



*From Girlhood to Womanhood; Navigating Life's Challenges
in "The Lives of Girls and Women" by Alice Munro*

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من الطفولة إلى سنوات النضج؛ كيفية التعامل مع تحديات الحياة في رواية "حياة
الفتيات والنساء" لأليس مونرو.

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Abstract:

Lives of Girls and Women is a compelling exploration of the multifaceted journey from girlhood to womanhood. Through the protagonist's experiences, Del Jordan, the narrative unfolds with a keen examination of societal expectations, familial dynamics, and personal growth. Munro's storytelling intricately weaves together the challenges and triumphs of female development, offering a nuanced portrayal of the complexities inherent in this transformative process. As Del navigates the intricacies of identity, relationships, and societal norms, the narrative becomes a mirror reflecting universal themes of resilience, self-discovery, and the negotiation of individual agency amidst external pressures. The abstract concludes with recognizing the enduring strength depicted in Munro's characters, inviting readers to contemplate the profound implications of the girl-to-woman journey portrayed in this literary work.

المخلص:

يُعد "حياة الفتيات والنساء" استكشافاً مقنعاً لرحلة متعددة الجوانب من الطفولة إلى النضج. تتناول الرواية توقعات المجتمع وديناميات الأسرة والنمو الشخصي من خلال تجارب البطلة ديل جوردان. تتشابك سردية مونرو ببراعة تحديات وانتصارات تطور الإناث، مما يقدم صورة معقدة للتعقيدات المترابطة في هذه العملية التحولية. كذلك يعكس السرد الثيمات العالمية للصدود واكتشاف الذات والتفاوض على الوكالة الفردية في ظل الضغوط الخارجية. كما يستحق تأمل القوة الدائمة المتجسدة في شخصيات مونرو التي يدعو القراء للتأمل في الآثار العميقة لرحلة الفتاة إلى النسوة التي تُصوّرها هذه الرواية الأدبية .

Introduction

Lives of Girls and Women is Alice Munro's novel that shows her ability to capture the nuances of women's experiences. Published in 1971, the novel departs from Munro's more traditional short stories. It unfolds as a series of interconnected stories that offer a broader exploration of Del Jordan's journey from girlhood to womanhood in the fictional town of Jubilee, Ontario. The novel of Munro immerses readers in small-town dynamics and the complexities of Del's relationships, family, and personal discoveries. The precision of Munro's story paints a vivid picture of the challenges and complexities that mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Del's encounters with societal expectations, family secrets, and evolving desires create a story that resonates with authenticity and emotional depth. As the novel progresses, readers are invited to witness Del's inner growth, navigating the landscape of identity and sexuality. And social norms. Known for her precision and insight, Munro's prose captures the nuances of Del's experiences, making *Lives of Girls and Women* a compelling study of the universal yet deeply personal journey of becoming a woman (Chang, J. 2016, pp. 27).

Munro's research contributes to the broader discussion on gender, identity, and social norms. The novel's exploration of Deli's evolving relationships, aspirations, and conflicts with social

boundaries provides a rich tapestry for understanding the construction of femininity. It reveals the subtle and apparent pressures that shape a girl's self-esteem and agency. It allows readers to reflect on the broader effects of societal expectations on women's lives, and its relevance extends to its resonance with readers from diverse backgrounds. The universality of the researched topics makes it possible to connect the characters' personal experiences and those experienced by the readers (Beer, J. 2009, pp. 143).

In the context of Alice Munro's novel, the transition from girlhood to womanhood is a central theme that deserves careful consideration. The story intricately weaves through the life of the protagonist, Del Jordan, as he battles countless challenges along his life-changing journey. However, despite the richness of Munro's description, there are gaps in our understanding of the specific sociocultural, family, and individual factors that significantly affect navigating these challenges (Munro, A. 1971 pp. 110).

The study's primary aims would be:

1- To Investigate the societal norms and expectations placed on girls transitioning into womanhood as portrayed in *Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro.

2- Investigate the role of family dynamics, including parental expectations and relationships, in the coming-of-age experiences of the female characters.

3- To Explore the individual journeys of female characters, particularly Del Jordan, focusing on their personal growth, self-discovery, and empowerment throughout the narrative.

