CLRI Contemporary Literary Review India
Print ISSN 2250-3366 | Online ISSN 2394-6075

Vol. 7, No. 2: CLRI May 2020 | p. 70-91

Contradictory Aspects of the Formation of Womanhood in Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women

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Abstract

Del Jordan, the heroine of the titled novel, is one of Alice Munro's brands of heroines who are progressive but whose identities are determined within heterosexual love relationships. This paper explores several problematic aspects of the womanhood Del develops. First, as a woman suffering at the hands of men she becomes an 'Other', at the end of the plot, gradually dislodged from the pivot of her 'self'. Next, this trajectory from childhood into her adulthood, as the interpolation of the adult consciousness suggests, incorporates many self-conscious moments when she is critically aware of her putative feminization or marginalization and resists men's power, albeit quite secretively. These moments effectively inscribe the fiction she plans to compose. The other face of this fictional self is her progressive 'Real Self' that sets out for the city.

These oppositional positions make way into the construction of a heroine who is critical of the gender hierarchy but is unable to transcend her circumscribed position. These same dual impulses underpin the matured narrator's aesthetic formulation that helps her to foreground the heroine's self-affirmation in the face of all negativities and thus, restores her power.

Keywords

Alice Munro's heroines, womanhood and gender struggle, female *Bildungsroman*, feminine writing, *Lives of Girls and Women*.

Introduction

Alice Munro's only novel, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), is a female *bildungsroman* that features Delia Jordan's growth as a girl and the development of her mind as a would-be novelist. All of the seven chapters shaped as individual stories portray different characters and describe their influence on the multiple phases of her transformation.

There exist provocative debates regarding Munro's portrayal of male and female characters in the novel. Two texts that I could access to and that stimulated my response posit her attitudes from diametrically opposed viewpoints. Brad Hooper says, "[It] is

through Del's eyes we see women generally unfavourably and men the opposite way" (Hooper, 42). Janet Beer makes shrewder remark: "This female *bildungsroman* ends in authorship and exile not in love and marriage. The short stories that tell of men's lives here, however, end in stasis, with a funeral, with failures of imagination, refusals to change and even regression" (Beer, 146). While I believe women are shown 'unfavourably', Del's adoption of 'authorship' invests some powers in female pen. Female writing shapes the narrator's attitude towards the protagonist too. The protagonist seems to emerge against the male 'stereotypes', as Beer uses the word, as progressive and powerful. This study presents Del's femininity in both negative and progressive lights and examines the relation between fictions and her womanhood, the shaping influence her fiction-writing has upon her development and the other way round. I suggest that they correlate and complement each other. The first section examines the increasingly negative implication Del's growing femininity assumes as she approaches her womanhood. The second section examines the relation between the narrator's fictional life and 'Real life' and the feminine identity the fictional life inscribes. And the final section provides a brief theoretical engagement of the two threads and examines Munro's artistic resolution.

I

The novel presents Del's journey into womanhood as an account of cumulative suffering and tragic consequences suffered by her and many of the other characters of the locality. Major disasters or losses that enable significant transformations operate as the landmarks as well as the structural markers for chapter-division. The wide gap between the lively, assertive child she is, as a master of her own self, and the passive, abiding and submissive woman she gradually becomes, variously reinforces the perception of women as men's 'Other', who seethe with penis-envy. The suffocated language the

adult narrator employs to recapitulate the change seems to crawl through the under-represented realm of the 'Other' that stretches beyond the capability of signification. We will resist theoretical interpretation for a moment and instead map out and concentrate on the textual instantiations of those locales when circumstances compel this 'Otherisation'.

In Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth's malign agency, for the first time, young Dale encounters the vile collusion of crookedness, misery, lack of ambition and femininity. Their idea of femininity is pre-empted by their avowal of insuperable sexual difference between men and women. The so-called feminine levity of "rampaging mockery, embroidered with deference" (p. 47) is apparent from their contradictory emotions: "They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it. This was strange; they could believe absolutely in its importance and at same time convey their judgment that it was, from one point of view, frivolous, nonessential" (p. 40). They double every word so that "nothing could be stated directly, every joke might be a thrust turned inside out" (p. 47). They admire their brother, Uncle Jenkin Craig for his denial of ambition to stand in election. Del can distinguish her mother's unpretentious, straightforward way from theirs. She further associates palpable feminine bodies with feminine wretchedness on account of their uncritical adoration for and correspondence with

Aunt Moira and her daughter Mary Agnes. Aunt Moira has 'a gynaecological odour' and her cataloguing of women's misery at the hands of men, gives off her image as "one of those heavy, cautiously moving wrecked survivors of the female life" (p. 50). Her own daughter Agnes, a victim of child-abuse, attracts commiseration from everyone. As opposed to other women, in characteristically un-feminine manner, young Del refuses to sympathize with any such stunting gesture of defeat or death but intentionally desecrates the carcass of a cow to ward off the overpowering effect of death this scene gives off. Soon Uncle Craig's demise despatches another temptation of deference to death's horrifying reverence for her and this time she determines to 'pin down' death: 'There is no protection unless it is in knowing.' (p. 58) Death has not yet called for her femininity but these women have enough influence to distract her from her mother's way.

Del's being a detractor of her mother can be read as the heroine's reaction against the first generation of feminism. Del is critical of her mother because of her over-sureness of her way, the positive self-assertion and her prudery. Mrs Jordan repetitively boasts the progress she made from her poverty-stricken backward household and claims, "I have cleaned chamber pots to get my education!" (p. 98). Her recollection often sounds like comparison between the conditions of the mother and daughter as if the women of two different generations compete to demonstrate who has the worse situation. Mrs Jordan sensitizes her daughter: "You think this is poor. This is nothing to how we were poor." (p. 95). She points to the privilege she has afforded for Del when she says that she had no occasion to become 'shy and self-conscious' like Del. Shyness and self-consciousness, conversely, are 'luxury' and they visibly do not help memorizing encyclopaedia Britannica. But her self-consciousness makes Del wary of her mother's drawbacks. She is troubled by 'a lack of proportion' in her diligent mother's complacency about marriage (p. 100). Del is not yet aware of the implication of sex but her mother's entrenched apprehension of

anything sexual turns out to be her flaw. Del's criticisms might be liberating for herself in the long run but the intensification of misery is dwelt on to a greater extent so that daughter's sufferings are shown to parallel those of her mother's.

Del's long-time companion, Naomi operates as the principal negative agent to seduce her to feminine experience. Initially, in her company, the sickening medical guideline to sex becomes interesting. The two remain absorbed in speculation about Mr Chamberlain's penis and sour sexual jokes. Later, she initiates her in the real life with men *i.e.*, introduces her into the marriage-market: 'to have (her) a start in the life.'

To discuss Naomi's influence on Del, the latter soon subjects herself to feminine humiliation by submitting to Mr. Chamberlain's sexual prank. The pages describing the most illuminating and glorious part of their female friendship end with Mr. Chamberlain rudely assaulting Del at her breast. His account of Italian fathers selling their adolescent daughters set her examining her breasts and now she cannot entirely avoid its lure. Despite being conscious of the evil of his proposal—I leave the part where she examines her consciousness for further examination in the following section—she accompanies him for prospectively rougher, more violent experience. His shockingly authoritative thrashing subdues any beneficent or jubilant connotations eroticism might have to her and

sparks off the dark, death-like potential sex has: "And this was what I expected sexual communication to be—a flash of insanity, a dreamlike, ruthless, contemptuous breakthrough in a world of decent appearances" (p. 205). Needless to say, in order to combat with dark sex she fortifies her dark femininity with the help of 'what deceits I was capable of'. Beset with assaults at different levels, Del acknowledges, a girl's progress must be in the direction opposite to a man's.

