

Del's Growth: A Typical Example of Construction of Female Self-consciousness— A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of *Lives of Girls and Women*

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Abstract: *Alice Munro is a famous contemporary Canadian women writer and the winner of 2013 Nobel Prize in literature. She is known as the "master of contemporary short stories". Munro is very concerned about the life experience of ordinary women. She always focuses on the daily trifles and details of ordinary women and describes their journey from a girl to a wife in detail, especially focusing on the psychological fluctuations and twists and turns of women. They seem fragile, but they are persistent. Munro's works are full of postmodern feminism, focusing on women's self-awareness and subjective conscious construction.*

*From the perspective of postmodern feminism, the thesis focuses on the gradual formation and evolution of the heroine's self-consciousness in Alice Munro's only "full-length" novel *Lives of Girls and Women* in the process of growing up from a girl to a woman, and how female images to jump out of the hierarchy, logical structure and linear narrative surrounded by men's words and begin to express own world.*

*The introduction gives an overview of Alice Munro and the novel *Lives of Girls and Women*, literary reviews at home and abroad, some key elements in postmodern feminism, and the significance of this thesis.*

The body section consists of three chapters: Chapter One focuses on "Del observes the adult life". Through Del's observation, the life of Uncle Benny's wife, two aunts, her mother and the teacher unfolded. Chapter Two analyzes "Self-consciousness of Del begins to construct". Del gradually began to grow up. The awakening of sexual consciousness, the doubt of belief and the excavation of herself have gradually become the theme of this adolescent girl's life. Chapter Three revolves around "Establishment and Perfection of her self-consciousness". Finally, she got rid of her fantasy and self-deception, her past mistakes and perplexity, and left home to start her real life.

The conclusion part summarizes that from the perspective of postmodern feminism, the self-growth and consciousness awakening of Del is how women break away from the role of "good women" who meet the social expectations and find their own real nature. Munro challenges the forces we take for granted and shakes the foundations of our lives. Women perceive the world in a way different from men and resist the grandeur of history with daily trivialities. Munro constructs women's value expresses her voice and embodies her choice of will by transcending feminism and returning to women's ontological experience.

Keywords: *Lives of Girls and Women*; Postmodern feminism; Female subject.

1. INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro (1931-) is a famous Canadian woman novelist. She does well in describing the dilemma of girls facing her family and fate, especially the progress of female's self-seeking. She was awarded various prizes, including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, and her work is translated into 13 languages spreading around the world. *Lives of Girls and Women* is Munro's only one full-length novel, which is also an autobiographical novel. The plot centers on a girl who lives in a small town experienced the light and darkness of women's life and became a clever, brave, and self-reliant woman from an ignorant little child. This novel is not only a presentation of the construction of female subject, but also an optimistic towards all women of various background, reflecting the value of our specific time.

The study of Alice Munro has gradually caught scholars' attention at abroad and at home. Before 2000, except for some sporadic translations, such as Mrs. Cross and Mrs. Kidd, published in foreign literature published in 1991 by Zhang Dezhong, the research on Munro in domestic literature was almost blank. The domestic critical articles

about Alice Munro started in 1993. The Office review by Jian Guoru commented on the theme, characters, and artistic techniques of Munro. In 2009, Alice Munro won the Booker Literature Award for *Runaway*, which promoted the depth and breadth of research on Munro in China. The research perspectives of Alice Munro's work in China include theme, narrative strategy, writing style, linguistic perspective, identity, and feminism. For example, in the role of male images in Alice Munro's novels on the growth of female consciousness, Zhou Zhiqin (2013) analyzes the role of male images in the patriarchal society, husband and male friend, and thinks that it is the interaction between the two sexes that makes women understand themselves more and stimulate women to play a role in male consciousness. In October 2013, after Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize in literature, Munro's fever was further upgraded in the world. But the domestic study on *Lives of Girls and Women* started later, and the quantity was relatively small, and the depth was insufficient. The first research on this work in China was the paper published by Liu Xinhui in 2000. This article is only a general description of the stories of the work. It is believed that the work not only expands the connotation of short stories, but also changes the single theme of the long story, forming Munro's unique writing style and "classic work with Canadian national color" (158). The latest research on the novel is "Harmony and Construction -- *Lives of Girls and Women*" published in June 2020. At present, there are few studies on this novel in China, most of which are concentrated on two works: *Runaway* and *Dear Life*, and it has not studied Munro's work from the perspective of postmodernism.

