



## RE-SURFACING OF WOMEN PROTAGONISTS FROM GENDERED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ALICE MUNRO'S "FLOATING BRIDGE"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the role of space in gendered societal relations as represented by Alice Munro in "Floating Bridge" from *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) which portrays a space of duality and contradiction in relationships. The discrimination that Canadian women faced pushed them to re-emerge as an independent woman as they fight to overcome the struggles of gender discrimination. The paper discusses Munro's attempt to discover the themes related to the problems and everyday hardships faced by her and her women protagonists in the domestic setting. The study delves into the desire of Canadian women to attain independence in the patriarchal set-up. The paper has been presented through the aspect of both 'physical space' and 'lived space' of memories as recommended by Henry Lefebvre in "The Production of Space". He explains this space as 'pure subjectivity', which includes human emotions, feelings and experiences that helps an individual attain emotional sustainability.

**Keywords:** space, gender, psychological satisfaction, liberation.

Alice Munro, the literature Nobel laureate from Canada, is widely acclaimed for her extensive influence to the genre of Canadian short-story. In 2013, Munro became the first Canadian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature for her wide-ranging and challenging literary exploration of the dilemmas of the contemporary world. Munro also gained appreciation for her complexly written short stories was also cited as "the master of the contemporary short story" by the associates of the Swedish Academy.

In an interview given to Cara Feinberg "Bringing Life to Life" for *The Atlantis*, she was requested to tell whether she ponders herself to be

a feminist writer of women's issues as many of her stories are a conversation regarding the lives of the female protagonists in her stories. Munro responded: "Naturally my stories are about women—I'm a woman. I don't know what the term is for men who write mostly about men. I'm not always sure what is meant by 'feminist.' In the beginning I used to say, well, of course I'm a feminist." She says, "But if it means that I follow a kind of feminist theory, or know anything about it, then I'm not. I think I'm a feminist as far as thinking that the experience of women is important. That is really the basis of feminism". In many of her discussed interviews Munro describes her situation

as a woman where she depicts the lived experiences of her female characters through her stories. Munro in her stories encompasses intricate description of the life of a woman and her constant struggles for survival in the Canadian male-centered society.

Space discussed in her stories is not stationary as it alters with our emotions, experiences and recollections which we are exposed to in our everyday lives. Henry Lefebvre in "The Production of Space" (1991) recommended the idea of a "space of pure subjectivity" where the women characters would negate the societal structures of suppression and marginalization to search for illumination through their dreams, fancies and feelings. The newly accomplished individual space supports females to experience an unreal world of fantasy where they can express their thoughts that are restricted because of the excessive expectations of the society. Many of Munro's women characters aim to achieve their private space that is distance from restraints of their male partners. The paper focuses on private relationships, the characters authenticity and unreality of spaces and also the "perceived space" of ordinary societal life along with the "lived space" of human thoughts and dreams that keeps an individual thriving for one's existence.

Munro depicts the idea of space and gender through her protagonists who are restrained to the repetitive routine of family life and compliance towards their partners. By referring to Munro's writings, Alina Cleju mentions in her article "Enclosed Spaces in Grace Paley's and Alice Munro's Artist Stories" and states that "she finds no other solution than to leave the space of the house, which is enclosed, confining, spiritually stifling, and ultimately impossible to accept and live in" (35). The protagonists of Munro's stories seek to discovery of oneself from the claustrophobic domestic environment of the family and to find independence for oneself.

The article "Resolution and Independence in the work of Alice Munro" also discusses the critic Marcia Allentuck view regarding the longing of Munro's women characters to break and run away from the boundaries of domesticity and their dependency on their counterparts for love, security

and refuge. She states, "This is the closest that Munro has come so far in offering us an implicit definition of independence — not to be 'at the mercy.' Surely, however, in her eloquent concern for autonomy and independence, and her embodiment of this concern in memorable characters" (343).

Lefebvre states, "That the lived, conceived and perceived realms should be interconnected, so that the 'subject', the individual member of a given social group, may move from one to another without confusion -- so much is a logical necessity" (40). Munro depicts the fragile condition of women as they are separated between two worlds, one being the world where they want to attain independence and liberty and on the other hand they are reliant on on their respective husbands and the home setting.

