



## Identity Crisis in Growing up female in Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women

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### Abstract

Alice Munro deals with the complex individuals, particularly girl or women who face a rigid structure of cultural and patriarchal dominance prevailed in Canadian society. She put forward the problem of women in a patriarchal structure through the construction of society where women are the dominant and quest for their identity. Her tempt to "get at the exact tone or texture of how things are" dominates and gives Alice Munro's writing to characteristics and qualities. As a Canadian writer, she boldly exposes the narrow minded Canadian society which imposed on women under the pretext of culture. She probes into the consequences of patriarchal construction of women's roles and its effects on the mental emotional and psychological sphere of women Alice Man's collections of short stories are rudimentarily revolves around with the process of maturation and social pressure which form the individual identity. Munro fictional work serves a repository of an example of how gender ideologies are constructed and the protagonist cope with the bitter reality and finds their own voice, a sense of identity

*Key Words: Maturity, Female, Gender, Inequality, Crisis*

### Introduction

Alice Munro is regarded as one of the best short story writers in the world and has been crucial in making short-story writing respectable in Canada. Moreover, she has been included in the 2010 Times magazine's 100 Most Influential people. Too Much Happiness is her seventh short story collection, published at the age of seventy eight and forty years after her first collection appeared. Throughout long literary career, her style and themes have not changed a lot, although in her stories, she tends to emphasize more on the sufferings, constrains and loneliness of old age, and the way her narrators tell a story based on memories from their youth. Thus, she has gained new perspectives of time and space as her characters have grown older along with Munro herself, reflecting on their personal histories. In order to know what it is that makes Munro's short stories so remarkable, some theoretical background will be provided, such as a short history of English-Canadian short story, as well as some features of it. Furthermore, although Munro is famous for her realistic style, a close examination of Canadian postmodernism will prove that Munro's style is a typical Canadian one, with an unbelievable narrative and gothic connotations.

Munro's short story writing reveals subtle but definite changes throughout her long career which gives us the pleasures of reading her works. Nevertheless, Boys and Girls is representative of Munro's work as a whole, as the formal strategies of the story can be linked to the general trends in her writing. Munro is known for her use of irony, and this story contains numerous ironic flourishes. As the girl protagonist is being groomed



to curb her wild behavior and pay attention to her manner of dress and her looks in general, Munro lavishly fleshes out the appearance of the mother, whose labor-intensive housework makes it necessary for her to ignore such things entirely. Thus, as the young girl is trained to be vain, an adult woman is presented whose lifestyle in fact precludes such vanity. The girl's mother ties up her hair and wraps it in a scarf, and favors simple clothing that suits her workaday habits.

Munro further explores these issues in her collection *Lives of Girls and Women*, again from the viewpoint of the narrator of *Walker Brothers Cowboy*. This return to the narrator-Del Jordan-allows interested readers to more closely scrutinize and follow one girl's Endeavour to attain maturity, and observe how her peculiar way of looking at the world influences the choices that she makes. *Walker Brothers Cowboy*, however, authenticates Munro's skill as a writer and her concerns as a woman. Expanding the pattern she had developed in *Lives of Girls and Women*

In "Boys and Girls," the protagonist's parents consider the eleven years old girl like a grown-up female and the immature sexuality allows her to help in taking care of the foxes. Her mother also wishes to work her. Here Munro penetrates into the psychological development of a child. Conversely, the young protagonist feel working in "the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing: work done out of doors and in my father service was ritualistically important" (DHS 117). The girl shows to her father that she was capable of doing a manly work and handling the real tools from the adult world. Boynton wrote: "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).

Munro shows the contrast of the rare approaches of her mother in her father's domain with men's no participation wife's household duties. But in case of the girl, she 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, as a little boy and recognized no signs of growing up and becoming a man. In an incident heard what her 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 attitude changed 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). Here the protagonist started realizing 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 has shown up courageous, athletic, adventurous qualities. In an incident when the children's father was going to shot one of the two horses, Mack, he sent them out of the stable to play around the house, Here The girl was interested in the process and admitted, "it was better to see and know as if a thing really happened" (Barnet 258). The independence-spirited girl 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 *Lives of Girls and Women* investigates into the process of acquiring self-awareness as a girl. Thus, the awareness for girl



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 has complicated the word by suggesting its connotations throughout the story. The protagonist differentiated the father's world from that of the mother. By doing so, she feels somehow a 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," here give symbolic difference between a female and male. As Kristeva pinpointed out rightly, "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). The girl's attachment to the father, her mother felt 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). Here she awoke 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). Thus, the protagonist of the story faces an identical crisis or 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 the protagonist 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 forth 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 clude 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 brusted 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**

The short story collection "Lives Boys and Girls" deals girl characters who suffer their actual freedom under societal norms and confines her only to the chores or the homely tasks. On the contrary, a woman also desires 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. The collection pictures a contradiction between the girl's status as a real human being and her inner voice as a female. Thus, putting gender inequalities throughout her life at scrutiny, Alice Munro creates her female characters bold to become rebels of the society to fight against the imposing a chain on their freedom. The readers have impression that the work connects with their own lives and those of 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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