



## **CROSSING BOUNDARIES AND CREATING SPACE IN ALICE MUNRO'S WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE**

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### **Abstract:**

*'Who Do You Think You Are' is acclaimed as the best critical book of Munro's career and is awarded with Governor General's award, Canada highest literary prize. The title of the book itself refers to the question of identity. In Munro's earlier work, the search for identity is limited to the social milieu, where protagonists struggle against stereotypical gender norms to assert their own identity but this collection of short story reflects the battle of identity that is fought within the self and hence become a psychological struggle. Munro goes beyond the tradition of bildungsroman as a genre which explores the growing up of a male hero. She denies the chronological progression as in a conventional bildungsroman in order to explore the unequal opportunities and the power struggle of growing up of female protagonist so that she could realize her true self. Thus, a full and far-reaching portrayal of female life and creativity is centered through Rose's life with a candid attitude. Through the unfolding of the stories, we find an unapologetic insight into human behavior what turns out for Rose's search for space in society. Hence, this paper endeavors to explore various elements of the protagonist's struggle to find and shape her own identity; how she denies being a puppet in the hands of others overstepping societal boundaries only to create space and a distinct identity thereupon in this patriarchal world.*

**Key Words:** Identity, Bildungsroman & Gender Stereotype

### **Introduction:**

Rose, the protagonist is a poor country girl who craves for an intellectual life and wants to get rid of stereotypical male-female order and social expectations and narrow-mindedness of small town Hanratty. She is talented and ambitious enough to assert her identity but she is haunted by the traditional societal norms which crippled her. She has inherent talent of acting but she has to face various hardships as women are expected to follow the ruts of the society and certain pursuits are a kind of taboo for them as an unwritten law.

Rose is asked three times this question- Who do you think you are? This question rings in her ears for the whole span of life. The deep craving to get an answer encourages her self-examination so as to gain self-knowledge. Many critics find this expression as a reprimand for being conceited, or pretentious or overly ambitious. She is described as having "high hopes of herself," as harboring "gaudy ambitions." Her ambitions receive smacks as Flo, her step-mother, is irritated by her "smart-aleck behavior": "Oh, don't you think you're somebody, says Flo, and a moment later, Who do you think you are? (Who 45)" One day in school, Miss Hattie, the teacher, wrote a long poem on the blackboard and told that "everyone was to copy it out, then learn it off by heart, and the next day recite it." Rose is so ease with poems that she skips the first step and learns it by heart. When the teacher notices it that she was not writing down the poem, she enquires about that and Rose replied that she knew the poem already. "Do you really?" said Miss Hattie in utter doubt about her credibility and with disgusting voice she asks her to stand up and face the back of the room. Rose did so knowing that

she is voiceless. She recited the poem to the class and her confidence was not mistaken as 'She recited without a hitch ...'

Miss Hattie's anger still continued to punish the girl: "Well, you may know the poem, but that is no excuse for not doing what you were told. Sit down and write it in your book. I want you to write every line three times. If you don't get it finished you can stay after four (45)."

Rose has to do the same even after four. When she submits her copy to Miss Hattie, she firmly remarks: "You can't go thinking you are better than other people just because you can learn poems." (46). The question 'who do you think you are' has kept the girl haunting as it was asked on numerous occasions. Though she has not paid attention to it but it has struck her many times. Later on Rose realized that Miss Hattie was not a sadistic teacher. In fact, she was trying to teach her the most important lesson of life than any other poem can teach, and one she truly needed. Miss Hattie attempted to teach her to keep her aspiration and pretensions in check in such a society, for she too was the product of the same milieu where woman has limited space.

The childhood of Rose is quite traumatic as it is replete with impoverishment and dysfunctional relations. Her mother passed away in her prime age and her father brought Flo as her step mother to take care of little child who later bore Rose's half-brother, Brian. Rose's stepmother is quite ambivalent in her attitude and disapproves the rebellious ways of her. Flo often threatens the girl with 'a Royal Beating' for her language and tone, which exhibited her chagrin for the tender girl. The phrase 'Royal Beating' has certain fantastic images for Rose as her attempt to cross certain boundaries has always been retributive. She imagines as "She came up with a tree-lined avenue, a crowd of formal spectators, some white horses and black slaves. Someone knelt, and the blood came leaping out like banners. An occasion both savage and splendid, in real life they didn't approach such dignity" (4).

