

Social Conditioning and It's Impact in Alice Munro's *Boys and Girls*

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Abstract

Alice Munro is an acclaimed Canadian writer who has gained international recognition with her interesting short stories. She is the first author to win the Nobel prize for short stories. The story *Boys and Girls* reveals the gender constructions of the society and exposes the gendered assumptions regarding the role of daughters and sisters in the cultural space of the society. The author projects how women are assigned customary rules and are expected to conform to the societal layouts since childhood. The disparity between the rearing up of boys and girls has been depicted in an uncomplicated manner. It has been clearly portrayed that to wrestle with patriarchy is to combat the accepted notions that are instilled deep into the psyche of the society. There is a constant refrain on the independent thinking and movement of girls in the patriarchal system which they are forced to accept eventually. The socially approved usages confine the individuality of women. Both the boys and girls are groomed to become just the products of the cultural conventions.

Keywords: gendered assumptions, patriarchy

Alice Munro's *Boys and Girls* was written at a time when gender equality was not a concern. Men and women were not treated as equals. The narrator of the story finds it difficult to come to terms with the subservient position assigned to her at home. She is expected to follow the behaviour and manners considered appropriate for a lady. The narrator is supposed to be refined, quiet and dainty while her brother Laird is expected to be stout and rough. Laird has been intentionally named so as it literally means lord. He tries to exert his force upon the narrator to make her follow the society's customary rules. Their home is a typical symbol of the patriarchal structure. The male-folk are snobbish and support the gender assumptions. The father of the narrator is a decent, hard-working and family man who forsee his daughter's future as eventually getting married and leaving the house. The narrator's mother and father shower love and protection on the girl but expect her to conform to the conventional framework of marriage, children and kitchen. Any deviation is considered to be impossible and unacceptable. The narrator feels perturbed when she realises that although she is of greater help to her father at the Fox farm

than her brother yet they consider Laird to be the only right heir to the father. Even her mother is rarely seen at the barn. She is an ideal homemaker who fulfils her domestic duties with energy and enthusiasm and hopes her daughter would follow her footsteps.

The trepidations of a young girl have been presented in an interesting manner by Munro. She is in a transitional phase of life when she is maturing from childhood to adulthood. She feels as if she is being stopped from doing what pleases her. Munro presents how patriarchal control is exerted negatively over the female body which hampers the development of her personality and gives the female a sense of unbelongingness and exclusion. The protagonist seeks her liberation but she is repeatedly encouraged to retreat into her domestic world. Portraying the patriarchal reality Munro exhibits the alienation women undergo. A woman is not allowed to lead a life of her own choice. Owing to the deep-rooted myths about women the likes and dislikes of a woman are neglected systematically. This under privileged position of women is further succoured by the conventionally accepted male perspectives. This fact has been well presented by Munro in the story by the character of Laird, the narrator's younger brother. Laird is a typical representative of patriarchal male, ready to take the position of a man in society who is supposed to define what the females should and should not do. Though he is meek and dormant in his childhood, he soon comes under the influence of men and seems to enjoy the thought of being a hero in the house. He gladly embraces the male identity. Though he participates little in his father's farm work but the whole family assumes that he is the next head of the family, neglecting his sister. The narrator tells us that the flux in the life of the characters was almost predestined and inevitable.

The mother in the house spends most of her life inside the house and rarely comes out in the barn. Whenever she comes out of the house it is to do the household chores like hanging out the clothes or to dig potatoes in the garden. She considers kitchen work to be appropriate for females which includes her daughter also. The mother is always subservient to the father. Even the daughter thinks her mother to be secondary in comparison to the father:

“It showed how little my mother knew about the way things really were.” (531).

The decisive authority is the father.

The protagonist is eleven year old girl whose metamorphosis is a time overwrought with anxieties as she is socially typed. Her journey is fraught with intense pain and poignancy. She resists the phallogocentric

social system and realises that women are considered to be inferior to men at all levels. The girl proves to be of much help to her father at the farm and feels proud in this. Contrasted to her, her brother Laird exhibits much less energy and activeness. Realising this she views of future as being assigned the role of a responsible member executing the outdoor jobs. She mirrors herself as a boy and even dreams as if she is a hero who in different circumstances rescues people from various dangers. She refuses to mutely accept the patriarchal structure. As she describes her transition from carefree childhood to maturity, her psychological trauma is unfolded. The zealous horse, Flora, symbolises her verve and spirit. After years of service to her family she finds in a winter season that her parents are expecting her to accept the role of a lady and work more in the house than in the farm. It surprises her that everyone thinks this transgression to be most natural and inevitable. The girl overhears her mother's words:

“and then I can use her more in the house. It's not like I had a girl in the family at all.”
(117)

She is pained to see her brother's encroachment on her work and position. All this time she had believed herself to be superior to Laird and her mother as being more conversant and arduous. She identifies herself with the male domain. She feels the world outside the periphery of the house is the real and vibrant world. Despite all her credence and disapproval she has to ultimately accept the confinement imposed upon her and become ready to play the role of a homemaker assigned to her. Munro points out that this enclosure of females in the stereotypical patriarchal society is almost inescapable. As the narrator says:

“A girl was not as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also, it was a joke on me.” (119)

A girl is expected to behave in a certain manner which includes how she speaks, sits, walks, talks or what she does. Her space is controlled and directed by others. With the incidence of the mare, Flora, it has been presented how the protagonist tries to resist her gendered role till the end and even disobeys her father by trying to free the captured mare. She opens the gate and lets the horse break free into the meadow against her father's will. The freedom of the horse symbolises her own freedom which she desperately desires. But the horse is hunted and recaptured by the males of the family. At this juncture the girl gives a silent consent to the assigned role in the social setup and accepts that the society has been successful in turning her into a girl finally.

The story reveals the covert societal forces which shape an individual into the role of a male or female. It also projects the futility of wrestling with patriarchy and the values which operate within this sphere. Internalization of the conventions and beliefs of the community further strengthens the oppressive matrix. It is almost mandatory in the society that a female accepts the social code and conforms to it completely in order to be able to survive. Even the males are groomed such that they step into their roles irrevocably.

WORKS REFERRED

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