Emptiness and vacuum is experienced by the characters of the story "The Floating Bridge" Nina as she discovers temporary free dimension from her domestic setting and husband; by stepping out into an open space to attain liberty. The representation of a house in Munro's stories is presented as a place where females are not permitted to discover their fantasies. Munro's stories also present dysfunctional private relationships as wives are displeased with their husbands' callous approach towards them. During an interview "Bringing Life to Life" Cara Feinberg asked Munro "But your stories, despite these themes, are never maudlin. Even in 'Floating Bridge,' a story about a woman with cancer, you have her more worried about the responsibilities of returning to the real world after her last treatment than the pain of her disease." Munro responds, "Oh yes, I hope they're not maudlin. I do look at things differently now. When I was thirty, if I'd tried to write about someone dying of cancer, I would have been overwhelmed by the tragedy of it. Just growing older affects. It's the simple experience of where I am in life." Munro explains the effects of cancer on her body by not becoming emotional regarding it but rather she deliberates on it and its consequences on her body in her stories.

Munro in the story "Floating Bridge" portrays the private space of distress and her characters attempt to liberate them from the suffocating space, though temporarily. The protagonist, Jinny gets the

unexpected news of her declining cancer. But her husband Neal's indifferent approach towards her disease and his relationship with Helen, makes her a rebellion as she goes against her husband. On the other hand Jinny feels like a stranger in her house as Neal gives no attention to her.

Neal's insensitive treatment of Jinny for over two decades had to lead to an implicit aloofness between the partners that resulted in an alteration of approach and behaviour towards each other: "Would you ever have thought to come after me?" she asked Neal (56). The area in the house (front room) were a special part in their lives as they had spent private and intimate moments in that space. This space was intruded by a stranger who became a threat to Jinny's relationship with Neal.

Helen, an outsider is brought to their house to look after Jinny's health, but she is represented as an object of want by Neal. But Jinny wanted to explain her condition to Neal, but she was quieted by him. It is seen that Munro's characters are scared to converse as they choose to live in a realm of imaginations as they are not able to challenge their reality of life. Jinny is silenced pushed to the boundary where she is only expected because she's a woman to listen to Neal and can't put her opinions forward like Neal. She thinks, "And yet—an excitement. The unspeakable excitement you feel when a galloping disaster promises to release you from all responsibility for your own life. Then for shame you must compose yourself and stay very quiet" (60). In the story, Munro displays the claustrophobic space of relationships between partners, where women are expected to conform unlike males and continue with their monotonous routine without considering the boundaries that are symbolic of chains that bind them.

Lefebvre in his study of the aspect of space discusses the significance of relations and its outcome on our emotive and psychological existence. He describes the metaphoric spaces in between relationships which reflect disconnectedness, as they do not have sensitivity in them; rather it is presented as an unreal space which lacks the essence of any existence in them. He states: "Considered in isolation; such spaces are

mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain 'real' existence by networks and pathways, by bunches or clusters of relationships" (86). Helen and Neal went to Matt and June Bergson's house to take Helen's shoes. This left Jinny alone in the car pondering over her life. Ricky met Jinny who was Matt and June Bergson's son. For Jinny being in a private space away from Neal's existence round her was a place of tranquility for her. Jinny thinks: "but to be alone was a great relief" (71). Jinny momentarily lived in her own space where she could be herself. Jinny enjoyed her 'lived space' of private imagination and reminiscences which gave her a little repose.

Jinny stepped out into a fresh area of enlightenment, experienced an epiphany after she kissed Ricky on the floating bridge when alone. Jinny reveals her present mental state as, "The whole story, all by itself. A tender prologue, an efficient pressure, a wholehearted probing and receiving, a lingering thanks, and a drawing away satisfied" (84). In conclusion, Jinny has found comfort in the open space of the floating bridge. She finds her momentary freedom away from the domestic space and boundaries as established in the last line, "What she felt was a lighthearted sort of compassion, almost like laughter. A swish of tender hilarity, getting the better of all her sores and hollows, for the given time" (85). Female protagonists of Munro's fiction, temporarily shun the barriers levied upon them by men as they find an alternative by experiencing the unfamiliar territory where they can be true to themselves without any hesitations.

Munro replies to Feinberg, how she changes her stories and the way the plots of the stories are intertwined, "That's true. And it's not at all like following a path to see what happens. Quite often, I know what happens as soon as I start reading it. Maybe not the twists the plot will take, but the real story. In my story 'Hateship, Friendship...' the plot is rather important, but often in a story, the plot isn't the most important element".

The title of the story also condenses Munro's emphasis on her protagonists' want to flee, find relief and fulfillment in their personal accomplishments, to attain true appreciation and

identity. The title "Floating Bridge" portrays Jinny's moving out of her domestic life and her husband's domineering personality by kissing Ricky on the bridge. This act by Jinny also shows her rebellion against her husband and her inclination to attain enlightenment. Munro's stories focus on her own thoughtfulness as a woman who faced parallel difficulties and sufferings to become a writer. Therefore, Munro's stories are symbolic of women's movement for freedom and the accomplishment for their rights in Canada which helped them re-surface from the commands of the society.

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