



Growing up Female in Who Do You Think You Are?

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"Who Do You Think You Are, an acclaimed book of Munro's career was awarded with Governor General's award, Canada highest literary prize. The title of the book itself refers to the question of growing up. This collection of short story reflects the bottle of growing up in Rose life that she is fought within the self and hence become a psychological struggle. Munro goes away from the tradition of bildungsroman as a genre which explores the growing up of a male hero. She departs the chronological progression as in a conventional bildungsroman and instead explores the unequal opportunities and the power struggle of growing up of female protagonist so that she could realize her true self. Thus, the unfolding stories of Rose's life is the portrayal of female life and creativity and brings out an unapologetic insight into human behavior what turns out for Rose's search for space in society. Here, this paper endeavors to explore various incidents of the protagonist's struggle to find and shape her own grown-up maturation, how she denies being a puppet in the hands of others overstepping societal boundaries.

Key Words: Identity, Maturation, growing up female and Stereotype

Introduction:

Rose, the protagonist, grows up in a poor country girl who longs for an intellectual life and desires to get rid of stereotypical male-female order and social expectations and narrow-mindedness of small town Hanratty. She is ambitious and talented to assert her identity but she is haunted by the crippling traditional societal norms. In such norms she has to face various hardships as women to pursue her inherent talent of acting. Who do you think you are? This question being asked three times rings in her ears for the whole span of life. In pursuits of the answer she does self-examination so as to gain self-knowledge. She is described as having "high hopes of herself," as harboring "gaudy ambitions." Her ambitions receive smacks as Flo, her step-mother, is irritated by her "smart-alec behavior": "Oh, don't you think you're somebody, says Flo and a moment later, Who do you think you are? (Who 45)". In a day in school, Miss Hattie, the teacher, wrote a poem and asked "everyone was to copy it out, then learn it off by heart, and the next day recite it." In response Rose skips the first step and learns it by heart. When the teacher noticed that Rose was not writing down the poem, she enquired about that and Rose replied that she knew the poem already. "Do you really?" said Miss Hattie in utter doubt about her credibility and with disgusting voice she asks her to stand up and face the back of the room. Rose did so knowing that she is voiceless. She recited the poem to the class and her confidence was not mistaken as she recited without a hitch. Miss Hattie's anger still continued to punish the girl: "Well, you may know the poem but that is no



excuse for not doing what you were told. Sit down and write it in your book. I want you to write every line three times. If you don't get it finished you can stay after four...."

Rose has to do the same even after four. When she submits her copy to Miss Hattie, she firmly remarks: "You can't go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems."(46). The question 'who do you think you are' lingered in the protagonist's psyche on numerous occasions. Earlier times she paid a little attention, but later on Rose realized that Miss Hattie was not a sadistic teacher and in fact tried to teach her the most important lesson of life than any other poem can teach, and one she truly needed. Miss Hattie hinted to teach her to keep her aspiration and pretensions in check in such a society, for she too was the product of the same milieu where woman has limited space. Rose's childhood experiences with parents are quite traumatic, impoverished and dysfunctional. Her mother's death her prime age and her father's second marriage with Flo as her step mother to take care of little child who later bore Rose's half-brother, Brian. Flo is quite ambivalent in her attitude and disapproves the rebellious ways of Rose and often threatens her with 'a Royal Beating' for her language and tone, which exhibited her chagrin for the tender girl. The phrase 'Royal Beating' has certain fantastic images for Rose as her attempt to cross certain boundaries has always been retributive. She imagines as "She came up with a tree-lined avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. An occasion both savage and splendid, in real life they didn't approach such dignity" (3).

Rose receives the physical and psychological humiliation by her father. In this inhuman drama of 'Royal Beating', Rose plays her part with same intensity as her father performs. She cries, shrieks and takes an escape in her room where she ponders to retaliate in a dramatic manner, plans to make a suicide attempt or run away from home. This beating probes into domestic violence which has been prevalent in Canadian society as with some other parts of the world. The ruthless father practices beating to approve as a privilege of a man to control another sex. Munro points out gender discrimination at this point as Rose's brother is far away from this episode: "He runs away, out the woodshed door, to do as he likes. Being a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the house hold struggle" (15).