In front of her tamer partner, Jerry Storey, she flaunts her 'difference' of intellectual practice. True, in their experiment with sex she plays the masculine role. She arranges the room for him to 'perform', smartly unbuttons herself and he fails to perform anything 'exploratory'. But in the intellectual realm, she tries to look submissive. She lets him go to any degree of absurd prophesying about the imminent apocalypse. She lets him disregard her knowledge about similar kinds of vision already developed in a number of novels she has read as if these were merely trivial. While both share intellectual solidarity to 'think about the universe' she carves out a *different* niche for her thought. Hers being predominantly derived from novel-based imagination is suspect, and his, from abstract scientific propositions and so, more positivistic. Del draws on the 18th century female tradition of education-cum-entertainment through novels and reinforces the culturally received binaries of enlightenment/fiction, progress/regression, and man/woman. She flaunts her femininity by bombarding Jerry's futuristic speculation with her novelistic imagination. Jerry foretells the possible mutations in human features the future generation shall witness; Del immediately asks 'Like *The Brave New World*?' This differentiation anticipates the distinction their respective careers envision: Del prepares to be a telephone-operator and Jerry might win a scholarship for the MIT with avenues of prosperity unrolled to him. After all, "I felt in him what women feel in men, something so tender, swollen, tyrannical, absurd; I would never take the

consequences of interfering with it; I had an indifference, a contempt almost, that I concealed from him''(p. 248).

To return to Naomi, she reappears in the beginning of the chapter 'Baptizing', as I have already mentioned to complete Del's initiation into womanhood. The two friends run in an unhealthy competition to find who faster catches a man. After Naomi gets into a creamery, when for the first time Del sees her she feels anxious about her shortcomings in feminine qualities: "It seemed as if she had got miles ahead of me…things were progressing for her. Could the same be said for me?" (p. 230). Naomi's intervention coincides with Del's confrontation of the two articles in the contemporary fashion magazines. She is now confirmed of the 'constructed nature of femininity ('Femininity—It's Making a Comeback!') and of difference in men's and women's modes of thoughts. No doubt, in Naomi she sees the model womanhood these magazines uphold. Compared with her glamorous made-up femininity, her greasy sweater and brassiere tied up with a safety-pin are outworn.

Another magazine quizzing 'Is Your Problem that You're Trying to be a Boy?' gives her different insight. Del confirms herself that she never felt to be one. The question remains: if she neither conforms to the prescribed shape of femininity—and she criticises it to be a 'masquerade'—nor 'feels' like a boy but wants to 'think' like him, what kind of individual she is. We can also ask why she does not

feel like a boy. It is so perhaps because as a girl 'famous for her memory' she cannot easily elude her secret but intense competitions with a number of men including Mr Chamberlain and also her relationship with Frank Wales and Jerry Storey. Existence of desire in man-woman relationship, for Del (and also for Munro by extension), forecloses the possibility of passing for each other. And she wants 'men to love (her)'. Simplistically formulated, the gender problem stands like this: she desires a man to love *her* and also wants to think *like* him. And if she is at a remove from Naomi's kind of beauty, she cannot get men's love since 'love is not for the undepilated'. Readers can speculate: she could momentarily withhold her urge for being loved and prepare for scholarship, as her mother proposed her to do so, that she could escape the tyranny of being put into the oppressive frame sketched out for women.

Any such speculation is not effective because unlike her aunts she cannot rest with negative capability (*i.e.*, 'preferring not to' do) but must face up to the worst crisis imaginable. After the humiliating experience at the dance hall she finds comfort in reading Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*. The latter novelist's progressive ideal might be temporarily comforting. But her later adventure suggests departure from Jane Eyre-type self-development She resigns herself to the hallucinatory spells erotic experiments cast: "Only when I was sick, with a fever, had I ever before had such a floating feeling, feeling of being languid and protected and at the same time possessing unlimited power' (p. 275). The brush she has with death through sexual intercourse with Garnet French, a past criminal permanently brands her identity as a woman. The blood-drop that trickles along her thighs sums up the meaning of love. It is 'love' that apparently 'pins down' death and consolidates her past anxieties about death. Moreover, as he asks her whether she would like to have child she masochistically says 'yes' as if with a child within her womb she would become a full woman from a 'lack'.

