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Chief Editor

**Dr. Ramesh Chougule**

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## GENDER ISSUES IN ALICE MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

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**Abstract:**

Alice Munro, the master of the contemporary short story, has often written about the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separates men and women. In the short story "Boys and Girls," this gap is examined in the small world of a farm. Because the narrator is female, she is expected to behave in a subdued and frivolous way, to be devoted to domestic chores, and to ally with her mother against "male" pursuits such as farming, shooting, and heroism. Initially, she identifies more readily with her father than with her mother, noting that her father's work seems important and interesting while her mother's is depressing. The daughter is proud that her father appreciates her hard work, but she is ambivalent about the violence and callousness that is necessary to please him. Her gender forces a whole complex of behaviours on her; she is scorned by her mother and grandmother for not being enough of a girl and is ridiculed by the men in the family for being too much of a girl.

"Boys and Girls" is a short story by Alice Munro, the master of the contemporary short story, the Canadian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. It was originally published in 1964 and later included in Alice Munro's debut collection *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). The CBC produced a television adaptation of "Boys and Girls" in 1983. It won an Academy Award in 1984 for Best Short Subject. Among many others, a significant element in Munro's narratives of growing up is her exposure of the constructedness of rigid concepts of femininity and masculinity. The young female characters in her growing-up cycles *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and also in several other individual stories are deeply confused by the dictates of gender-scripts.

Alice Munro has often written about the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separates men and women. In "Boys and Girls," Munro records the humiliated and anguished psychology of a young girl conditioned by the society from her early formative stage. It highlights the invisible forces which shape children, in this case, the narrator and her brother Laird, into gendered adults. As Marlene Goldman states, "one such 'invisible' mechanism central to the production of gendered adults, involves the division and control of space". Here in this story, spatial divisions and control of space are emphasized by a female narrator still young enough to remark upon details which the adults ignore. Because the narrator is female, she is expected to behave in a subdued and frivolous way, to be devoted to domestic chores, and to ally with her mother against "male" pursuits such as farming, shooting, and heroism. Initially, she identifies more readily with her father than with her mother, noting that her father's work seems important and interesting while her mother's is depressing. Throughout the story the narrator is torn between the "girl" life with her mother inside the house, assisting in the kitchen, and the "boy" life with her father outside the house, helping out with the farm. The story explores the gender bias prevalent in the society and also the protagonist's feelings toward, and struggle to find, an identity of her own.

The action of this story takes place entirely on the fox farm. In the opening passage of a remarkably clear and restrained description Munro creates the feeling of the place and details the daily tasks the girl performs as she helps her father, keeping the pens supplied with water and spreading grass over them to prevent the foxes' pelts from being darkened by sunlight. The narrator's mother disliked the whole pelting operation which includes the killing, skinning and preparation of furs. The

narrator, however, seems to find her father's work comforting and to her "the smell of blood and animal fat" is "reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles" (112). She prefers her father's outdoor activities to her mother's domestic sphere and chores: "It seemed to me 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" (117). Indeed, the whole story centers on an inside/outside dichotomy linked to gender spaces. The young girl identifies with the male world and feels at ease with it; she even considers herself more suitable for it than her younger brother Laird, whom she regards as a sissy for a major part of the story: "Laird came too, with his little cream and green gardening can, filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes. I had the real watering can, my father's, though I could carry it three-quarters full" (114). The curiously detached centre of all this activity is formed by the foxes which, despite generations of captivity, have not ceased to be wild animals, hostile and intractable: "Naming them did not make pets out of them, or anything like it" (115).

The challenges to the narrator's connection to the father and her right to occupy the male 'outside' space are launched from within the household itself. The female family members begin to coerce the narrator. Efforts to restrict her behaviour occur at every level of existence. Statements by her visiting grandmother affirm the fact that the female gender role is an utterly restrictive one at the time when the story is set. Her grandmother tells her, "girls don't slam doors like that"; "girls keep their knees together when they sit down"; and when she asks a question, she is told "that none of girls' business" (119).

The stories which the narrator tells herself before she falls asleep at night, suggest something about her desires and wishes. They allow the narrator to imagine herself in alternative versions of her own life. In these stories, she casts herself into the role of heroic subject, as male savior, she rescues people from a bombed building, shoots rabid wolves and rides "a fine horse spiritedly down the main streets" (113). These stories of rescue and heroism seem, at least in terms of their content, quite clearly to place the narrator precisely where she would like to be: in the male-centered world of work which she associates with her father.

The symbolic act of letting Flora free also constitutes the protagonist's first rebellion against her father, who adheres to the authoritative gender patterning. It can be considered as a silent outcry against her own domestication. It is also interesting to note that she finds herself wanting to *tell* her mother about this incident. But she ends up remaining silent, still in the hope that her brother, who saw the incident, might not, mention anything to her father and her loyalty to her father's world might remain intact.

The climax occurs at the end of the story with Flora being captured and Laird telling the family at dinner that his sister was responsible for letting Flora escape. Laird's telling is itself an act which challenges the completeness of any opposition between father's world and mother's world, between boys and girls. For the first time in the story he sides with his father against her. When the narrator begins to cry, her father, having overcome his immediate consternation about his daughter's apparently ill-advised act, reacts in a manner that is even more threatening to his daughter than either fury or reproach. He simultaneously absolves and dismisses her by saying that she is "only a girl" (127).

"Boys and Girls," written at the beginning of the "second wave" of feminist involvement with literature in North America, renders gender relations in a rather programmatic manner: the systematic, highly symbolic opposition between interior/female and outer/male space, the almost stereotypical characterization of the father and the mother, the seemingly logical mirroring of the girl's ongoing socialization process in her different dreams, the divergent character of the male and female horses, the clear-cut socializing influences imposed on the girl both by family members and by the closed rural society. The story illustrates the restrictive, de-individualizing forces of an essentialist gender concept

during the adolescent phase of development. Simultaneously, it also points out positively valued, liberating opportunities for women to rebel against dominant male codes of behaviour.

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