1.0 Alice Munro's Biography

Alice Munro, born July 10, 1931, in Wingham, Ontario, Canada, is a distinguished Canadian author recognized for her extraordinary contributions to the short story genre. Growing up in a rural environment, Munro was inspired by literature from an early age. Despite leaving the University of Western Ontario before graduating and marrying James Munro in 1951, she began her writing career with the publication of *The Dimensions of a Shadow* in 1950. His breakthrough came in 1968 with the Governor General's Award-winning collection, "Dance of Happy Shadows." Munro continued to gain acclaim for later works, including *The Beggar Girl: The Stories of Flo and Rose* (1978) and *The Friend of My Youth* (1990). Her exploration of the complexities of everyday life and her mastery of narrative have won her several awards, including the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first Canadian woman to receive this prestigious honor. Although Munro officially retired from writing in 2013, Munro's legacy lives on as a transformative force in

contemporary literature, demonstrating through Novelli's art her deep understanding of the human condition (Martin, W.R. 1987 pp. 81).

2.1 Her Life

Alice Munro's life is characterized by a journey from a modest rural upbringing to one of the world's most famous literary figures. Born on July 10, 1931, in Wingham, Ontario, Canada, Alice Ann Laidlaw grew up in a small farming community. His father worked as a fox and mink breeder, while his mother was a teacher. Despite limited childhood resources, Munro developed a passion for reading and storytelling, which influenced his early efforts to become a writer in 1951. She left the University of Western Ontario before graduating and married James Munro. The couple moved to Vancouver, where they opened a bookstore, and it was at this time Munro's writing career began to take shape. Her first published story, *The Dimensions of Shadow*, appeared in 1950. Munro's literary breakthrough came in 1968 with her *Dance of the Happy Shadows* collection, which won the Governor General's Award. He went on to write critically acclaimed collections, including *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) and *The Evolution of Love* (1986). Munro's writing is known for exploring the complexities of human relationships, the challenges of women, and the subtleties of everyday life. A significant moment in her career

came in 2013 when Munro received the Nobel Prize for Literature, making her the first Canadian woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Only the 13th woman to receive that prestigious honor. In the same year, she officially gave up writing due to her age and a desire to spend more time with her family. Alice Munro's literary contributions received many awards and accolades, confirming her reputation as an artist. Novel genre. Her stories often describe the complexities of city life, family relationships, and the changing roles of women. Despite her retirement from active writing, Alice Munro's influence on literature remains, and her works continue to be praised for their depth, insight, and enduring relevance (Moss, J. 1977 pp. 17).

2.2 Best Works

Alice Munro, renowned for her mastery of the short story genre, has produced impressive work. While opinions on the "best" works can be subjective, several of Munro's collections have received widespread acclaim and are considered essential to understanding her literary prowess (Gault, C. 2006 pp. 163):

- a. *Dance of the Happy Shades (1968)*: This debut collection won the Governor General's Award, bringing Munro into the literary spotlight. The stories explore the complexities of family relationships and the nuances of small-town life.
- b. *The Moons of Jupiter (1982)*: Known for its profound

exploration of human connections and the intricacies of memory, this collection further solidified Munro's reputation as a master of the short story form.

c. *The Progress of Love (1986)*: Winner of the Governor General's Award, this collection delves into themes of love and its evolution, often challenging conventional expectations. Munro's exploration of the complexities of human emotion is evident throughout.

d. *Friend of My Youth (1990)*: This collection examines the impact of the past on the present, with stories that skillfully interweave memory and the passage of time. Munro's narrative depth and character development are particularly notable in this work.

e. *Open Secrets (1994)*: Focused on the secrets that shape individuals and communities, this collection received critical acclaim for exploring moral ambiguities and the interconnectedness of lives.

