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Adolescent Challenges in Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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Abstract:

The present paper examines the selected short stories of Alice Munro's *The Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) that portrays a true picture of a quasi-rural Canadian society at the time of Great Depression. In delineating the stories of surface realities, she delves deep into the female characters' psyche, their struggle of growing up as adolescent girls in 40s and 50s society when Canadian values were on the making. The proposed study is significant as it focuses on author's use of social realism, geographical setting and narrative technique to unravel the mystery of the society, especially prejudice against women. The methodology used in the present study is analytical. Feminist and other critical theories have been taken in support of in analysing the characters. Thus, the study is an endeavour to show the challenges of adolescent girls and their unheard voices so succinctly that the readers are driven from surface to the heart of the truth and it draws the attention of the world at large in neutralizing the negative discourse that prevail against women.

Keywords: Social realism, Adolescent, Narrative, Identity, Locale, Marginal.

Dance of the Happy Shades reflects Munro's concern for the society and as a woman she herself suffered the societal prejudices what was written back creatively in 1968 in Canada and subsequently it was published in 1973 in the United States. The author's collection is based on the autobiography which forms the new fiction of collective self. The ambiguities prevalent in those times against women in Canadian society are portrayed in subtle nuances through the characters which can be termed as her social realism. Post industrial revolution in Europe during nineteenth century witnessed social and economic inequality, numerous social evils in society and novelists like Dickens and Thackeray in Britain came up with aesthetic of realism depicting life in its universal appeal. The tradition was followed by many American writers who depicted life of the marginal people to create textual and social space. Munro in Canada has followed the tradition as avant-garde Canadian writer.

Munro endeavoured to capture the everyday life of Canadian society of her time reflecting not only the social reality, but also delving deep into the psychological moorings of the protagonists' complex motivation and unconscious desires. Her own childhood and schooling are marked by bitter experience of Canadian society. Life in school was dominating, discriminating, vulgar and full of violence. She learnt to survive against those adversities what she described later in *Who Do You Think You Are?* In an interview, Munro has asserted that she wanted her stories to give the readers 'intense, but not connected, moments of experience' because that is how she saw life, as fragments rather than as a continuum (qtd. Rasporich : 36). The quality of her work could be judged by the value and impression she created in the collection of short stories and to quote from Henry James, it is an 'air of reality' (4) that makes it so penetrating : "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" (James:5).

The paper attempts to highlight the skills of her characterization and storytelling through which she has made the challenges of the women protagonists conspicuous. A few basic tools what she has used are realism, geographical location, regionalism and narrative technique. Realism is the result of her difficult childhood ridden by poverty, fear, injustice and so forth. Characters are true to life with the author's sympathetic presence through the marginal people of the society. Her style is individual and cannot be traced to a particular tradition or development even though she was influenced by short story writers like Edna O'Brien, Katherine Mansfield, O' Cooner , who had the ability to transform an ordinary place to a unit of real world with real people. Realist painters like Ken Danby, Christopher Pratt also influence her to present a story with photographic impression. The other tools and techniques are discussed while analyzing the individual stories.

The collection comprises fifteen stories of which a selected ones such as 'Walker Brother Cowboy', 'Thanks for the Ride', 'Day of the Butterfly', 'Boys and Girls', 'Red Dress-1946', and 'Dance of the Happy Shade' are discussed. The stories are largely unrelated, although certain themes and characters appear again and again. Most of these stories were written during the Fifties and Sixties when Munro was just emerging from the period of her life as a young mother and dependent wife and the ingredients are autobiographical as the stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* have reflect her childhood experiences as 'Walker Brother's Cowboy' draws from her experience of going with her father to visit a woman who teaches her to dance; 'Red Dress-1946', from her mother sewing her a dress; 'The Peace of Utrecht', from the experience of returning home after her mother's death, and being confronted with her mother's clothes. In an unpublished interview with Gardiner, Munro admitted them as 'personal stories' because they draw on her own experiences –selected, reshaped and recombined to convey an emotional reality.