Rose bears the physical as well as psychological humiliation through the hands of her father. In this drama of 'Royal Beating', Rose plays her part with same intensity as her father performs. She cries, shrieks and takes an escape in her room where she ponders to retaliate in a dramatic manner; plans to make a suicide attempt or run away from home. This beating exhibits the face of violence which has been prevalent in Canadian society as with some other parts of the world. The ruthless father beats Rose badly and approves this violence as a privilege of a man to control another sex. Munro points out gender discrimination at this point as Rose's brother is far away from this episode: "he flees out the woodshed door, to do as he likes. Being a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the house hold struggle" (15).

In 'Privilege' Rose gets admission in school where she learns to survive the poverty and harshness of preliminary school life that echoes the dramatic tales of Dickens. Here, Rose is exposed to the perverse and harsh realities of life. Like other girls, Rose has to tolerate the comments passed by the bigger boys who look like wild dogs 'capricious, jubilant in attack" (33). In school Rose tried "to avoid the dark place under the steps and the place between the woodpiles; not to attract in any way the attention of other big boys, who seemed like wild dog... (33) Once at school a boy tries to grab Rose as "She was coming down the fire escape, tearing the sleeve of her raincoat out at the armhole" (34).

Very often sex becomes an instrument to abuse by the male to victimize the female. Munro presents Franny, a schoolgirl who has become victim of male sexual gratification in school. His own brother exploits her to satisfy himself. With the incident of Franny and her brother Shortie, Rose learns the survival skills that a girl is not safe

even within her house. At this time Rose is psychologically detached from the experience of watching the act of incest in boy's toilet. She does not understand at this point that this could happen to anyone else. Rose's detachment from this incident helps her to leave from it both as a child and as an adult though in a very different manner.

Later on Rose as an interviewer remembers the shame and outrage inflicted upon Franny, who is sexually assaulted by various boys in school and even by her own brother. She shares these memories in her programs. People were shocked to know that such things can happen even in the childhood. Rose is a true artist who, through her art and creativity, survives the hardships of life and derives the pleasure even from the ugliest things. She herself asserts that "no matter with what cravenness and caution, what shocks and foreboding, is not the same as miserable. It is not interesting" (27). Rose is highly sensitive and perceptive and possesses the abilities to accept the harsh realities of life and joyful creativities of her heart with same passion. Rose cannot be called miserable as she has innate capabilities to survive with her imagination and creativity. Apparently she crosses boundaries, but that is a new space she creates that could recreate the social conditioning afresh and in the process she learns to survive. Thomas E. Tausky has truly pictured the condition of Rose:

Beaten by her father, hearing tales from Flo about evil men, witnessing incest in the entryway of the Boys' Toilet at school, Munro's protagonist Rose has one educational challenge before her: "learning to survive". As she moves from childhood by way of an unsuccessful marriage into a precarious middle age, she feels that it is her individual destiny, and the fate of her sex, never to be the free person, the one with that power.(9)

Munro's own relationship with her mother has its shadow on Rose-Flo relationship. Flo plays an important part in shaping the identity of Rose. Rose has been deprived of the motherly affection and her only image of a woman was Flo: "Flo was her idea of what a woman ought to be . . . energetic, practical, and clever at making and saving" (47). Throughout her life she makes various performance takes up many roles and discards numerous others.

