TRADITIONAL SOCIALIZATION IN A. MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

Smaranda Ștefanovici, Assoc. Prof., PhD "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureș

Abstract: The story deals with the search of individuality in a society infested with gender roles and stereotypes. The word girl has formerly seemed to be innocent and unburdened like the word child, now it appears it is no such thing. A girl is not, as the narrator has supposed, simply what she is; it is what she has to become. She is growing aware of traditional socialization, that is expectations for boys and girls. While the story starts with a powerful gender dichotomy relationship between brother and sister, parents and children, it develops toward the anonymous girl's inferred but hopeful-of-a-change acceptance of gender discrimination.

Keywords: traditional socialization, discrimination, differences, dichotomy, interchangeability.

Introduction

Alice Munro, female writer of Canadian origin received many awards and prizes for her collections of short stories, the most recent being The Nobel Prize in Literature (2013). The story "Boys and Girls" is part of her first collection of stories *Dance of the Happy* Shades (1968), which was highly successful - winner of the Man Booker International Prize - and was followed by other twelve collections, which brought her the fame of a "true master of the form" (Salman Rushdie).

The story under analysis here tackles the theme of the search for individuality in a society infested with gender roles and stereotypes. Set in the 1930s rural Canada, on a farmland, the narrator (through the voice of an anonymous girl) recalls, amid a description of her family childhood, a growing awareness of differences in the expectations for each sex. Munro's special use of language gives attention to all her characters, irrespective of gender and thus makes the readers inhabit the characters fully, irrespective of gender. In this short story, the author pays attention to the girl's experience. The story starts with a powerful gender dichotomy relationship (between her and her brother Laird) and develops toward the anonymous girl's acceptance of gender discrimination. However, despite the girl's resignation faced with the female discrimination in the community she belonged to, the ending of the story is not pessimistic, it ends in a sense of hope that things can change in the future.

The juxtaposition of the two words (boy and girl), while unarguably innocent and unbiased by any further implication that it might presuppose an entire panoply of differences, brings along a never-ending series of dissimilarities that few are still stubbornly determined to combat.

However, this humble resignation to significant differences between genders and the numerous implications that are thus triggered have not always been embraced with the same readiness as today. Primitive cultures and religions believed that men and women were united in the same body at the beginning of genesis and that only a disruptive event caused the separation of sexes (gender differentiation is yet an issue to arise only later when the sex-gender distinction became marked with higher accuracy). The Bible justifies the very choice for the apparently arbitrary order "boys and girls" instead of "girls and boys", as we are told that Eve was created from Adam's rib. Primitive African cultures held it for a fact that men and women were a unified entity at the beginning, a twin divinity from which human beings were created. Plato believed that love was the fruit of men and women's desire to become again one single being. This very idea of the sameness of belonging, if ever proved, would probably offer a considerable support to feminists worldwide struggling

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to fight off the consequences that are implied by stating the superiority of men relying in their origins. If men and women were created with the inherence of the same rightfulness, then no discriminatory act would find any acceptable justification. Moreover, nowadays the equality of rights is disputed over more solid grounds than sheer primordial arguments.

Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls" is a conclusive example of stereotypical perceptions of the differences between sexes in traditional and contemporary society. As a feminist writer (even more so as this particular short story conveys a subtle message of the way gender issues should be approached), Munro depicts instances of female discrimination which, paradoxically, at times cannot even be understood as discrimination since the "oppression" is humbly assumed as an inevitable end in the process of becoming a woman.

The two children of the family whose main income results from fox farming take on a lifestyle corresponding to the paucity of the material means the parents dispose of. The girl develops a special nurturing in tackling the hard work on the farm and takes delight in helping her father, while conscious of the fact that her help is important and irreplaceable by her brother: "Who could imagine Laird doing my work - Laird remembering the padlock and cleaning out the washing dishes with a leaf on the end of a stick, or even wheeling the tank without it tumbling over?" (204). As the gender identities and differences between the two children begin to reflect in their attitudes, the harmony within this previously tight dichotomy begins to lose space in front of the urge to settle with a greater clarity the places they should occupy within the given patterns of family and society. Suddenly, the innocent childhood companion with whom she used to share secrets, worries and fears threatens to replace her in the tasks she has become so accustomed to that she had traded her femininity in exchange and had cast a pitiful, despising and suspicious outlook on a mother's and housewife's duties. Not only is the mother silently accused of guilty submission to the husband and acceptance of her role, she is also the one who impedes and binds the girl to an undesired destiny; with no self-remorseful stance, she would halt her from her adolescent momentum and annihilate her chances of freeing herself.

