GENDER DISCOURSE IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET LAURENCE'S AND ALICE MUNRO

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ABSTRACT

"Many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art, with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is radically diminished" - Susan Gubar

In the Nineteenth Century, gender was a matter of much public discussion and debate in Britain and the United States. "The Woman question" as it was called, focused on whether gender should be a factor in granting or limiting rights, like voting rights; it also focused attention on men and male social roles, asking questions about the nature and function of gender. Some of the primary questions were: Is gender innate and biological? Is it the product of socialization and environment? Is the family structure eternal, universal, divinely ordained, natural--or socially constructed and thus variable? Behind these, lies the basic question: Why is gender important? It is because "Gender," meaning the differentiation, usually on the basis of sex, between the social roles and functions labeled as "masculine" and "feminine," is universal. Gender stands as central feature of all cultures, throughout the world. Gender is so ubiquitous as a topic of study because of our capacity, in the Twentieth Century, to "deconstruct" gender categories. Therefore, it is this nature of gender which forms the driving force of this paper. As to how Gender discrimination paralyses women in general and the Canadian women in particular, and their struggle to rise above Gender bias, is seen through the experiences of the protagonists of the two Canadian women writers Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro.

The feminist perspective of Margaret Laurence is taken into consideration for the purpose of this Paper and as to what this perspective envisages is essentially the struggle of the writer to penetrate the woman's search to discover the self as the means of confirming self-fulfillment. Moving further, the novels of the post 1960s Canadian women writers have the purpose of making women critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structure, thereby infusing in humanity the need to recognize the claims of women for their rightful place in any social structure throughout the world. Further Canada as a nation, is large in size with minuscule population living in isolation from each other due to vast stretches of snow and severe snowdrifts that threaten to occur without warning. Thus, the common factor that underlies the feminist perspective of any woman writer in Canada is what Margaret Atwood calls as the 'Survival' motif. It is for this reason that Atwood has named her major critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972).

Thus, Laurence tackles the fragmentation of the human soul, the mass media's proliferation of commercial and artificial images of identity, the denial of life-fostering instincts or their manipulation into pathological avenues of expression, conformist adaptation to the status quo, the destruction of the physical environment, and the loss of community among men and women. Laurence's profound sensitivity to the numerous factors that shape an individual's experience in Canadian society is clearly manifested in her ability to convey the emotional and psychological aspects of her characters' in relation to such determining factors as gender, class, race and ethnicity.

'Furthermore, the most prolific writer of our times, Alice Munro has a rightful claim to be honoured with the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her writings explore and present a new genre of writing; a collection of short stories with the cohesiveness to be called a novel. Her themes encompass a whole gamut of women's writing, exclusively penetrating the female psyche of the Canadian woman. Her works make exciting reading and the nuances present in them invoke introspection on the part of the reader, both male and female, to the extent of reconsidering their roles in a civilized society, for both men and women are two sides of the same coin. In the early days of Modernism and during the 1950s, Alice Munro developed the kind of modernism that one finds not only in James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence but also in their European contemporaries like Thomas Mann and Italo Svevo. There is the same tendency towards the *Bildungsroman*, whether manifest in a novel or disguised in a cluster of related stories; the sense of a society observed with oppressive closeness from within by someone who wants to escape; the concern for the appalling insecurities created by what was then called social climbing and now, is called upward mobility; the agonized awareness of the perils of moving through the transitions of life, from childhood to adolescence, from adulthood to old age, all this in addition to overcoming gender discrimination. Alice Munro was dealing with a society that represented a decaying established culture

rather than a frontier one. The problem of those who inhabited it was not that of conquering the wilderness without being destroyed in the process, but to escape before one had been dragged down into the mental stagnation and physical decay of the marginal farmlands of Ontario.