Again, in Flo-Rose relationship there is a cyclical movement in the novel which chronicles Rose's departure from Hanratty as a separation from Flo and her eventual return to Hanratty to take care of ailing Flo as a mark of reunion with her. Critics have acclaimed that as Hanratty is physical locus of Rose, in the same manner Flo is spiritual locus of her. Rose loves her mother but at the same time there is an undercurrent of hatred and scorn. Though she shares deep affinity with her mother but sometimes her weird and unpredictable behavior causes her shame and anxiety. Mary Elizabeth Marlow has pointed out about such a relationship:

The Dragon Fight is the age-old conflict in establishing our own identities. The dragon is the symbol for our parents. The Dragon Fight begins early in life and can be life- long. At the heart of the fight is the issue of our own individualities, our struggle to be authentic. The Dragon Fight is the struggle we have with ourselves when we rebel against our parents or strive to emulate them. Either way there is a fight. The Dragon Fight ends when we are willing to accept our parents the way they are, and complete the job of parenting ourselves (Qtd.Premalatha: 24).

In her school days, Rose becomes infatuated with a girl named Cora. Cora is described as a beautiful girl with shiny makeup and colorful clothes. She is the girl other boys want to be with. At first Rose imitates her, practices in front of the mirror to speak and behave like her and wants to accompany her every time. Rose has fallen in the trap

of admiring and idolizing Cora, She notices each and every detail of her appearance and actions, her gesture, tone, gait as: "She wanted to grow up to be exactly like Cora. She did not want to wait to grow up. She wanted to be Cora now"(33). She has an inherent talent of acting which she cherishes through imagining herself in the role of Cora.

The act of imitation is her search for new space so that she could well be accommodated like Cora receives attention from others. Of course, it was not mutual but she gains a psychological companion who was able to denote her cravings for and deprivation of real life. Though Rose commits many mistakes in her life but she has enough courage to admit them, review herself and come out with better understanding of life. Rose is not puzzled by her follies and foibles, whatever negligible they might be, and hence, she moves to high school to gain knowledge so as to experience the life along with other people of the town.

In school, Rose feels aloof amidst all the students as this is the place where she realizes the boundaries on the basis of class and social status. She figures it out that she does not hate herself but her hatred is towards her social class which causes her shame at every step of life. She does not want to confine herself in working class situations of Hanratty. She craves to fly high to cherish and live her own dreams and she knew it very well that the only way to do it is to leave the town. As Holton highlights: "Rose is intensely aware of how her location in this stratified community imposes a class-based identity on her, a social valuation which limits her options and negatively influences her sense of self" (33). Thus, she associates the possibility of escaping her social identity with a departure from the confines of the town.

Her journey to explore herself starts at the very early stage. She observes each and every thing very minutely and experiences it to learn the survival skills. She wants to be one of them, "align herself with towners, against her place of origin, to attach herself to those waffle-eating coffee-drinking aloof and knowledgeable possessors of breakfast nooks" (40-41). She realizes that in most of the cases poverty is the original source of all the miseries. Rose has decided to change her social identity. She attempts everything to be accepted well. She changes her appearance, even practices Shakespearian plays to overcome the accent of her native place. She moves to Toronto and ponders: "Flo receding, West Hanratty flying away from her, her own wearing self-discarded as easily as everything else" (60). In this way, Rose prepares herself to make a new identity in the larger world. Darizon has corroborated the same fact that Rose has endeavored for a new social identity as her attempt "articulates a symbolic motif: that of a passage from one universe to another" (123).

Rose's mother cautions her by narrating the stories of young girl being taken advantage of. Rose is sort of torn between horror and curiosity and finds herself crippled to do something in her own defense against this sexual attack. Though her inner conscience was pricking her but she could not do anything at that point: "Please don't. That was what she tried to say. She shaped the words in her mind, tried them out, and then couldn't get them past her lips" (74-75).

Munro is not a didactic author. In most of her short stories, she has tried to show the true responses and perspectives of girls and women. This true depiction of female psyche shatters the traditional masculine interpretation of women. Rose surrenders to the groping fingers of that man who appears as a minister. The point is that Rose herself wanted to cross the threshold of childhood and her private parts were longing for adult sexual contact: "She had a considerable longing to be somebody's object-'Pounded, pleased, reduced, exhausted' ( 63). This event has a long lasting effect on her psyche. Though Rose never met the man again but he remained on call, so to speak, for years and

years. While living in the house of Dr. Henshawe, a retired classics professor, Rose experiences the difference between the life of the rich people and her own life in Hanratty. She recognizes the true potential of Rose and discovers her identity in intellectual pursuits. The professor even warns Rose that Patrick does not deserve her and only money and social status can be the reason of their alliance.

