

A FEMINIST READING OF ALICE MUNRO'S 'LONGER FICTION'

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Abstract

Alice Munro's fiction sensitively explores the freedom and constraints involved in being a female in the patriarchal structure of society. She has published two linked story sequences sometimes described as 'longer fiction' or novels: 'Lives of Girls and Women' (1971) and 'Who Do You Think You Are?' (1978) portray women in the postmodern context striving against the traditional stereotype roles to seek independence. A regionalist she usually sets her stories in small town Ontario, working with material she knows personally and evoking fully realized milieus. Munro's female characters enjoy a degree of sexual, social and economic independence by making impossible; a possible

Keywords: Longer Fiction, postmodern, regionalist

In the history of Canada, the 1960s signified the completion of a hundred years of confederation which gave birth to a wave of nationalistic fervor across Canada. Canadian writers like Alice Munro are primed for the paradoxes of postmodernism by their history and also by their split sense of identity, both regional and national. David French rightly comments, "All art is set in specific localities". All localities are specific to individuals. Postmodernism in Canada is a cultural phenomenon that reflects profound changes in society and culture of the post war years, endorsing notions of heterogeneity, multiplicity, particularity and discourses with varied possibilities. The prefix 'Post' in the term suggests that Post-modernism is a movement which succeeded modernism. Linda Hutcheon defines it as "a current cultural phenomenon that exists, has attracted much public debate, and so deserves critical attentions" (Hutcheon ix). The writers like Kroetsch figuratively began with idea of quest for identity with reference to the idea of self-assertion and self-actualization. This discovery led to new forms, narratives and subjectivity in the fiction. As he says, "The fiction makes us real" (Neuman, 54). In novels like *The Studhorre Man*, *Badlands* by William Dawe's, and *Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro and so on fabricates an identity of the narrator-protagonist in real. In the Canadian literature canon, there is a strong female presence searching for a cultural identity sharing the themes of powerlessness,

victimization and alienation that make women open, tolerant and at the same time angry and resentful. Lorne Irvine says, "The female voice politically and culturally personifies Canada". (Miller,11). This conflict in consciousness of female protagonists fully modernizes and justifies the writings of Alice Munro. Violence in her longer interconnected stories is an act of aggression and of self-preservation, which has historical and political dimensions and emphasizes vulnerability and helplessness of a woman in a "no exit" situation.

Alice Ann Laidlaw was born on July 10, 1931 at Wingham, Ontario, in Canada to Robert Eric Laidlaw and Anne Clarke Laidlaw. As a teenager her first story was 'The Dimensions of Shadow' (1950). She studied English and Journalism at the University of Western Ontario, married James Munro and opened Munro Book Store at Victoria. Her first collection of stories was 'Dance of the happy Shades' (1968) followed by 'Lives of Girls and Women' (1971) and 'Who Do You Think You Are?' (1978). She remained a consistent writer publishing a new collection of short stories every third year. Her collections are translated into thirteen languages. Thrice she had won Governor General's Award alongwith Canadian Book Sellers Award (1971), O Henry Award (2006), Commonwealth Winner Prize and so on. She has been an honourable member of American Academy of Arts and Letters Royal Society, member of National Art Club, and Writer in Residence at University of British Columbia & Queensland. On Oct.10, 2013, she became the first Canadian and 13th woman to receive Nobel Prize in Literature cited as "Master of the Contemporary Short Story". Her moving short stories with their distinct effortless style are focused on her native Huron, county in South Western Ontario She is poised between a realist and postmodernism modes of storytelling like her women protagonist, Del and Rose-who stands against the traditional stereotypes and treads on the painful road to independence. Munro has published two linked story sequences sometimes described as longer fictional novels: 'Lives of Girls and Women' (1971) and 'Who Do You Think You Are' (1978). A regionalist she usually sets her stories in small town Ontario, working with material she knows personally and evoking fully realized milieus.

