

## FEMINISM AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SHORT FICTION OF ALICE MUNRO

**Dr. Deepak Kumar**

Associate Professor  
Department of English, MEOFL  
H.N.B.G. University,  
Srinagar Garhwal,  
Uttarakhand (India)

### ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the different ways of women to come out of their dominated society who get her awareness about their identity in their man-woman relationships. In order to present this thought in an emphatic way, the paper will employ the arguments provided by the twentieth century feminism. From a feminist perspective, the present paper will be based on the close textual analysis of Alice Munro's selected stories from her short story collections of *Dance of the Happy Shades* and *Moons of the Jupiter*. The protagonists discussed in these stories follow the non-conventional way of living. To get their identity, they struggle with their psychological predicament but at last success to explore their real existence while breaking all the taboos prevailed in Canadian society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Identity, Equality, Social Structures, Relationships.

In twentieth century, a number of women writers has been encouraged by the idea of survival and identity of women in Canada. These Canadian writers have better understood their position rather than the feministically inclined American Counterparts. They convey what goes on in the mind of a woman trying to deal with the little brutalities inflicted on her body and spirit by "the harsh politics of 'Sex'" (Seelan 79). Writers like Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, Marie-Claire Blais, Margaret Avison, Ethel Wilson, Marian Engel, and Alice Munro have accomplished themselves as prominent writers of Canadian literature. All these women writers had been battling to discover identity to advance the survival of individuals; out of this has come the major Canadian literary theme: search for the survival and identity. Beverly J. Rasporich, in her book, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* claims, "in fiction by modern Canadian female writers, their protagonists like the gothic heroines of old, struggle to escape imprisonment and drawing, and attempt in a modern, constructive way to manage space, to achieve room and office" (12-13). Millet in *Sexual Politics* notes that contemporary feminism attempted to destroy this gender system and she looked forward to a society in which equality of the sexes was established (Millet 62).

Feminism as a movement has played very vital role in projecting the suppressed status of women in the patriarchal society. The feminist issues of unbalance and inequality between the sexes was first discussed by Mary Wallstonecraft in *A Valediction of the Rights of Women* (1792). Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) too surveyed and raised similar questions. Feminist wave become more powerful with the release of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) emphasized that sex is biological and gender a social construct. Thus feminism as a stream to study has become specialized and systematic. *The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* defines feminism as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men, and feminism is a struggle to achieve this aim" (Hornby 16). Chaman Nahal also observes the basic concept of feminism and writes:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes. (Nahal 17)

Toril Moi defines: 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally determined characteristics. The word 'feminist' and 'feminism,' says Toril Moi, are political labels supporting the aims of women's movement of the 1960s (Moi 204). Barbara Berg in her introduction to *The Remembered Gate: Origin of American Feminism* describes the term as:

[B]road movement embracing numerous phases of women's emancipation . . . it's the freedom to decide her own destiny. Freedom from sexations, freedom to express her thoughts . . . and to convert them freely to actions. Feminism demands the acceptance of women's rights to individual conscience and judgment. It pastorates that women's essential birth stem from common humanity and does not depend on other relationship of her life. (qtd. in Hooks 114)

Alice Munro as a Nobel Laureate and well-known Canadian feminist writer of twentieth and twenty-first centuries believes that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. In her literary works, she tries to comprehend the social and psychic mechanism that construct and perpetuated that woman should claim for more space within the existing social structures and try to dismantle the prevailing social status quo. She does not use conventional narrative in order to highlight the feminist concerns. She herself states, "I am intellectually a great supporter of the women's movement" (King 5).

As a short story writer, her works present a feminist fantasy where she presents her protagonist in a powerful stage which inspires them to struggle for self-identity and self-space. She explores the disappointment, deprivation and anguish faced by women who deeply aspire and awaken her protagonists for more space within the existing social structure. Having the same flood of suffering and negation against the existing social structure for women, her stories "Postcard" appeared in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), "Prue" and "Dulse" in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) present the protagonists Helen ("Postcard"), Prue ("Prue"), and Lydia ("Dulse") who are conscious and aware about their self-identity and self image in their Canadian society. All the protagonists of these stories come out of their silent and oppressed behavior and don't like to surrender before the dominated nature of men.

