

SUBSISTENCE OF SPACE AND GENDER IN ALICE MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

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Abstract

Alice Munro's short story 'Boys and Girls' is a perfect manifestation of women subjugation in the patriarchal society. My study tries to portray how space can become an essential factor in limitation of women's mobility. It examines the role of gender in external space in both individual performative acts and physical environment. Munro explains how everyone of us is driven by our need to identify ourselves through the young girl's thirst for independence. It investigates the relationship between patriarchy and perception.

Keyword: women subjugation, Space and gender, patriarchy and perception

1. INTRODUCTION

"Gender ought not to be constructed at a stable identity or locus of agency by which various acts follow: rather gender in an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts". (Judith Butler)

Butler embosses a link between space and gender through her prominent work *Gender Trouble*. She embosses gender identity as a changing performative act. Space articulation occurs as an optional choice rather than gender publicly articulates its social relationship with space. Alice Munro's short fiction "Boys and Girls" is a coming of age story, which portrays the life of a young girl's dreams subjugated under the patriarchal norms. Gender discrimination is clearly defined through an unnamed young girl's initial confrontation with domesticity and struggles. It is settled in a time and society pervaded with gender roles and labels. It examines the formation of gender roles, as it focuses on how a 11 year old girl was pushed into a female mould.

Adoration for her father, jealousy towards her brother and hatred of her mother's household chores portray how the patriarchal world enjoys certain privileges, that doesn't even touch women. The humiliation and anguish that a child has to undergo to grow up as a girl within a patriarchal society is the major concern of the story. Narrator's growth as a gendered subject and acceptance of gender roles are concerned with the space and time, in which the story is set.

2. SUBSISTENCE OF SPACE AND GENDER

As the text clearly suggests, construction of gender is related with the space and time in which they evolve. If sex is a biological term, both the male and female are different by birth, but the concept of gender was constructed among the societal groups.

The creation of gendered adults remains invisible, both the sexes are supposed to accept those gender roles unknowingly. The roles seem natural but the reason they are taken for granted remain as a mystery or invisible. It performs as a crucial component in the creation of division and control of space among the creation of gendered adults. Spatial division, control of space and gender inequalities of household and outdoor duties are explicitly portrayed in 'Boys and Girls'. Eleven year old girl's inquisitive point of view makes an innocent construction of the gendered inequalities.

One among the major characters is the father, who cultivates wild animals for the purpose of consumption. The young girl explains, he "raised silver foxes in pens." The term "raised" offers strict referential meaning and plurality of meaning, it can undertake within the familial context also: people often talk about raising children. And father raises foxes in "pens" – spaces in which bodies are confined, this image reassures the enclosure and concomitant distinction between inside and outside recur throughout the text.

Foxes and the children are given equal importance in case of space. The story evokes multiple instances of confinement and enclosure of female. The dark, hot, stifling kitchen imprisons the narrator's mother and threatens to imprison the narrator (116-8). Similarly, the fields surrounding the farm and the gates, which restrict traffic, become an enlarged version of the pen (124). Finally, the town itself and the outlying farms are conceived of in terms of an inescapable enclosure (125). As a result of these replications of the enclosure, the father establishes his power and role through his supervising the boundaries between inside and outside take on greater significance and begin to reflect a far more pervasive cultural project. Narrator's father performs a task which supports industrial society and wage work and ultimately capitalist production.

Furthermore, the intense light which illuminates the space also reflects the father's desire to control of specific space within the home. When not working out of doors, he carries out his activities in the cellar, a room which is white-washed and lit by a hundred-watt bulb. By definition, white-wash is "a solution of quicklime or of whiting and size for brushing over walls and ceilings to give a clean appearance." Figuratively speaking, "white washing" suggests clearing "a person or his memory of imputation of someone's reputation". In this case, the presence of whitewash in the male domain suggests that an attempt is made to "give something a clean appearance" something which may be fundamentally unclean. In *'Power and Knowledge'* Foucault suggests "a form of power whose main instance is that of opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness" (154). Thus the white-wash and the bright lights in the cellar effectively undermine the seeming neutrality of the father and his activity

The narrator enjoys a kind of safety in the male sphere and enjoys the "warm, safe, brightly lit downstairs world." She feels threatened, by the "inside," the "unfinished," upper portion of the house, the bedroom which she shares with her brother Laird (112). Unlike the clearly delineated male territory below, the bedroom remains undifferentiated. Neither male nor female, the space is fraught with danger. The unfinished state of the room can be taken as an image of the undifferentiated consciousness of the children.

Laird has not adopted a gender role associated with the father in the beginning of the story. Nor has the narrator been forced to sever her connection to the

father and take up an identity aligned with the mother. This hypothesis concerning her male orientation gains support from the nature of her nocturnal fantasies. She enjoyed the farming jobs rather than the household chores.

Placement of specific objects within the space, either inside or outside the home signifies the power relation existed in the family. For instance, the calendar hung on both sides of kitchen door, Montreal Fur traders supplied the narrator's family in return for the pelt, affords amount of cultural information regarding power structure. The calendar serves as a connection between father's economic occupation as farmer and his role as producer of gendered subjects. Placement of calendar on both sides of kitchen door suggests clear cut difference between the father's work in the field and mother's work in the domestic sphere.

Yet another example of power illustration is by the father introduces his daughter to the salesman as a hired man. The salesman responds according to the dictates of culture: no female is allowed on the outside. He reacts to the threat of her presence by treating the father's remark as a joke: "could of fooled me," he says, "I thought it was only a girl" (116). Efforts to suppress the narrator's attempt to occupy male "outside" space is visible among the other female characters, who accepted the imposed gender roles. For example, her grandmother tells her, "girls don't slam doors like that" (control of her movement through space); "girls keep their knees together when they sit down" (control of the body); and when she asks a question, she is told "that's none of girls' business" (control of consciousness itself) [119]. A similar bid for control, the narrator's mother confronts the father in front of the barn one fall evening, demanding that he relinquish his right to the girl's labor.

The subplot of the story deals with the conflicting characters of the horses, which fascinates the narrator's consciousness. Even Bailey, the slave enjoys his power as a male by shooting the horse without any mercy. When he tries to shoot the second horse, Flora it escapes from the clutches of men with the help of narrator. Flora resembles the spirited horse of the narrator's nocturnal fantasies. When the men try to pen her in, to use her for their own, limited ends, the mare makes a run between Bailey and the father. It radically breaks from the male identified position. At that night she sums up with hopeless burst out of tears for the accusation helping the mare to escape. Rather than deny the accusation she

burst out into tears hopelessly accepting the gendered subject roles of "feminine".

3.CONCLUSION

"Boys and Girls", was written at the beginning of the second wave of feminist involvement with literature and it contributed in gender relations in a rather different manner. Here the characterization of the father and the mother is very ordinary. Presentation of female's interior and male's outer space is in a very symbolic manner. The conflicting characters of the male and female horses, family members and classed rural society with socializing forces influence the girl and her dreams. The humiliation and anguishes that a eleven year old young girl has to undergo to grow up as a woman within a patriarchal world is the major concern of the story. Narrator's growth as a gendered subject and acceptance of gender roles are concerned with the space and time, in which the story is set.

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