While the Canadian feminist perspective of Margaret Laurence is liberal in nature, that of Munro is more of existentialist. The Paper also enables scope to explore Short Fiction from a new generic perspective customized to suit the story line without much loss to coherence.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Perspective, Survival, Genre, Bildungsroman, Stream of conciousness

About the Author

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Gender Discourse in the Novels of Margaret Laurence's and Alice Munro

'Survival' of both geographical and psychological constraints, is regarded as the *leitmotif* of Canadian literature. The women protagonists in the novels of Canadian women writers like Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are engaged in the dialectics of survival. "It is essential for them to redefine the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence (Singh 121). For these women protagonists, survival means no "dominance or submission, but that all individuals be free to determine their own lives as equals" (Sawyer 372). The feminist perspectives of these writers are more an appeal or a plea than an aggressive demand like that of their other counterparts. The two novels: *The Fire-Dwellers* and *Lives of Girls and Women* by Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro respectively, are selected for the purpose of this paper as it is in these two novels that both the writers envisage how Gender differentiates between the social roles and functions labeled as 'masculine' and 'feminine,' delimit the lives of the protagonists in seeking joy and fulfillment through what they otherwise wish to experience. The two protagonists Stacey MacAindra and Del Jordan are chosen in particular because the first is a housewife and the second an aspiring writer and as to what they have in common is being victims of gender discrimination which hinders their progression of giving full expression to life because they have to function within the socially-construed framework of gender. Therefore, what follows is a study of their intrinsic and extrinsic psychological landscape to trace the nuances of their feminist perspectives as means to overcome gender discrimination.

To begin with, Margaret Laurence's most prominent works are known as the Manawaka novels. Each novel of the Manawaka series, therefore presents: "Unforgettable portraits of women wrestling with their personal demons, striving through self-examination to find meaningful patterns in their lives." Whether a Canadian writer writes about men, women, or animals, he/she has the humility to make his or her complaint more of a plea than a demand. She says, "There really is room for an unlimited number of different points of view" (Gibson 90).

The Fire-Dwellers (1969) is the third novel of the Manawaka series which speaks about the fears and anxieties of Stacey MacAindra an ordinary housewife who lives in a manipulative society characterized by brutality, deception and masked violence. Stacey's fears, both personal and social, are generated largely by her society. The novel covers several months in Stacey's thirty-ninth year, ending on the eve of her fortieth birthday. Much of the action takes place within Stacey's mind as she struggles with herself, her husband, their four children and the society, to wring a partial victory from besetting difficulties. It is also through this novel that Laurence is trying to establish her feminist perspective when she says: "I'm 90% in agreement with Women's Lib. . . . The change must liberate them (men) as well" (Atwood 23). Here, Laurence takes the stance of a liberal feminist when she says "We can't go to war against them. The change must liberate them as well" because, Laurence does not encourage her protagonists to rebel against the patriarchal society but to reconcile to the system by living up to the expectations desired by society, in playing their roles to the hilt while simultaneously reeducating their men by evoking their empathy for the suffering women.

In *The Fire-Dwellers,* Stacey is portrayed by Laurence as "lonely, bewildered, frustrated, desperately trying to find the person she once thought she was in other words, a waif caught up in the universal search for identity….but she is a person worthy of respect for her valiant fight simply in coping from day to day," (Grosskurth 227) an aspect which her husband fails to recognize and becomes the cause of Stacey's frustration. The real problem that Stacey encounters lies in the fact that society forces too many roles upon her in terms of wife, mother, neighbour and mistress and all that she knows is that she is expected to be beautiful, efficient and radiantly cheerful. In portraying Stacey, Grosskurth further says Laurence has "managed to scratch through the cutaneous layers to the essential core of a human being" (Grosskurth 227).