In 'Privilege' Rose's encounter with the poverty and harshness of preliminary school experiences exposes the perverse and harsh realities of life. Like other girls, Rose has to tolerate the comments passed by the bigger boys who look like wild dogs "capricious, jubilant in attack"(33). In school Rose tried to avoid the dark place under the steps and the place between the woodpiles; not to attract in any way the attention of other big bows, who seemed like wild dog (31) Once at school a boy tries to grab Rose as "She was coming down the fire escape, tearing the sleeve of her raincoat out at the armhole" (34)



Very often sex is used as an instrument to abuse by the male in order to victimize the female. Munro's female character Franny, a schoolgirl, has become a victim of male sexual gratification in school. Her own brother exploits her to satisfy himself. With the incident of Franny and her brother Shortie, Rose learns the survival skills that a girl is not safe even within her house. In such incest incident Rose feels psychologically detached and does not understand at this point that this could happen to anyone else. In a way the incident imprints a disgusting mark in her psyche in a very different manner.

Later on Rose as an interviewer remembers the shame and outrage inflicted upon Franny in her programs. People were shocked to know that such things can happen even in childhood. Rose is a true artist who, through her art and creativity, survives the hardships of life and derives the pleasure even from the ugliest things. She herself asserts that "no matter with what cravenness and caution, what shocks and foreboding, is not the same as miserable. It is not interesting"(27). In such growing up years Rose shows a highly sensitive and perceptive character and possesses what John Keats called "negative capabilities" in the harsh realities of life. Thus, Rose cannot be called miserable. In a way she crosses obviously so-called female boundaries, but that is a new space she creates that could recreate the social conditioning afresh and in the process she learns to survive. Thomas E. Tausky has truly pictured the condition of the protagonist Rose has one educational challenge before her: learning to survive.(9)Munro's own relationship with her mother Flo played an important part in growing up years. Rose has been deprived of the motherly affinity and understood only the image of a woman was Flo: "Flo was her idea of what a woman ought to be... energetic, practical, and clever at making and saving" (47). Flo-Rose relationship has been quite ambivalent. There is a cyclical movement in the novel which chronicles Rose's departure from Hanratty as a separation from Flo and her eventual return to Hanratty to take care of ailing Flo as a mark of reunion with her. Critics have acclaimed that as Hanratty is the physical locus of Rose, in the same manner Flo is the spiritual locus of her. Rose loves her mother but at the same time there is an undercurrent of hatred and scorn. Though she shares deep affinity with her mother but sometimes her weird and unpredictable behavior causes her shame and anxiety.

During her school days, Rose falls madly in love with a girl named Cora who is a beautiful girl with shiny makeup and colorful clothes and other boys want to be with. Rose imitates her and practices typical speaking elocution and traits and wants to accompany her every time. Rose has fallen in the trap of admiring and idolizing Cora, she notices each and every detail of her appearance and actions, her gesture, tone, gait as: "she wanted to grow up to be exactly like Cora. She did not want to wait to grow up. She wanted to be Cora now". She has inherent talent of acting which she cherishes through imaging herself in the role of Cora.



The act of imitation is an important factor for her search for maturity so that she could well be accommodated like Cora receives attention from others. She does not equal with Cora but found a psychological companion who was able to denote her cravings for and deprivation of real life. In so doing Rose commits many mistakes, but she has enough courage to admit them, review herself and come out with better understanding of life. Rose is not puzzled by her follies and foibles, whatever negligible they might be, and hence, she moves to high school to gain knowledge so as to experience the life along with other people of the town.

While schooling, Rose realizes the boundaries on the basis of class and social status. She does not curse on herself, instead her social class which causes her shame at every step of life. She is not hindered by working class situations of Hanratty. Instead She craves to fly high to cherish and live her own dreams and she knew it very well that the only way to do it is to leave the town. As Holton highlights: "Rose is intensely aware of how her location in this stratified community imposes a class -based identity on her, a social valuation which limits her options and negatively influences her sense of self" (33). Thus, Rose escapes her social identity with a departure from the confines of the town.