The setting of the stories seems to be of 1950s or even 1940s and represents the Canadian life in that very day. From the lines mentioned in 'The Peace of Utrecht' we can infer the context and time of these stories. "the whole town, its rudimentary pattern of streets and its bare trees and muddy yards just free of the snow... dirt roads where the lights of cars

appeared, jolting towards the town, under an immense pale wash of sky (123). During this period, Canada was at its height of short fiction. Munro depicted the characters located mainly in south western Ontario and the Pacific coast. So, there is reflection of specific geographical location that bears upon the characters, hence is the tool of regionalism. But her fiction has marked distinction with provincialism. The flora and fauna, customs, traditions, etc. have influenced the characters and plots, but there is no center-periphery struggle. The adolescent struggle that grew out of that geographic location resembles every society where women are treated unfairly. Munro's regionalism provides a sense of identification for a specific class through a specific environment.

In an interview with Graeme Gibson, Alice Munro has made an interesting comment that “I'm not a writer who is very concerned with ideas. I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very excited by what you might call the surface of life, and it must be that this seems to me meaningful in a way I can't analyse and describe” (241). This ‘Surface of Life’ refers to the everyday ordinary situation which is replete with disguises and deceptions. Munro writing about ordinary people in ordinary situations creates a portrait of life in all of its complexities. In her richly textured stories, she explores the nuances of relationships, the depths of emotions, and the influence that one's past has on the present. With a few details, she is able to evoke someone's personality or an entire geographical region. She is a master at creating a short story that is as fully developed as a novel. With the publication of her first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* she established herself as a distinctive Canadian voice firmly rooted in the Lake Huron country of southwestern Ontario. It explores the intimate experience of girls and young women who have to pay the price of not conforming to the societal constraints. The collection is also critically acclaimed by the New Yorker Magazine as:

... The background in these stories is beyond all doubt authentic. The interiors of the houses, the views from their windows, the walks the people take on the roads and streets of the places where they live—all these, and the weather, are made so real that a reader who had never heard of Canada would understand, and perhaps even half recognize, the world Alice Munro is describing. ...so that in the end the stories can be compared to a series of excellent, irreplaceable photographs in which every leaf, every thread, every stick of furniture is as clear and clean-cut as the day the camera clicked, while the human hands and faces have faded away into a blank place that is beyond recall. (186)

The setting does not limit the themes of the stories of Munro. Like Hardy and Faulkner, by restricting her canvas geographically, she has widened her imagination to explore a wide range of themes as coming of age, growing up, love and sex, family relationship, journey of an artist. In this collection of short stories, Munro begins with a questioning exploration of the dependency of women. Here present and past mingle to exhibit the emotional and psychological evolution and development of the characters and establish the process of self-discovery of protagonists. Martin Levin appreciates stories of this collection as: “alive and well in Canada, where most of fifteen tales originate like fresh winds from the North creates a solid habitat for her fiction – southwestern Ontario, a generation or

more in the past – and is in sympathetic vibration with the farmers and towns people who live there” (588).

Child and young persons in the stories learn the truth about the adult world and behavior of the social outsider within the small-town milieu. It deals with the issues of coming-of-age for a young girl in a patriarchal society where she rebels against traditional gender restrictions. In Munro's stories, the female experience is expressed by the rebelling voices of young girls who despite patriarchal as well as mothering structures try to find their individual voices. Munro states that women's movement has radically changed the relationship between the man and woman. The changing roles of women and its impact on the society have been exploring and interesting topics for the authors. Munro narrates the real life situations of girls and women in this first collection of stories.

We find that the narrator in Munro's fiction is a young girl who carefully observes life, not making judgments but noting all the peculiarities in the world around her. That world is authenticated by the small textures, the descriptions of setting, matters of dress, standards of conduct, mannerisms of speech, assumptions and attitudes which specifically characterized the small Ontario town in the 1940's. There is a documentary quality to the best of Munro's fiction (Stouck: 260).