In “Postcard” (*DHS*) the central character Helen tries to gain her identity which she had lost in her relationship with Clare. “Postcard” brings forward the values of Canada which are universal of all small towns and have a great impact on man-woman relationship. The Protagonist Helen is abandoned by her lover named Clare MacQuarries, who marries to another girl from a rich and prosperous family. Helen, who was deeply in love with Clare and waits for marriage with him for last fourteen years, was deeply shocked hearing Clare’s marriage with another girl, but she controls on her emotions. Next day as a strong woman, she attends her store as usual and says, “I bet this will be a big day for Children’s Wear” (*DHS* 139). At noon, during taking some snacks, her friend Alma informed her about the arrival of Clare with his new married wife. This news makes her restless, and she decides to take revenge as she does not want to spoil her entire life in his loving memories. The statement of Alma that “men are always out for what they can get” (138) also supports Helen to gain her lost power, and being infuriated she reaches at the home of Clare at night. Having disgust and agony for Clare, She yells at him, “Clare MacQuarrie!” (143) again and again; she honks the horn of her car as louder as she can. Halvard presents this condition of her as “a characteristic of desire” (Assad 48). Although one of Clare’s neighbours Buddy Sheilds comes out and terrifies her by the insult and the lost of reputation which she would get by his neighbours on her activity of yelling and honking at a married man which is not considered good for a female in Jubilee. Sheilds says, “You don’t want to give them anything more to talk about, do you?” (*DHS* 144). On this Helen responses, “they got nothing to do but talk anyway, they may as well talk about me” (144). Helen expresses that “I don’t feel like stopping . . . I called and called him and he won’t come out, all I want is him to come out” (143). At last Clare comes out with a bit of hesitation and suggests her to return home and “go to bed properly” (144). Seeing him, she thinks: “he is a man that goes his own way . . . he was a man who didn’t give out explanations, may be didn’t have any. If there was anything he couldn’t explain, well, he would just forget about it. Here were all his neighbours watching us, but tomorrow . . . he would tell them a funny story” (145).

Although Helen’s Momma also blames on Helen that it would be only her fault that Clare has married to another woman and considers that “once a man loses his respect for a girl, he is apt to get tired of her . . . If a man loses respect for a girl he don’t marry her” (141-42), yet as a female neither Helen remains silent nor gets terrified from the society. She decides to behave with him in a different way not to recognize him in future. On returning after this incident when Sheilds asks her whether she is sorry what she has done in the street she strongly thinks, “That’s what I should have done, paid attention” (145). Her thoughts for Clare change and she criticizes him as “an un-explaining man” as he was unable to reply to Helen anything. By calling Clare out by her yelling from his home at night, she showed her female power and presented that she could pass a hilarious life without him also. Her sense of identity makes her realizes that man is not only the reason of women’s happiness, a true happiness which a women can get, it’s only through the realization of her identity.

“Prue” (*MOJ*) by Alice Munro is also a story about a woman’s growing sense of awareness in relationship with her lover Gordon. She is a woman in her forties who practices cynicism in a winningly light heart way and drowns her sorrow in a small revenge strategy of pilferage” (Smith 48). Prudence, or Prue, in “Prue” as a divorcee lives a passive and isolated life. In between she comes under the love relationship with Gordon, a married man who does not love her truly. Prue, upon hearing Gordon’s statement that he is in love with another women yet would like to marry her, compels her to steal one of Gordon’s cufflinks, and even that she throws in her tobacco tin to be put out of sight and forgotten, just as she is treated by Gordon, and just as

she represses her own emotions and desires. Rowland Smith expresses, even the bizarre acts of several of Munro's protagonists are examples both of unreason, the irrational and of an insistent analysis of ways of finding connection. The stealing of her lover's cufflink by the condescended to Prue in the eponymous story is typical of the collection in that the action is both unpredictably absurd and a transparent attempt to maintain connection of a kind (Smith 163).

Once, Gordon to whom Prue discusses as "a large man with heavy features" (*MOJ* 132) declares that "the problem is that I think I would like to marry you" (131), she at once understands that "he opportunistically dates while other relationships are not going well" (Hornosty 110). When Gordon invites Prue in his new built home, she notices the disturbance at the door which was being created by a girl. Disturbed by the noise at the gate, Gordon again and again was going there and tries to keep it hide from Prue. But Prue as an adult was much sensible to note the situation; she notices "Gordon's voice, pitched low, cautioning. The door did not close—it seemed the person had not been invited in- but the voices went on muted and angry" (*MOJ* 131). When Gordon realizes that Prue knows of his relationship with another girl, he tells her about the controversy with that girl who threw a "bloody overnight bag" filled of gifts presented by Gordon in his house. Hornosty writes, "while discussing it, Gordon's grotesquely funny self-absorption and insensitivity are evoked without authorial intrusion" (110). Prue who already considers marriage as "a cosmic disaster" (130) feels isolated. To get free from the situation and the frustration which she got from Gordon, Prue thus extracts "its revenge on Gordon in the same deft, understated way that Prue steals small objects from Gordon's lavish house (Hornosty 110). According to Prue "taking one is not a real theft. It could be a reminder, an intimate prank, a piece of nonsense" (*MOJ* 133). Although she does not take the things from Gordon' house every time but now "she does not do it in a daze and she does not seem to be under a compulsion. She just takes something . . . and puts it away in the dark of the old tobacco tin, and more or less forgets about it" (133). Prue's mute rage at Gordon expresses itself in her petty theft of his belongings has been discussed as "psychic disequilibrium" (Smith 33). Thus, the protagonist, the title character in the story who presents her life in anecdotes and considers that "hopes are dashed, dreams ridiculed, things never turn out as expected" (*MOJ* 129), by stealing his cufflinks tries to take revenge from Gordon as the same way as he hurts her heart without any realization of her feeling.

