



A FEMINIST STUDY OF ALICE MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

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ABSTRACT

Alice Munro writes about complex individuals who faces a rigid structure of cultural and patriarchal dominance prevailed in Canadian society. She uses the fabulative mode which is extremely effective in focusing attention on the questionable working of patriarchy. She explores the problem of women in a patriarchal structure through the construction of society where women are the dominant. Her desire to "get at the exact tone or texture of how things are" (Pfaus 2) dominates and gives Alice Munro's writing its characteristics and qualities. As a Canadian writer, she exposes the orthodoxy and narrow mindedness that Canadian society has imposed on women under the pretext of culture. She shows the debilitating consequences of patriarchal definitions of women's roles and its effects on the mental, emotional and psychological sphere of women. Alice Munro's collections of short stories are basically concerned with the maturation process and social pressure which can influence the individual. As Catherine Sheldrick Ross puts it, "she presents ordinary life so that it appears luminous, invested with a kind of magic" (Ross 15). It's productive to analyze the themes of romance, marriage, female sexuality, and the like, as they are explored in domestic fiction (King 77). Her fiction serves as an example of how gender ideologies, such as those represented in the romantic formula, have begun to be appointed by feminism.

INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro, a Nobel Laureate of 2013, occupies a prominent position as a short story writer among her contemporaries such as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Carol Shields. She is internationally recognized as one of the great story writers in English. Widely regarded

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as Canada's best writer of short stories, Munro is often compared with Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), the greatest short story writer. Alice Munro is routinely spoken of in the same breath as Anton Chekov (Vancoppennolle 7). Cynthia Ozick addresses her as "our Chekov" (Daphne 2). Her main works include *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), *Open Secrets* (1994), *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), *Runaway* (2004), *Too Much Happiness* (2009) and *Dear Life* (2012). Most of her works have been published in the form of the collections of short stories. The admiration of Munro's works is understandable and widely acknowledged in Canada and all over the world by rewards that she has received. Her desire to "get at the exact tone or texture of how things are" (Pfaus 2) dominates and gives Alice Munro's writing its characteristics and qualities.

The story "Boys and Girls" appeared in her short story collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) portrays the patriarchal pattern of society within the family unit which forces the protagonist to explore her identity. In "Boys and Girls," the eleven years old girl begins to experience those differences that parents come to expect of her as a female. The daughter sexual immaturity allows her the chance helping her farther to take care of the foxes. Even though her mother expects her as the only 'girl' she would want to work with her. But the child believes that "work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors and in my father service was ritualistically important" (DHS 117). With great pride, the girl demonstrated to her father that she was capable of doing a man's work and handling the real tools from the adult world. Boynton writes: "Munro emphasizes psychological barriers by illustrating those terms of physical barriers: the father works with the foxes in their pens removed from the house where the mother cooks and cleans" (29). The mother rarely approaches her husband's domain, and he does not participate in her household duties. Unlike her mother, the girl lived in two worlds, imaginary and real, traveling back and forth in her mind between home and an exotic other place. Ironically, the girl perceived Laird, her brother only as a little boy, not seeing or not wanting to recognize a perspective of him eventually growing up and becoming a man.

When one day the children's mother said to her husband, "Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help" (DHS 117), the girl's entire nature furiously protested. It was not until the girl turned eleven years old when she experienced her brother's physical strength. Once Laird and she were fighting and the farm worker Henry saw the fight and said, "Oh, that is where Laird is gonna show you, one of these days!" (Barnet 257). This was the first time when the girl realized that her brother, slowly but surely, began turning into a man. However, the feminist part of her character refused to surrender, saying that she "was getting bigger too (DHS 119)".



The protagonist in “Boys and Girls” was not only courageous and athletic but also adventurous. On the day, the children’s father was going to shoot one of the two horses, Mack, he sent them out of the stable to play around the house. The girl never saw her father shoot a horse, but she knew where it was done so she reached there. The procedure of shooting a horse was not something the girl wanted to see, but as she admitted, “it was better to see and know as if a thing really happened” (Barnet 258). As the same way no wonder that the independence-spirited girl, who was confined in the same old farm for eleven years, got excited about watching broken free Flora when she made it free.

The theme of “Boys and Girls” addresses the problem of acquiring self-awareness as a girl. For the girl such awareness comes only with a sense of shame and humiliation—her dreams of heroism are of kind not usually attributed to girls and her one act of greatness (letting Flora escape) is misinterpreted, leaving her marked as “only” a girl. Munro had successfully played upon the word “girl” not only in a verbal exchange between the father and the salesman, but also by suggesting its connotations throughout the story. The girl differentiated the father’s world from that of the mother. By doing so, she appears to be arriving at some sense of self-definition, particularly by insinuating herself into the father’s world. For example, nothing gives her a greater sense of pride than to be introduced by her father as “my new hired man,” a phrase that protects her from the salesman’s observation, “I thought it was only a girl” (DHS 116). Because the girl considered working for her father “ritualistically important,” we can see how her dwellings about the choice between the house and the barn symbolize a female and male difference. According to Kristeva, “in order to become a subject in the symbolic realm, it’s necessary to reject/ abject that which gave us our existence—namely the mother” (Nath 174). Keltner supports Kristeva thought and writes, “[in] order to become a subject, the *infans* [sic] must separate from its primary unity with the mother. Abjection is a process of rejection by which a fragile, tenuous border that can become mommy-and me is demarcated” (174). Because of the girl’s attachment to the father, her mother feels as if there is “no girl in the family at all” (Barnet 256).

