

Dimensions in Relationships: An Exploration of Alice Munro's Select Stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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Abstract – Alice Munro is a well-regarded Canadian woman short-story writer. She wrote about ordinary people in ordinary situations, creates a portrait of life in all of its complexities. In her magnificently textured stories, she explores the distinction of relationships and the profundity of emotions. “Master of short story writer”, Munro awarded the Nobel Prize for her literary contribution in the year 2013. The present paper is an attempt to explore the Re-examining Human Complexities in Munro's first collection *Dance of the Happy Shades*. She published this collection in 1968. All the stories in this collection one can find dimensions and intricacies in family relationship. The study has taken seven short stories from the collection which is relevant to the study. These stories are travel around the themes of gender disparity, mother-daughter relationships, quest for identity, isolation and alienation. The study focuses on Human Complexities: Dominant Daughters-Distanced Mothers and Ignored Relationships of the protagonists. It deals with the complexities of human relationships at different levels of young, teen and middle-aged protagonist's with parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors. The study concludes on how the changes occur in protagonist's life, how she and others are relevant to the modern society, and how they are adapting from generations to these perpetual changes. The paper has also traced many observations with new conclusions from selected short stories.

Keywords – Complex relationships, intricacy, dominant, disparity, relation and generations.

I. DIMENSIONS IN RELATIONSHIPS:

An Exploration of Alice Munro's Select Stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*

Human relations are the relations between a human being that are affected by many other factors and helps in the accomplishment of goals of an organization. The term human, a relation in its broadest sense covers all types of interactions among people and their conflicts, cooperative effects, and group relationships. Predominantly family relationship and attachment also an integral part of one's life. Early development depends on an adequate relationship with a caregiver (mother). Subsequently, the relationship with other family members, with peers, the society with teachers shapes the personality. An adequate network of personal relationships forms important protection against psychological and physical ill-health. So, relationships are the most important part of our lives. But present days, the values of human relations have little importance. In present generation, adults and children do not know the importance of human relationships. Even children do not give any value to their parents.

The woman writer, Alice Munro explores the representation of embodied human ethics and affects in her writings very clearly. She is a well-regarded Canadian short-story writer born in 1931 in a small town. She is the first Canadian woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. For her literary contribution, she is called “the master of short story writer”. In her works, one can found that the narration relating to the ordinary people in ordinary situations and creates a portrait of life in all of its complexities. She highly acclaimed stories chronicle of small-town life, usually around Ontario, where she grew up. In her tales, primarily written from feminine point of view, the incidents of life get redefined in the inner landscape of intellect and emotion of the protagonist which in turn are a reflection of the author's own perceptions. As a woman, Munro understands all kinds of human relationships very well. The recurring themes in her creative writing are conflicts within relationships; between domesticity and independence, creativity and compulsion, commitment and the freedom to follow one's wishes as well as the disparity between social classes and the complex problems faced by a creative woman. The aim of the present paper is an attempt to explore and examining the human relationships in Alice Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades*. These stories present the experiences of a young and perceptive narrator and bring out the narrator's awareness of life in Huron County in the 1930s and 1940s.

The chosen stories are travel around many common themes such as gender disparity, mother-daughter relationships and quest for identity, isolation and alienation. The study particularly focuses on Protagonist Relationships: Dominant Daughters, Distanced Mothers and Ignored Relationships of protagonists. It deals with the complexities of human relationships at different levels of young, teen and middle-aged protagonist's, with her complicated relationships with family, siblings, friends, and neighbors.

Dominant Daughters and Distanced Mothers:

Firstly the paper analyses “Dominant Daughters and Distanced Mothers Relationship” in four stories of a collection: “Boys and Girls”, “Red Dress-1946”, “An Ounce of Cure”, and “Dance of the Happy Shades”. These stories discuss the young unnamed protagonist’s bold, strong and rebellious behavior over their mothers and other family members. This part also explores the protagonists’ quest for identity. It reveals the distanced, disliked and strained mother and daughter relationship from a new perspective.

