine jobs. The story is about an aspiring artist, Rose and her path of achieving towards success which is unfortunately blocked all along despite her intelligence. She realizes her limitations as an ordinary human beings which is an answer to the

question in the form of the title *Who Do You Think You Are?*. (Munro 262) She could not get success in her career because of her priorities which are in disorder and her character and impulses are difficult to find sympathy and compassion for her as a victim. Finally she realizes the ineffectiveness and enters into sexual indulgence, which she feels as a vengeance on the society and as a means of liberation from the male dominated society. Munro did not believe in religious morality which she feels useless. Hence her women characters indulge in the acts of moral transgression without any feeling of sin.

Munro feels that women are treated as subject and men are object in the male subjugated society. She presents vividly the problems of women in her writings and always fight against the masculine power in order to protect the rights of the marginalized women. She acknowledges the difficulty of her women characters to escape from the social devaluation. Her involvement in women's liberation is expressed in her writings. Her characters don't expect sympathy from their male counter parts but demands the status of equality in all walks of life. They try to maintain their individuality and ready to fight against the male chauvinism. "Women are torn, as most of us are torn, between the past and the future, between our mother's frustrations and extravagant hopes we have for our daughters." (Jong 175)

Munro's characters develop from the level of unsure individuals to the confident women as there will be growth of their character. In the story *A Real Life* she depicts the character and confidence of a young girl Dorrie who tries very hard to keep her individuality with the person who she has to get married. She is confident in her ways and ready to fight against the societal norms. Her conversation with Millicent, the groom is a clear indication to show her confidence. Millicent says that he wants to give a real life by marrying Dorrie but she replies confidently that 'I have a life' with which is comfortable and she doesn't need the approval of any body in the society. The women characters struggle very hard to come out of their troubles and tribulations. They wanted to get rid off the psychological and sociological turmoil inflicted by the male dominated society. They wanted to cross

the barriers created by willful male folk and they wanted to liberate from clutches of the male chauvinistic society.

Munro's "observation about the way in which women are put upon the world she writes about, or the world she inhabits, are not really different in pleasure from the one she makes about the lot of the poor, or lower classes generally." (Ditsky 2) In *Walker Brothers Cowboy*, the protagonist a young girl who has lost the fox farm and her father has been forced to take a job of peddling patent medicines to the farmers in Ontario but the girl still looks deeply at the ordinary world and finds enchantment in it. The story explores universal themes like isolation, identity, and maturation. The protagonist is a young girl who shows maturity than her age in understanding her father and coming out of isolation which is posed by her mother. It is an extremely emotional story within the realm of ordinary experience.

The story *Boys and Girls* projects a young girl's quest for identity for her equal rights with her brother. She was humiliated not only by the society but also by her own family members by comparing with her brother in the male dominated society. Her brother is named Laird, which is a synonym of lord. It shows that the parents are giving more importance to the boy neglecting the girl who was given an ordinary name. The title was very apt as it describes the roles, differences and positions of both boys and girls in the society. The boys have been assigned different roles when compared to the girls. The girl was not supposed to help her father but restricted in helping her mother only. She is discouraged though she works very hard and meticulously. The worst thing in her family is she was not even encouraged by her mother. *Memorial* is a story of two sisters June and Eileen and the story is told from the side of more contemplative, less assertive sister. The accidental death of June's son and the impulsive seduction of Eileen by June's husband is a criticism on the modern day society that women are not safe in their comfort zone, the family. The story *Dulse* is a complex idea upon the theme of love. The protagonist, Lydia, has been deserted by a selfish lover by using her in all means. She was haunted by three men for sexual favours. Among them one is a young but experienced

French Canadian, the second one is a pensive middle-aged potato farmer, and their boss, a vulgar self-made man. This is a clear indication that women may not in a position to believe even her lover.

Munro writes about her own battle to define herself in *Boys and Girls*. She is torn between the "inside" world of her mother and the "outside" world of her father. In the beginning her father's world prevails, but by the finale, her mother's world invades her heart. Her heroines seem to depend on men, despite their attempt to succeed by themselves. Their efforts at maintaining a self-sufficient life shows that they are strong women, but they simply suffer the same plight that most men and women do. She is also able to evolve her women into confident and successful individuals through her stories. The bitter experiences of women characters and their quest for liberation and identity in the men-centric world is portrayed wonderfully by Munro throughout her works. She has no limitations and her characters try to request the reader to understand them correctly. Her characters are truthful representations of her experiences and they are ready to fight against the existing norms against the deprived women. They take drastic steps in their life as a token of their vengeance against the male domination.

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