At a second reading, the suspicious feminist eye stumbles upon a (perhaps petty) yet disturbing topical aspect. Why not "girls and boys"? Why are such unimportant "accidents" always in favor of the male gender? The question soon finds a supporting echo just as the plot of Alice Munro's short story adds to the basis of the suspicion: a young female tries to transcend the embedded gender boundaries by annihilating the stereotypical construing of women as weak, obedient, submissive, preoccupied with household or even feminine and is just as soon silenced and symbolically reminded of her position. In other words, this piece of writing is a harrowing account of yet another victory in subduing female consciousness and teaching her, in an understanding tone, as Laird does at the end of the short story, that "She's only a girl" (210), which constitutes a sufficient reason to dismiss any accusation of surrendering to inconsistent whims. But perhaps the most striking aspect is the female gender's humble resignation to the given situation. No protest, no outcry of rage in face of the injustice, but a mere resignation to the biased perspective of an ascribed female gender framing: "I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true" (210). The conclusion sets the basis for reflection, especially when one considers that numerous women do not even go as far as to challenge and attempt to deny the way their gender is perceived or what is thought appropriate for a woman to do.

The nameless female character of "Boys and Girls" symbolizes the unheard outcry of women in the face of the injustice that has for too long been put up with, but which is stifled by the incongruity between what they desire to become in the eyes of the society and what society deems suitable for them. For as long as women are preoccupied to fit the roles they are ascribed and impeded in their efforts to mark a change by harmful feelings of self-sufficiency, uselessness and vain (it will be remembered that the attempt to free Flora ended

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in a painful failure), women might well remain nameless characters following traditionally outlined patterns and performing their duties.

The short story follows the step-by-step history of gender discrimination and reduction to silence of a formerly tomboyish female character. As a child, the protagonist undertakes housekeeping tasks generally associated with men, activities which not only require a man's strength, but which are held as exclusively appropriate for male labor: "I had the real watering can, my father's, though I could only carry it three-quarters full" (202). As the protagonist is soon to find out, full measures are only allotted to patriarchs, irrespective of the amount of work. For the character, however, childhood is the blissful age when female attributions are not yet to be assumed and when trans-gender stances find satisfying justification in the playfulness seen in performing grown-up activities, the age when she is still able to delight in gratifying remarks of the kind that acknowledge her status of *not just a girl*: "[...] my father said, 'Like to have you meet my new hired hand'. I turned away and raked furiously, red in the face with pleasure. 'Could of fooled me', said the salesman. I thought it was only a girl" (203). The father's work is symbolically inbuilt with the importance of the patriarch's role as the family protector, which thoroughly explains why the girl eschews from her mother's indefatigable kitchen work and attempts to identify with what she unmistakably senses to be perceived as superior. She experiences painful disappointment, when, in the process of maturing, her mother downplays her help and comforts her husband by saying: "Wait until Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help [...] And then I can use her more in the house" (203).

As she grows up, she realizes that new, solicitous and seemingly unfair demands have to be coped with: "I no longer felt safe. It seemed that in the minds of the people around me there was a steady undercurrent of thought, not to be deflected, on this subject. The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become" (205). It would follow that while becoming a man is a mere question of natural development, becoming a woman implies an endless list of expectations and constraints in order to fit to a commonly accepted sample. And even so, if one becomes a woman as it is supposed that a woman should be, she would still have to face prejudice and content herself to being a dignified exponent of this gender, whose definition is "always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment" (205). Moreover, preadolescence brings about the upsetting feeling that femininity and womanliness is understood in association with numerous constraints and norms in what concerns behavior: "Girls don't slam doors like that" (205), "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down" (205). The growing pressure resulting from the normativity of the feminine attributions triggers opposite effects and rebellious attitudes, typical for the age, whilst particular in that they are generated not exclusively by the "gap of generations" symptomatology, but by a feminine response to unjust to unexplainable attitudes. Hence the vicious circle she finds herself trapped in. If girls and women are ascribed *a priori* attributions that keep them far from what is perceived as privileged, then what chance do they stand in re-balancing gender roles? A starting point might possibly reside in reiterating and reconstructing the meaning of femininity as not necessarily and strictly related to what men construe as "feminine". As long as "women's lives are shaped by the rules of femininity" (Alcoff 59) and they define themselves as "part of the conceptual project of exalting masculinity" (59), while "it is the other against which men define themselves as admirably and uniquely human" (59), a readjustment of roles is neither possible nor satisfactory to redefine womanhood holistically speaking.

