BREATHING LIFE INTO THE DRY MANNEQUINS OF ARTIFICE IN THE SHORT-FICTION OF ALICE MUNRO

Abstract

Some spinsters are happy-go-lucky and live life to the fullest, whereas others lead depressed and unhappy lives. The seminal stories, *Walker Brothers Cowboy* and *Images,*taken from Munro's maidan publication, *Dance of the Happy Shades*published in 1968, reflect upon the childhood experiences. Munro brilliantly portraysNora Cronin and Mary McQuade, the two elderly single women, through the eyes of young girls.

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Munro skillfully presents her stories with greater resources of feeling and understanding. She notably juxtaposes the role conflicts that are blatant between the sexes. She expertly lays down the facts to reckon the behavioral changes that often lead to unprecedented afflictions. Most men take life for granted, and they normally are inclined to a host of priorities, which in turn make them irresponsible, whereas women at some age purely devote all their energies to the well - being of the families they are usually associated with. Yet, they remain and leave the world as the unsung and unacknowledged heroines. To put the same in a nutshell, theirs is an eclipsed life. They have their entrances and exits in sheer obliteration. Their birth is kept inconspicuous, their remarkable achievements are flung beyond the iron curtains, their intellect is hardly welcomed, and at the worst, they lead the life of the aliens in spite of having their own people around them.

Munro, through her women persona, glorifies the committed life of womankind. The narrator's father of *Walker Brother's Cowboy* had formerly been a fox farmer who tries hard to make the two ends meet, but finally, it becomes impossible to sustain it any longer, and he eventually vows his business to the feed company. Later he becomes a wandering salesman or rather a peddler, whose job is to go around the territory and knock at the backwoods kitchens to render his occupational service to the needy. Obviously, he is a good breadwinner for her family, but undoubtedly he fails to be the honest husband, real father, a true lover, and dependable friend.

In spite of the fact that he has run bankrupt in his former business and there is every need to restructure the battered life, he stands true to the generic flaw that is being girl-crazy. He takes the vantage of his present job to meet his former girlfriend, Nora, whom he disturbs emotionally by refusing to dance with her. This exactly is contrary to her mother's nature, who remains at home, for she is very much concerned with the household work, who often says, "I look up at that tree, and I think I am at home" *(Walker, DHS;* 6*).*

The young narrator's mother is a busy and work-minded woman who consistently sits sewing, cutting, matching, and perfecting old clothes to have an excellent outfit for her daughter. She also represents the typical feminine trait, not to while away the time by unnecessarily gossiping with the neighbours about the national calamity. The narrator's mother truly exhibits her concern towards the hazardous life that has come upon them because of their failure in the fox farming business. She earnestly strives to make amends for the irreparable damage. Occasionally she explains to her sole neighbour about their impoverished life, who sadly says, "We poured all we had into it, and we came out with nothing"*(Walker, DHS;* 4).

In fact, that was the period of an ordeal to which the whole human race was put in the 1930s. The great depression of 1930 trod the people across the globe, thus casting the planet into a dangerous, volatile, and economic insecurity. To the narrator's mother, the national calamity is not the prime one but her own. "Many people could say the same thing, these days, but my mother has no time for the national calamity, only ours"*(Walker, DHS; 4).*
In short, her mother aspires to have a simple living:

> No bathroom with a claw-footed tub and a flush toilet is going to comfort her, nor water on tap and sidewalks past the house and milk in bottles, not even the two movie theatres and the Venus Restaurant and Woolworth's so marvelous it has live birds singing in its fan-cooled corners and fish as tiny as fingernails, as bright as moons, swimming in its green tanks *(Walker, DHS;* 4*).*

From the above-quoted extract, we understand that the child narrator's mother barely cares all such physical comforts. Such modern facilities are less likely to appease her. However,the National calamity finds expression in the narrator's words: "Fate has flung us into a street of poor people, and the only way to take this, as She (her mother) sees it, is with dignity, with bitterness, with no reconciliation"*(Walker, DHS;* 4*).*

In Munro's depiction of women during the fatal Depression, there is a lot to elaborate about the sustainable contribution of women to retrieve the nation's economy. They equally suffered and strove hard to better the situation. When Munro's father, too, had incurred losses, her mother went door to door selling scarves, muffs, and caps. In Munro's second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*published in 1971, Dell's mother goes selling encyclopedias from door to door and earns a living to help her family overcome the sluggish economic crisis.

Similarly, Mary Mcquade of *Images*, the spinster cousin, moves from house to house, treating the sick. At times she is gloomy and often complaining but is a figure to be reckoned with. Big and blousy like Nora, she lets her virginal "power" (*Images, DHS;* 32) felt all around, especially in the father's family, who sometimes exhibits her reckless behaviour, for she happens to be the old maid. "Her voice was loud and hoarse, and the complaint was her everyday language" (*Images, DHS;* 31). Although she is often teased by the family about husbands, she enjoys all this teasing: "all these preposterous imagined mating" (*Images, DHS;* 31). Both Nora and Mary McQuade, despite the limitations of their singleness, symbolize the privilege of being emotionally independent, as they do not have to conform and adapt themselves to the rules set for married women.

