

CULTURAL AND PATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE OF WOMEN IN ALICE MUNRO'S SELECTED STORIES

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to serve the close relationship between the agency of gender and culture as mirrored in the fiction of Alice Munro. Through a brief discussion on the cultural construction of gender, it also elaborates the marginal positions of gender which brings out a female bounded in a community which is conventional and traditional. This paper also portrays the suppressed role of women in patriarchal society—the practice of subordination of women to men—the women who face social, cultural and psychological predicament at different levels. All the discussed stories in this paper present the marginalization and subjugation of women in Canadian society.

Keywords: Marginalization, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Culture, Gender Discrimination, Sex, Gender.

Gender discrimination plays a cruel role in the society; it creates chasm to segregate relations. What is a man, what is woman, and what else can one be? Since the advent of the second feminism wave, gender has been detached from, then reattached to, biological sex (Bal 530). Generally, gender can be defined in terms of the roles attributed by society to men and women. Gender is a fundamental aspect of personal and social identity, and a biological, psychological, and cultural category has paramount importance in it (Nicolaesue 2). It helps in stereotyping and structuring not only the roles of gender but mind set as well. Sex is biological while gender is a cultural attribute to it; culture is responsible for the formation of the psyche of an individual either male or female and for the ways by which society understands biological differences. Sex is considered a fact—one is born with either male or female genitalia while gender is considered a social construction. The difference is based on the words 'nature and nurture'. Because of this ideation, male is considered as a synonym of 'power,' 'strength,' and 'domination' while the female is confined to the words as 'pretty,' 'beautiful,' 'delicated,' and 'tender.' Regarding the stereotyping of women in society, Beauvoir considers, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 301).

Over a long period of time, the female was presented as formless matter that impregnated by the active male power. In the Christian myth, regarding creation, God is the light and form who gives light to darkness and chaos. This acceptance of old beliefs and conventions regarding 'sex' and 'gender' gave birth to 'Patriarchy' and made woman's life miserable. 'Patriarchy'

literally means rule of the father in a male-dominated family. It is a social and ideological construct which considers men as superior to women. Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control on women's production, reproduction and sexuality (Ray 1). Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* calls it "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (qtd. in Ray 1). Shakespeare himself admitted the patriarchal pattern in *The Taming of the Shrew* where he makes Katherine advise her daughter by the words "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life thy keeper/ thy head, thy sovereign" (qtd. in Bhongle 11). Thus, a woman doesn't have an identity of her own as it's directly related to man.

The practice of patriarchy is directly associated to 'culture.' Culture, neither gives voice to woman nor fortitude to leave in the family and society freely and makes their life subordinated and marginalized. Every culture has its peculiar and salient features. In general term, culture is that which moulds human life and provides a selective pattern to them to exist. Culture is both the individual construct and social construct; culture is "as much an individual, psychological construct as it is a social construct" (Smith 20). To some extent, culture exists in each and every one of us individually as much as it exists as a global, social construct. When we consider the possible meanings, connotations and uses of the word 'culture,' we face a mass of interpretation and symbolic associations. So many sociologist, anthropologist and theorist tried to define the particular term 'Culture.' Hofstede discusses that "[culture] is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede 5).

The cultural dominance and patriarchal pattern are the central theme of every literature, but its dynamics with other socio-cultural factors can be easily found in the writing of Alice Munro. 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, 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. 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. 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. 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.

Alice Munro's short story "Lichen" appeared in her collection *The Progress of Love*, seems to provide the theme and thought of considering woman as a sexual object, and a commodity under the blind practice of culture and patriarchy. The story opens from David's point of view: Look what's happened to Stella" and says "she is turned into trollop" (33) when he visits his ex-wife, Stella, at her home overlooking her father Lake Huron in the company of

her new married Catherine. But he thinks that she has done this on purpose as “it’s not just an acceptance of natural deterioration—oh, no, it’s much more . . . there’s the sort of woman who has to come bursting out of the female envelop at this age . . .” (33). Presumably David stills feels an identification with his ex-wife, and as he knows they are of the same generation, Catherine’s identification of Stella as “an older woman” (33) cannot be pleasing to him (Assad 50).