2.0 Literature Review

The protagonist's mother in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* is given a significantly more prominent role than the mother figures in *Cat's Eye* or *The Stone Angel* since Munro portrays the relationship between her protagonist, Del, and her mother in detail and all its complexity. According to Perrakis,

Del's mother is her "first and most influential model," at first "unquestioned and unanalyzed" (62). She is an example of a fully developed mother-figure character. She is a constant presence in the novel, and ample time is given to Del's interaction with her and to Del's reconstruction of who her mother is as a person. In her narration, Del views her mother not only as one of the essential people during her growing up in Jubilee but also as one of the more interesting characters of the town, one whose past and present are worth writing about. Being a writer, Del uses the artistic license to be selective about which people she wants to focus on: her father, though also present in her life, is only mentioned in passing in the novel and mainly about her mother. It is not the lives of boys and men, after all, that the novel is concerned with. Del's mother's name, Ada, is revealed early in the novel but never repeated since Del naturally refers to Ada only as "mother." Although she is a character with a relatively rich life, the readers are thus repeatedly reminded of Ada's primary function in the story: that of the protagonist's mother (Munro, A. 2011, p. 167).

However, Munro allows Del to disrupt this categorization of Ada by naming the chapter focused on her not "My Mother" but, mysteriously, "Princess Ida." Later on, it is revealed that this is Ada's "nom de plume," inspired by Tennyson and used by her to publish "letters in which she [promotes] education and the rights of women" in the local paper (Munro 90-91). Besides being

one of the girls and women Del writes about, Ada is also given the privilege of coming up with the novel's title: "There is a change coming, I think, in the lives of girls and women. Yes. However, it is up to us to make it come. All women have had until now been their connection with men... more lives of our own than domestic animals. He shall hold thee when his passion shall have spent its novel force, closer than his dog, dearer than his horse." (Munro 193, original emphasis p. 90-91).

Harris notes that the reason Ada quotes her favorite poet, Tennyson, in this powerful speech is because he, in her opinion, speaks for the liberation of women. Nevertheless, this "worship" of the poet might be argued to "[involve] various kinds of misrepresentation" (Harris 101). While Ada is very fervent about her ideas and belief in a better future, she is also shown to be somewhat narrow-minded and naive in her idealism. Her blind trust in the unwavering validity of Tennyson's words is one example, and her obsession with scientific knowledge, which will be discussed further in another. Del is different, more down-to-earth, and less uncompromising, arguably thanks to learning not to follow her mother's example too closely, only to be inspired by it (Harris, M. 2008. 101).

From her early childhood, Del is aware of her mother being different from the other mothers in Jubilee: firstly, she has an

unusual, and among the women in the town also an unprecedented, fascination with science; secondly, she is not content with living in the small town. To Ada, "knowledge [is] warm and lovely" (Munro 73). As the daughter of a woman she calls "a religious fanatic," Ada revels in absorbing all available pieces of popular science, reading articles about the science fiction-like future and discussing them with anyone even remotely interested — which appears to include solely her daughter, at least when Del is still young enough not to protest (Munro 84). Del explains why her mother has become known as the "encyclopedia lady" in Jubilee: Ada deliberately chose a path as different as possible from her own mother's, whom she detests for spending all her inheritance on bibles instead of feeding her impoverished family (Munro 243). Ada does not care about the social norms observed in Jubilee. Her quest for the proliferation of knowledge is more important to her than the town's opinion. As she gets older, Del becomes aware of her mother's status in Jubilee: her self-sufficiency in making a living from selling encyclopedias is regarded with disdain and suspicion. "Not much time for ironing when she has to go out on the road" (Munro 72). Ada does not belong in Jubilee and is only accepted there as one of the town's oddities. All her attempts at socialization through hosting quiz game evenings fail as many of the invited "ladies [cannot] be made to understand how to play" (Munro 81). Ada's self-reliance and the pursuit of her interests

despite the majority opinion ultimately turns her into a source of inspiration for Del. She, after all, chooses a similar path to her mother's, disregarding the regular expectations and choosing to leave Jubilee to become a writer (Munro, A. 2011 p. 70-81).