Britain's "The Independent" says, "this Canadian *Chekhov* has won both critical reverence and the loyalty of fans across the world for stories that encapsulate a life within a dozen pages, and for a tender but unsparing gaze on the ordinary events that assume great dimensions in all our lives." According to Margaret Atwood, "She writes about the difficulties faced by people who are bigger or smaller than they are expected to be when her protagonists look back." (Atwood, 248) She Joins Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Harold Pinter, Jose Saramago, Nadine Godimer, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, and Seamus Heaney in her literary expressions. Beyond the doubt what her characters have to offer, is a creation teeming with life, an unforgettable gallery of splendidly realized characters almost like Dickens, Hardy and Austen. Her short stories have been sometimes called novels because of a common setting, characters and continuous narratives, which are set in rural South-Western Ontario and are partly autobiographical. The art of Alice Munro could be called as self-reflexive. Alice Munro ranks parallel to "The Three Maggie's" of Canada-Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence and Margaret Anison. Canadian multiculturalism has make way for her literature accommodating plurality with a distinct identity. Thus Munro is a major voice among fiction writers with her superb, elegant and natural style to relate her across time and place. The regional literature at times strikes a universal chord and it is at such a moment that Canada emerges as a nation. Linda Hutcheon points out, "Women must define their subjectivity (or selfhood) before they can question it, they must first assert the selfhood they have been denied by the dominant culture. Their doubled act of (literally) 'inscribing' and challenging subjectivity has been one of the major

forces in making postmodernism such as a resolutely paradoxical enterprise.”(Hutcheon 6)

The Canadian female writer Alice Munro conveys elements expressing Canadian Postmodernism, regional representation, and quest for identity with Bildungsroman or Kunstlerroman narratives in her fiction. Alice Munro's stories are set in small fictional town Ontario where Puritanism and provincialism together produce attitudes restricting spontaneous self-expression. The "Intertextual" references are also seen in Munro's stories especially from the texts of Virginia Woolf and Jane Austen. Munro's *"Who Do You Think You Are?"* is a collection which is termed, "sequence stories" or "linked stories" like Laurence's *"A Bird in the House"*, "with the effect of a novel" (Keith, 160). Her other book *'Lives of Girls and Women'* echoes with an autobiographical tone. The protagonist of *'Dance of the Happy Shades'* (1968), Helen Louise and Munro herself are daughters of Fox-farmers. The feature which characterizes Canadian postmodernism is Regionalism like Laurence's Manawaka and Munro's Ontario. Even native local, customs, passions and religion too plays a major role in the making of Munro's characters. She also refers to the Depression of the 30's. Old Joe Phippen in Munro's "Images" live up in no man's land beyond the bush" (43). To fight linguistic determinism and male control, women see language as a tool to be used and made subservient to thought, (Cameron, 82). An important way of radical women writers to stand against phallogocentrism is by stressing woman-to-woman relatedness and at the same time, setting the site of difference in women's diffused sexuality.

Deborah Isenberg wrote in *'The Atlantic Monthly'* (December, 2006); Munro's Work is more on the order of a flowing exploration, which begins in obscurity, brings vividly into the light assorted pioneers and settlers of the author's family, and then weaves itself into various circumstances of Munro's own life, probing possibilities and happening upon continuities. The book looks simultaneously back and forward, even beyond the confines of its own end, seeking to divine the place and internal experience of certain individuals, including the author herself, within history and passing time. To read this book is to experience one speculatively, too-to sense acutely the properties and capacities of a mortal existence as the future streams toward us.” Her women characters are generally confined to the house chores performing the duties of daughters, sisters, mothers and wives. Her women characters like Flo & Rose in *'Who Do You Think You Are?'* and Del Jordan in *'Lives of Girls and Women'* try to run away from the restrictions of a small Canadian town for a bright dreamy future. Del comments:

They (Her aunts) respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it... And they would never meddle with it; between men's work and women's work was the clearest line drawn (Lives, 27)