Stacey's role in the novel reminds the reader of Laurence's own ideals about being a wife and mother. In this regard, Laurence herself says "I always knew I wanted to be a writer. There was never any doubt in my mind about that. But for many years, when I first started writing seriously, I felt enormous guilt about taking the time for writing away from my family" (Atwood 23). Further, in the essay "Face to Face," Atwood sums up Laurence's views on the Women's Lib Movement by recollecting her words: ". . . You weren't supposed to say those things out loud, to question the assumption that the woman's only role was that of housewife. I don't believe most housewives are happy just doing housework" (24). When Laurence says "you weren't supposed to say those things out loud," she points out that the problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that, women have been forced into silence, euphemism or circumlocution. In this regard, Virgnia Woolf, while comparing herself with Joyce, noted the differences between their verbal territories: "Now men are shocked if a woman says what she feels (as Joyce does). Yet literature which is always pulling down blinds is not literature. All that we have ought to be expressed – mind and body – a process

of incredible difficulty and danger" (Woolf 164). This is very true of *The Fire-Dwellers* because as a writer Laurence never felt particularly oppressed but this novel of hers received sexually biased reviews from some of the male reviewers. These reviewers did not find the book to be bad but just one they did not want to read because Atwood says, "they found Stacey threatening. Stacey was a wife and mother, and if their own wives and mothers had thoughts like hers they just didn't want to know about them" (24). These men tried to provide another alternative to Stacey's predicament by suggesting that she should pull herself together and perceive the causes of her misery from a different angle altogether rather than taking to an extra-marital affair. But, the men fail to realize that, on Stacey's part, the affair is only an attempt to find some personal space. Here again, the men fail to grasp a similar situation in the novel in which, Mac, Stacey's husband has a brief liaison with a young girl at his office. Mac confesses to Stacey that he did have a sexual encounter with Delores Appleton and tries to reason out by saying: "Only once, though. And only after I thought you'd gone to bed with Buckle" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 7). Furthermore, he says that the girl desired a long lasting relationship to which Mac did not oblige though. To this, Stacey simply reacts without any jealousy or guile and says "Yes. I can see that. I guess she does. Mac-- I don't mind honestly" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 221). Stacey does not feel bitter about Mac's escapades because she truly understands his frustrations which are so similar to her own. Thus, from the above lines, one can analyze the difference in the perspectives of men and women.

In this context, in *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Gilbert and Gubar envisage that the nature and difference of women's writing lies in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity; the woman writer experiences her own gender as a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy. The woman writer inscribes her own sickness, her madness, her anorexia, her agoraphobia and her paralysis in her texts. In the light of this view held by the two writers, Laurence says "There ought to be a different category for women who are writers and who need grants for housekeepers. Right now they won't give money for this. Male writers can get grants to take leave from their jobs, women can't. But housework is work" (Laurence, "Ten Years" 28). At a particular stage, Stacey laments" I don't have anytime to myself. I'm on duty from seven thirty in the morning until ten thirty at night" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 159). Thus, Stacey takes up a full time job which is unpaid for or not rewarded in any way and yet since "differentiation takes place in relation to the mother (the primary care taker), attitudes toward mother 'emerge in the earliest differentiation of the self', 'the mother, who is a woman becomes and remains for children of both genders the other, or object'" (Laurence, "Ten Years" 28).

Further, what Stacey desires, is seen in Chodorow's work which suggests that shared parenting, the involvement of men as primary caretakers of children, will have a profound effect on our sense of sex difference, gender identity and sexual preference. Therefore, Laurence, before she began *The Fire-Dwellers* asked herself "who on earth, . . . is going to be interested in reading about a middle-aged housewife, mother of four?" (Chodorow 11) But, the unselfish service rendered by Stacey to her family and accepting her role as "the other, or object" by her husband and her own children and the added anguish she feels for them everyday by taking upon herself all the frustrations and despair, is definitely a laudable task worthy of recognition and appreciation from all, in any human society.

Margaret Laurence made three or four false starts on *The Fire-Dwellers* over a ten-year span. She was desperately seeking a form to convey a sense of simultaneity with complexity. She firmly believes that: "The inner and outer aspects of Stacey's life were so much at variance that it was essential to have her inner commentary in order to point up the frequent contrast between what she was thinking and what she was saying" (Laurence, "A Place" 18). Thus, Laurence's conscious effort to establish the contrast and conflict between the two dimensions of Stacey's existence ultimately results in the interior landscape getting the better of the physical landscape of the novel.