The first story, “Boys and Girls” is a gender-sensitive short story. It displays the hard times that a young girl goes through competing with her brother for equal attention and love. The story took place on a small family farm, in which the father of this family works with the foxes in their pens. The mother of the family disapproved of the entire pelting process and wished that it should not take place in their home. The protagonist is an eleven-year-old girl, who told the story in point of view of the innocent and honest. The young narrator admires her father and “worked willingly under his eyes and with a feeling of pride” (115 *Dance of the Happy Shades*). The mother is described as an enemy who is “plotting” her attempts to get the daughter’s bits of help in the kitchen and ‘she would do this simply out of perversity and to try her power’. Therefore the radical girl protests against her mother’s expectations and “continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free” (119).

The story is attracted by the power of freedom found in the male world. She finds herself threatened by the word “girl” as it implies to her something that she “had to become” (119) and not something she was. Her gender is not yet fixed and she is torn between her urge to help her father in his outdoor work at a fox farm and her mother’s wish to get help in the household: “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work is done out of doors, and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important” (117). A girl cannot risk driving her father away and that is the underlying cause for the girl’s idealization of her father. The narrator who is in a young age always admires her father and “worked willingly under his eyes and with a feeling of pride” (115). The mother is described as an enemy who is “plotting” her attempts to get the daughter’s helps in the kitchen and that ‘she would do this simply out of perversity and to try her power’.

Similarly in the other story “Red Dress – 1946”, the narrator finds herself in an environment, where girls are expected to become pleasing objects but where she tries to remain autonomous. The story is about a thirteen-year-old girl who is about to attend her first high-school dance and the story begins with the mother-daughter conflict, which is a recurrent theme in many of Alice Munro’s stories.

My mother was making me a dress. All through the month of November I would come from school and find her in the kitchen, surrounded by cut-up red velvet and scraps of tissue-paper pattern. She worked at an old treadle machine pushed up against the window to get the light, and also to let her lookout, past the stubble fields and bare vegetable garden, to see who went by on the road. There was seldom anybody to see. (DHS 147)

The story explores the protagonist’s search for identity outside her mother’s control. She criticizes the mother’s creaking knees and her legs, which are “marked with lumps of blue-green veins” (DHS148).

The third story “An Ounce of Cure” is about an unnamed teenage girl. It is told primarily as a flashback from the adult narrator. Consequently the narrator tells her story with playfulness, self-deprecation, detachment and even fondness. While the unpleasant incident caused her legitimate pain at the time, she has long since come to terms with it. The story discusses the refusal of a young girl by her boy friend. She on one of her baby-sitting nights drinks a lot and feels embarrassment herself. She is crazed by her school friend, Martin Collingwood. The boy later drops her and starts dating with another girl with whom he is staging the play *Pride and Prejudice*. The young disillusioned girl moons over him and she spends “ten times as many hours thinking about Martin Collingwood- yes, pining and weeping for him- as I ever spent with him; the idea of him tormented my mind relentlessly and after a while, against my will”. (DHS 77)

All the way through the story, the young protagonist encounters several situations that require the right decision. A person indeed has to realize one’s own mistakes, but several times, with no adult information and a lack of mother and daughter communication, the narrator struggles to know what to do. The mother in this story would be considered a flat. The narrator describes her as “forthright and unemotional.” The mother’s main concern is alcohol. She does not drink, nor do her friends drink. Mother has given the girl the impression and that she does not have a lot of confidence in how she will be when she grows up. Besides, the mother uses quotations and platitudes to make her points. Even when the girl has been dumped by her boyfriend, it takes a while for the mother to notice that there is something wrong. In this story, both mother and daughter characters are physically powerful and courageous. Eventually, she knows her mistakes, forgets her failure love story and leads a successful life happily. Finally experiencing the absurdity and nothingness of life, she finally settles down with a sense of achievement.