However, before that happens, Del internalizes the opinion of the others and gives in to their "sly and gloating and pitying looks," viewing her mother, her behavior, and especially her "innocence, her way of not knowing when people were laughing" with embarrassment (Munro 90). Perrakis remarks that Del first willingly participates in her mother's encyclopedia selling. Like every child seeking her parents' praise, she happily "reels off" facts of general knowledge to endorse her mother's business, using her excellent memory well (62). In her adolescence, Del matures from the plain memorization of facts into becoming a "participant-observer" of the daily "rituals and routines" in Jubilee, which is an endeavor her mother has never been interested in (62). Finally, at the end of the novel, Del takes advantage of both her excellent memory honed by her mother's encyclopedia training as well as her ability to empathize with the various inhabitants of Jubilee to record her growing up in the town in her writing (Perrakis 62). Del's relationship with her mother is far from static; it changes and evolves throughout the novel. Del eventually comes to understand her mother (and partially also her mother's mother and the role she played in the sequence of mothers and daughters that followed),

but before that happens, she experiences a phase of universal teenage contempt for everything her mother represents. Still, in the end, Del embraces the values of independence and intellectualism her mother has been promoting all along (Perrakis, P. 1982, p. 61-67).

Besides being the mother to the protagonist and her brother, Ada, as Del remarks, is also a woman frustrated with her life and the way it has turned out: "Had all her stories [got] turned to frizz, after all, to end up with just her just [Del 's] mother in Jubilee?" (Munro 90). Just as the people in Jubilee barely accept her, so Ada only barely tolerates living in the town, being particularly disdainful of their home address, "the last place [she wants] to live" (Munro 10). As Del notices, Ada compensates for her unfulfilling life by escaping into fantasies about a very different future "when towns like Jubilee would be replaced by domes and mushrooms of concrete when the countryside would be bound and tamed forever" (Munro 158). Instead of adjusting to what actual possibilities her life in Jubilee offers, Ada gives up on reality and focuses her energy on the abstract imaginings of a better future for humankind and her daughter ((Munro, A. 2011 p. 90-185).

It would appear that Munro portrays Ada as a solely positive role model, a woman who would have liked to achieve more in her life but is repeatedly being hindered by the social norms of her time, which try to mold her into being a wife and a mother. It is,

however, more complex: Munro also presents a critique of Ada by implication. All it takes for her boarder's former lover, Mr. Chamberlain, to impress Ada is to mention that he has visited Florence — a city frequently featured in Ada's encyclopedic knowledge: " 'In Florence, you were in Florence,' repeated my mother, confused and joyful" (166). In this absurd situation, Ada admires the man who will, in a few pages, molest her daughter and who has betrayed perhaps her only friend, her boarder Fern. Ada's obsession with knowledge is thus detrimental to her relationships with other people and attempts to impede her ability to be a good mother or friend. Indeed, Ada's judgment about what is best for her daughter also becomes clouded by her personal preferences projected onto her daughter. In other words, Del becomes Ada's proxy for fulfilling the dreams she once had for herself. When Del begins dating the unintellectual Garnet, Ada is devastated: "You have gone addled over a boy. You with your intelligence. Do you intend to live in Jubilee all your life?" (Munro 241). Ada's worst fear is for Del to share her fate of getting stuck in Jubilee. Del later rejects such an outcome, but she decides on her own after refusing to be forced by her boyfriend into a life she does not want. Although Del does, in the end, meet her mother's expectations and leaves the town for a very different life, she does so only after they have grown apart due to Ada's fear of Del being a disappointment. Munro presents other mother figures for her protagonist: Aunt

Elspeth and Auntie Grace, with whom Del sometimes goes to stay. They are not fond of Del's mother, looking down on her encyclopedia-selling business. The aunties are Ada's opposite when it comes to regard for men and their importance, and they also have a definite and personal sense of humor, having been living together all their lives: "They respected men's work beyond anything; they also laughed at it And they would never, never meddle with it; between men's work and women's work was the clearest line drawn" (Munro 38). The aunties do not resist Jubilee's values and never entertain any silly notions of leaving the town or Uncle Craig, whom they care for as he writes his Jubilee chronicle. Instead, they embody these values in their own self-deprecating and humorous manner. No other options are apparent to them, so they decide to accept their life's direction on their terms. Like with Del's mother, Munro shows how Del's perception of the aunties changes over time — she enjoys their jokes and pranks as a child, but when she grows up. As they age, she starts seeing through their carefully maintained facade: "They told their same stories, they played their same jokes the older they got, the more frail and admirable and inhuman this construction appeared" (Munro 68). The mother figures Munro portrays are far from perfect, but they demonstrate to Del the different ways of facing the expectations of society: while Del's mother closes herself off into her world of science and dreams about Del's future, brighter than her own, the

