



A YOUNG WOMAN'S QUEST FOR EMPOWERMENT AND THE CHALLENGES MET: ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORY "THE OFFICE"

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Abstract

The concern of the women across the globe, despite the women being oppressed for ages; they have come out to voice their agonies that have long been suppressed. The woman who wants to ascertain that she wants to have a private space, wherein she can talk to herself though not to others, whether a woman is in or out, she doesn't have freedom to proclaim that she is intellectually free to speak her mind. However, is that as simple as for a woman to achieve a private space? What are the challenges a woman has to encounter? "The Office" is a short story in which a reader explores the challenges of a woman who aspires for a private space. In this story, Alice Munro presents a young wife who has zeal to fulfil her passion encountering the stereotype norms of gender indoctrination in the society.

Key Words: Private space, Intellectually free, Indoctrination, Stereotype norms, Empowerment

Alice Munro is a Canadian short story writer and has a remarkable status in Canadian literature. She received Nobel Prize in literature in 2013. Her central characters are women in different spheres of life. She always talks about how her central characters balance relationship with others even in complex situations.

In many of Munro's stories, the narrators are themselves writers and artists. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir rightly states that "it is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom" (813). The double bind of being a woman and a writer can be seen in Munro's protagonists who confronts many challenges each day. In "The Office", Munro portrays the narrator-protagonist as a writer whose career is obstructed by the trespassers with their domineering behaviour.

To start with, the writer-protagonist of this story offers a set of reasons for procuring an office of her own outside her house. This story echoes Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in which she says that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she wants to write fiction"(4). Money for financial empowerment and a room to explore intellectual horizon. The protagonist of the story, "The Office" desires to journey her intellectual potential in a private space having an office of her own. She, like most other women writers yearns to ascertain for her own space, wherein she would feel at home to pen down her thoughts. Beauvoir rightly points out that,

It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom. The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite; there is no longer need for a masculine mediator between her and the universe. The curse on the woman vassal is that she is not allowed to do anything. (*The Second Sex* 813)

Aspiring to have an office, which is a simple but an audacious decision. However, being a fiction writer, the protagonist finds it difficult to prosecute her passion staying at home. Evidently, in a patriarchal culture, the gender roles in a family are clearly defined. To bring her dream into reality the protagonist should take an acceptance from the head of the family.

The woman's desire of moving towards self-actualization, in particular, to be a "writer" since ages, is only to portray her inner voice. Maslow in *Motivation and personality* suggests a theory which rightly depicts a woman's craving for self-actualization. When viewed the status of the protagonist of the story "The Office" who represents a woman in a patriarchal culture can be understood from the point of view of Maslow's theory as,

- Physiological needs
- Safety needs
- Love and belonging
- Esteem
- Self-actualization

Physiological needs (air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, **reproduction**): Marriage is a status given to a woman by the society. Hence, a woman gets married which further results in reproduction. In the words of Beauvoir, "the destiny that society traditionally offers women is marriage. Even today, most women are, were, or plan to be married, or they suffer from not being so. Marriage is the reference by which the single woman is defined (*The Second Sex* 502). In *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, Susan Moller Okin argues that "marriage has earlier and far greater impact on the lives and life choices of women than on those of men" (142). Ergo, the protagonist in "The Office" marries.

Safety needs (personal security, employment, resources, health, and property): In a patriarchal culture, nevertheless women after marriage willingly or compelled to live under the protection of men. After marrying, the protagonist got personal security, household employment, a house to live in and all the resources granted by her husband.

Love and belonging (friendship, **intimacy, family, sense of connection**): The protagonist is bestowed with husband, children, and a family bond which has fulfilled the need of love and belonging.

Esteem (respect, self-esteem, **status, recognition**, strength, and freedom): The protagonist gains respect from the society as a wife and not individually. The protagonist craves for individual identity and recognition. She strongly believes that she should have her own status. The protagonist's passion to write encourages her to get into serious writing and establish herself as a 'writer'.

Self-Actualization (Desire to become **the most that one can be**): The protagonist desires to become a 'professional writer' and determines to have an office for herself.