In this regard, she confesses to God that "it's a worthwhile job to bring up four kids…. But how is it that I can feel as well that I'm spending my life in an unbroken series of trivialities?" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 89). At times, she tells herself "can you imagine what it is like to live in the same house with somebody who does not talk or who can't or else won't and I don't know which reason it could be" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 152). The jarring notes of dissonance and despair emanate from temperamental incompatibilities and the lack of communication between spouses. This is exactly Stacey's dilemma, wherein she fails to understand her husband's true nature and realization comes to her not until she has done enough damage to herself.

The crux of Stacey's problem is that she does not have an identity of her own. She desperately feels: "It would be nice to have *something of my own*, that's all. I *can't go anywhere as myself*. Only *as Mac's wife* or *the kid's mother*. (emphasis added) In this regard, her attempt to seek an outlet leads her to accept Buckle Fennick's offer to give her a ride in his truck and also to have a liaison with the young writer, Luke Venturi. Later on Mac confronts Stacey on the basis of Buckle's words that he had taken Stacey to bed with him. He suggests that it was the end of trust between his wife and himself as well as his friend. Contrary to his thoughts, Stacey thinks "I think Mac has fallen for that girl (his boss' secretary) and who could blame him I guess and I really think I wouldn't be so blamed mad about it if I could go and do the same thing myself with some guy but how and

anyway I think this is a despicable reaction" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 138). Hence, Stacey asks Mac" Who're you? God? (*The Fire-Dwellers* 148) suggesting that only God had the right to judge human beings because he alone is righteous and no man or woman is flawless to judge the other, based on man made values and codes.

Mac's lack of trust in Stacey, forces her to really seek consolation and solace in the embrace of Luke Venturi, a young writer who is almost ten years younger to Stacey. Three days after having met Luke, Stacey begins to design plans to enable her to see him again. She confesses to God "Okay, God, say what you like, but I damn well wish I could get away just sometimes by myself. But no, It's a criminal offense, nearly. What makes any of them think they've got the right to tell me own me have me always there not that they notice when I am only when I'm not" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 170). All that she wants to do at the moment is get out of the house. On her next meeting with Luke, they discuss Stacey's worries and scares. Luke was very eager to give a hearing to her problems. Finally, their conversation ends up in a sexual relationship as if that was the end of it all and the only thing that Stacey was looking forward to. Stacey was "surprised by the force of her own response, the intensity and explicitness of her pleasure" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 185). After having a taste of Luke's hospitality, Stacey feels "If only I could get out to see him more often… I'd like to start again everything, all of life, start again with someone like you" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 189). Stacey fails to realize the fact that life's cycle goes on and so does Stacey's life. This sort of a realization does not come so early to Stacey but at the end of the novel she tells herself "Even if you'd [Luke] been older, or I'd been younger and free, it wouldn't have turned out any simpler with you than it is with Mac. I didn't see that at one time, but I see it now" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 253).

On her third meeting with Luke, he suggests that Stacey should go with him up the Skeena River. To this, Stacey says "If I had two lives, I would. You think I don't want to?" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 209). Luke very well understands that Stacey cannot leave her children and go and hence with an undercurrent of mockery he sings: "*Ladybird, Ladybird, Fly Away Home, Your House is on fire, Your children are gone*" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 209). It is then that Stacey realizes that Luke is ridiculing her helpless condition and also he reveals to her that he is twenty four and not twenty nine. Stacey realizes that she is old enough to be his mother and that puts her to shame. She vows never to see him again. That was the end of the Stacey–Luke relationship. In a way, Luke's entry into her life helped Stacey understand life better.

From this point, Stacey tries to begin life on a new note with Mac. When she abandons Luke and returns home, she learns that Buckle Fennick is dead. Mac is shattered by the news and Stacey finds him crying in the privacy of their bedroom, "the lung wrenching spasms of a man to whom crying is forbidden" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 216). Here, Laurence is trying to suggest that it is not only women who have repressed emotions and frustrations but also men who suffer emotional breakdowns.. This realization helps Stacey to get over her complaints and frustrations and understand clearly that whatever she has gone through in the past was just inevitable.