aunties accommodate to life in Jubilee by ridiculing the norms at the same time as obeying them. Harris points out that the aunts, with their endless and meandering stories, perform what is considered "primarily a women's activity" in the novel: storytelling (106). While Uncle Craig writes down facts for his chronicle, the aunties gossip, tell jokes, and recall various memorable events from their shared past, teaching Del there is more to a narrative than bare facts. The aunties then, too, are a source of inspiration in Del's transformation into a writer as it is also thanks to them that she learns to appreciate the "texture of individual lives," which tends to get lost in impersonal, factual accounts (Harris 106). Del's mother and aunts thus serve as role models for how to behave as a woman and demonstrate to Del the different ways to perceive and record reality.

3.0 Analysis

Throughout the centuries, feminist thinkers and scholars have understood the relationship between patriarchy and gender as crucial to the women's subordinate position. Patriarchy's ideology of the gender system has provided the model for domestic slavery. Patriarchy explains how the male-dominated society controls women with its gender politics. Gender politics colonize the mindscape of women. Gender refers to sociocultural definitions of man and woman. Gender according to Oakley, "gender is a matter

of culture" (Oakley 69). Therefore, gender is institutionalized by patriarchal culture.

Alice Munro, who has been hailed as a "realist" (Bowering 4) and a "super realist" (Gervais 9), raises her voice against gender politics of patriarchy through her novel *Lives of Girls and Women*, published in 1971. She won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2009 for her celebrated novel *Lives of Girls and Women*. Munro is best known for her short stories and is one of Canada's most celebrated writers.

Munro is a "visionary documentary writer" (Mallinson 70) who documents the wretched conditions of the lives of girls and women in her novel *Lives of Girls and Women*. The novel tells the average realist story of a sensitive child, Del Jordon, "growing up to be a disillusioned but wisely maladjusted adult" (Bowering 4). The novel reveals the photographic vision of Alice Munro. The photography of events depicted in the novel gives us "the sense that we can hold the whole (patriarchal) world in our heads as an anthology of images" of the victimization of girls and women (photography 3).

Gender discrimination is socially constructed by the parents, relatives, neighbors, environment, culture, and society, injected slowly into the psyche of the individuals. As boys are taken as strong and girls are given a more feminine designation of being,

such expressions on one's physique powerfully shape the self-image and personality of boys and girls. Alice Munro says:

It is the girl who is responsible because our sex organs are on the inside, and theirs are on the outside, and we can control our urges better than they can. A boy cannot help himself (148).

Women are treated as subjects of oppression on the consumer in the male marginal dominant society, where they lose their rights and equality to raise their voice against men for being treated as secondary citizens and enslaved people, even though she has the intention to revolt against men. Bouchier expresses:

Women's sexuality had always been controlled by fear of social disgrace, fear of hell, fear, and fear of pregnancy. As these sanctions lost their power, the ignorance that went through them was dispelled by more and more explicit information about sexual matters (Bouchier 26).

The novel *Lives of Girls and Women* is the story of Del Jordon, who tries to connect herself between the external and internal world, between religious, sexual, and artistic experiences. The novel is related to the chronicles of a young female protagonist trying to connect herself between the inner and outer worlds. Martin says, "The novel is the study of Del's social, sexual, emotional and intellectual growth and maturation-brought into some coherent or accepted relation with one another" (Martin 63).

It is structured as a series of episodes in which Del Jordon copes with some fundamental problem and finds her way through it. She deals with the limited vision of ignorance and near madness, knowledge, belief in god, playing a reality role, sex, love, and power. All are intervened in her life.

Lives of Girls and Women is the portrait of the artist who reconciles freedom with pride, taking control and responsibility for her life and advancing into full consciousness. Del's growing awareness and acceptance of herself. Moss says:

Munro transcends time through point of view in brilliant flashes. She is one of the best short story writers alive and has made the personal reminiscence a genre of her own (Moss 56).