II

The narrator, within the course of the novel, introduces double time-scheme: one, the girl who grows up from childhood and gains in experiences; the other, perhaps has migrated to town and revisits her past a few years later. It is the matured observer, who takes cue from the fragments of novel she wrote as a young girl, memorizes them with feelings and analyses them with adult consciousness. The novel's incorporation of double time-scheme has attracted much critical attention. Ajay Heble notes the coexistence of 'the syntagmatic disposition of events suggesting a temporal development—while also giving us Del's paradigmatic evaluation of those events', a narrative strategy of 're-imagining, re-experiencing and re-shaping' the past that often features in Munro's later fictions (Heble, 48-49). But what he describes her attention to unreality or 'absence' beyond the pale of rational discourse of ordinary events, I argue, are also the spaces wherein she develops her self-conscious feminine self (Self-consciousness appears to be missing in all the other female characters) . Del develops her self-consciousness in the following two ways.

At moments especially during her relationships with men, Del becomes aware of a kind of inner reconfiguration of her self. She suspends her judgment temporarily and becomes submissive purportedly and waits for retribution. We can cite three crucial occasions. Confident of her powers Del has agreed to accompany Mr Chamberlain in his car even after his behaviour has struck her as no less than imbecile. She has become alien to herself: "I had looked in the mirror of the girls' washroom and smiled secretly at my ruddy face, to think what lewdness I had been invited to, what deceits I was capable of" (p. 208). She is disdainfully attentive to the demarcation between the visage that portrays what society demands of her and the one reflecting her true state. Later in chapter 7, at the dance in the Gay-la Dance Hall in her first clumsy confrontation with conventions she learns the manners of partying that helps a woman to find a husband. She foolishly laughs to maintain

appearance for fear that otherwise, she would give off the impression of not understanding the jokes. When Clive sarcastically asks whether she advocates capital punishment for women, as she espouses women's rights, she agrees in order to maintain the impression of integrity but at the expense of much humiliation. Finally, before Garnet French she holds no resistance at all. She concedes: "Perhaps I successfully hid from him what I was like" (p. 278). Her motive is, she acknowledges, not love but to penetrate his instincts. In all the three instances she retains the appearance of benign immature and passive femininity while perhaps is also being secret aware of her levity.

It is instructive to trace her changing relations with the appearance or mask of passive femininity. As Naomi gets into the creamery and Del still pursues with her bundles of books, the latter is reproachful of her friend because of the 'mask' she assumes in order to make herself feminine and thus, marriageable: "What was this masquerade she was going in for now, with her nail polish, her pastel sweater?" (p. 226). She cannot resist her friend's inflection. Gradually, as we saw, she too starts employing feminine mask as she cannot undermine the compelling effect of the article titled 'Femininity—It's Making a Comeback'. As the last paragraph argued, this mask that has the potential to make her desirable to men, the inconclusiveness of her relation with French prevents it from being

permanently fixed on her. Her rediscovery is directed to the dual consciousness and the dual time-scheme implemented here: "Without diminishment of pain I observed myself; I was amazed to think that the person suffering was me, for it was not me at all; I was watching. I was watching I was suffering" (p. 304).

The 'mask' of femininity—an issue we elaborate on in the next section-- here is intricately linked with Del's desire for making fiction, a desire that she cultivates more than seriously. The attitudinal transformations her love-makings bring in her, she must have put into her novel as she renders all the mundane details of daily life into fictions. At places we receive hints of her inclinations for fiction-making. Firstly, the vividness and immediacy with which the adult Del catalogues the episodes attests to the magnitude of the transformation her relationships bring. Secondly, towards the end of the second chapter, she segregates 'the part of the novel' she had written novel from the massive ruinous bundles of Uncle Craig's manuscripts. It means she has been careful enough of her own merit. Later, in the Epilogue Del acknowledges: "I saw that the only thing to do with my life was to write a novel" (p. 308). The task of writing, that was hitherto unexecuted, presents itself with all its urgency. And also, "Nobody knew about this novel. I had no need to tell anybody. I wrote out a few bits of it and put them away, but soon I saw that it was a mistake to try to write anything down; what I wrote down might flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel in my mind." (p. 308)

