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2. Envisioning Feminist Ideology: A Study of Sentimentalism and Imaginative Concern in Alice Munro's My Mother's Dream

*Chinmaya Chirasundar Das¹, *Dr. Trailokya Nath Parida²*

¹ Lecturer in English, Banki Autonomous College, Banki

²Lecturer in English, KISS (Deemed to be University), Bhubaneswar

*email: trailokyanath.mitu@gmail.com

The intended objective of this paper is to ascertain Alice Munro's inevitable concern of sentimentalism and her artistic perception of feminine fantasy in "My Mother's Dream". The implied vision embracing these ideologies renders the genuine interest of the artist's sensibility in evoking memory and delineation of unbounded imaginary love. The story's obvious conjecture lies in the characteristic way of an infant crying mournfully for her distressed mother. The possibility of the tragic victory of the grief-stricken mother over puzzlement, anxiety, bewilderment and perplexity to earn the status of motherhood, takes a paradigm shift in feminine and social sphere. The fictional narrative pertaining to the social trauma and the anxiety of the protagonist with her enlightened vision serves as a replica of the depressive middle class Canadian women living in postwar decades. A dispassionate and meticulous analysis will re-examine the power of literary artist and her narrative endeavor to codify and construct a mythic pattern of a woman's fanciful measure to transcend fact in passionate dreaming.

Key words: *sentimentalism, sensibility, paradigm, feminine fantasy, dispassionate, narrative, enlightened, trauma and transcend.*

Literary sensibility and the prevalence of Sentimental love create an incredible feeling of kinship, affection and the overabundance of emotions in art and literature. This overindulgence of love and emotional excessiveness result in certain discernible situations and circumstances which pertain to the judgment of the individual and to the substantial historical changes in culture and literary fashion.



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This phenomenon has deep roots in the fiction and subsumes its pervasiveness more prominently in novels. The reflection of the self and the intimate aspects of human minds stand supreme in the sentimentalizing taste of protestant phenomenon. Fiedler points out the idea of sentimentalism while indicating the continuing relevance and immediacy resulted in the American novel: “one is almost tempted to say, by the invention of a new kind of self, a new level of mind; for what has been happening since the eighteenth century seems more like the development of a new organ than the mere finding of a new way to describe old experience” (Fiedler 32-33). The resultant attitude in the shape of social and cultural outlook delineates modern psychology, from the saga of community to the mind of the individual which provides an array of similar enterprise typical to the protestant belief. The practical men aspired for a form and structure that would certainly reflect their psychic status, a salable commodity to be brought or rented in the market place like other goods, a chunky and steady item to be placed on the table with other evidences of their wealth and taste. The social view of mankind in the second half of the twentieth century disseminated the cosmic importance of all regions of social research and intellectual history in the post war Canada and exploited a history of changes in forms of literary sensibility in private and transcended attitudes toward sex, race, wealth and poverty. Another important ingredient related to this contours of sentimentalism is the fantasy in literature. This fictional element in literature exhibits the strangeness of its setting and heavily dependent for its effect. The imaginative writer is more inclined to remake the existing world or anticipates the possibility of future worlds. This phenomenon greatly pervades the rubric of Munro’s literary sensibility.

The present story “My Mother’s Dream” which found its existence in the collection of stories, “*The Love of a Good Woman*” propagates the dreadful fantasy and its lasting hallucination of post-war living. Munro’s artistic perception can best be viewed through the combination of fantasy and realism. Her perception really arises out of her own experience about the degradation and disintegration of social and cultural values resulting in the ideology of rigid Protestantism. Sharon Spencer explains that “the adjective “feminine” when applied to literature nowadays customarily indicates the author’s preoccupation with intimate human relationship, concern with the emotional aspects of life and with the dynamics of the psychic realm of experience” (American writing, p 157). The feminist ideology in



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“My Mother’s Dream” engenders the preoccupied notion of feminine traits concerning gender, race and sex. To analyze the story, “My Mother’s Dream” in the context of feminist criticism and sentimentalism, is to get the breakthrough from the vantage points of its artistic nuances of psychological differences in social, cultural and domestic sphere.

With its unusual passion in the seemingly related bourgeoisie protestant life in small town Ontario, Munro’s fictional world displays transparency and renders meaning together in one compass. This astounding reality on a closer approximation divulges tortuous levels of unimagined ramifications about the fundamentals of human experience: love, choice, mortality, faith and the force of language. This study brings the purpose of analyzing Munro’s stories in terms of the intricacy of emotions in the face of commonplace events of life and their looming possibilities. Munro’s emotive art always gets transformed into fictive art which displays the possibility for reality acknowledging the credulous affairs in the making of the real life beyond the artifice and limitation of fictional narrative. “My Mother’s Dream” unfolds the story of post-world war trauma and the anxiety of worn out and sadistic life pervaded after 1945: “It is early morning when this happens in the real world. The world of July 1945” (Munro 80). Munro perceives her memory back into world-war II. She imagines and takes back her memory to the events and happenings at a specific time. She nurtures her feelings into the dream of the Canadian past. She does not glorify but restructures pictures into a cognitive resemblance of past inheritance. The much-coveted picture reflects the amnesic trace which undergoes a natural process of weakening; it is the target of the interfering action of pre-existing and future memories. Sometimes the dream in Munro acquires a chilling effect of the narrator and envisions the dejected tones in the story: “when she got outside she remembered. She remembered that she had left a baby out there somewhere, before the snow had fallen. Quite a while before the snow had fallen” (Munro 79-80).