As stated, "passionate men, emotional women" (Shields 2007), women are considered the best to maintain the well-being of the family and men are for power and work. It is always an ignored notion that women also possess passions but suppress for twin reasons. One is to dedicate time completely to the family and the other reason is to keep up the notion of the society that she is emotional if not she is branded as outlier.

Consequently, the protagonist of "The Office" chooses the favourable time and starts conversing with her husband while doing her household work "ironing a shirt" (DHS 136). She informs her husband that she wants to hire an office while her husband was "watching television sitting in the living room" (136).

Alice Munro's symbolic representation of "ironing the shirt" states that the woman is always busy with household responsibilities whereas the man relaxes after his outside day work, "watching television" is a symbol of relaxation. Bell Hooks rightly states that, "at church, they had learned that God created man to rule the world and everything in it and that it was the work of women to help men perform these tasks, to obey, and to always assume a subordinate role in relation to a powerful man". (*Understanding Patriarchy 1*)

Though she lives in a pleasant house at the brow of a sea shore, she is unable to continue her writing because of her familial responsibilities and the frequent visits of her friends. She relates, "It doesn't matter. However I put it, the words create their space of silence, the delicate moment of exposure. But people are kind, the silence is quickly absorbed by the solicitude of friendly voices, crying variously, how wonderful, and good for you, and well, that is intriguing. And what do you write, they inquire with spirit." (DHS 137)

Evidently, the protagonist is ready to shoulder the twin responsibilities. On the one hand she takes care of her family on the other hand fulfils her passionate desire. While doing so, she has to undergo stress and pressure but still she strives for her identity. At this juncture, the state of mind of the protagonist is a reflection of Beauvoir's statement,

If they [women] had been able to choose between forty hours of weekly work in a factory or at home, they would undoubtedly have responded quite differently; and they might even accept both jobs eagerly if, as women workers, they would become part of a world that would be their world, that they would proudly and happily participate in building. (*The Second Sex* 814)

Though the protagonist has a typewriter, a little pencil, some paper, a table and a chair in the corner of her bedroom, still she says, "I want an office" (*DHS* 137). She wants an office, for it sounds dignity, peace and purposefulness and the importance to her. She emphatically asserts that a house is alright for a man to work in. She avows that, a man brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it; the house rearranges itself as best it can around him. Everybody recognizes that his work exists. He is not expected to answer the telephone, to find things that are lost, to see why the children are crying, or feed the cat. He can shut his door...a mother shutting her door, and the children knowing she is behind it; why, the very thought of it is outrageous to them (138-139)

This difference is due to the vulnerable responsibilities of a woman both as a wife and also as a mother. Beauvoir states that "she wants to live both like a man and like a woman; her workload and her fatigue are multiplied as a result" (*The Second Sex* 817). While shouldering multiple responsibilities a woman finds it difficult to fulfil her passionate desires which are either suppressed or denied due to time constraint as her responsibilities at home are never ending tasks.

The writer-protagonist finally moves to resolve her desire for self-actualization. So, she gets a room for twenty dollars a month, and sets up her office for her private use at the weekends and sometimes in the evenings. To an extent she is glad of owning an office for her personal use, and wants to be free from all kinds of diversions. Despite the challenges the woman who come forward are at times, troubled unintentionally or deliberately by the trespassers. How much ever she is precautious and proactive foreseeing her future, she becomes a victim to Mr. Malley, the owner of the office, who deceptively asks "Ah, you're a writer...Then we'll do our best to see you're comfortable here" (*DHS* 145), which as a matter-of-fact, is an ironical affirmation, for it is he who becomes a sole cause of her leaving the rented office for good. The protagonist becomes a victim to the malicious house owner's undue care for her.

Mr. Malley who is an uninvited and unwanted guest takes undue advantage of her and becomes a major hamper in her pursuit of becoming a successful writer. She comes to her office for the first time the following "weekend with all her bag and baggage-a type writer, yellow jug etc", (*DHS* 150). She starts brooding over with satisfaction. Soon the impregnable shadow of intervention comes in her way; Mr. Malley starts explaining to her about the things that in no way affect her only to disturb the privacy of her. She soon gets tired of him and urges him not to disturb her or bother her any more. When he has gone she feels better, even a little exhilarated at her victory and tells herself that, "he would have had to be discouraged sooner or later, it was better to have it over with at the beginning" (150).