The research of Munro's novels by foreign literary critics mainly focuses on the following three aspects: First, the related achievements of Munro's unique narrative techniques are the most important research in the novel. Mark Nunes (1997) thinks Munro is a typical postmodernist writer. Because of the integration of many postmodern writing techniques in her work, such as the continuous transformation of narrative perspective, multiple story levels and mosaic story structure. Mark thinks that the story narration is regarded as a process of background construction in Munro's works, and each part can be regarded as an independent story; however, behind each independent story, there is the same theme to integrate it into a whole. Sharmila Kulkarni thinks that although the work describes only the life of ordinary people, it implies complicated emotional factors of characters. Munro broke the theme of traditional Canadian short stories and deconstructed the linear development and dramatic ending of the stories in the novel, which is a great change to the writing art. Second, some scholars interpret it from the perspective of feminism. Barbara Godard, in his paper, taking the life of girls and women as an example, discusses the issues of female subject, desire, and the regulation of female writers and literature. Third, comparative study. The article published by Rowena Fowler holds that the characters in *Lives of Girls and Women* have double identities: on the one hand, they are both storytellers and their own experiences.

Postmodern Feminism is the main perspective in this thesis. In the 1950s, postmodernism was committed to deconstructing the central culture since the enlightenment, emphasizing equal dialogue, and respecting differences, which had a great impact on the western culture. As an important part of postmodernism, postmodern feminism absorbs and draws on the theory of postmodernism. Its spearhead is Phallogentrism with male as the core. It affirms women's dominant position by negating all centrism, grand theoretical narration, and binary opposition of traditional metaphysics, and reestablishes women's own advantages on the premise of respecting differences. If the female representatives headed by Beauvoir once took women's position in the male centered social order as the goal and tried to work side by side with it, then postmodern feminism is to ensure women's dominant position by paying attention to differences, and completely abandon the social order dominated by male discourse. Alice Munro followed the postmodern feminism wave in her works, wrote the female identity confusion under the rule of Phallogentrism, and expounded her own views on the gender gap, and reconstructed the female subjective consciousness. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del is a model of constructing female self-consciousness. She pursues a better life and realizes her personal value in the process of constantly exploring, mediating, and improving her relationships with all kinds of people.

2. DEL'S OBSERVATION

2.1 The Flats Road

Del is a curious girl having fun that has a keen observation and is good at magnifying the meaning and significance behind the actions of the surrounding adults in daily life, predominantly female: her mother, aunts, friends, and teachers.

As a pupil of Grade Four, Del observes the different habit between her father and mother. The Flats Road, at the end of the town, is a place that her mother doesn't like. Her mother prefers the life in town or the county. She acts as the behavior of people in the city, paying attention to the grammar in the daily conversation, as if she wants to

show off. Relatively, the people here don't welcome her and Del has felt the embarrassment with her mother. But the mother care for the poor.

However, her father likes Flats Road very much and is very popular here, who also has own enterprise and social status. From the conversation between her father and mother, the father expresses some traditional rules in the patriarchal society, such as telling her wife not to interfere with others' families.

Uncle Benny, he is a main character touching with Del during Del's childhood and influencing her a lot. Del goes fishing with Benny, reads the newspaper in the Benny's house different from her parent' newspaper and writes letter for Benny. Their life contacts tightly. Uncle Benny has the strong power to imagine. For example, the ordinary rainbow can be imagined as the promise of God by him. In addition, Uncle Benny is also good at telling stories, one of which is the story of Sandy Stevenson's marriage, so that the existence of Madeleine is regarded as a story later. Therefore, Uncle Benny is her early art enlightenment tutor.