Stella, to be astonished feels a pang for poor Catherine who is unknown about this man’s nature who entices the young girls, romances with them, marries with them and finally leaves them alone to find a new one. His nature of changing the woman as a commodity can be noticed when David himself thinks about his new wife Catherine, “he thought she was a little over thirty. He saw many remnants of girlishness; he loved her fairness and tall fragility. She has aged since then. And she was older than he thought to start with—she is nearing forty” (34). On his visit at Stella’s home he says to her, “you know there’s a smell women get . . . it’s when they know you don’t want them anymore. Stale” (40). So he considers women as stale things who should be left after sometime. After Catherine, he is sexually aroused towards a young girl named Dina who is twenty two years old and a student at the Art College where Catherine works as a teacher. David addresses Dina as “the little witch” (42) who has tormented his soul in her love. Stella always notices a sudden change in his voice whenever he talks about girls in a romantic way, “this special voice of his is rather high-pitched-monotonous, insistent, with a deliberate, cruel sweetness” (42). But, both the voice and the girl to Stella particularly artificial and Stella being conscious for the existence of women compel to think, “Whom does he want to be cruel to Stella, Catherine, the girl, himself” (42).

On the other hand, Catherine, who is deeply in love with her husband David, notices his changing behaviour for her. She realises that her husband is skewing to another woman and expresses to Stella, “it can make you mean. Love can make you mean. If you feel dependent on somebody, then you can be mean to them. I understand that in David” (44). And Stella wonders on her statement in such a serious and real tone.

Through this statement of Catherine, Alice Munro presents a common thought of the world where the male is considered like a wave which never ends and always rises with a new form, enthusiasm and zealous to move forward. Like the waves, David is also zealous for the new girl. Catherine statement presents that his search will be continue till the end of his life. David realizes that he is involved with the second kind of love. “Real love—that would be going on living with Stella, or taking on Catherine” (49). But he was continuously under the desire of having new women. Like Stella and Catherine he also thinks about Dina: “In ten years’ time . . . she’ll be a woman tagged by little children. . . . He knows that sooner or later, if Dina allows her disguise to crack, as Catherine did, he will have to move on. He will have to do that anyway to move on” (50). David like others, will go on moving ceaselessly from object to object, never finding complete satisfaction (Assad 52) and thus to prove the statement of Buchi Emecheta who in her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* writes, “A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never old. He matures with age and is dignified” (71).

In the concluding paragraph of the story however, Munro overturns the reader’s confidence in the objectivity of Stella’s interpretation as well. The story transforms expectations just as the photograph of David’s latest conquest has been transformed by sunlight: the image of the girl’s naked body has faded beyond recognition. Stella recollects that when David first showed her the picture, he announced that the black mound between the legs looked like lichen.

Now that the picture as faded, she realizes that her statement appears truer than before, but at the same she reveals her own capacity for deception:

She said it was lichen . . . she felt the old cavity opening up in her . . . she said “Lichen.” And now, look, her words have come true. The outline of the breast has disappeared. You would never know that the legs were legs. The black has turned to gray, to the soft, dry color of a plant mysteriously nourished on the rocks. (55)

Alice Munro’s “Baptizing” appeared in *Lives of Girls and Women* also presents the same thoughts about women through the protagonist Del in Canadian society during 1940s. Jerry Storey, the close friend and classmate of Del Jordan like to each other. They love to walk, to watch movies and to smoke and drink coffee together. They were called “The Brains Trust” or “The Quiz Kids” (214) among their friends. Del expresses, “I felt in him what women feel in men, something so tender, swollen, tyrannical, absurd. . . ” (215). Once she visits to Jerry house where she met his mother who was a widow of a teacher. On her first visit, her mother appreciates a lot of his son’s I.Q. and expresses his ambition of doing Ph.D and post doctoral programme. About Del she expresses in a discriminative way: “you have a very nice I.Q. yourself . . . but you know Jerry’s I.Q. puts him in the top quarter of the top one percent of the population” (220). The mother of Jerry also seems to blame the women for the failure of male’s success and intimidated her: “Jerry could not get married. I would not allow it. I have seen these cases of young men forced to sacrifice their lives because some girls has got pregnant and I don’t think this is right. . . I don’t agree with it. I never did. I don’t agree that it’s the boy’s responsibility and he should sacrifice his career” (221).