Furthermore, she feels "I was wrong to think of the trap as the four walls. It's the world. The truth is that I haven't been Stacey Cameron for one hell of a long time now. Although in some ways I'll always be her, because that's how I started out" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 276). Routine prevails in her life and tomorrow will be the same as yesterday for Stacey. A few things will change in minor fashion, of course, but basically the structures remain intact. However, she reconciles and prays to God. "Never mind. Give me another forty years, Lord and I may mutate into a matriarch" (*The Fire-Dwellers* 281). Therefore, Laurence's portrait of Stacey MacAindra shines through as a compassionate depiction of a woman caught at a particular time of her life, in a particular time of the life cycle of women. Laurence's heroines must wrestle with the symbolic form of ultimate reality as male-gendered and with all that this representation implies both socially and culturally--for woman.

Woman in this culture, has become the victim–as has Nature–of the projection of the shadow of the rational masculine mentality that leans even more towards violence and sterility as it separates itself from its ground in matter. In this novel, Laurence tackles the fragmentation of the human soul, the mass media's proliferation of commercial and artificial images of identity, the denial of life-fostering instincts or their manipulation into pathological avenues of expression, conformist adaptation to the status quo, the destruction of the physical environment, and the loss of community among men and women.

Laurence's profound sensitivity to the numerous factors that shape an individual's experience in Canadian society is clearly manifested in her ability to convey the emotional and psychological aspects of her characters' in relation to such determining factors as gender, class, race and ethnicity. Having said so much about Laurence's feminist perspective, we shall move on to witness what Alice Munro has to offer.

Lives of Girls and Women(1971)[2], the most celebrated work of Alice Munro and the winner of the Canadian Booksellers Association International Book Year Award and the Canada-Australia Literary Prize, is a novel which deals with the protagonist Del Jordan and "especially about the growth of her mind and imagination up to the point when she begins to practice as a conscious literary artist.".(Struthers 32)

In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Munro chooses to juxtapose seemingly disconnected episodes, and places her fiction in a modern novelistic tradition. In this context, James Carscallen rightly connects *Lives* "a novel of seeing, in which a girl is slowly learning what she must see to be a writer," (Carscallan 74) to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, and matches it with Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*.

Hence, the discussion that follows here has a duality of purpose, the first being, to study the novel as a *Bildungsroman* written by a woman writer as a medium to understand how gender undermines the potential since 'Writing' is considered a male prerogative by commonly held bigotry against women and the second is to study the protagonist's struggle to overcome the physical and psychological hurdles imposed by gender discrimination that stand in her way to realize her ambition to become a literary figure. In other words, it is the study of the woman as artist who attempts to write about the female body and its varied experiences through the different phases of life. Canadian small towns, perhaps in both literature and reality, are generally marked by a "paradoxical cohesiveness that operates within a context of various forms of exclusion.(Keith 151)

Geographically and socially located as outcasts, many of Munro's female characters are relegated by their stratified community to an underclass position of indigence and social devaluation. Munro examines how gender interacts with class-based ideologies to maintain hegemony within such impoverished groups, identifying the manner in which class-based values construct boundaries that prohibit women's ambition and upward mobility, boundaries which, although restrictive, are nonetheless culturally significant to those who exist within their confines.

This self-identification within a limited location is indicative of her characters' desire to redefine themselves outside of the town's confines, a recreation of self which ultimately necessitates removal from the stifling social geography of the community.

For this matter, Munro did not take the stance of a rebellious artist in protest against what the society expected of her as a woman. She never shirked her traditional responsibilities of daughter, wife and mother but on the other hand was able to bravely sail through the doldrums of life, through a middle class marriage, to divorce, economic displacement and remarriage. Therefore her solution to the problem of the artist as woman is to instinctively convert the situation into the woman as artist, which paves the way to discuss in detail, the roles of women and codes of sexual conduct which hinder the female body and mind from achieving their goal. In this context, Del's ambition is to become a literary artist.