It is in this period that she saw the differences, complexity, and more impossibility of life, and then she starts to understand the world and construct the realization of it

2.2 Heirs of the Living Body

Del begins to realize the traditional value of men and women. They respected men's jobs beyond anything. There is a clear distinction between men and women's work in traditional views, which is seemingly, accepted widely. If anyone goes over it, he will be laughed at ruthlessly. Aunts and Uncle Craig show that vividly.

Uncle Craig, different from Uncle Benny, is not moved to curiosity and gives me disapproval. He thought Del flighty and stupid. Likewise, Del finds his masculine self-centeredness. He is also the first person Del knew who believed in public and politics events. Uncle Craig renews Del's view of world: we cannot control anything will happen in our life or in the world.

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace are busy with some daily things, such as cucumber hoeing, potato digging, tomato picking and so on. They are apt to be anger while they are milking and singing. They refuse to do something that can make them clever, for example, reading music or driving a car. Util Aunt Grace was troubled with arthritis in her hands, she gave up all the things besides the sewing. Aunts are proud of the man who has a decent job in his family. They are traditional women who put themselves behind men and alarmed of ambition, flourishing their outworn ideas of women's place in the life.

Del's cousin Ruth McQueen is a person who refuses to choose something and accepts those things that are offered, including marriage, position, opportunities, and money. Once she chose to give up the scholarship and the chance of going to college. She is also a typical woman with traditional value.

Del's mother calls Aunts and Ruth: "Afraid to stick her head out of her own burrow".

Cousin Mary Agnes is an unlucky girl. The shameful thing happened to her. It also makes Del imagine the situation where she will perhaps be in and realize the sexual shame. From the moment Del know the miserable thing, she starts to imagine the thing she has seen as the other similar thing, such as comparing the cow's hide as a map, and question the daily things, for example, she has a question why the cow exists and how those white spots settled.

Later Del was forced to face the death of Uncle Craig. She fears to take part in the funeral and takes the last look of the corpse. But finally, she made it and survived. It is at this stage that Del realizes the closeness of traditional gender construction to women and began to show her own differences.

2.3 Princess IDA

In Princess IDA, Munro added some details and experiences of Del's mother, Addie Morrison, who has the profound impact on Del about the view of knowledge and situation of women.

Regardless of lacking certain educational degree, the mom was an intuitive, skeptical, and curious woman who loved to read and learn everything from the world and the people that surrounded her. A woman who also sold encyclopedias to the local farmers. She was not afraid to question them and quickly decipher them with that sharp

mind of an intelligent woman. Some people, like her, just have that natural curiosity and desire to have more than what the actual environment you're living in can offer. For a small town like Jubilee, not so different from many others, her ways were looked as weird and eccentric. She looks for different ways to satisfy this need. For the mom, one way to satisfy this need for culture was to weekly tune in to the Met radio and become familiar with the most famous arias. I can almost picture her listening to La Traviatta while getting lost in a sea of emotions under the influence of Verdi and surrender to that painful destiny of Violetta in the final act. Later, you read about Del listening to Carmen and finding a piece of her mom through this wonderful music. These are the unconscious sentimental connections and impact between Del and her mother. So subliminal that we are unaware why we prefer some colors, or types of music, or tend to behave a certain way under different situations. I believe Munro portrays this influential and unconscious bias of our behavior, of our surroundings, and the complexity of our emotions by looking into our past, into our memories. Not everything is always so soundful and beautiful, yet the ugly and painful are part of our final cut version as well. Still, life is a blend of meaningful experiences and Munro depicts this life awareness so well through her stories in a very truthful way.