Her narrative techniques include geographical setting, environment characters and they are organized through plot to lay bare the specific emotion of a particular character. Most of the stories in this collection are narrated from the perspective of a child or an adolescent. Again in delineating her story she maintains her point of view from an angle of injustice that was meted out to a woman. Along with first person narrative, she also involves an intrusive narrator who further gives clarification to the hidden recesses of protagonist's psychology and her emotional reactions in a given situation. Thus, she moves from the plot to the interior of the character's mind and justifies their actions. Child's perspective generally differs from that of an adult as the world of a child has its own distinguishing entity which is completely different from that of an adult. Children do not possess the same felicity as adults to assimilate all the morals and ethics of an adult society. Their knowledge of right and wrong relies heavily on what they have understood and imbibed emotionally as well as rationally from their surroundings, their peers and elders. The main characters tried to explore their identities as they began the process of discovering their own entity. Most of the stories of this collection delve on the ontological questions on being and becoming and around a dichotomy and it is what H. Dahlie observes:

...between happiness and despair, between freedom and captivity....The author's use of a first-person narrator in eleven of these fifteen stories emphasizes her concern with the subjective dimensions of reality, and the fact that the narrator or reflector of the action is in most cases a young and sensitive girl anticipates the shifting nature of this reality (45).

‘Walker Brothers Cowboy’ is a story about an adolescent girl and her differing and contrasting attitudes toward her mother and father, with particular focus on the event by which she gains knowledge about her father especially and the adult world at large. This story is based on the real event as portrays the social and economic decline of the Laidlaw family. Munro has stated: When I was a much younger child, my father took me for some reason I’ve forgotten to that woman’s house, and she taught me how to dance. There was something about the revelation of this whole Catholic style of life that seemed much freer and jollier and poorer - if you can imagine poorer than ours!”(Tausky:62).

The very opening line of the first story does not provide any background information regarding the plot or characters but directly drives the readers into action. “After supper my father says, ‘Want to go down and see if the Lake’s stillthere?’(Dance 1).This is the revolutionary technique which was adopted in the early twentieth century by Katherine Mansfield and nourished in the subsequent years by renowned authors as one of the important features of short story. Munro has employed this technique in her unique way to give a fresh and innovative outline to her stories.

The story’s second line places the girl’s mother within her domestic environment, involved in an activity that traditionally defines the role of wife and mother: “We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light, making clothes for me against the opening of school”(Dance 5). The girl indirectly imparted an increased sense of entrapment, a sort of imprisonment as she reflected while her walk to the lakefront pass a group of children. “I don’t know them . . . because my mother keeps my brother and me in our own yard, saying he is too young to leave it and I have to mind him”(13). The main protagonist idealizes her father and avoids her mother as she is mocked at by neighbors and friends. The young girl accompanies her jubilant father on one of his sales trips while her mother stays at home. Her trip with father takes her a step ahead from the mother’s enclosed world to outside life, a way for her to find selfhood and maturity.

In the company of her mother she is compelled to be –a “a creation, wretched curls and flaunting hair bow, scrubbed knees and white socks ‘all I do not want to be’” (5). While in her trip she can be herself with her “knees unscrubbed, my hair unringleted” (6). The mother figure symbolizes as a bodiless clown disguised into a lady in her “summer hat of white straw”, and she merely consists of a pair of sewing hands (5).Though she is dependent on her mother yet she searches for her selfhood and identity. She does not want to be bounded by the constraints imposed on her by the society. Her search for individuality, beyond the enclosed female world where she feels like merely 'a creation' is encouraged by her father’s cheerful and simple behavior. Though she is still a young child and not able to comprehend what is expected from the society due to her gender. The mother tries to nurture the girl according to patriarchal structures of the society; the girl wants to free of all these clutches of the society.

Beneath the genial and familiar surface, it is a story about : loss and separation, potential relationships that cannot finally come together, ordinary livesthat cannot be fully

understood and things in the world that are rendered unstable and unknowable in the face of time and history. It raises a kind of ontological question by juxtaposing two realities before us: one, a textual dimension of reality of life, that is to say, what we read and interpret and the other, what something we understand from an epistemological point of view. Stories are presented to undermine our confidence in our ability to understand certain things - people's lives, things in the world, the notion of time - thus preventing us from treating these things as though they were stable or reliable entities.

Munro has characterized a number of unmarried and abandoned women in her works to explore the other possibilities for women. In spite of all odd circumstances and having been rejected by Ben, Nora, who is now middle-aged, crude and coarse, survives alone on a poor farm with her blind mother. Though sometimes Nora felt the sad implication of being alone but "Nora is a vibrant soft flash of color in her soft brilliant dress and a hearty woman capable of uproarious behavior and active invitation (Rasporich: 40). In most of the stories we find that the women characters, despite undergoing a tortuous path of life's journey, they manage to stand on their own and do not blindly conform to the rules of the society. In this collection Munro has portrayed the poor, primitive women who are not very mature and even impotent in their defiance but are less emotionally dependent on men than the central persona.