Writing the body explains several layers of reality in Munro's fiction. Unlike Virginia Woolf who refrained from writing about her own sexuality and renounced female passion, which is a theory of the androgynous mind and spirit, Alice Munro works closely to the core of her own feminine consciousness and through the authority of her own fragmented and transformational experience. The very consciousness and imagination of Alice Munro as a woman artist is made explicit through the character of Del Jordan in the novel, for Del is a character faithfully drawn from real life, the heroine of a fiction mirroring the modern realities in the form of constraints upon the female consciousness. Here it is clear that Del is fashioned to be what Munro is herself-- a woman writer.

In this context, James Joyce's influence on Munro has been established (Martin 120-26) for the form and title of the novel under study in this chapter clearly alludes to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, yet the opposition of "Lives" to "Portrait" as well as the sexual difference of "Girls and Women" to "Man" points to a *Bildungsroman* written against Joyce. However, this contradiction is intentional on Munro's part. Two passages can be taken as examples to show that Munro has imitated Joyce's form and subject. The first example being Munro's description of the poor and marginal folk of the Flats Road fashioned on Joyce's description in *Dubliners* and the second example is more significant in the passage illustrating Uncle Benny's address which says:*Mr. Benjamin Thomas Poole, the Flats Road, Jubilee, Wawanash County, Ontario, Canada, North America, The Western Hemisphere, The world, The Solar System, The Universe* (12).

This illustration is clear enough to state that Alice Munro has been influenced by Joyce's *Portrait*. However, this modular narrative method comes more naturally to her from her literary inheritance through Margaret Laurence and Eudora Welty, a heritage openly acknowledged. (Metcalf 57)Munro also structures Del's discoveries along a path already chosen by Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait*. Like him, Del as she progresses through life, from chapter to chapter in the novel, explores the forces of religion and sex on the shaping of her aesthetics. What distinguishes *Lives* from the *Portrait* is the female narrator of the story. It is the account of a young girl maturing into an artist despite all social taboos of a conservative society.

To have a better insight into the argument, it becomes necessary to give an outline of the plot of *Lives of Girls and Women*. To begin with, the transition of Del Jordan from childhood to adolescence through a series of episodes put before the reader, helps one gauge the expanding sense of confinement in a young girl's process of growing up, which forms the main theme of the novel. Therefore, the story of Del Jordan beckons the reader to lay great emphasis on the theme of emancipation from the perspective of a feminist quest for identity and freedom, and like the frogs in the first few lines of the novel struggling to avoid the hook, Del passes through

several stages in the narrative in which she learns to cope with the situation and wriggle free of a destructive social dicta in order to possess herself.

The first chapter of the novel "The Flats Road" was the place where Del lived as a child very close to nature and the primitive imagination of its inhabitants. This then was the milieu in which Del lived as the daughter of the foxes' farmer, Mr. Jordan.

Del's mother suffered from the tendencies of moving towards snobbery and this left a deep influence upon young Del during her formative years. The most noteworthy influence upon Del's ambition to become a writer was that of Uncle Benny at a very early stage in her life, especially for the quality of mind that he possessed and the patterns of his thoughts. She seems to accept him as a sort of spiritual fore bearer, for she could identify herself with him. Consequently Del keeps her own aspirations and desire for status concealed thus only silently acknowledging that she shares her mother's desire for culture, education and change.

In the third chapter " Princess Ida," we see Del's mother Ida Jordan's influence upon the young writer's perspective. What is noteworthy of Ida Jordan's feminist perspective is that although she admits "shyness and self consciousness, those are the luxuries I could never afford" (74), she cautions Del about the limitations of being a woman. Furthermore, Ida is well aware of her own limitations in realizing her ambition to become a learned scholar. She says "What good is it if you read Plato and never clean your toilet?" (81).