The Mother loves knowledge, which is warm and lovely to her and doesn't believe in religion because Del's grandmother spent all money in buying *Bible* leading to the poverty of Addie's unhappy childhood. In such the environment and people group, most regard knowledge as warts. She advocates that women could accept the same education and rights as men. Therefore, Del learned a lot of things from the encyclopedia sold by Addie and showed her freak memory. During the progress, Del finds her shyness and self-conscious and owns a lot of wishes. Del has many similarities with her mother. She also likes the life in town and the charming of the knowledge. But she acts less passionately than her mother, so that she disagrees with her mother sometimes. She felt uncomfortable when the mother held the ladies' party, wrote letters to the newspaper, and made a speech in the school.

"I myself was not so different from my mother,
but concealed it, knowing what dangers there were."

Furthermore, Del supposes the first mention of sex. She thought the action between sex belongs to the young not decent adults.

3. START OF CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

3.1 Age of Faith

Uncle Craig is devoted to genealogy. Del's mother is devoted to knowledge. Others are devoted to God, and to romance, marriage, and sex.

There are three progresses developing together, sexual awakening, doubt of the faith and the early construction of self-consciousness.

Del mentions reproductive organs twice. She noticed male figures so that she raised a question whether there were marble genitals underneath and she ever drew a drawing of a fat naked lady with obvious female characteristics with her friend Naomi. It shows that Del has an early realization of the sexual relationship.

About the religious faith, firstly, Del had a careful observation of all kinds of church in the town, then she analyses features of different believers, such as ages and genders. Due to the influence of her grandmother, her mother resisted the religion and thought that any activities of religion made no sense. Similarly, Del own her opinion of the faith, not following her mother. She believed that the existence of believers shows the significance of the religion, but she was eager to find the answer to the question that whether God really exists and the proof of it. There is nothing that could be found in the church. Until the bad thing happened that Major killed sheep and it needed to killing, the words of Owen awake Del: pray can't save Major, even save nothing. At last, it dawned on her that the religion conflicts with the life and she got the exact answer that God doesn't exist.

"I saw with dismay the unavoidable collision coming,
of religion and life."

Del started to doubt the words of her mother in the daily life and thought seriously whether she is right. For instance, her mother is very careful when they block the door in case of the burglars and Del suspected the existence of them. What's more, she aimed to gain people's attention through going to church for many times and comparing

with her mother.

There is a hint that shows Del is different from the women of traditional value like Aunts---she can't sew.

3.2 Changes and Ceremonies

At the beginning of *Changes and Ceremonies* is the description about the dangerous nature of boys. The boys reduced girls to what it was they saw. Ritualized hostility between boys and girls was cracking later. "Through the differences between boys and girls, Del begins to yearn to explore the world of boys after realizing the differences between men and women. In the library, the interest of Naomi" "Is there a part in the book where they do it?" also indicates the initial awakening of the sexual consciousness of Del and Naomi who are gradually stepping into puberty. Sex, currently in Del's heart is only the initial imagination. But the view of Del and Naomi on sex is opposite. When they talked about the incident in the bicycle shed, Naomi represented the women in the traditional patriarchal society, who is lower and need to take the responsibility, while Del disagree with her completely. And Del tried to clear out the relationship between genders, taking the relationship among her classmates and between Miss Farris and Mr. Boyce as an example. It is in this fantasy that Del is approaching the feeling of love step by step and gradually loves Frank Wales secretly.

This feeling was especially strong during the rehearsal of the operetta, and it was not until Wales went to work that it faded out of Del's mind. Although the emotion completed in fantasy has not changed her life substantially, it is an important stage of Del's transition from childhood to teenage. In the future, she will continue to explore love, sex, and relationship between genders.

3.3 Lives of Girls and Women

Lives of Girls and Women is the real beginning of Del's sexual enlightenment. She has entered high school and talks about sex with Naomi almost every day. Del's first fantasy of sex was shown on Mr. Chamberlain, who often met Del's mother's roommate, Fern. However, in this period, such realization is just a vague concept for her, and Mr. Chamberlain is a symbolic alternative, through whom Del wanted to know more about sex and sex behavior. When Mr. Chamberlain finally exposed, the romantic sex that Dale imagined completely collapsed. Dale has gone from obscure love to sex and real sex has now appeared in Dale's life.