Women in her fiction tries to escape for a successful free life but the people around them always tries to degrade them being gender bias. As the protagonist 'Rose' is told, “You can't go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems. Who Do You Think You Are?” This was not the first time in her life Rose had been asked who she thought she was, in fact the question had often struck her like a monotonous going and she paid no attention to it.” (Who, 196). Her protagonists march ahead with a rational attitude reacting to religious and cultural scenarios of their puritan society. Del is also puzzled like Rose by basic concepts of Christian belief though their families belong to the United Church in Jubilee or West Ontario respectively. They struggle for more freedom and independence and wonders whether Christ's

death on the cross was really followed by his resurrection and its redemptive implications, "cruelty is the law of nature." (Lives, p.73)

Munro's fiction is full of realism and challenges pose by the prevalent norms of the society. Her longer fictional works like "*Lives of Girls and Women*" and "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" portrays women against a world that is cruel, unjust and conservative. But still women strive, struggle and have hold of their sexual and financial lives. They enjoy a degree of sexual, social and economic independence by making impossible; a possible. Though they suffer emotionally as in Doris Lessing's "*The Golden Notebook*" yet sexual liberation of women has brought its own challenges and problems. Women characters in her stories often realize that they are dehumanized by traditional attitude of men and society as is felt by her protagonists Rose, Del and Flo. Her stories do not cry like conservative aggressive feminists but they tries to balance between various relations of a woman that she carries in her life time. But besides keeping the spirit of relationships, her protagonists want to keep their individuality for being a true human. Tessa Hadley explicates the novelty of Munro's work, brilliantly and at length, in the London Review of Books (January 25, 2007): "Transporting her own sensibility backwards, Munro opens a door for us into a strange place, enabling us to read its signs, fill the gaps between its codes with familiar flesh, the familiar flashes of appeal and repulsion between individuals pressed up close together in families. She never tries to give us an exhaustive picture of the past moment, any more than she would want to be exhaustive if she were writing about her own time, she moves intuitively around, putting out her words to catch its essential elements, capturing the far past, if one can only do it, turns out to involve very much the same act of imagining as capturing the present; and that's just where its special difficulty lies. The stories in 'The View from Castle Rock' are an important addition to Munro's work, something new, full of interest and mystery...." An atmosphere of secretiveness and repression is seen in the puritan society of small Canadian towns as reflected in Alice Munro's "*Lives of Girls and Women*" and "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" Sinclair Ross's "*As For Me and My House*" and Leacock's "*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town.*" The marriage ceremony remains the most important event of these towns and in their women's life:

"...one side of that life could not exist
without the other, and by undertaking and getting
used to them both a girl was putting herself on the
way to marriage. There was no other way. (Lives, 161)

Munro's problems of childhood, adolescence, and dreams are often seen in stories like '*Baptizing*', '*Lives of Girls and Women*' and '*Who Do You Think You Are?*' with the biographical tone of her stories. Del's aunts perform household duties with efficiency, reliability and contentment. But her mother is vibrant woman, driving car, selling encyclopedias, discussing books, writing letters of complaint to newspapers and dealing with the rights of women. She frankly says, "God was made by man, not the other way around" (Lives, 89). Naomi often calls her as an atheist.

Feminists often blame that women are always marginalized in relationships. They have to lead a life of control and responsibility towards sexual encounters and pregnancy. As Naomi's mother states, "It's the girl who is responsible because our sex organs are on the inside and theirs are on the outside and we can control our urges better than they can. A boy can't help himself (Lives, 112). For Del this is "the anarchy, the mysterious brutality" (Lives, 112) of the moral conventions of a society. Her mother Mrs. Jordan visions a change in women's expectations from the dubious contentment of *domesticity* to the personal and sexual independence. "There is