Furthermore, in the Chapter " Age of Faith", Del's observations on the United Church [her own], the Baptist Church, the Presbyterians and the Anglican Church are almost like photo reporting than what she got out of the two churches the United and the Anglican by way of worship. Nevertheless, her observations are correct to the extent that these churches were not attractive from the perspective of the youth. At this point even Del's mother fails to motivate her in using her religion constructively in her daily life and inspire her to accept the biblical perspective of living. In this context, it is a pity that the churches are inadequate in catering to the genuine spiritual need of the Canadian, which is constructive individualism.

Man has traditionally been interpreted as the controlling head and woman always faced the conflict between reason and passion. Here, Del's problem is special because she is forced by conventional society to choose between sexual union which objectifies and diminishes her and cuts off her creative potential, and the single state of the artistic or intellectual life through which she can express her selfness. This brings to Del's mind her mother's warning that: 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[…]"(193).

In this context, Del can be interpreted as Munro's living portrait of the social and psychological tensions of this female condition and its choices. Despite her resolve, Del comes under increased pressure to conform to the prevailing sexual roles of the community. However, she finally cannot accept this abrogation of self required by such a social role.

The third step that Del took is the most involved step she has yet taken in her "desire for the physicality of Garnet[…].(Thomas 113) This is an instance where it is difficult for any human being to make the right decision. It is with Garnet French that Del realizes pure physical passion, loss of her virginity and the collapse of her scholarship examination. The basic ambition then, for any person, with strong sense of personal freedom, is to escape from the trap they feel they are caught in. Therefore, "She chooses to write from the centre of her own experience, not from the periphery of someone else's and she sees her act of creation as an act of redemption also.(Atwood 193)

As for Del Jordan's literary quest, she took notes of her long lost Jubilee, but she did succeed in meeting Bobby Sheriff, a semi-sane member of the Sheriff family, the family on which Del had intended to write her novel, after changing the name sheriffs to Halloways. The significance of Del's return to Jubilee after a gap of four years lies in the warm welcome she had received from Bobby Sheriff and he was the same person who said goodbye to her on her departure from Jubilee by adding " Believe me," he said' "I wish you luck in your life", to which Del replied "Yes , I said instead of thank you" (278)

The conclusion of *Lives of Girls and Women* is that Del needed all the luck she could lay her hands on—both of mind and body. Alice Munro as a female artist admits that: I am a little afraid that the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion (and never more so than when it is most dazzling, apt and striking) an avoidable lie.(Munro 182)

Such self examination about the legitimacy of her art, and of art itself, has troubled Munro throughout her career, but, for the most part, she has chosen not to make this concern evident in her fiction. Munro distrusts the art that relies upon a trick or the virtuosity displayed in the "most dazzling, apt and striking" technique. Hence, the difference of women's literary practice, therefore, must be sought in "the body of her writing and not the writing of her body(Miller 271)

In the early days of modernism and during the 1950s, Alice Munro developed the kind of modernism that one finds not only in James Joyce and Lawrence but also in their European contemporaries like Thomas Mann and Italo Svevo. There is the same tendency towards the *Bildungsroman*, whether manifest in a novel or disguised in a cluster of related stories; the sense of a society observed with oppressive closeness from within by

someone who wants to escape; the concern for the appalling insecurities created by what was then called social climbing and now, is called upward mobility; the agonized awareness of the perils of moving through the transitions of life, from childhood to adolescence, from adulthood to old age. Alice Munro was dealing with a society that represented a decaying established culture rather than a frontier one. The problem of those who inhabited it was not that of conquering the wilderness without being destroyed in the process, but to escape before one had been dragged down into the mental stagnation and physical decay of the marginal farmlands of Ontario.

The general inclination of "*Lives of Girls and Women* is indeed that of a portrait of the artist(Woodcock 2) and the first-person voice in which the events are narrated, is quite appropriate. The eight parts (significantly they are named rather than numbered so that they seem as much stories as chapters) really serve two functions. Each part is an exemplary episode, self contained even though its characters spill over into other episodes, so that it can stand on it's own. Yet, in the classic manner of the *Bildungsroman*, each episode builds on the last, revealing another side of Del's education in life, and as the progression is generally chronological, the continuity becomes that of a rather conventional novel, which begins with the heroine's childhood and ends when as a young woman who has just allowed a love affair to divert her from winning a scholarship, she turns to the world of art and begins her first book.