Lives of Girls and Women has enjoyed a well-deserved popularity. It examines the process of growing up from a specifically female point of view. Del Jordon, the heroine, becomes aware of the socializing process at an early age, whereby sex distinctions determine her relations to others. She is expected to help her mother in the house instead of working with her brother and her father in the fox pens; she is expected to be gentle in her behavior, submissive to authority, and modest about her accomplishments. Del arises over the matter of intelligence. Society honors and respects a boy who shows intellectual promise, but a bright girl is considered suspect. The matter becomes a crisis of identity when

she reads a magazine article by a New York psychiatrist who discusses male and female habits of thought. Munro says:

He said that the differences between the male and female modes of thought were easily illustrated by the thought of a boy and girl sitting on a park bench, looking at the full moon. The boy thinks of the universe, its immensity and mystery; the girl thinks, "I must wash my hair." When I read this, I was frantically upset; I had to put the magazine down. It was clear to me at once that I was not thinking as the girl thought; the full moon would never, as long as I lived, remind me to wash my hair (150).

The question of sexual identity is not resolved in the novel. However, Del's mother, a woman with rudimentary feminist ideals, prophesies that life will someday be very different for women. Munro drives home message:

There is change coming in the lives of girls and women. Yes. However, it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. He shall hold thee when his passion has spent its novel force, closer than his dog and house. Tennyson wrote that. It is true. It was true you will want to have children, however. That was how much she knew me.

However, I hope you will use your brains. Use your brains. Do not be distracted by a man; your life will never be yours. You will get the burden; woman always does (193).

Del Jordan's account of her growing up is destabilized by breaking the narrative chronology, but such disruptions are mirrored by equivalent breaks with male authority and especially with male language. The novel is expressed through a "Complex set of aesthetic tensions between past and present perspectives, between different layers of experiences and even reality and surreality, but still coheres as a whole" (beer 132). The stories in the novel *Lives of Girls and Women* men pass in and out of Del's life and are contained by the structure of the individual short story by their representative role, their marginality both in social and geographical terms, and their function as adjuncts to the main thrust of the narrative.

Lives of Girls and Women, with its foregrounding of the emotional ties between a mother and daughter, is very much based on Munro's experience, as John Metcalf reports her having said that the "emotional reality" of the work is entirely based on her own life (58). The ever-lasting connection to the past usually seen in Munro is thus defined by Murphy:

"The typical writer in Munro's fiction is ambivalent about her work but driven to do it. She struggles for representative accuracy, which failures of love and talent undercut. Munro's writer's labor to connect memory and identity and the problems inherent in such connection provide the central conflicts of Munro's fiction.

However, the connection itself is always the subsuming theme. Three kinds of connection are essential to the Munro Weltanschauung: travel, the connection of one place to another in a journey replete with metaphorical meaning; change, the connection between past and present; and sexual love, probably the most fundamental and highly problematic of human connections". (45)

The Lives's affinities with the Kuntslerroman give the reader ample opportunity to view the woman-in-the-make that is Del, and its episodic nature highlights the stages she goes through in her maturation. Therefore, studying it in terms of the theories of Gilbert and Gubar can reveal the secrets behind Del's construction of identity and provide readers with a better understanding of how modern female writers conceive of their works.

Conclusion

While *Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro navigates the intricate terrain of girlhood to womanhood, the conclusion of this literary journey is marked by a poignant reflection on the profound impact of societal expectations, familial dynamics, and personal choices. Munro's narrative culminates in a nuanced understanding of the complexities that shape girls' lives as they evolve into women. The protagonist, Del Jordan, emerges as a symbol of resilience and self-discovery, having traversed the challenges inherent in this transformative process. The conclusion invites

readers to reflect on the universal themes of identity, agency, and the negotiation of societal norms. Munro's exploration emphasizes the significance of individual empowerment and the intricate interplay between internal desires and external constraints. Ultimately, the conclusion resonates with the broader implications of this journey, portraying the enduring strength of women in the face of life's multifaceted challenges. Through Munro's lens, the conclusion becomes a mirror reflecting the intricacies of one character's life and the shared experiences of women navigating the complex path from girlhood to womanhood.

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