The omniscient narrator describes her memory about the condition and anxiety generated between the infant and the mother: “Baby and mother are worn out by a long battle, and the mother has forgotten even that at the moment. Some circuits are closed down: the most unrelenting quiet has settled on her brain and her baby’s” (Munro 80). The reference to this traumatic condition of mother and daughter serves ambiguity, might be assumed out of the battle waged in the world-war II or even a more



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personal kind of battle; probably both. The external world is almost an illusory world and seems more hallucinatory where the incongruity and the disillusionment of life transmute the futile elements and makes the inner self more obscure. The post-war decades inflict threat to the personal order and the history shows that the second half of the twentieth century remained the field of conflicting forces. Since 1950s, the American Civil War entertained and allowed contemporary political conflicts between North and South over integration, industrialization and Americanism to be comfortably displaced into a reconstruction of nineteenth century social detail and battlefield strategy. Resistance is the main strategy against the forces of bleak and darker environment; the mother finds the infant crying and inconsolable. The underlying sentiment about the motherly affections for her baby is of paramount importance. As the story proceeds, the narrator is caught between misfortunes and clumsiness and between diverse social factors. A young woman has forgotten about her baby and left her outside overnight and snow has fallen over the ground. This unfolding story concerns and makes the reader more aware of domestic and political violence, terror stricken of vulnerable women as nightmares of persecution, torture or pursuit. The narrator experiencing things from her infancy that fills her dreams coming from the world which delve into the recesses of consciousness where nightmare is the only reality and fantasies cannot be distinguished from facts have nevertheless described a world as familiar as it is strange. The vulnerability of women aftermath of World War II is of course a matter of concern in Munro's storytelling. The status of motherhood as the narrator explains bears the symbolic significance in internalizing its acute disorientation, anxiety, confusion, desperation and some cases of madness. The narrator indicates the inner potentiality of Jill and her fascination towards music while she was staying in an orphanage:

JILL REALLY knew nothing about living in a family. She had grown up in an orphanage. From the age of six to sixteen she had slept in dormitory. Lights turned on and off at a specified time, furnace never operating before or beyond a specified date..... Jill was taken to a concert, with some others, when she was twelve years old, and there she decided that she must learn to play the violin (P 91).

The passion for music somehow stuck with the filial love and upbringing of the baby when the existence of the vulnerable middle class women becomes a question and more importantly, living

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alone away from the sophistication of life. Munro delineates unbounded sympathy for the vulnerable women and in the circumstances of Jill, it strikes a chord. Her ostensible or concealed motive goes beyond the attributes of feminine affection. Her vocation or charming eccentricity to play her violin makes her impatient which evokes a nostalgic hunt and daunting task as well. Fate seems unkind and nursing strikes her as an uncommon stroke of bad luck. The pursuit to cherish a comfortable living in the depressive world speaks no guarantee and the overeager protagonist seems immobile without her husband. Feeling inconsistency, she desperately looks for any guide, duenna, loving mother but of no use. The despondency and the desperation about her motherhood are not unrealistic: "Finished. She is finished altogether. The piece that she mastered months ago and perfected since, so that nothing in it remained formidable even tricky, has completely defeated her. It has shown her to herself as somebody emptied out, vandalized. Robbed overnight" (Munro 100). This kind of vision sets a preliminary map about the experience of women living in the postwar Canada. Thus, Munro allows the reader to become part of those experiences with their full shares of social despair and individual energy.

The feminist concern and the obsession of having motherhood are very much embedded in this story, "My Mother's Dream". This artistic perception leads the viewers to the world of fantasy. The story "My Mother's Dream" is also elaborative and ambivalent in the adult narrator's conflicting relationship with her mother, Jill, when the narrator was a squalling effect: "We were monsters to each other. Jill and I" (Munro 98). The mother and the baby after having excruciating experience love each other and this mental aberration is duly forgiven. Giving birth a child is not only a robust feminine sentimentality and the immense joy of celebrating the motherhood but also a clinical experience of unexpected terror even leading to death. Munro here speaks both the filial anticipation of women and taking joy out of this physical phenomenon. So the spontaneity of getting motherhood is not an easy one, not even a victory but a social and feminine phenomenon.

