
WOMEN AND THE IMBALANCE OF POWER IN THE WORKS OF ALICE MUNRO

BALAKYNTIEW SYNGKLI

Abstract: Alice Munro's talents lay in her extra ordinary ability to present the truth about the realities of life that she and her characters face in South Western Ontario. Her works mainly focus on the tangled relationships of her characters. Her works also depicts the ordinary life of the people in rural Ontario, and the sad condition that many women face in their search of self-identity. Munro's stories often deals with women who are in love with relationships that are suffocating and believes that there can be no perfect happiness without their loves. She also attempts in challenging their visions of happiness, marriage and relationships, which somehow are linked inherently to her own art of the short story. She is, in fact, A deeply political writer, repeatedly tracing the contests, victories, and defeats between conference in a domestic system founded on power imbalance (Katherine Mayberry: 1994) Gender plays a very crucial role in society and parents expect more from their sons than their daughters. A suitable example would be the narrator in *Boys and Girls* (DHS), who is trying to prove to everyone at home that she is capable of doing the same tasks as her brother. She is, in fact, stronger than him, but the narrator is not appreciated in the family because 'she's only a girl' as her father has said. Munro, as a feminist writer, experienced the difficulties that majority of women face in trying to speak for themselves. Alice Munro also fought for space, identity and freedom in her small town Canadian environment, where women's ambitions were frowned on by society. Del is a memorable woman character in *Lives of Girls and Women* who wants to be an artist. Del learns through her mother of the many obstacles that are expected to come her way, and she is ready to face them because she knows that only through experience she will learn and grow. But though she became a writer instead of an artist, we can see here that a man, Mr. Chamberlain, still dominates her life, when she is sexually exploited by him. In another story, *Open Secrets*, Maureen, a character is sexually abused by her husband Stephens. She sleeps with him not because she's happy but because she feels insecure that he may leave her. The paper titled "Women and the Imbalance of Power in the Works of Alice Munro" will analyse in detail about the power imbalances that women face in their relationships within the family, in society and with the men who influence and dominate their lives. The paper will highlight the complicated lives women are compelled to accept in their seemingly ordinary lives lived in the quaint rural setting of South Western Ontario.

Keywords: Canadian Literature, Human relationships, Freedom, Inequality, Short story.

Introduction: Alice Munro (b.1931), nobel laureate and Canadian short story writer, is widely regarded as one of the best living short stories writer in English. She is often considered a regional writer who draws the attention of her readers to the common life of her people in Western Ontario. Her writing often makes the readers to fall in love with the warm environment of her hometown Ontario. Coral Ann Howells in her book, *Alice Munro: Contemporary World Writers* remarks: Munro's stories are frequently introduced as gossip and they circulate as gossip; they are complicated interwoven fragments, full of glimpses of parallel lives and silent female knowledge - of women's bodies and the many 'casualties of the female life' of love stories and failed romantic fantasies, also of adolescent girls aspirations for more glamorous narratives than their everyday lives contain (4) Munro's works are mainly focused on how her characters are struggling in their tangled relationships with their family and society in search of self-identity. Her strength as a feminist writer lies within the wide range of female portraits in her short stories and the presence of strong, intelligent and mature women characters who questions society's

expectations of her as a female living in a male dominated society. But her women characters are mostly caught within the repressive prisons of unreasonable social values which Cixous describes as a patriarchal society [which has] made female desire a meaningless term by situating women objectively (30) Gender plays a very crucial role in many of Munro's short stories and the parents expect more from a son than a daughter. A suitable example would be the narrator from one of Munro's short stories, *Boys and Girls* (DHS) where the narrator feels inferior because everyone thinks that she's only a girl. The narrator like any other young girl, dreams of living her own life, the one that is not restricted by society or parents. She longs for something different other than regular life that the past generations have lived. The narrator keep telling herself, These stories were about myself, when I had grown a little older; they took place in a world that was recognizably mine, yet one that presented opportunities for courage, boldness and self-sacrifice, as mine never did... (113)The narrator in the story knows that she can perform better tasks than her brother Laird, though he is younger to her, and in the story too, we

can see that in most of her father's works, she was the one helping him when,...when the foxes had to have water twice a day. Between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, and again after supper. I filled the drum at the pump and trundled it down through the barnyard to the pens, where I parked it, and filled my watering can and went along the streets. Laird came too, with his little cream and green gardening can, filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes. I had the real watering can...(114) The narrator enjoys helping her father out in the farm but she was forced to help her mother with the daily chores at home. She was living in the society where girls are expected to be helping in the kitchen and doing works like knitting, sewing, cleaning and so on. But the narrator here is different. Though she's a girl, she performs her duties better than a son could. Her father does not talk to her much except when it's about work. There was one time when the narrator heard her mother saying, "Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help" (117). The narrator here is surprised to hear her mother saying that because it appeared to her that her (narrator's) help was never appreciated. The narrator now understood that The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word *child*; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become (119) Whatever help the narrator has given was never appreciated because like her father had said, 'she's only a girl'. There was also an incident where one day the narrator and her brother were fighting and her brother caught her arm for a moment, but it was hurting her. Henry, her father's hired man on seeing this said, 'Oh, that there Laird's gonna show you, one of these days!' (119). Does it mean that her brother is stronger than her? The narrator thought that if her brother is getting bigger, so was she. Slowly she understood that her brother will always be superior to her, and that her family can totally depend on him and she would have to be like her mother, taking care of the house and the family. In the words of Sociologist Karl Marx: Sexual inequality is due to the economic system and dates back one million years. An ideology is a set of beliefs that legitimates social arrangements and makes them seem natural and morally acceptable. Sexism is the ideology that men are dominated over women. (Morra 5) Alice Munro's short stories reveal a debate on the self-consciousness about women's identity. Sexuality occupies a central theme in most of her short stories while exploring one's identity. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1: An Introduction* states that sex itself is an "ideal point made necessary by the deployment of sexuality and its operation... It is through sex... an imaginary point ... that each individual has to pass in order to

have access to his own intelligibility... to the whole body... to his identity..." (155 156)