Next comes “Dance of the Happy Shades”, which is the last story in the collection, can be called a masterpiece. The story starts with the day of the annual recital party: the June recital, a small-town social ritual. The mother does not want to go; it’s boring and Miss Marsalles is tiresome in her fuddy-duddy ways. Plus, “piano lessons are not as important now as they once were; everybody knows that” (DHS 210). Therefore there is a gap between the mother and daughter who makes the daughters feel uneasy and uncomfortable in the presence of their mothers. Alice Munro depicts the changing world and the generational gap in a touching manner in above discussed stories.

Ignored Relationships by protagonists:

The second focus of study is on 'Ignored Relationships'. Another three stories have been taken in the collection, "Walker Brother Cowboy", "Images" and "The Peace of Utrecht". In every story mother characters are ignored by daughters (protagonist). Similarly, the stories reveal the protagonist's carelessness towards her parents and also explore the common struggle between mother and daughter and the generational gap. A distance between them makes the daughters feel uneasy and uncomfortable in the presence of their mothers.

The opening story in the collection, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" propels the reader into the action straight away with no preliminary background to the characters and without any contextual explanation of what is about to happen to them. The protagonist talks about her father's job as a salesman for Walker Brothers and he goes from door to door in the backcountry. In Dungannon, they had a fox farm, but they went bankrupt and were forced to move to Tupper town. The girl's mother is unhappy with their new poverty, and more so, with their fall from the dignity of owning a business to their status as the family of a "peddler". Here the story reveals the daughter's distance and dislike of to the mother and her attention is drawn more towards her father. The mother tries to regain her gentility but the daughter realizes that trying to be a lady is not enough.

"After supper my father says, 'Want to go down and see if the Lake's still there?'" (DHS 1) The opening line tells the reader that the story starts itself as a first-person narration. The story is about an adolescent girl and daughter of Ben Jordan who recollects a day spent with her father. Alice Munro does not examine Jordan's 'state of mind', but rather, she details those things around what he reacts to and against: those images depict the special mood and tension that exists in the Jordan family and between Ben Jordan and Nora Cronin (Ben's girl friend). She has differing and contrasting attitudes towards her mother and father, with the particular focus on the event by which she will gain adult knowledge.

The story's second line tells about the girl's mother within her domestic environment, involved in an activity that traditionally defines the role of wife and mother: "We leave my mother sewing under the dining-room light, making clothes for me against the opening of school" (DHS 5) by the insertion of a single word in the next paragraph, Alice Munro subtly but immediately recasts the perspective by which the story is being told. Mother "make[s] me stand and turn for endless fittings, sweaty, itching from the hot wool, ungrateful (*italics mine*)."

 (DHS 6) The word ungrateful suggests an adult view of events; that the narrator recalls these incidents as an adult.

The mother character in this story is completely ignored. Though she takes care of the family members no importance is given. The narrator wants to spend her time with her father. According to the protagonist, her mother is nothing but a pair of sewing hands that work on thriftily with patterns and plaids of the past to construct something for the daughter's future. "Walker Brothers Cowboy" sets the outline of external events that lead to internal changes in a character, primarily again in the awareness of the often-confusing adult world by a precocious but relatively sheltered teenager.

In the same way other story, "Images" is about an album of a little girl's fears: that her mother might die like her grandfather because her cousin Mary McQuade, who took care of her grandfather has come now to take care of her mother. The narrator Del has caused all this that maybe this feral (undomesticated) man will hurt her beloved father and that maybe the unspoken fear will come true. Her mother will stay permanently sorrowful or worse almost die, she is sick and has taken to bed; Mary McQuade has come to help, and Del thinks that she is forced to blame her for her mother's condition. "She spoke of herself and mysterious object, difficult to move. She spoke of herself pessimistically in the third person, saying, "Be careful, don't hurt Mother, and don't sit on Mother's legs." (DHS 33)

However, the narrator's relationship with her father is very interesting as there is no outward display of love or affection by either character and the narrator does tell the reader that her father 'came back to us always, to my mother and me, from places where our judgment could not follow.' This line in particular is important as not only is it confusing but there is also a sense that the narrator doesn't really know her father. Through the story Alice Munro is suggesting that the narrator's father may not necessarily be one to show affection. Something that is clear when both the narrator and her father are checking the muskrat traps. In some situations her father does not guide her. Del moves closer to the father wherein perhaps Del wants to gain the identity for herself and though the father may not be so affectionate to her, she wants to live the rural life filled with the freedom which allows her to enjoy fully.

