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ALICE MUNRO'S 'LIVES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN:' A DEVIATION FROM CONVENTIONAL CANADIAN SHORT STORY

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Abstract:

Short story emerged as the most popular form of literature in late 20th century and Canadian women writers – Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood. Margaret Lawrence and Alice Munro are amongst the most esteemed short story writers of the world. Alice Munro has exclusively dealt with the short story form and with her 14 short story collections published from 1967 to 2012, numerous awards and accolades for her splendid craftsmanship of storytelling; she is hailed as the finest living short story writer of the extant era. The present paper attempts to study Lives of Girls and Women, a short story collection by Alice Munro as a deviation from the conventional Canadian short story with respect to theme and narrative art.

INTRODUCTION

Canadian Literature is comparatively a recent phenomenon and in true sense it started taking shape only with the break of 20th century. In Canada literature before Confederation was mainly written by explorers, traders, priests and farmers and it was in the form of colonial literature. After Confederation the conscious attempt of the Canadian writers was to make the people aware of their past, naturally Canadian history and mythology were the popular themes. Canadian imagination was mainly shaped by the vigorous climate and wilderness of Canada, poetry and novel were the popular genres. Short story has a hesitant start and emerged as a literary genre only after 1920 with Morley Callaghan, Rayman Kinster, Fredric Grove, D.C.Scott, and Robert Watson as the major incipients. The recurrent themes in Canadian short stories were physical and mental survival in the extreme climate and geographical wilderness of Canada. There was the recurrence of the patterns of isolation what Margret Atwood calls as the 'collision between mind and land' in her Introduction to Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories. There were travel tales, animal tales, garrison tales, prairie tales, historical romances, moralistic melodramas, humorous didacticism and issues arising out of Canada's multiculturalism. In Lives of Girls and Women, Alice Munro stroked a novel theme of 'a girl coming to an age'. She used 'bildungsroman genre' for this short story collection and also broke off the conventional narrative art.

Lives of Girls and Women is Alice Munro's second short story collection published in 1971 and is regarded as a mile stone in Munro's artistic maturity. It is a collection of eight short stories which are interlinked at the same time they are self contained segments that could be treated as separate short stories. The stories, though interconnected, have separate buildup, tension and summing up. They are warm and sensitive recollections of a girl Del Jordan, of her lonely childhood and adolescence in a small town Jubilee. The stories are the memoir of Del of her age from 8 to 20, her gradual development and selfhood attained through her experiences that continually emphasize her difference from the prescriptive environment. Barbara Godard comments that Munro had broken the tradition of bildungsroman as the genre traditionally explores the growing up of a male hero. Female bildungsroman is a misnomer. There is no chronological progression as in a conventional bildungsroman. W. H. New a well-known critic of Canadian literature remarks,

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“Munro has fractured the linear structure of
 bindingsroman in order to trace the unequal opportunities
 and the power struggle of growing up female”. (New, W.H. 249)

All the eight stories focus on the lives of women mostly aunts, spinsters, mother, grandmother who provide means of self understanding to Del. There are her aunts – Elspeth, Grace and Moira, her mother Addie, mother's boarder Fern Dogherty, Del's friend Naomi, her teacher Miss Faris ... amongst whom Del is growing up with her observations and perceptions. Munro describes aunt Moira as 'a wrecked survivor of woman's life with her varicose, hemorrhoids, cysts, discharges, inflammation, lumps and stones at various places. (Lives of Girls and Women 46). Aunt Elspeth and Grace are typical spinsters who are always busy in household marathons of scrubbing, washing, baking, preserving, cooking They live in their own world, as if on the edge of civilization. They have submitted to patriarchy, had clearest line drawn between men's work and women's work and respect men's work beyond anything. They appreciate not preferring to do and think that being ambitious is to risk failure and making fool of oneself. Munro makes a bitter comment on the lives of women in patriarchy through the characters of these aunts.

Del's mother Addie is in contrast to the aunts. Rather she stands different in the small world of Jubilee. Through Addie Munro shows awakening of a new woman aspiring for her selfhood, career and independence. She is a rebel and wants to prove herself. She does not live on her husband's fox farm and rents a separate house in Jubilee. She sells encyclopedia and though she could hardly sell any, drives over highway and back roads of the country with a jack and shovel in the car. The aunts despise her endeavor by calling it 'going on road.' Mother likes opera, writes letters to local radio and newspapers about local problems, joins a book discussion group and advocates the need of public distribution of birth control devices. She is ambitious about her children, wants to see them educated and repeatedly tells them about how she walked nine miles for school and washed chamber pots to earn money for her schooling.