Therefore, *Lives of Girls and Women* is a remarkable achievement both in human understanding and in technical prowess, presenting a psychologically and emotionally convincing episodic narrative of a questing child's development into a young woman on the edge of artistic achievement. By using a quasi-documentary form so effectively, Munro makes us aware of the imagination shaping and illuminating the gifts of an obviously vivid memory. Del Jordan's growth, besides being an examination of contrasting options available to women, is an exploration of the realities of evil, death, religion, gender, sex and art.

Alice Munro's art like that of James Joyce, deals with oppositions, contraries, tensions, inconsistencies and then resolution implied or achieved; in literary terms the oppositions produce not only ironies and paradoxes, but also moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled, at least in the imagination. It is this technique of Munro that makes her work so readable, exciting and satisfying. Hence, *Lives of Girls and Women* is a self portrait of a young woman as a young artist in rural Southwestern Ontario, presented from a first person feminine point of view to inscribe women into history and as a means to overcome gender bias.

In the two novels *The Fire–Dwellers* by Margaret Laurence and *Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro, there is sufficient evidence that the predominant theme of their perspectives is the survival; the saga of the struggle of the characters, especially to overcome the psychological hurdles for their 'spiritual survival,' forms the fictional concern of both Laurence and Munro. If there is anything particularly feminist in the perspectives of Laurence and Munro, their perspectives are certainly above labeling. Thus it is evident that the basic task of the Canadian women writers of fiction is to project the woman's search to discover the self as the means of confirming self-fulfillment. Laurence's characters assert their identity as " individuals and as members of the human race, with dignity and potential rights and responsibilities, which are insistently known to be equal to men"(Thomas 193) while it is the inner strength of her women characters to withstand happenings and situations, that forms the main strand of the feminist perspective of Munro.

The novelist in Laurence wouldn't settle for anything short of palpable life on the page, no matter how unattractive or disturbing. Laurence mentions Virginia Woolf as an early literary model, but adds that in her late twenties, " I began to feel that her writing lacked something I needed[…]. Her characters were beautifully, ironically drawn but what was lacking was ordinariness, dirt, blood, yelling, a few messy kids. Virginia Woolf's novels, so immaculate and fastidious in the use of words, are also immaculate and fastidious in ways that most people's lives are not." (Galt 73) Therefore, Laurence's works succeeded I incorporating the grit of everyday life into narratives that never shied away from the dark side of human nature yet were always underpinned by her unbreachable moral sense.

Since Munro belongs to the next generation of writers after Laurence, she projects society in more liberal terms. She presents characters who did not mind indulging in acts of 'sin,' especially fornication. However, Munro is not fully free from the nuances of the puritanical and patriarchal percepts she was exposed to in the small town of Wingham. Therefore the feminist perspective of Munro is a plea for the recognition of both feminine flaws and virtues by men, women and children who are the nucleus of any human society. In this context, Alice Munro as novelist has no excessive or limiting parameters laid down for her novels. She only appeals the reader to take a balanced view of the feminine issues, which reminds one that human existence is in itself a coin with two sides to it.

Nevertheless, the important feature common to the two protagonists in the novels under study is that the knowledge of self and the solutions to their problems were provided by the men in each of the novels. Biblically speaking: "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love." Hence whatever the perspectives of women writers and critics, be they Christian, Atheist, Agnostic, Liberal or Existentialist, their faith in their perspectives remains shattered, unless " the greatest of these is love"—of participation and responsibility.

In conclusion, it is evident that the basic conflict in the minds of Canadian women writers of fiction is essentially their struggle to discover the self as the means of confirming self fulfillment. Moving further, the novels of the post 1960s Canadian women writers have the purpose of making women "critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structure,"(Howells 4) thereby infusing in humanity the need to recognize the claims of women for their rightful place in any social structure, not only in Canada but also in other parts of the world.

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