The narrator doesn't want to talk and see her mother. She is passionate about her father, he seems to have two personalities, and Del accepts each; and it appears a strange man might kill Ben one day while Ben is out trapping muskrats. It's a bit overwhelming; it's just on the tip of her comprehension: these strangers have come, her mother could die, and her father could die. So that Alice Munro named this as "the shadow of death".

Next story is "The Peace of Utrecht". It was published in mid-1960. It reappeared in *The Tamarack Review* (Howells 1998: 14) eight years later. This story is set in the imaginary Southwestern Ontario town of Jubilee, some thirty miles east of Inverhuron, a real town on Lake Huron mentioned in this story. The story is about two adult sisters in their early to mid-thirties who spend several weeks together, in the summer following the death of their invalid mother the previous winter. Maddy, the elder, single and without children, works for the town clerk and lives alone in the family house. Helen, the younger sister, is also one of the story narrator; she is married and has lived away in the Toronto area for many years. She has brought her two small children (a girl and a boy) with her for this visit; "on the last lap of twenty-five-hundred-mile trip" (DHS196) by car. "The Peace of Utrecht" is an important story for Alice Munro because she once told that it is the first story she had to write and wasn't writing to see if she could write that kind of story.

According to the above discussed stories Munro depicted that her characters are motivated and protected by ritual as evidenced. For example in “Boys and Girls” the young girl feels that “work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important.”(DHS 117) The story “The Peace of Utrecht” is Alice Munro’s “first really painful autobiographical story.” In an interview with John Metcalf, she explains that stories are written after “The Peace of Utrecht,” tend to draw on autobiographical material”; they are autobiographical in “emotional reality” rather than factual events. Some stories are actually “changed versions of real incidents.”

Munro’s accommodating femininity and aspirations to a “normal” life, however, can be misleading, prompting the king of critical response offered in the offhand, pejorative way to me by one male English professor, a few years ago that she was merely a “housewife writer.” One of the occasions she expressed:

I’m much more aware of people and humans than when I was younger, and I want my children to be happy and I want my marriage to be good. I probably want these things in a far more conscious way, in a deeper way, than I did when I was a young woman. The dutiful, young mother was a mast for a very strong derive-a king of monomania about being a writer. (Rasporich 3)

Comparably Alice Munro to many other writers, they have also incorporated mother-daughter relationship in their works. Mostly the Canadian writers Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Indian writers Shashi Deshpande here perfectly illustrated this type of stories. The distancing and reconciliation of the mother-daughter and family disturbances are apparent in Deshpande’s “Why a Robin” (*The Legacy*).

II. CONCLUSION

Finally the paper examined ‘Dimensions in Relationships’ between family members and society. Totally seven stories deal with young and teenage girls exhibiting radical behavior and pessimistic relationships with their mothers and others. The stories argued difficult and distanced mothers. In these stories, the unnamed protagonist expressed her internal struggle for their liberty, gender equality and the quest for identity. So, the study revealed the common struggle between mother and daughter. Such themes also can observe in Alice Munro’s other collections *The Moons of Jupiter*, *Dear Life*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* The study examines each of the stories of Alice Munro discussed above that hinge upon how relationships between mother and children shaped the world and to what extent external forces impact bond with one another.

Stories of Alice Munro bring out the ideas of failure and the inability of the daughters to know their mothers completely. The estrangement of the mother and daughter is apparent in these stories. Finally, in every story the daughters recognize the mother as another woman. She needs her mother’s assurance when she matures from a girl into a woman. Thus, the distance is bridged by the recognition of the female body and the bond that exists between women. Likewise human relations and their values are perfectly illustrated by Alice Munro through her writings.

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