Del's awareness of herself and society is taking shape through her observations and experiences in the small town life. She hates the hollowness and negativity of her aunts and also feels ashamed of her mother's over enthusiasm, show off as an intellectual and attempts of outdoing herself. She has seen that her mother's assertiveness, craving for personal accomplishments and dissatisfaction with the social status and environment have made her a social ridicule in the small town life. Del has realized that she too is like her mother but is afraid to admit it. Through her observations of the lives of the women around her Del has realized that neither the primitive submissiveness of her aunts nor the aggressive spirit of her mother is rewarding. Del rejects the feminine way of acceptance and feminist protest as both are incapable of providing selfhood to a woman. In the stories Flats Road, Princess Ida, and Heirs of Living Body Del is seen shaping herself with the observations of her mother and aunts. Finally, in the last story Epilogue: The photographer, Del develops herself as a creative writer. She is looking back and trying to make sense of her experiences and takes interest in her Uncle Craig's incomplete work of writing family history which she used to despise in her childhood. She is seen writing about the lives of the people in Jubilee and trying to add fiction to the reality. There too she has to face questions about her own creation. Del sees her imaginary world, which she has powerfully and cunningly created, damaged by the reality.

In search of selfhood Del wanders through different churches and faiths in Age of Faith and finally shifts her emphasis from religion to sex. Open boldness of woman's sexuality and shock to the romantic notion of love and sex are the striking aspects of Munro's writing. The stories Lives of Girls and Women, changes of ceremonies and Baptizing revolve around Del's sexual awakening. Del is developing as a reader and she finds herself happy in the library among the printed pages. She and her friend Naomi hunt through the books for the information denied to them by the society. Both the girls read and openly talk about sex, genitals and child birth. They gossip and daydream about the imaginative imitation of the lovers. They hunt through the books for the detailed descriptions and wonder, “was this the ill thing that was sung of in all the songs.” (Lives-132). Munro describes the sexual awakening of the growing girls, their curiosity and imagination with shocking boldness which is rare in women writers. There are free references to the terms related to sexuality. Del's sexual awakening, sexual evolution, her awareness of her own body, daydreaming, night-outs and lies in the house... all give a moral shock to the cultural codes and taboos of female virginity. Through Del's and her school friend Jerry Storey's curiosity of each other's body in Baptizing Munro wants to confirm Freudian Principle that boys and girls pass through early stage of development in much the same manner.

Here is the rejection of the constraints of womanhood and rejection of romantic notion of love. Munro wants to disturb the traditional image of a woman as 'an angel in the house'. Mother Addie is a feminist and tells Del, “Don't get distracted over men, once you make the mistake your life will be never your own, you will get the burden a woman always does” (Lives- 193). Mother speaks against male domination and is optimistic that “There is change coming over the lives of girls and women, it is up to

women to make it come" (Lives- 193)

Del also realizes that
being female made your damageable, certain amount of
carefulness, solemn fuss and self protection is called for,
where as men were supposed to go out, take on all kinds
of experiences and come back proud. (Lives -239).

Del desires to have this privilege of a man. She is against her mother's anti-sex stance and wants man to love her. She meets French Garnet, a truck driver in the church and gets distracted over him. Her increasing intimacy with him, play of touch, sexual encounters come in the story with startling realism and without any romantic notion. For Del "sex seems to be all surrender not of a woman to a man but of a person to a body" (Lives - 239). It is only physical grandeur not love. There is no guilt in meeting French Garnet anywhere and anytime, lying to the mother and neglecting studies till the pivotal moment comes. Del is proud of having taken the liberty of a man of going for the experience. Munro herself has admitted that her story Baptizing has been a cultural shock to the readers. She has subverted the traditional concept of romantic love, marriage and fantasy of living happily ever after.

In Munro's work plot is secondary, little happens and much is based on epiphany- the sudden enlightenment. In Del's life epiphany comes when Garnet French tries to push her head down into the river to baptize her so that he could marry her. Del could not allow any body such a mistake to think he has more power over her, even in play. Though five minutes before they were enjoying swim together and talking of marriage, it was all over in a moment. It was clear as a day to her and he also knew it. She pushed him away by kicking hard and came out of the river. She never met French Garnet ever after. She has lost her scholarship also but she is not broken. She knows that

Future could be furnished without love, without
scholarship. Now at last without fantasies or self-deception,
cut off from the mistakes and confusions of the past. (Lives -- 264)

Del is ready to get started with real life. Munro leaves her protagonist with ever increasing option after the closure. In the last story Epilogue : The Photographer Del becomes a creative writer, enters into a male dominated field, gives fictional rendering of real life episodes. Shelagh Wilkinson says-

Munro has chosen to explore the emerging self through a
writer protagonist: a woman who writes herself her story,
her life into being", (Changing Patterns: Women in Canada 209)

To sum up Lives of Girls and Women reveals the surprising depths of complexities of the emotional lives of ordinary people. Munro has broken free from the conventional themes of Canadian short story and she has dealt with the sexual evolution of a girl and dilemmas of a girl coming to an age and struggle of a mother and a daughter to become their own persons and growing to potentials. Mother is a failure and daughter succeeds. She has also rejected the linear development of the story, happy endings and twist at the tale type endings. Stories are written in segments with big time gaps. There is play of past and present. It is the beginning of a turbulent shift in attitude, perception and technique, beginning of Munro's genius which she excelled in her later works such as Beggar Maid, Moons of Jupiter and the latest one Too Much Happiness.

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