'Day of the Butterfly' is a heart touching story about a dying child of sixth grade class and the narrator's depiction of her first experience with death poetically. The narrator expresses the deep outrage towards the social authority of the small town towards those who make the 'unjust rules and conditions of our lives'(107). The tender girl feels that in her society the social standings of girls and women are dependent on that of their fathers or their husbands. Women do not have their individual identity but their identity is defined in terms of their relation with men. The narrator unravels "the immense, complicated bows of fine satin ribbon" (108) which are made by mothers as a gift to Myra's last birthday party and which symbolize the artificial, decorative function of women. She will let her brother pull apart Myra's gift of a leatherette case with a mirror and cosmetics. She expresses her outrage that the society expects her to dress up and be on display. By portraying Myra as a "fascinating object Munro has possibly created only a dress-up doll and perpetuated the artificial, masquerading psychology of women" (Hooper: 37).

In 'Boys and Girls', Munro shows the humiliated and anguished psychology of a child, who is compelled by the society to fit in the so-called definition of a girl. She is fascinated by the freedom and power enjoyed by the males. But she finds herself threatened by the word 'Girl' used by the salesman as it implies to her something she "had to become" and not something she was (119). She is torn between her deep urge to assist her father in his outdoor work at the farm house and her mother's wish to get help in domestic chores. Mother's sphere of things, for the protagonist, is uninteresting and repressive while the work of the fox farmer father seems to her interesting and exciting as she said: "It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, in my father's service, was ritualistically important"(117). Her visiting grandmother told her the

rules set by the society for the girls. Girls do not slam doors; girls sit with their knees together; girls mind their proper business. She realized that as a girl she is not free to have the experiences according to her wish. Identification with her father and his fox-farm work is not allowed; in reality she is expected to help her mother with women's work.

The girl finds herself no longer free to help her father in the works of farm but to be restricted in conventional household works. Adolescence is difficult stage for a woman because as a child she has been an autonomous individual but in adolescence she has to accept the social pressure to become a passive object. In this story Munro has depicted the true psychology of young girls in the society. Simon De Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex' has asserted: But for the young woman... there is a contradiction between her status as a real human being and her vocation as a female. And just here is to be found the reason why adolescence is for the women as difficult and decisive a moment (qtd. in Rasporich: 38).

'Red Dress' deals with a girl who finds herself in an environment where girls are expected to become pleasing objects. It represents the teenager impatience with parents and their discomfort in their own skin. It is enigmatic that a girl with a stiff new brassiere, red velvet dress, curled hair, deodorant and cologne, is compelled to abandon the safe 'boundaries of childhood' (151) to enter into adult world by being an alluring object to others. A thirteen-year old girl has to go for her first high-school dance that represents a threshold to the adulthood and the young narrator is quite hesitant as well as fearful and wants to hide her puberty 'behind the boundaries of childhood' (151). Further, she senses the dependency on her mother and the female world whereas, she has a strong need of defining herself as an individual. She is critical of her poor mother's efforts to make a new dress for her to attend the dance. The mother dresses her in a 'new stiff brassiere' (152) and turns her into something that she is not. She feels alienated as well as humiliated. Simone de Beauvoir argues that girls are taught to please and hence are treated like living dolls (295). When she agrees to dance with a boy's appeal, she conforms to the expectation of her mother as well as society. But psychologically she rebels against being a sexual object expected by a patriarchal society. Though the narrator is not able to overcome the norms of the patriarchal society but she challenges the traditional gendered roles and tries to find an alternative and solution to life.