This novel, she says, she has carried 'everywhere with me…I carried it along when Jerry Storey and I walked out on the railway tracks' (p. 309). Her imaginary life as it is on her pages and the life that is out there for the real execution, split apart. And here, her life as she transcribes it into her novel, we can infer, is constitutive of tangles of narratives handed down by women, family histories (she planned to base her novel on the Sherriff family history) and their mysterious unexplored past, or even small, apparently unworthy details. Once she perceives the horror of the blood-drop that

consummation drew along her legs—the strangled and tremulous tone that informs the episode is worth noting—she comes to share the same sense of loss with all women. So the unobserved but shockingly true, details, no wonder, Del has previously heard about women's victimization, must make their way into her novel as they appear in Alice Munro's other works too. Her earlier scepticism of Aunt Moira's accounts or implicit revulsion for her 'gynaecological odour', in the end, change and the sense of disbelief is replaced by sympathy and urge for investigation and representation through fiction (p. 186). Moreover, women's oral accounts—and the material female body—form a substantial part in this novel too as the very name of the novel suggests. The matured Del does not hesitate to incorporate in her narrative the accounts of the phalanx of vulgar aunts who once motivated her against her mother. She finds herself as a representative of the women of the Jubilee Street. Her life sort of represents theirs too.

Anyway, Del's life must be different from the other banal, unambitious women's. She does not end up being stuck within the confines of the Jubilee Street. Alert to the practicality of her circumstances she knows that if she has to materialize her ambition as a novelist she must get trained and seek to publish in order to avoid the dissipation Uncle Craig's manuscripts underwent. As her enterprise with Garnet French comes to an end and her 'old, real self' returns and simultaneously, 'sabotaged by love' she misses the scholarship, she prepares for the unexplained 'Real Life' as a telephone-operator at town: "…I felt a mild, sensible gratitude for these printed words, these strange possibilities. Cities existed; telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships" (p. 305). Solitary life would furnish possibilities for fleshing out the fiction the seeds of which have cumulated in her head. Previously she dabbled in writing pieces. But now she must undertake the 'Real' task of composition. The chapter 'Baptizing' ends with the following invocations:

Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French.

Real Life. (p. 305)

It seems, like poets, she is invoking her former lover as her muse in her upcoming novel.

During her relationship with French the conscientious first-person observer in her was replaced by third-person speaker. She bethinks herself as a heroine of her life as if it has been already written out: "I talked to myself about myself, saying she. She is in love. She has just come in from being with her lover. She has given herself to her lover. Seeds run down her legs" (p. 292). Through writing, the voice of the adult, sensible narrator returns.

III

The first section has showed the negative implication that pervades Del's womanhood. The second one dwells on the alternative possibility of radical departure from that melancholic position en route fiction that additionally has restorative potential. Following is our examination of two famously oppositional positions: one, the essentialist position and the other, the subject position as enacted in language.

To consider anti-essentialist position first, heterosexual love as it is glorified in society—and Del too experiments with-- turns out to be absurd at times. Her 'maddeningly erotic' expectation is punctured

at the sight of Mr Chamberlain's phallus which is "not at all like marble David's, it was sticking straight out in front of him…raw and blunt, ugly-coloured as a wound…vulnerable, playful and naïve. It did not bring back any of my excitement, though. It did not seem to have anything to do with me" (p. 213-4). The sight of the tremendous attempts he makes to masturbate is unpleasant and self-mocking. Almost similar experience she has with Garnet. The detailed description of the whole episode of love-making in the rendezvous is delineated in such crude material details that it effectively deflates any much-vaunted divine implication one can attach to sex. One can recall a decisive remark from *Gender Trouble* in relation to the overwhelming ache Del developed and French's violent pushing and crushing:

> *[Some] parts of the body become conceivable foci of pleasure precisely because they correspond to a normative ideal of a gender-specific body. Pleasures are in some sense determined by the melancholic structure of gender whereby some organs are deadened to pleasure, and others brought to life. (Butler, 71)*