It is important to note that the little girls watch these spinsters with interest. The girls find these women odd anddifferent from the women at home. The comparison takes place between the two kinds of women and leads to a new evaluation of women. Stereotypically the role of a spinster is relegated to that of a caretaker. Since such elderly unmarried women stayed at home, they were expected to take care of small children, elderly and sick relatives, selflessly devoting their time and energies to them mostly because they had no life of their own.

Since the mother of the child narrator of *Images* is sick, the young girl is kept under the care of Mary McQuade. Mary, in her white uniform, appears to the child narrator as an island who supervises her most of the time. Because the child's mother is ailing, she often speaks of herself gloomily in the third person: "Be careful, don't hurt Mother, and don't sit on Mother's legs" *(Images, DHS;* 33*).* That is why, the girl's dependent mother longs to be assisted, who often whimpers childishly: "Mary, I'm dying for you to rub my back. Mary, could you make me a cup of tea? I feel if I drink any more tea I'm going to bob up to the ceiling, just like a big balloon, but you know it's all I want" *(Images, DHS;* 33*).*

After Mary's arrival to the girl's house, her mother stops telling her the stories about the princes and also about her own childhood leaving her to Mary's care. The child is not happy to welcome her aunt, Mary, for she feels her presence to be a burden on her. So, she pretends as if she did not know her: "Now that Mary Mcquade had come, I pretended not to remember her. It seemed the wisest thing to do" *(Images, DHS;* 30*).*

The old maid prevails upon the little girl and forces her to do the house chores: "Head hung, like an animal chained to her side, I fed her clothespins" *(Images, DHS;* 32*).* Mary's influence on the girl is so imposing that she feels her presence everywhere in the house and in everything: "In my porridge at breakfast and my fried potatoes at noon and the slice of bread and butter and brown sugar she gave me to eat in the yard-something foreign, gritty, and depressing" *(Images, DHS;* 32*).*

In her first volume of short stories,*Dance of the Happy Shades,*Munro presents decorous spinsters who are simple and play stylized roles preordained by the Calvinist doctrines. They are treated on par with the earth mothers and primitive women. Munro recurrently makes the mention of aunties in *The Peace of Utrecht*, an autobiographical story which set a milestone in her life as a writer. In the story, the protagonist returns home after her mother's death. The mature narrator introduces us to unmarried aunties who show the way of life to womankind.

Though they look childish and their lives seem to be unfulfilled, they lead an ordered life of intricate domesticity and private ritual who often indulge in polished conversation and discreet circumlocution. They are very understanding and hardly indulge in unnecessary arguments with one another. When she visits Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, they are seen spending the afternoon "making rugs out of dyed rags" (*Peace, DHS;* 202-203). They lead a very ordered life."They get up early in the mornings, wash and powder themselves, and put on their shapeless print dresses trimmed with rickrack and white braid" (*Peace, DHS;* 203).

They patiently carry out every household chore and keep their house neat and clean with dignity and see that it is "dark and varnished, and it smells of vinegar and apples" (*Peace, DHS;* 203). Furthermore, they exhibit their sense of responsibility and carefully preserve the narrator's mother's dresses to be given to her as a token of her mother's memory. The aged aunts counsel the narrator with the propriety they believe in, but she gives them a cold shoulder. They advise her that "Things must be used: everything must be used up, saved and mended and made into something else and used again; clothes were to be worn" *(Peace, DHS;* 206*).* Here Munro comments upon their "prepossessing materialism," which was the basis of their lives.

> For the protagonist, there is no real possibility of having regular "communication with Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou who, thrown back on a tidy, virginal web of sisterhood" (*Peace, DHS;* 203*)* have become aged and dry mannequins of little substance and much artifice (*Rasporich,1990: 43).*

The old unmarried women not only lead an organized life but also stand true to the web of sisterhood. The old women respect one another and uphold the value of sisterly love towards their own sister, who is no more. Quite contrary to this, Alice Munro presents two young sisters, Helen and Maddy, who are pitted against each other. Hardly is there a chance

for having healthy Communication between the sisters,because they both suffer from different kinds of guilt about themselves and particularly about their mother. Helen states flatly at the beginning of the story: "At heart, we reject each other, and as for the past, we make so much of sharing we do not really share it at all, each of us keeping it jealously to herself, thinking privately that the other has turned alien, and forfeited her claim" *(Peace, DHS;* 190*).*

Helen saves herself at the cost of enormous guilt. Putting all her familial responsibilities aside, Helen seeking her fortunes, leaves home for good. She also leaves her ailing mother at the care of her old unmarried aunties and younger sister. She gets married and has two children. On the other hand, Maddy stays back at Jubilee to shoulder the family responsibilities. She becomes a victim to the circumstances of life because she has never learned to demand a life for herself.