'Dance of the Happy Shades' the title story deals with a group of young mothers who are quite hesitant to attend the annual recital party organized by Miss Marsalles. The attitude of mothers towards the house of Miss Marsalles refers to their repulsive and arrogant nature. In the recital, Dolores Boyle plays a song called 'Dance of the happy shades', which denotes the freedom of great unemotional happiness. Rae McCarthy Macdonald commented that "the reader understands that the retardation of those children 'who are all not there' has been a symbolic externalization of the hidden out ultimately graver, retardation of those smug social survivors, the nervous mothers and their normal children" (367). These retarded children conveys the innocence and ability to spiritual revival which they have nurtured in the company of Miss Marasalles and have given a live presentation in their music. The song played by these children represents a small and naïve world of the retarded children who are ignorant of the worldly pursuits and hence, the dance of the happy shades. In this story

Munro has rightly explores the theme of social inequality and inhibitions and exposes the insecurities of self-righteous and self-centered characters.

'Thanks for the Ride' is the story which is told from male perspective and portrays the condition of female worker whose father was beheaded and who is at the mercy of middle-class men. The title of the story itself refers to the intercourse. Dick and George pick up two poor local girls Adelaide and Lois, for the enjoyment in a barn. After being picked up on the street, Lois insists on going home to dress up nicely for her date. Further, Lois, the protagonist woman, is exploited against her sexual and class position. After spending a night of cold passion with Dick, she addressed him with abusive irony: 'Thanks for the ride' (58) what reminds the feminist concern that one is not born woman but one is made so. After losing his virginity in the barn, Dick also feels dejected and remorseful and remembers part of the Latin aphorism, "Omne animal... Triste est" (56). He finds Lois as a cold and rumped girl who is utterly closed up in herself. Though he wanted to talk to her but he realizes that he cannot find any words that would seem 'even half-true'. So he drops her home, but as he drives away, he hears her calling after him in a 'loud, crude, female voice, abusive and forlorn : ' thanks for the ride' (58)! This is quite ironic as the words of deep agony of Louise, if deconstructed, speaks of her protest against such crude treatment. 'Ride' is substitutive of pain that could be ecreiturefeminine language and feeling.

'The Time of Death' is the oldest story in the collection written in 1953 and first published in Canadian Forum in 1956. The plot of the story is based on a real death that took place in Wingham, the hometown of Alice Munro. The story takes place at a time when the first snow fall of the year is expected at any time but has not arrived yet. The story surrounds the death of Benny, the youngest and eighteen month old child of Leona Parry, the mother. Patricia is the eldest daughter in the four Parry children. Patricia is in sharp contrast to her mother, whom we've seen until now as hysterical, generally disliked, and probably negligent. Patricia tries to be the responsible one: "She did things the way a grown-up does; she did not pretend things." One of those grown-up things is to clean the house. So she puts a pot of water on the stove to boil for cleaning; and her retarded brother Benny somehow tips the pot over and is scalded to death. Patricia reacts to the situation in an indifferent and grown up manner. She pretends as nothing has happened. Benny is a late talker which indicates that he might be suffered from maternal neglect.

A critical analysis of the story suggests that Leona's hysteric state is just not an individual problem; she is made so by the prolonged pressures of poverty and neglect from family and society. Whereas her daughter, Patricia, keeps her composure calm at the time of tragedy and she tries to behave decently at everywhere. After the funeral, everybody returns to one's usual work; even Leona's anger for the Patricia goes down and then one day Patricia breaks down and yells at the sight of the scissor man which is understood by neighbors as : "you'd think she'd gone off her head." She's just like Leona' (50). Patricia's delayed reaction symbolizes delayed snowfall and the people around represent the theme of alienation and rootlessness. Patricia is the design of her hysteric mother, who is unstable and vulnerable

behind her matured adult like behavior and the theme of death is a tool around which two female characters are juxtaposed for unveiling the gloom against women in Canadian society.

Conclusion:

Most of the stories of this collection revolve round a familiar world and a dilemma faced by girls in adolescent age. A girl or a young woman often comes across a key moment in her life, when she becomes aware of the adult world of reality in relation to her chaotic potential of sex and complexity of gender roles in the society she lives in. This is usually combined with a merciless dissection of family relationship, sexual difference, loss and pain. Munro's female characters do not want to conform to the conventions of the society. The stories in this collection are concerned with the individual's will to survive, a challenge and struggle which is universal and can be identified by everyone. The adolescent challenges of girls and women, while they negotiate social norms that treat them differentially, open up fundamental human experience and a new discourse against marginal people.

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