Judith Butler denies any supposedly natural pre-existing alliance between pleasure and particular organs which are taken for the source of emanation of desire. The childish performance of love-making is exposed to be an absurd and imaginary attempt to work oneself up to ecstasy in this novel too. When a New York psychologist, a 'disciple of Freud', writes about the difference between male and female modes of thought 'chiefly to their experience of sex' and illustrates it as "the boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, 'I must wash my hair', Del problematizes this pigeonholing attempt to differentiate the genders when she affirms: "I wanted men to love me, and wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon. I felt trapped, stranded; it seemed there had to be a choice where there couldn't be a choice" (p. 228).

Secondly, Del's identification with her mother remains a suspect. Speaking of the limits of mother-daughter/father-son gender identifications, Judith Butler alleges feminists' attempts to privilege the genealogy of the mothers as responsible for the reinstitution of the male/female binary. She writes:

> *[Maternal identification] tends to reinforce, precisely the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine and forecloses an adequate description of the kinds of subversive and parodic convergences that characterize gay and lesbian cultures. (Butler, 66)*

Del cannot be characterized as a lesbian per se but her identification with her mother is neither unproblematic nor uncritical.

It is also worth considering how Del garners masculine influence at least for the purpose of writing. Interestingly, she plans to build the Sherriff Family narrative—into which, we speculate, a considerable mass of women's gossips too should make way—from the inspiration she derives from Uncle Craig. True, his manuscripts are destroyed because of her negligence, yet she is 'The Heir of the Living Body', as the name of the second chapter suggests. Another most remarkable source of her inspiration is Bobby Sherriff who provides her with the materials for writing the history and genuinely wishes her 'luck'. Gender hierarchy is not dismantled— as it is nowhere so in Alice Munro's works—but the circumference of the definitions of 'womanhood' is much broadened.

To consider our contrary position, we can interrogate what the implication might be of the adult re-configuration of the older self. This question is worth asking since it determines the narrative strategy of many of Munro's works. This study does not encompass her other texts but this *bildungsroman* establishes a narrative technique that recurs in the later fictions. Here, as Del returns to her past she does so as a woman. Feminine self-consciousness, as we lately saw, is never missing from her narrative. Nostalgic and always greedy for justifications and explanations for 'what people

do not understand', the adult Del cannot let her earlier sufferings pass into oblivion (Beer, 144). Even the very last sentence of the book evidences her desire for the gratification of her possessiveness since she views herself as the 'refused' or the deprived one. Del hears Bobby Sherriff's account and he says: 'Believe me, I wish you luck in your life" (p. 319). Del does not thank him but says 'yes'. The adult narrator penetrates her sentiment: "People's wishes, and their other offerings, were what I took then naturally, a bit distractedly, as if they were *never anything more than my due*" (p. 320; emphasis added). The tone is humbly feminine. But it never fails to highlight the rebellious passion for retributions underpinning her victimhood as a girl.

In this connection, I want to draw attention to a passage in which Judith Butler reflects on Joan Riviere's article 'Womanliness as Masquerade' (1929):

> *[The] donning of femininity as mask may reveal a refusal of a female homosexuality and, at the same time the hyperbolic incorporation of that female Other who is refused—an odd form of preserving and protecting that love within the circle of the melancholic and negative narcissism that results from the psychic inculcation of compulsory heterosexuality. (Butler, 53; emphasis added)*