"Dulse" (*MOJ*) presents the recollections of the protagonist Lydia's past with her latest failed relationship and her battle with her feelings for her self-identity. In this story, Lydia, the protagonist is a divorcee, middle aged woman having two grown children who works as an editor for a publisher in Toronto, finds herself with a loss of identity. By analyzing on her past she is trying to get which she lost in her relationship with Duncan in her life. At the trip, through the realisation of her identity she feels that "*she had stopped being one sort of woman and had become another, and she had noticed it on this trip. She was not surprised because she was in a new, strange condition at the time*" (*MOJ* 36). Lydia feels a profoundly giant shift in her identity and she wants to get "hoping to manage some kind of recuperation, or even happiness, before she had to start working again" (Thacker 44). Because of the bitter experiences of her relationship with Duncan, she imagines Duncan and herself as they "were monsters with a lot of heads . . ." (*MOJ* 56). Stopping at a guest house for the night, she muses over the moves and motives of the people whom she meets seeking to infer and then to "understand the source of their apparent wholeness" (Thacker 45). Early in the story, she realizes "that people were no longer so interested in getting to know her" (*MOJ* 36) and she seeks "an understanding of herself in view of such changes" (Thacker 45). Throughout the story, Lydia's thoughts focus primarily on her

won concerns, especially on Duncan and their relationship, she was “stupid and helpless when contemplating the collision of herself and Duncan” (*MOJ* 50).

She was so disoriented and nervous after her breakup from Duncan that she feels unable to “make the connection between herself and things outside herself” (41). Even she feels not good in market or the world of outside, “she saw herself as something like “an egg carton, hollowed out in back” (41). She feels that she is now for Duncan, merely the latest in a long line of former girlfriends, “Morose, Messy, unsatisfactory Lydia” (52). She “sacrificed herself to him—in living arrangements, in the matter of friends” (Pfaus 94). But she remembers that even in that situation, “she didn’t feel at all like committing suicide” (*MOJ* 42). She tries to cope herself with the world. One of his fellows named Eugene tries to seduce Lydia but Lydia feels “in the past she might have done it. She might, or she might not have done it, depending on how she felt, now it seemed not possible” (50). As she is well aware of the selfish males who seek for women only for their enjoyment so rejects his offer and goes to sleep. In telling the men at the hotel about Duncan’s funny stories she had hoped “to show herself attached but realized that was a mistake” (Pfaus 93). But in her new condition, she is aware that she had changed; she felt “as if she was muffled up, wrapped in layers and layers of dull knowledge, well protected. It was not altogether a bad thing” (*MOJ* 50). So she wants “to make a living in some new way, cut off from everything she had done before” (36). At the last of the story Lydia again sees her ability to attract a man still confirmed in Vincent’s present of ‘dulse’. Thacker expresses that “yet, the observe of her pleasure here is the implication that Lydia is still getting her identity from men-giving them the same ‘power’ over her that she allowed Duncan” (Thacker 53). But I consider that if this time Lydia would be involve with another male i.e. Vincent, she would be free from her emotional attachment with him and take his relationship as a revenge for her ‘self’ which she has lost in her relationship with Duncan or she might attempt to hurt Vincent as the same way as her lover Duncan as a male did with her to be attached with several girls. So I don’t accept her inclination towards Vincent as a real and naturally aroused insist but she accepts Vincent gift of ‘dulse’ as a recovery for her lost feelings and emotions. Her earlier deny to Eugene presents that her failed relationship with Duncan made her conscious about her feminist identity and also about the seductive nature of men for women who treat women just as a property or as a sexual object.

Thus, through a sexual encounter between Maya, Miles and she, there is a psychologically valid reason for believing that action is stimulated by a preceding experience in the lives of Munro’s characters. As in a sexual encounter, Georgia states, “the female subject experiences herself as ‘another woman’ who is released from her everyday objective self” (Assad 20). This everyday self is transformed by sex to a woman becoming an objective self, yet one not identical to the self before the encounter (Assad 20).

To conclude, any reading of Alice Munro reveals the emergence of the protagonists who are disappointed in their persisting quest for fulfillment in life through her actions. In her fiction, self-identity is a more essential concern although at the centre of their quest for selfhood is always their love and hate relationship with men. Using a diversity of voices, style and forms, she explores the aspects of experiences which are specific for the women. Consequently, her stories envisage the women entangled in their cultural and psychological predicament in which her characters struggle to come out to take a new shape with new experiences and motivations. They don’t like to survive as a secondary object and raise their voice against the domination of patriarchal society.

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