After the death of the mother of Maddy's and Helen's, Maddy also wants to live life fully like her sister. But she fails to do so and wonders at her inability to fancy around. Further, she cries out at the end of the story to know why she cannot go after her personal choices like her elder sister. "The cry is appropriate to the character of Maddy who is kindly portrayed by her antipathetic sister" *(Martin,*1987: 44*). Understanding her sister's plight,* Helen advises her dissatisfied sister to get out of that cloistered house. However,at the end of the story, Helen finally agrees with Maddy that "nobody speaks the same language." Her peace with Maddy is illusionary, as she mentions in the beginning: "At heart, we reject each other" (*Peace, DHS;* 190). From the close reading of the story, we understand that Maddy cannot find an excuse to escape from Jubilee.

In her first volume of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*,Alice Munro introduces us to the poor and primitive women. In her fiction, they dissent the oddities of life with rage. They appear immature and impotent in their defiance, but they are less emotionally dependent on men. Besides being economically dispossessed, they pull through their lives like isolated individuals. The two Marsalles of *Dance of the Happy Shades*, at the first instance look:

> Too grotesque, childish, sexless, wild and gentle creatures, bizarre yet domestic, living in their house in Rosedale outside the complications of time. They belong to a passing world, their lives wholly unrealistic (*Dance, DHS;* 214-215*),* diminished by spinsterhood and, now, history *(Rasporich,1990: 43).*

Munro safely protects her town spinsters who confidently live an independent life. In her Rouge and hairdo and the brocaded dress, she is hardly real, like a figure from a masquerade, "like the feverish, fancied-up courtesan of an unpleasant Puritan imagination" (*Dance, DHS;* 217). But unlike the courtesan, Miss Marsalles belongs to no man and thus suggests independence and untamed feminine magic.

The story gains its momentum when the retarded child plays the piano better than the normal ones, with whom Miss Marsalles works out a miracle like an ancient divinity. "The music is carried through the open door and the windows to the cindery summer street" *(Dance, DHS;* 223*). Munro through her elderly single women, shows how art becomes a medium of expression. In spite of her limited mental ability, the girl performs exceptionally*

well before the audience. Miss Marsalles shows her guests how abled her differently abled pupils are. Thus the narrator can ask: "Why is it that we are unable to say-as we must have expected to say-Poor Miss Marsalles*?" (Dance, DHS;* 224*)*

In most instances, to Munro, society, and life appear to be cruel and deforming. She adds that society puts before us listless negative anchors in the minds of people that act as strong barriers. Such a continued negative force affects the lives of normal and seemingly energetic people who suffer from serious deformities. In some of her stories, the obviously defective people look confident, freer, and seem better off than those who are assumed to be normal in the societal sense. She also staunchly believes that the really maimed, the idiots, the retarded, the fatally ill women and the senile are the symbols who truly externalize the internal deformities of those who look good and proclaim to be powerful and active. So, in *Walker Brothers Cowboy*, old blind Mrs. Cronin who sits passively in her easy chair and from the hollows of whose eyes comes "a drop of silver liquid, a medicine, or a miraculous tear" (*Walker, DHS;* 12),suggests the long-accepted sorrow of her daughter Nora who could not marry the narrator's father because of a difference in religion. Though Nora, a strong woman by nature in the acceptance of the world, gets overwhelmed when she invites Ben to dance with her, her face shining with exercise and delight. Soon, she comes out of her crazy and uproarious behaviour and promptly pays him back in the same coin by not minding to repeat the direction when Ben gives Nora to invite her to his house. Hence, she becomes potent and totemic, even in her single authority. Munro investigates her psyche that has several female voices which in turn represent a host of primitive dimensions.

> In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, her portraits of isolated women, betrayed by the absence of men, are often tinted by the ancient mythology which equated women with nature and its primal power; these primal women help create an impression of the female tribe which Munro projects in her first volume of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* as the source of an independent female imagination. All of her women, the earth-mother, the primitives, the Victorian spinsters, are literally figures in relief *(Rasporich,1990: 44).*

Outside the society, they live as the other, ancient goddesses or avatars to a child's imagination permeate *Dance of the Happy Shades*. Even the spinsters suggest that they exhibit the ancient authority symbolizing themselves to be the queens of Egypt, as it is referred to in *A Trip to the Coast*by the fierce, old grandmother of undressed May. It is so, because they advance such a possibility, owing to the obviousness and the awful studiedness of their disguises.

> There is a felt privilege in the status of these women. Despite their cut off situations, they seem to be emotionally free; moreover, they do not have to conform to the rules for married women. Mary and Nora are enlarged by the author's conception of them as the figures out of memory who sustain their lives with a primitive and ancestral source. To the child's eye, they are like the mythopoeic figures who loom like Great goddesses, big breasted Nora all warmth and bulk, Mary, ferocious, with a closeness to animal life. If the girl in both stories is attracted, repulsed, and even frightened by these earthy women and their vestal order, they dearly are arresting characters who belong to a web of sisterhood more obviously championed by Munro through Mrs. Fullerton, an earth-mother type in *The Shining Houses* (*Rasporich,*1990:40*).*

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