Therefore, according to Butler, 'femininity' is the cultural product of 'compulsory heterosexual' societies that Riviere supports when she effaces distinction between 'genuine womanliness' and 'masquerade'. Butler claims such a 'mask' presupposes an identification of the masculine that 'preserves' and 'protects' the female object of desire and eludes homosexuality. It is more than challenging to conceive of Del-Naomi dyad as an example of female homosexuality since both belongs in the matrix of heterosexuality. This issue demands broader research than the scope of this study allows. Otherwise, conceived as a whole, the representation of the Jubilee Street 'preserves' and 'protects' the negative experiences love brought in her life; negative because love ultimately hastens her metaphoric 'death'. Thus, I infer, Del qualifies herself within the heterosexual relations in a manner that is over-protective of the past melancholy memories. Contrary to 'transcending' sex, as Virginia Woolf articulated should be the duty of the writers in her *A Room of One's Own*, Alice Munro's Del is inevitably drawn back into the 'circle'. In her later stories the foundation of womanhood is more robust; the narratives are increasingly built around past loves (obviously heterosexual) with added layers of complexities. Women often make enough progress, or shown to make so, to initially get away with the 'circle'; but their memories cannot dismiss the negativities that inform their self in childhood. Here as elsewhere, womanhood is constituted around such solid foundation of the self so that the responsibility of the description in the adult consciousness is rarely switched to the opposite sex. True, Del is shocked at the crudely 'performative' version of femininity; she is perhaps aware of the ruse of the sexual differentiation her society valorizes. But a fatal affinity is shown to exist between the desirable shape of femininity and the woman she counts herself to be. Del, after all, cannot wholly ignore the vile seduction of the article on the comeback of femininity. This is how society constructs a 'woman' and Del *becomes* a woman.

Similar kind of fatality further informs Del's desire for Garnet. It is fatal for her definition of desire is not unmixed 'love' as she confesses: "We had seen in each other what we could not bear, and we had no idea that people do see that, and go on, and hate and fight and try to kill each other, various ways, then love some more" (p. 302). It is the same kind of duality that determines all her actions. The pronoun 'we' implies complementarity so that Garnet and she seem to be the two faces of the same coin. Interestingly, solidarity immediately falls apart: "And already I felt my old self—old devious, ironic, isolated self—beginning to breathe again and stretch and settle…" (p. 303). Is it this desire, then, that reinstates in her the 'old' self and recuperated her individuality when she resists French's attempt to baptize her? What role does this Janus-faced desire play in her writings?

In reply to these I will examine the nature of her aesthetic sensibility in relation to desire. Del's desire for men does not stand apart from her instinctive feeling for the entire locality she leaves behind. She returns to the Jubilee Street in her novel because of 'the beauty and wholeness' its novelistic transcription might evoke (p. 308). However self-destructive her desire for Garnet apparently is, the adult Del attends to the beauty of relationships too. This sense of 'beauty' is neither explicitly egoistic like that of Uncle Bill who grossly prospers in America nor that of abnegation or resignation her aunts nurture by 'preferring not to', but poised between the polarities. She analyzes: "Like certain subtle harmonies of music or colour the beauties of the negative were beyond me. Yet I was not ready, like my mother to deny that they were there" (p. 48). This initial aesthetic feeling is modified and crystallized in the end into Munro's famous quotation about writing memory-based-fictions: "[What] I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together—radiant, everlasting" (p. 319). Such *jouissance* requires equal keenness to failure and triumph, retrogression and progress, loss and restoration. Even if the

woman is 'Otherized', careful memorization of pains and losses attempts to recover its lost authority. Traversing along the circle of desire thus inscribes the emasculated, disempowered female self.

Further, it is now easy to understand why certain 'attitudes' that Beer talks of, prevails in Del's representation of men. Restoration of female authority is done at the expense of 'stereotyping' of most of the male characters who in one way or other, had previously eclipsed her power.

Conclusion

One must remember Alice Munro treated womanhood as more than mere fictional enactment. In her 2013 Nobel Prize interview, she affirmed herself as a woman. She did not draw dividing line between the genders; rather incorporated the highest amount of possible diverse experiential ingredients within the umbrella-term 'woman'. Consequently, over her careers she has explored multiple dimensions of the lives of girls and women. As the incidents of the novel end with 'Real Life', in which the heroine must undertake her quest to materialize her ambition as a novelist, that experiential or material paradigm, I believe, can never be undermined. Munro's life as a wife/mother supplied her with materials for her memory-oriented writings. Her memories are of a society where

heterosexuality, as far as this novel shows, is the most legitimate practice of society. The adult Del, therefore, critically interrogates all the conflicted aspects of a girl's/woman's life in the realm of compulsory heterosexuality.

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