a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women, Yes. But it is up to us to make it come...Don't be distracted. Once you make that mistake, of being-distracted, over a man, your life will never be your own. 'You will get the burden, a woman always does, "...It is self-respect I am really speaking of self-respect," (Lives, 146-147). This growing consciousness of woman is portrayed by her protagonists in her short fiction too. Her second book "*Lives of Girls and Women*" is "autobiographical in form but not in fact. My family, neighbors and friends did not serve as models. Though the closest autobiographical story is "*The Ottawa Valley*" in the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*.' She talks about the complexity of the relationship with her own mother in a fictionalized manner. As a feminist, her female characters are more complex than the male characters that capture the essence of everyman. She fights small battles instead of loud ones. *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) record the growth of Del Jordan through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and then setting as an aspiring novelist in the fictional town of Jubilee. Del has to face challenges in a patriarchal world, where she is often alienated and misunderstood like Joyce's portrait of Stephen Dedalus in *'Portrait of the Artist.'* Unlike the male figures the most powerful characters are all women: Del herself, her mother, her mothers' boarder Fern and her aunts. Wild laughter and strong abusive language used by Naomi and Del are "the commonest methods of combat used in adolescent struggle." (Beauvoir, 83).

"To make game of the feminine body, to ridicule men, to laugh at love, together constitute a way of disowning sexuality" (Lives, 101).

Munro's writing highlights the negative role of the prevalent gender stereotypes and seeks to redress the balance by repudiating them unequivocally. In her collection "*Something I've been Meaning to Tell You*" (1974), "There's the same interplay of emotions the same marvelous perceptions that distinguish the earlier stories." (William). "Munro is a passionate woman writing passionately about women," observes Rasporich Beverly Iean in his book *'Dance of the Sexes'* (Preface VIII). The dominating figures in her stories are intelligent, ambitious, experimental and mature females searching for new opportunities and avenues in the rural North-Western Ontario. Her women move through places, fate and circumstances. Canadian fiction rose after 1940 with Hugh Mac Lennan's *'Barometer Rising'* and Sinclair Ross's *'As for Me and My Mouse'* just as Indian fiction got recognition after, Rabindernath Tagore and Mulk Raj Anand in the Post-colonial context. Nationalism and Regionalism played a prominent role in Canadian fiction which gave a distinct identity to their literature in comparison to English or American literature. The novels like Margaret Laurence's *'The Diviners,'* Susanna Moodie's *'Roughing it in the Bush'*, Rudy Wiebe's *'Scorched-wood People'* and Alice Munro's *'Lives of Girls and Women'* and *'Who Do You Think You Are'*, reveal true sense of Canadian places and localism. The regional specificity of Munro's shorter novel i.e. the South-Western Ontario can be compared to Manawaka novels of Margaret Laurence, Thomas Hardy and R. K. Narayan's Malgudi; Even Del reaches Jubilee in search of her native history and roots. A symbolic picture of the town is, "Jubilee was visible from a rise about three miles away on the No.-4 Highway...The town lay spread equidistantly on either side of the main street." Her native place for her is a source of solace, though for Uncle Bill, "Jubilee seemed not unique and permanent as I had thought, but almost makeshift and shabby; it would barely do." (Lives, P. 71)

Michiko Kakurani concludes, "The women in Alice Munro's stories like the men in the fiction of John Updike find themselves perpetually torn between two poles: between domesticity and independence; between familial roots and freedom; between a yearning for connection and a more, solitary sense of themselves as outsiders. In tracing the choices her heroines make and the fallout of their decisions." Her women are caught between traditional gender roles and new

possibilities in the wake of the "sexual revolution." *'The Moons of Jupiter'* (1982) deal with romantic love from the women's point of view. In her later works like, *'The Progress of Love,'* she focuses on travails of middle age, single elderly women and simplicity.

"Who Do You Think You Are?" was published in US under the title, *"The Beggar Maid: stories of Flo and Rose"*. Rose's journey of life is haunted by the question *"Who Do You Think You Are?"* She grows up in impoverished rural, Hanraty living with her father, step-mother Flo, and younger brother. She marries Patrick; blessed with daughter Anna her friendship with Jocelyn and Clifford, and her failed marriage leaves her a lonely alienated woman though she is an actor. Kildare Dobbs says in his review- "All the stories are told with the skill which the author has perfected over the years, narrated with meticulous precision in a voice that is unmistakably Ontario in its lack of emphasis, its sly humor and willingness to live with a mystery." The complex mystery of life symbolically is compared to the local rivers as in the story *'Winter Wind'*, the protagonist keenly observes:

"From my grandmother's bedroom window you
 could look across the CPR tracks to a wide
 Stretch of the Wawanash River, meandering in reeds...Like
 Siberia, my grandmother
 said, offended, you would think we are
 living on the edge of the wilderness."(104)

Munro's love of the land is laudable, and inbuilt. She thinks in global terms but presents her art in local terms.