The mother-infant relationship in this story surpasses any other roles and responsibilities typically assigned to women characters. The narrator as an adult moves back to the past which determines her infancy and she became extraordinarily aware of her mother's health during her pregnancy and even speaks of the implicit admission that women encounter alcoholics, drug addicts, and others plagued

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with different sorts of poverty, the central characters who scrape by at motherhood are not stupid, financially desperate, or unusually greedy, jealous or spiteful, with all their white, middle class advantages: they are merely in the throes of passion. Some women characters portrayed in this story seem lurking and decadent but remain significant because they are confined and obliged to certain social roles they undertake. Iona who at first seems very insignificant becomes the leading character because she takes care of Jill's baby: "Iona had gone from being the most negligible to being the most important person in the house." She became the instrumental in restoring sanctity and order in the family: "She was the one who stood between those who lived there and constant discordance" (Munro 94). There are also numerous instances in this story where female members sacrificed their lives in one way or other to strengthen the consanguinity in the social sphere. This perceived notion consequently acquire a broader spectrum in this story and the consciousness of the mother and her sentimentalism remain inescapable when the mother stood away from her baby: "What is it about an infant's crying that makes it so powerful, able to breakdown the order you depend on inside and outside of yourself? It is like a storm—insistent, theatrical, yet in a way pure and uncontrived. It is reproachful rather than supplicating—it comes out of a rage that can't be dealt with, a birth right rage free of love and pity, ready to crush yours brains inside your skull" (Munro 99).

Nicolas Malebranche, the great philosopher insisted that " Imagination is thus parallel to sensation, in the sense that it is the faculty of producing or reproducing images of material things in the absence of those things; that is to say when we are not actually perceiving the things in question" (Copleston 185). The imaginative faculty which is more calculative in connection with a baby's perception of girl and women is really remarkable as the baby finds her love from her mother: "when I gave up the fight against my mother (which must have been a fight for something like her total surrender) and when in fact choose survival over victory (death would have been victory), that I took on my female nature" (Munro 109). The emotional longing between the mother and the infant becomes more solid when the baby turns as a girl and the love between them seems as a protection against catastrophe: "And to some extent Jill took on hers. Sobered and grateful, not even able to risk thinking about what she'd just escaped, she took on loving me, because the alternative to loving was disaster" (Munro 109). Through this sentimental move and filial attachment, the maturity from the infancy of the baby is very

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much evident. The development of mind or the positive intent of course attune to the result of historical development of human mind. Auguste Comte, the foremost exponent and much renowned with his *Course of Positive Philosophy*, holds the view that “In its historical development through the centuries, the human mind passes through three main stages or phases, the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. These three stages in the intellectual development of mankind have analogues however in the life of the individual man as he passes from infancy through adolescence to manhood” (Copleston 78).

The story, “My Mother’s Dream” is devoid of any father figure. The mother of the infant is the central protagonist but the narrator’s description about the mother might be devilish as she is caught up between two ends: the ability to cope the whole situation after her husband’s funeral on the one hand and the affection to console the crying baby on the other hand. The sentimental concern or motherly sentiment is fully garnered by the malevolent aunt and the depressive mother, Jill loses her significance due to the inconsolable infant. The trauma and the anxiety of the protagonist finally settled when she takes some sedatives ultimately from her sister-in-law’s room. The contrast arises out of a common drug which is used by both in different ways: one way to control the internal pangs and exhaustion after a day long struggle to anticipate the feminine sensibility. The mother uses the painkillers by grinding and sprinkling into the child’s milk and this medicine is “on top of piles on sanitary pads” (P). The sister-in-law, “Aisla takes something strong for her menstrual cramps” (p). The contrast here establishes a striking parallel with a woman whose body has produced a child whom she tries to silence with painkillers and the female body that bleeds every month without producing offspring and thereby causes another kind of pain. The domain of feminine sensibility usually reciprocates both pain and pleasure. Munro’s stories about contemporary Canada bear resemblance of suppression and depression in the feminine world. The emotional tonality which explicitly deals with the sentimental concern, always pose a challenge to Munro’s artistic creation. In Comte’s view “Man is not however simply an intellectual and active being. He is also characterized by feeling. In every normal existence affection constantly dominates speculation and action, though their intervention is indispensable for it to be able to undergo and modify external impressions. Man, has for example, a social instinct or sentiment” (Munro 91)



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“My Mother’s Dream” almost revolutionized the splendor perspective of women’s sentiment and duly garnered the essence of feminine sensibility. This is rightly maneuvered and obviously transmitted by a baby’s sentiment which is almost exposed ludicrously to the much of her mother’s clumsiness and misfortune. This perception had even created the form of early death most prominently unconsummated in this story. Towards the end of the story, the primary character to benefit from the preservative powers of the unconsummated remains tangential and unheard-of one, known throughout her succinct presence only as “the girl who was crying in church and looks as if she will cry some more.” Imagining this girl as a would be lover of the late George, Jill takes the cognizance with a note of little sadness that this girl is now free to “remember that she was in love with George and think that he was in love with her- in spite of all- and never be afraid of what he may do or say to prove her wrong” (Munro 307). George’s death emanates the viability of love that he could have for this girl, and their fragmentary acquaintance- however imaginary- is almost an endlessly untapped but conclusively an unacknowledged probability. For these characters, a sudden or early death or otherwise unconsummated ending has the same effect of preserving possibility in their lives as Munro’s open conclusions do in the stories themselves.

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