Subsequently, the girl’s mother comes outside to talk to her husband, the girl heard adults bringing up the theme of being a “girl.” The word “girl” no longer seemed innocent and unburdened like a word “child” (119). For the first time, she realized that a girl was not, as she supposed, simply what she was; it was that she had to become. As the narrator says, “It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me” (Barnet 257). And thus the protagonist of the story realizes a typical female dilemma between a sense of independence and submissiveness. She felt that people around expected a certain behavior from her, the kind of behavior that is appropriate, typical, and socially acceptable for a girl. But for her only the outdoor work was pleasant, desirable and the housework, by contrast, was “endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing” (Barnet 255). Hereafter, she feels alienated and isolated herself irrecoverably from the males in her



family. Hall Vard Dahlie suggests that: “Isolation here is accompanied by the impulse to freedom by her act of setting the mare free: the horse, however suggests that freedom is only on illusion . . .” (Boynton 30).

During a few weeks when the children’s grandmother stayed with the family, the girl got a third chance to feel directly a social pressure associated with the word “girl.” The girl heard quite a few alarming things such as “girls don’t slam doors like that,” and “girls keep their knees together when they sit down.” The worst the narrator heard was the response “That’s none of the girl’s business” when she asked some subject-related questions (*DHS* 119). But he continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures she kept herself free. Given that much information, we can clearly see a conflict between regarding herself as the essential, and the social pressure to accept herself as a passive object.

At the very end of the story we see how emotional the narrator really is. During the family dinner Laird announced that his sister could have shut the gate, being astonished her father says, “She is only a girl. I did not protest that, even in my heart. May be it was true” (127). When her father asked if that statement was true, she nodded quietly, swallowed food with great difficulty, and began crying. A typical female reaction to the father’s question, tears that flooded her eyes, illustrates the emotional aspect of being a girl. Professor Blodgett brought up an interesting nuance of the theme by pointing out that a word “girl” was qualified twice in the story at its first and final usage by the word “only.” Based on this, he suggested that in “Boys and Girls,” a state of becoming a girl “was accompanied by a sense of irrevocable separation and loss” (Blodgett 35). By the fourth encounter with the hidden meanings of the word “girl,” the girl’s destiny was sealed in her father’s final words “She is only a girl” (*DHS* 127) which absolved and dismissed her for good. To the girl in the story, this label meant a loss of not only her status as the father’s helper, but also a loss of her individual identity and the freedom of choice. Blodgett contributed a remarkable historic insight, where he explains:

To be only a girl is rejection of a radical kind, for in the world of the rural Ontario farm in the late thirties and early forties aspirations that went beyond those of sexual stereotypes were not simply wrong, they were taboo. They are not corrected by anger, but by a more powerful method, by “good humor.” The implication is that to be a girl is a destiny that carries with it a certain stupidity that cannot be corrected. (Blodgett 33)

Boynton also writes that the daughter can no longer elude the outset of her womanhood, just as she can not to elude the fact as she cannot hope to elude the fact of Flora’s death” (Boynton 32). The society created certain rules of acceptable social behavior for boys and girls, for men and women. From the early childhood, the boys are taught not to display their



sensitivity; in other words, they are taught not to cry on public. By contrast, it is perfectly fine for the girls to cry in any place, at any time, for whatever reason. According to Rasporich, the girl's final tears suggest compliance (Rasporich 38). The girl only commented that she was ashamed of her tears, of the mere fact of crying. Perhaps, her sensitive feminine nature confronted her feminist desire to stay strong as a man, and when the first finally won over, the girl bursted into tears. Thus, In "Boys and Girls" Munro recorded the humiliated and anguished psychology of a child who was being conditioned by society to become a definition—a girl and also explores the process of self-discovery of a young farm girl.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, "Boys and Girls" presents a character who finds herself failed to realize her actual freedom under the system which society has imposed on her and confines her only to the chores or the homely tasks. On the contrary, a woman also needs a space and freedom to realize her true self, her body, and her sexuality; she also seeks a place where nobody can control on her emotions and feelings so that she can pass a moment of her own. "Boys and Girls" pictures a contradiction between the girl's status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. Thus, Questioning gender inequalities throughout her life, Alice Munro presents her female characters in such a way who boldly decide to become rebels of the society which imposes a chain on their freedom. The readers discover in their work connections with their own lives, and with the lives of those around them which present "a myriad of realities as the lives of girls and women are explored through perspectives of other characters, and through various and often contradictory—self image" (Varley 2).

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