Her main themes encounters with growing up, sexual explorations, love, death and the growing consciousness of young adolescent girls into women and later on the experiences of older women and men. Like photography, she records the minute details drawing the attention of her readers to the complexity, relativity, subjectivity and the objective reality of her characters. Her imaginative descriptions transcendence ordinary life to extra-ordinary. Helen Hoy has written perceptively of Munro's "matter of fact union of incompatible tendencies" and her sense of reality as "inherently contradictory" (Lives, 107). A moral question is certainly raised even if it is to be distinguished from the feminist viewpoint of Mrs. Jordan objecting Del's assumptions that, "being female made you damageable." Del resents, "...men were 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, without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same" (Lives,147). As readers whether we read it "straight" or at an ironic remove, a moral attitude is equally involved in the exercise of aesthetic judgment. The theme of her book *'Friend of My Youth'* is consideration of a woman's sexuality which is as strong as a man's and feels no need to demonstrate what she regards as a fact. In an interview to Alan Twigg she agreed that there is, "no preaching for any particular morality or politics" in her books (15-156). The best known passage in all her writing show that Munro's stories rarely depend upon a direct and unequivocal moral commitment. "There's a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women, Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had, no more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals" (Lives 146-47). Del remarks, "My attitude towards everything my mother said became one of skepticism and disdain." (Lives,202). In *'Who Do You Think You Are?'* Rose's selfishness is "a sort of consumerism with respect to personal relationships. Her apparent lack of awareness the similarities between herself and her two "friends". (Who, 189) After a drunken party Rose has committed adultery with the husband of her friend Jocelyn in a vulgar shocking manner but the

next morning Rose is disgusted and towards the end adds a final, disorienting sentence: "Sometime later she decided to go on being friends with Clifford and Jocelyn, because she needed such friends occasionally, at that stage of her life." (Who,132) Gerald Noonan argues that the whole story "shows how life contradicts the expectations of art." (Who,165), the fact is that moral discrimination and artistic success are inextricably interwoven here, and that one cannot offer a judgement without considering the other. Del wants to write a book based on the local Sheriffs family, where the elder brother is an alcoholic, younger is insane in asylum and the sister had committed suicide. But she simplifies the plot, since "three tragic destinies were too much even for a book." (Lives,204) She translates this story into a Gothic fiction transforming "bungalow" into a "brick house" and head of family to a judge, the daughters represent an adolescent's sexual fantasy:

She bestowed her gifts capriciously on
men...But her generosity mocked them,
her bittersweet flesh, the color of peeled
almonds, burned men down quickly and left
a taste of death. She was a sacrifice,
spread for sex on moldy uncomfortable
tombstones, pushed against the cruel
bark of trees, her frail body squashed
into the mud and her dirt of barnyard...(Lives,204)