Rose has spent all her childhood in the poverty and squalor of West Hanratty. Her stay in Dr. Henshawe's house made her clear that she has two options available for her: first, to work all her life completely depending on scholarship and award that she gets and continue worrying for her life or to get married to Patrick to change her social identity. Though one time she breaks up with Patrick but soon she realizes the consequences of it as she has to go back to Hanratty to lead again the life of poverty or has to search a job to make her living in Toronto. She recalls the life of her step mother whose life was replete with wretched and poor happenings. In that world of poor Hanratty she does not have any hope of better future than Patrick. The very idea of going back to Hanratty is so alarming for her that she reconciles with Patrick.

Rose's financial conditions and sense of security compel her to settle down in the marriage. She was confused over this matter as she knew it very well that their marriage would not be a union of two souls; rather it is like an agreement of two persons for a happy life. Rose knows it very well that they both come from two different worlds, but she could not resist the privilege and status she has got after marrying him. Though she is happy with her decision of marriage but there is something in her which is stinging her. She feels a pain inside her which was unexplainable but ultimately pours on the pages as a poem:

Heedless in my dark womb  
I bear a madman's child... (84)

Rose has an innate talent of acting and no actress would desire to play one part for the whole of her career. She is aware of the limits of her role as a bagger maid. He wants to change her, not out of his love for her, but out of his own whim. Rose cherishes an innate talent of acting and no actress would desire to play one part for the whole of her career. In real life acting, she too cannot continue to be the shadow and the second fiddle of her husband, even though she is aware of the limits of her role as a 'beggar maid'. She recalls the whim:

Patrick loved her. What did he love? Not her accent... Not her jittery sexual boldness ... All the time, moving and speaking, she was destroying herself for him, yet he looked right through her, through all the distractions she was creating, and loved some obedient image that she herself could not see. (85).

The patriarchal world considers female as a weak creature and submission to husband's will is an ornament of women. But Rose does not fit in this definition as she aspires to live according to her will, not at the terms of others. So the threads of marriage could not bind them forever and eventually, they get separated after ten years. Patrick had been married ten years, and that during that time the scenes of the first breakup and reconciliation had been periodically repeated.

Gradually, Rose's sense of identity makes her realize that man is not only the reason of women's happiness, a true happiness which a woman can get, is only through the realization of her identity. At this point of life, Rose begins to understand the maze of life. After leaving Patrick, she moved to a small town which was surrounded by hills.

Rose comes back to Hanratty as she has to settle her ailing mother in a long-term care hospital. Rose has a number of memories of people she knew as a child. By settling Flo in country hospital she frees herself from Flo. It helps her to get rid of the

embarrassment caused by Flo. At this stage she overcomes the sense of 'internalized parents' and starts living for her own self. In Hanratty she comes across her classmate Ralph and misses "his feet and his breathing and his finger tapping her shoulder" (204). In her whole life Ralph and Simon are the only two persons she can identify with. Esfahani terms it as 'the 'ambiguous homecoming' (63).

**Conclusion:**

The short stories has delineated the simple events of Rose's life, akin to the definition of short stories given by Tagore (*Banglapedia*) in as much as the author has not philosophized the events, yet the protagonist's struggle and search for space throughout the life leaves the impression that the stories are not yet over. Rose's homecoming is not at all ambiguous. Here she recalls her past memories of childhood and adult life. The vicissitudes with all ups and downs appears to her as a new leaf of her comprehensive whole life. Her upward social mobility and again reconciling to the old status as divorcee is rightly creating new space for women whereby a woman could breathe free and assert her identity as unbounded human beings.

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