Once, in the absence of Jerry’s mother they come under the impression of sexual intimacies and being attracted Del asks, “why do you want me to?” he replies, “I have never seen a real live naked woman” (222). As they started to do something a bit more, Jerry hears the sound of her mother’s car stopping at the gate; noticing the arrival of her mother Jerry forgot all his romance. At once he pulled Del off the bed and pulled her out of the room as a useless commodity while she was still trying to grab her clothes. He started to rebuke her to do the things in a quick way and without any love and emotion on her condition left her down at the back stairs by pulling and pushing; finally he bolted the door from outside and went from there. Through this critical situation of Del Alice Munro presents the phenomenon of the women of the whole world who treated as a sexual commodity for sexual pleasure by the male:

Once I got used to the dark perhaps I could find the cellar windows and try to one of them open, but what good was that going to do me, when I was naked? Maybe I could find some old ragged curtain or piece of shelf oilcloth to wrap myself up in, but how would I ever get into my own house that? How could I get across Jubilee, right across the main street . . . ? (224)

Anyhow, she arranges to come out from that dark room, she finds Jerry was involved in discussion with his mother without any emotion and concern for Del Jordan. At this moment Del realizes a sudden opposition in her thoughts for Jerry and his mother. She thinks, “If his mother was so modern and knew about none of us girls being virgins nowadays why did I have to be shoved in here?” (225) and she thought “of banging the door. That was what he deserved. Tell his mother I wanted a shotgun wedding” (225). Thus Del, the protagonist realises the discrimination prevailed in her society. As a strong girl, she rebuked openly Jerry about his negative behavior for her in presence of his mother. At last, in succeeding chapters of *Lives of*

Girls and Women, Del attitude of love for Jerry changes and her ideology against the patriarchal system inspires her to search for her 'self' through other characters.

Munro's another story "The Office" appeared in her short story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* presents how the society creates hindrances and obstacles for the woman to gain her goal as a writer. The protagonist, a woman writer, presents other imperfections of representation, together with the difficulty of the writing for a woman. To achieve her goal, she rents a room; she does this largely because of the conflicts she feels between her roles as a "woman" and a "writer". Munro presents a strong sense of identification between the woman and her house, any woman and her house, which is contrasted to the different way a man inhabits a house:

A house is all right for a man to work in. He brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work exists . . . he can shut his door. . . . A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise to be known as an offence against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She is the house; there is no separation possible. (DHS 60)

Here the woman protagonist is shown trying to make a space for her art by delineating how a woman, in being identified with her house through her social roles as wife and mother, roles which she has internalized, and how her wish to write is treated in society. Both the house and the roles confine that it is not a simple thing to wish to be free of; it is a tender trap. The protagonist has said to separation from the house is possible, yet she tries, thereby like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), making a place in her life that is only for her. However, soon her calm enjoyment of her office is disturbed by Mr. Malley's interruption, the owner of the office, as he tells her of his own and other peoples' lives, supporting these things will interest her—as a writer? as a woman?—Or perhaps with the wish she will write his life story (Asaad 40).

When she refuses to spend more of her time listening to him, her begins to criticize her and her friends through the scrawled obscenities and drawn lewd drawings all over the walls of her washroom thus he might her seduce sexually. By this frequent disturbance by this male person, she leaves the office and waits for the better opportunity to come. Thus as a woman and a writer she faces the uneasiness of the society which presents woman as a weak object. At the end, the writer abandons her office and retreats to her home, capitulating to social demands (of which she has not yet been able to be free), again to engage with the conflict between being a woman and being a writer, to struggle to represent herself as a being who can combine the two.

To conclude, Alice Munro candidly reveals in her stories the working of patriarchy and cultural dominance in Canada. Behind every story of Alice Munro, we find a specific intent which presents the images of women's suffering and oppression in Canadian society. The story "Lichen" presents the superiority of the male members on the female by having more than one wife for his sexual and domestic satisfaction; she presents it through the dominated behavior of Canadian who leaves his wives one by one to get another by disgusting them on the basis of their physical appearance. Alice Munro's "Baptizing" presents the glimpse of 1930s and 1940s Canadian society where women were suffered at every step on their journey of life. Through the story "The Office," Alice Munro not only shows the marginalization and suppression of women but also of her talent through the misbehavior of the room owner. Through her stories, as a twentieth century-short fiction writer, Alice Munro has expressed the pathetic and vulnerable

condition of the middle class domestic sphere. Michelle L.King also presents that “Munro writes about complex individuals who face a rigid structure of culture and patriarchal dominance prevailed in Canadian society” (King 4).

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