Mr. Malley does not stop his ridiculous behaviour towards the writer-protagonist. He actually desires to have his life story written, he continues to offer her a gift after a gift. The protagonist is mature in her dealings with him; however, she finds it very difficult to turn herself away from his obsequious hunger. In order to avoid Mr.Malley, she even tries to come on her toes and opens the lock of her room fearing, Mr.Malley would hear the cling noise of the keys but he soon appears before her

with a nonsensical excuse. Besides this, she even finds him in her office in her absence, reading her manuscript. It becomes very hard for her to get him out of her sight; hence she literally shuns him.

Later one afternoon, he asks her to follow him to the wash room that she has been using it since her arrival. He vicariously starts accusing her, stating that she has spoiled the walls of the washroom by the marks of her lipstick for which she holds no accountability.

“The walls above the toilet and above the washbasin were covered with drawings and comments of the sort you see sometimes in public washrooms on the beach, and in town hall lavatories in the little decaying towns where I grew up. They were done with a lipstick, as they usually are”(DHS 164)

This is another kind of assault towards her. The writer-protagonist tries her best to explain to him that the washroom doesn't have any key and there is a possibility of some boys coming over there after her departure and might have done this mischief. Mr.Malley who is hostile with her, gives a deaf ear to her explanations. Being helpless she runs back to her office, packs all her belongings up and leave the place at once. However, she prepares to hire another office.

Mr. Malley's behaviour right from the beginning carries a mocking tone towards the writer-protagonist but it is he who gets defeated at the end in his attempts to follow the errand ways to accomplish his selfish motifs. In her article, “*Dance of the Happy Shades: Reading the Signs of Invasion*” Magdalene Redekop aptly says,

The letters mal have been prefixed, since the sixteenth century, to many English words to convey the sense of something “ill,” “wrong,” “improper,”—as in the word malevolent (OED). Since the prefix mal also suggests the word male it may be tempting to fix blame and see the story as a stereotypical feminist rejection of the male figure of power. (19)

Munro portrays Mr.Malley's betrayal of trust in the story “The Office”. He gets into the agreement with the protagonist that he receives the rent amount and leaves the room for her but he breaks the agreement by trespassing the privacy of her. Though her desire of owning an office for herself is materialized, soon she is forced to leave it for good.

It is evident that literature depicts the society, indeed, peeping into the society from the perspective of the woman brings the completeness in understanding man-woman perspectives. Perhaps, a better insight into the man-woman and human relationships. Indeed, the inclination of women towards “writing” certainly to pen her inner voice of her feelings, thoughts and desire to gain intellectual freedom. Women started to challenge the traditional and stereotypical role assigned to them by the society by establishing themselves as “writers”.

The protagonist got into the society's cobweb of power relationships where her dreams are suppressed even by the trespassers. Once her familial responsibilities have not allowed her to fulfil her self-actualization needs and when she successfully overcomes them, the trespasser becomes a hindrance in her path of intellectual freedom. It is evident, that the protagonist being in a patriarchy suppresses her interest once by family and further by the society.

Conclusion

In the process of becoming a prominent writer the first hurdle that is convincing her husband, the protagonist of the story successfully does. But she fails to convince the society. Mr. Malley does not accept the thought that a woman writes, he absorbs the information with a good humour. “Ah, you’re a writer” (*DHS* 145). In *Bloom’s Critical Views*, Magdalene Redekop rightly states that “the writer acquires a room of her own, but the walls of the room crumble for the simple reason that the narrator takes her mothering self with her and responds to Mr Malley, her landlord, as if he is a hungry child needing attention(17). In her stories, Alice Munro skilfully and delicately depicts to a greater extent the experiences she encountered in her early life as a writer. Her portrayal of women’s crave for identity is witnessed in most of her stories in which the protagonist are writers. ““The Office” carries an autobiographical element and explains the challenges which the author has met during her early days of writing” (Guignery 7).

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