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del, a memorable character believes that what she understands and learns about the knowledge of sex is that, Sex seemed to me all surrender – not the woman's to the man but the person to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility. I would lie washed in these implication, discoveries like somebody suspended in clear and warm and irresistibly moving water all night (56) What Del believes about sex is that it is not merely for pleasure, but for love and faith that one shares with her partner. Her idea about sex is romance and not vulgarity, but after she hears how Mr Chamberlain tells of his experience in Italy about a man offering to sell his daughter to him, She couldn't believe what she heard. She went to her bedroom and she thought to herself. "If I had been born in Italy my flesh would already be used, bruised, knowing it. It would not be my fault." Del now starts having daydreams, but as a mature woman, dreaming about how Mr. Chamberlain would see her not as a young girl but mature woman. She starts imagining him having control over her body, like the book she read in Naomi's house. The first time she experienced the violence against her was when she pretended to be a seal in order to get few drops of drink from Mr. Chamberlain who,... with the other hand he did something nobody could see. He rubbed against the damp underarm of my blouse and then inside the loose armhole of the jumper I was wearing. He rubbed quick, hard against the cotton over my breast. So hard he pushed the yielding flesh up, flattened it. And at once withdrew. It was a like slap, to leave me stung (177) After this incident, Del does not look at Mr. Chamberlain the way she used to and she thought to herself that she would make it easy for Mr. Chamberlain if he would want to do the same thing to her again. Her incident with Mr. Chamberlain cannot be disclosed to anyone, not even her best friend Naomi. But gradually with time, Del's curiosity in learning about sex leads her to the potential rape by Mr. Chamberlain who was masturbating in front of her. Mr. Chamberlain placed his hand around this thing and began to pump up and down, not too hard, in a controlled efficient rhythm... The face he thrust out of at me, from his crouch, was blind and wobbling like a mask on a stick... If he did not soon get to where he wanted to be, I thought he would die. But then he led out a new kind of moan, the most desperate and the loudest yet; it quavered as if somebody was hitting him on the voice box. This died, miraculously, into a peaceful grateful whimper, as stuff shot out of him, the real whitish stuff... (187) Though Munro never made a protest against sex, a deep understanding of its integral part is there in each of her stories. She makes her readers believe

that life has a lot of layers consisting of secrets and lies. Whatever Del has experienced with Mr. Chamberlain remained a secret in her life and she hopes that one day she will write a book and make that incident a story. Flannery O' Connor says that Alice Munro, believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious. What such a writer sees on the surface will be of interest only as she can go through it into an experience of mystery itself...[F] or this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not expect where adequate motivation and adequate psychology... have been exhausted (Mystery 41) Del's mother on hearing about Mr. Chamberlain breaking up with Fern and how she was upset when she receives a letter saying that he was taking off either to Alaska or California. Fern regretted that she did not keep all his letters and was delaying his marriage proposals and that may be the reason why he suddenly left. Del's mother thus says to her daughter, 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. 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... But I hope you will -use your brains. Use your brains. 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 (198) Alice Munro experiments with her heroines the social relations, and also illustrates the elements of humanity and insecurities that her characters possess. She also attempts in challenging their vision of happiness, marriage and relationships. Her stories are centered on liberation- sexual liberation, the economic liberation of the working class, women's liberation from the cultural domination of males. In its most simple formulation, it was about the individual, and how individual got what they wanted. If the era were about to be reduced to a single question it would be this: why can't (or how do) I get

what I want out of life? (Fawcett 70) Munro's stories show how many of her women are mistreated. Her stories picture how women are facing problems in family, society and in their struggles for love. In one of her short stories *Open Secrets*, Maureen a character was married to an old man of sixty-nine. She was more like his helper who does everything for him, from his works to his daily chores. She loves him dearly and unconditionally but she often longs for intimate moments with him. Lawyer Stephens was a man with two children and he cannot fill the emptiness that Maureen feels. After her miscarriage, her tubes have been tied to prevent anything from happening again. But deep inside she is insecure that he might leave her because she cannot give him a child, and thus she allows herself to be sexually exploited by him. " She was able to look into the bathroom mirror, and move her eyebrows, her lips and jaws, around to bring her expression back to normal. So much for that, she seemed to be saying. Even while it was going on she had been able to think of other things" (156) Maureen can leave him and find someone else because she is young and smart but she loves her husband and she loves it more when he is dependent on her. There are many times when he is rude and rough to her physically when, " He would speak to her in a curt and menacing way and sometimes push and prod her, even trying to jam his fingers into her from behind" (155). But Maureen still tolerates her husband and sacrifices herself for his happiness. Alice Munro has a very unique style of writing, where she uses her fictional stories to portray the conditions of her characters. She is a writer, who writes about the tangled relationships that most of her women characters are facing. Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* writes, Women have served all these centuries as looking- glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of a man at twice its natural size

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Balakyntiew Syngkli , Research Scholar, North Eastern Hill University (Tura Campus).