Her art, like Jane Austen, emerges from a social situation in which gossip and anecdote play an unusually large part in local life. She is concerned with the problem of transforming oral story into written literature. She has observed, "In places like Clinton, memory is always preserved in funny anecdotes. Even terrible things are presented as funny, because people have to live with it this way" (Connolly n, page). The scandalous lore of West Han ratty is preserved and passed on by Flo in *'Who Do You Think You Are?'* Munro comment in an interview, "the whole business of how life is made into a story by the people who live it, and then the whole town sort of makes its own story" (Struthers, "Alice Munro", 103-04). The story has Chinese box effect that Munro has created. Del is a fictional character who writes about Munro's reality in an imaginative realm, Jubilee which is created out of Wingham, the Ontario town in which Munro grew up. She remarks in a prefatory note: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact." The Epilogue to *'Lives of Girls and Women'* is a brilliant comment on the complexity of fiction and its relation to "real life." Aesthetically speaking Munro is a master of narrating a simple story without didactic (traditional) lessons, avoiding the artistic pretension, and has an uncluttered style of straight forwardness and directness with regional ethos and milieus. Munro sees the story not as a 'road taking me somewhere; but more as a 'house' for, the reader to move around in and to 'stay in' for a while. In *'Royal Beatings'* (*Who Do You Think You Are?*) origins, place, and the function of fiction in everyday life are analysed from a child's perspective. The beatings of *'Royal Beatings'* occupy many levels of the story, beginning in the foreground where Rose is beaten and kicked by her father at the instigation of her stepmother Flo. George Woodcock comments, "she has always written best when her stories or the episodes in her novels are close to her own experience in a world she knew." (Northern, 134). Even in "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" Rose decline in effectiveness when she is outside West Hanratty like West Vancouver or Kingston. Munro confesses to Metcalf in 1972, "...I write about places where your roots are and most people don't live that kind of life anymore." (Conversation,56). The temporary life style for her is "the shopping mall culture." (Macfarlane, 54-56).

Sometimes her fiction uncomfortably goes close to "women's fiction" -fiction about love and passion and the difficulties of getting a right a man. She tries to break the old conventions of chastity, romance, love and womanly behavior with the freedom of sexual liaison, love-relationship and new strategies for new challenges: "love is not kind or honest and does not contribute to happiness in any reliable way" (Moons 140). "Old fashioned" attitudes are regularly put into the mouths of unsympathetic characters like Patrick and Rose's half-brother Brian in "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" to retort that such actions are not satisfactory since Munro's supreme capacity for realistic illusion is designed to break down a distinction between art and life. In "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" Munro through Rose flaunts the artifice of fiction by specifically telling what is not to be told, "...building up the first store of things she could never tell. She could never tell about Mr. Burns... (Who,24). She is ashamed of her gossiping and play-acting." Rose didn't tell this to anybody; glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn't spoil by telling?" (Who,206). In Del Jordan's words" There is a sort of treachery to innocent objects...which a writer removes from their natural, dignified obscurity, and sets down in print." (Lives,181-82). As a child, Rose had thrilled to the stories told by her stepmother Flo, of the Tydes, a local family, whose brutal father has made his name a byword for cruelty to his children. Munro's Tyde family; - the deformed, dwarfish daughter Becky, the effeminate son, and the brutalized father-recalls the contorted vision of the American writers of Southern Gothic. "*Who Do You Think You Are?*" and '*Lives of Girls and Women*' attempt at a longer fictional form, the linked story cycle. The stories revolve around the lives of girls and women, especially Rose and her stepmother Flo, of West Hanratty and Del and her mother respectively. Though in America the book was published under a new title '*The Beggar maid: stories of Flo and Rose*' to appease the American audience. Rose, the protagonist, grows from a child to adolescence in '*Royal Beatings*' and '*White Swans*.' The eccentricities of small town cherished by the local community is depicted in the tantalizing, open ended stories such as '*mischief*', '*Simon's Luck*' and '*Half a Grapefruit*.' In '*Wild Swans*' conflicting feelings of pleasure, pain, shame and curiosity of the protagonist Rose is sensitively portrayed when she is molested by a clergyman on her first solo train trip to Toronto.

To conclude her most characteristic techniques and themes of stories are: the complex narration, divine self hidden in past, use of documents and photographs digging the truth behind stories. Munro has set her five volumes of fiction primarily in South-Western Ontario, where she was brought up. Alice Munro acknowledges- "From the "feeling" comes the shape of the work of art." She takes the ordinary everyday world around her and transforms it into fiction. . Munro narrates in her own unique style of lucid honesty and sincerity using simple expressions, spot on vocabulary, and basic phrases for expressing everyday thoughts and mundane incidents around the lives of ordinary natives and Canadians. Munro's fiction sensitively explore the freedom and constrain involved in being a female in the patriarchal structure of society.

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY (AUTHOR)

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