Perhaps the most significant moment of the plot superposes to the in-depth understanding of her status and of the way femininity would curtail the benefits of liberty in

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thought and demeanor. Freeing Flora, the mare, whom her father had intended to sacrifice in order to feed the fox, represents a symbolic treason of the briefly adopted masculine gender the child has chosen in order to fulfill the need for power and superiority, as well as the embodiment of all vain efforts to overcome a certain gender-biased position in society. As soon as the attempt to save Flora fails, the roles of the two children become irremediably reversed. The girl is no longer the calculated, helpful aid, but an impediment to the family's potential prosperity and is therefore reduced to the role of a woman. The moment marks the very beginning of the feminization process as construed by her family, since her once admirable masculine assuredness is fast replaced by an unexpected burst of sensitivity: "Everyone at the table was looking at me. I nodded, swallowing food with great difficulty. To my shame, tears flooded my eyes" (209), "I put down my fork and waited to be sent from the table, still not looking up" (209). It is the moment when the inevitable readjustment of roles marks the beginning of a new stage of gender dichotomy relationship, and which corresponds to the end of the short story. The unnamed character accepts her "natural" position within the family, and presumably in the society, while renouncing any further attempt to overcome her condition as a now grown-up female representative of those numerous would-be spouses and mothers. As she understands that "Flora would not really get away" (*208*) (a possible, perhaps not exaggeratedly far-fetched reading would be "Women are never really going to escape prejudices") and that being on Flora's side makes her "no use to anybody, not even to her" (208), she actually acknowledges the futility of trying to downplay the power of social and gender stereotypes.

An optimistic outlook on the matter would, of course, imply the denial of any such prejudice and a mere innocent emphasis on women-men differences. This is undoubtedly an extremely safe position, as the theory of inborn biological differences is gaining popularity with a speed that would make a more skeptical nature murmur that it is a matter of searching for pretexts. Others, however, might experience great relief at the thought that puzzling incompatibilities in mentality and behavior are now explained by unquestionable biological differences between men's and women's brains. Writers, psychologists, artists, pastors are now engaged in efforts to demonstrate how this might be a breakthrough of science and a cornerstone in gender perspectives.

Mark Gungor's *Tale of Two Brains* is rather conclusive in this respect. Instead of portraying the "anathema" of gender distinctions as impossible to erase, the humorous note of his seminar adds a welcome emphasis to the idea of accepting otherness on grounds of physiological differences that cannot be tackled otherwise than with patience, tolerance and understanding.

Stereotypically speaking, women link thoughts while apparently concerned by a singular issue and men only concentrate on one problem at a time, women feel the constant urge to communicate and to be listened to, while men are notorious taciturns, a woman's brain is like an entangled system of electrical wires always relating to each other and dominated by the force of emotion, while men often find refuge in "the nothing box" and are actually able to spend a certain amount of time without thinking about anything. Despite the fact that the reason for the very existence of the interconnected "wires" is a biological one, it is perhaps in modern times that women tend to assume far more numerous roles as compared to those they had in the past. As wives, mothers and career-women, they struggle not to neglect any of the newly-acquired postures. Advocates of the idea that women should only stay housewives would probably find it difficult to offer pertinent solutions to avoid an even stronger discrimination that some feel it is a stringent social issue even in present days : "by privileging the labour [...] distinction", women are rendered "peripheral unless they are engaged in productive wage labour" (McNay 24).

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Moreover, while women are forever self-critical and displeased about themselves, men are not only characterized by self-assuredness, but expect the same from their potential spouses. Following the now popular "You are what you think (about yourself)", it could be easily assumed that a positive, confident self-perception plays an important role in ensuring oneself a favorable image in the eyes of the others.

Further on, it seems that the same physiological differences influence very differently in men and women the need for physical and/or romantic relationships, as well as reactions when it comes to sharing household duties. It would appear that some of the most frequently encountered conflicts are easily solved with a minimum amount of communication: men simply need to be asked a service more than once; by contrary, their spouses find it natural that they should ask for it only once, which frequently leads to frustration on both sides involved.

Conclusion

Still too far away from a true feminist's ideal of "boys or girls", which would imply, beyond the shadow of any doubt, the idea of equality and interchangeability between sexes in what concerns their social status, working possibilities, as well as the idea of overcoming traditional expectations of women's familial roles. Although quite clearly not the terms of a perfect equation, neither of the notions designating gender should bear the stress of dominance. In times, we will be able to say "boys and girls" with no underlying meanings of superiority of either of the words.

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