In her growing up years she observes each and every thing very minutely and experiences it to learn the survival skills. She wants to be one of them, "align herself with towners, against her place of origin, to attach herself to those waffle -eating coffee-drinking aloof and knowledgeable possessors of breakfast nooks" (40-41). She understands that in most of the cases poverty is the original source of all the miseries and has decided to change her social identity. She attempts everything to be accepted well. She changes her appearance, even practices Shakespearian plays to overcome the accent of her native place. She moves to Toronto and ponders: "Flo receding, West Hanratty flying away from her, her own wearing self-discarded as easily as everything else" (60). In this way, Rose prepares herself to become matured in the larger world. Darizon has corroborated the same fact that Rose has endeavored for a new social identity as her attempt "articulates a symbolic motif: that of a passage from one universe to another" (123).

Flo warns Rose by narrating the stories of young girl being taken advantage of. Here Rose is a sort impatient between horror and curiosity and desires herself crippled to do something in her own defense against this sexual attack. Though her inner voice was pricking her but she could not do anything at that point: "Please don't. That was what she tried to say. She shaped the words in her mind, tried them out, and then couldn't get them past her lips" (74-75).

In most of her short stories, Munro has tried to show the true responses and perspectives of girls and women which shatter the traditional masculine interpretation of women. Rose herself wanted to cross the threshold of childhood and her private parts were longing for



adult sexual contact: "She had a considerable longing to be somebody's object-'Pounded, pleased, reduced, exhausted' (63). This incident has a long lasting effect on her psyche. While living in the house of Dr. Henshawe, a retired classics professor, Rose learns the surrounding impact on in her intellectual pursuits and the true potential of Rose and compares the life in West Hanratty. The professor even warns Rose that Patrick does not deserve her and only money and social status can be the reason of their alliance.

Rose has spent all her childhood in the poverty and squalor of West Hanratty. That horrible past haunts Rose every times. While living in Dr. Henshawe's house she has two options available for her: first, to work all her life completely depending on scholarship and award that she gets and continue worrying for her life or to get married to Patrick to change her social identity. Horrible past experiences and her mother's life of wretched and poor happenings compels forces her go with the hope of better future and that is Patrick. Here the very idea of going back to Hanratty is so alarming for her that she reconciles with Patrick.

However Rose's financial conditions and sense of security compel her to settle down in the marriage. She knows very well that their marriage would not be a union of two souls; rather it is like an agreement of two persons for a happy life, because they both come from two different worlds, but she could not resist the privilege and status she has got after marrying him. Though she is happy with her decision of marriage but there is something in her which is stinging her. She feels a pain inside her which was unexplainable but ultimately pours on the pages as a poem:

Heedless in my dark womb
I bear a madman's child... (84)

Patrick wants to change her, not out of his love for her, but out of his own whim. Rose cherishes an innate talent of acting and no actress would desire to play one part for the whole of her career. In real life acting, she too cannot continue to be the shadow and the second fiddle of her husband, even though she is aware of the limits of her role as a 'beggar maid'. She recalls the whim:

Patrick loved her. What did he love? Not her accent... Not her jittery sexual boldness. All the time, moving and speaking she was destroying herself for him, yet he looked right through her, through all the distractions she was creating, and loved some obedient image that she herself could not see. (85).

The patriarchal world female is considered as a weak creature and submissive to husband's will. But Rose is reflective and independent mind aspires to live according to her will, not at the terms of others. Thus, the threads of marriage could not bind them



forever and eventually, they get separated after ten years. Gradually, Rose's sense of maturity makes her realize that man is not only the reason of women's happiness, a true happiness which a woman can get, is only through the realization of her identity. Here she starts to understand the maze of life. After breakup with Patrick, she moved to a small town which was surrounded by hills.

Rose comes back to Hanratty where she settles ailing with mother in a long-term care hospital. By settling Flo in country hospital she frees herself from Flo. In settling Rose get rid of the embarrassment caused by Flo. Here she overcomes the sense of internalized parents' and starts living for her own self. Conclusion:

The collection has delineated the simple events of Rose's life, Rose's home-coming is not at all ambiguous. Here she recalls her past memories of child hood and adult life. The vicissitudes with all ups and downs appears to her as a new leaf of her comprehensive whole life. Her upward social mobility and again reconciling to the old status breathe as free divorce and assert is rightly her identity creating as unbounded growing up for human women beings. Whereby a woman could breathe free and assert her identity as unbounded human beings.

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