3.4 Baptizing

In *Baptizing*, real love comes. Garnet was Del's first lover, who ever spent four months in prison for fighting. Garnet was just "physical attraction" to Del, and they belong to two different group or world. But Del has committed herself to him without hesitation. Unfortunately, she lost the chance to get a scholarship to go to college later. Del had thought about marrying Garnet and giving birth to the child like traditional women. But when Garnett forced her to accept the baptism of his own church, Del's lost personal consciousness suddenly woke up. At this time, she realized that no one could really control herself, even Garnet, so Del chose to leave Garnet at once. She started a real life.

4. PERFECTION OF DEL'S SUBJECT

Epilogue: *The Photographer* is another unexpected contrast. It's almost from another book and another writer. It's shorter than the others, and Del reflects on the motives and meaning of fictionalizing real life, with a slight magical-realist aspect. The final chapter is the story of Del in the last period in Jubilee. She devoted herself in writing novels as an author and found the similarities between herself and the photographer. They all can discover all kinds of misfortunes and terrors hidden behind the peaceful life. Del is the kind of female writer who creates a black fable, indicating all kinds of mysteries and grotesques hidden behind life.

The part traces back to her last summer before leaving Jubilee. This may be the prelude before Del's real life, and from this ending, we also seem to see her future life as a writer.

Munro beautifully captured how strange and confusing the awkward transition from girl to woman is, the weird pangs of adolescence. Del understands all too well that the expectations people have towards her are not the same as they have towards boys. She feels trapped by a gender-based determinism; she wants to be her own person, not a girl as the people of Jubilee defines it, or not even as her mother would define it – she wants to create her own

definition.

Ultimately, this is the sentiment that made *Lives of Girls and Women* stand out in the sea of bildungsroman out there. Del and her craving both for romantic passion and for a freedom that goes beyond being a girl felt achingly familiar, and the bittersweet knowledge that if she stayed in Jubilee, she would never find what she was looking for. While the story is open-ended, I like to imagine her hopping on a train or a bus and going off to Toronto or Montreal and finding what people like her can never find in small towns.

5. CONCLUSION

Munro's prose is spare but not scanty. She skips major episodes in Del's life in favor of extended descriptions of the details that really count, details that flood the unadorned first-person narration with fierce authenticity.

Del's psyche is exposed, devoid of the glorified tint of nostalgia. It is also painstakingly shaped by the external occurrences in a community ruled by the tight grip of a suffocating religious dogma that shears the futures of those who dare to challenge its traditional heritage. Employing the intricate map of Christian sects; Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Union Church that coexist in town as a menacing background combined with a good share of disabled characters and some doses of mordant humor, Munro delineates Del's personal growth on the choices she makes along the road to adulthood.

Ignoring her unconventional mother, an agnostic amidst an ocean of fervent believers, Del experiments with faith as she does with sexuality or with premature first love, with rigorous self-determination, always remaining the mistress of her actions. She needs to discover her wishes, construct her ambitions on her own terms and so she dismisses preconceived ideas, even from her best friend Naomi who aspires to secure a good marriage or from her modern mother who covets a college education for her. Her mistakes, disappointments and frustrations teach her the most constructive lessons and set the founding pillars of her path to mental and physical independence.

These thematic lines have been addressed, exploited, and scrutinized before, but, in my opinion, what distinguishes Munro from other writers is her ability to construct a multi-dimensional world—domestic, personal, and equally subversive—that moves dexterously from introspective narration, minimalistic dialogue and objective narration to sketch flesh and bone characters whose inner struggles make the reading painful at times for the pangs of recognition it provokes in the reader. Munro is unapologetic and so are her characters, which become afire with life through her economical yet incisive prose.

Also, on this occasion, the reader is not only rewarded by the deft unfolding pathos of a classical bildungsroman, but also by the processes that take place in the making of an artist. Del Jordan discovers that her literary vocation will transform her words into powerful weapons that will provide a voice to those silenced by decades of sustained social injustice.

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