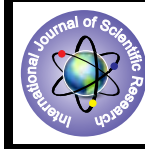


Craving for Identity in the Beggar Maid by Alice Munro

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Literature

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ABSTRACT

Identity is the need of life and satisfaction. Without knowing ourselves, one cannot lead in life. In the novel, the protagonist, Rose can be observed as a person who does not satisfied in her life because she does not know what is right for her. That is why; she is running behind many things aimlessly. This reveals that she always is in search of her identity which is not certain to her.

"Brilliant at evoking life's diversity and unpredictability... an unrivalled chronicler of human nature under a vast span of aspects, moods and pressures." Sunday Times (Friend of My Youth: Alice Munro)

Alice Ann Munro is a Canadian celebrity in English writing. She has achieved many literary accolades, including the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature for her work as "master of the contemporary short story", and the 2009 Man Booker International Prize for her lifetime body of work. She is also a three-time winner of Canada's Governor General's Award for fiction and was the recipient of the Writers' Trust of Canada's 1996 Marian Engel Award, as well as the 2004 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize for *Runaway*. Her work has been described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to move forward and backward in time. She has selected her native place Huron County in southwestern Ontario for the setting of her fictions. In her works, she tries to explore human complexities in an uncomplicated prose style. Munro's writing has established her as "one of our greatest contemporary writers of fiction," or, as Cynthia Ozick puts it, "She is our Chekhov, and is going to outlast most of her contemporaries." (*Things You May Not Know about Alice Munro*)

This collection of short stories cum novel is called *The Beggar Maid* in America, with the subtitle *Stories of Flo and Rose*; the Canadian edition, which appeared first, has a better and less misleading title, *Who Do You Think You Are?* It revolves around protagonist Rose. The stories are a transition between short stories and a novel. Here Munro portrays the life of Rose from her childhood to adulthood for the better understanding of her character as well as identity.

As suggested by the title, the theme of identity is central to the collection. Rose can be observed as a person who does not know what is right for her. Whatever the things she is getting in her journey of life, she accepts it, uses it, and when she does not feel comfortable with it, throws it, and again searches for new one. This reveals that she always is in search of her identity which is not certain to her. Whoever comes in her contact, she easily gets influence and tries to be like them. In her school time she was influenced with a girl named Cora. "She spent her time trying to walk and look like Cora, repeating every word she had ever heard her say. Trying to be her." (*Beggar maid*, 34) She was so obsessed of her that she stole some candy from her stepmother Flo's store to give her. Rose grows up in a small town, and lives in an impecunious home while she begins attending a school on the more affluent part of town. In class, when she is asked what she ate for breakfast, she lies and says "half a grapefruit" rather than revealing her ordinary, considerably less glamorous meal. The lie haunts her, and she is embarrassed by her upbringing. She does not like her reality. She wants to be another one. She wants to be confident and courageous lady like Cora but in reality she would not be able to stop a clergy man to molest her in the train ride to Toronto where she was going after winning

a scholarship to attend university. "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." (*Maid*, 63) She chooses to ignore this incident, but it has irreparable damage on her future relationships with men.

During her first semester there, she finds a comfortable place to live, a part-time job, and a male admirer. She meets Patrick at the campus library when she is working a weekend shift, reshelving books, and he is one of the few people studying there. Rose can tell at once that he is both high-minded and high-strung—a nervous man who wants to become a history professor. She also soon sees that he is in love with her. She is for him "damsel in distress" "you're like the Beggar Maid." She does not know, however, that he is the heir to a Mercantile Empire. She dates Patrick partly to spite her landlady, a spinster former English professor who encourages her "scholars" to stay away from "boys." Her landlady has posted some scholars' photos on her wall. Some were teacher, librarians, professor of English but Rose is not having to look at them because "There were no actresses among them, no brassy magazine journalists; none of them had latched on to the sort of life Rose wanted for herself." (*Maid*, 72) Again she distracts from her way and gives her time to Patrick who has a medieval perspective of women. He loves her because he sees her as a damsel in distress. Now she was the one who was being dishonest, pretending to throw her on his mercy, for of course she did not expect him to say, "Oh, well, if you come from poor people and live in a dump, then I will have to withdraw my offer. But I'm glad," said Patrick. "I'm glad you're poor. You're so lovely. You're like the Beggar Maid." (*Maid*, 78)

What was the problem with Rose in beginning she does not know what she wants when she gets one thing she comes to know this is not the right choice. The same problem occurs in her relation with Patrick. However her landlady tries to guide her by saying "what about your ambitions, Rose? What about your studies and your degree? Are you going to forget all that so soon?" (*Maid*, 80) She is totally confused about her decision of marriage with Patrick. "She would look at herself in the glass and think: Wife, sweetheart. Those mild lovely words. How could they apply to her? It was a miracle; it was a mistake. It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted" (*Maid*, 81). Even though she spares her valuable time and engaged with him but suddenly she shocks Patrick with this announcement that "I don't want to get married,"

"What else do you want to do?" Patrick asked
"I don't know."

"Oh, Patrick, listen, please, I can't marry you, please, I don't know why, I can't, please, I'm sorry, believe me, I can't," Rose babbled at him," (*Maid*, 93)

She has impulsive type of nature that is why her marriage with Patrick begins and ends many times in the novel without any

solid reason. As Patrick notices that “I just wonder,” he said, “if you know what you do want. I don’t think you do. I don’t think you have any idea what you want. You’re just in a state.”

They marry and have children but continue their pattern of separation and reconciliation, with subtle variations, for a decade. Eventually, they divorce. After that she meets other men (Clifford, Tom and Simon) and her acting career. One of her significant relationships is with Simon, a charming man she meets at a friend’s house. Both of them spend the weekend together, and she grows attached to him. He disappears unexpectedly afterwards. She later discovers that Simon has passed away. In the later stories, she tries to make her busy in acting career and as a journalist, do many shows, walk here and there, meet many people but nothing make her satisfy. Ideally, she wants to live very glamorous, prestigious, satisfied and respectful life but in reality, it is observed that she was running behind one man to another, totally unsatisfied life.

In the end of the novel when she does not have to do some concern thing, she returns her home trying to care her step mother Flo who was neglected by her real son and his family. This gives her a chance to close the chapter of her life involving her complicated relationship with her stepmother Flo. The novel ends without defining any significant identity of Rose. At last she is happy with this fact that Rose did not tell the story of G ---to anyone, glad that there was one thing at least she wouldn’t spoil by telling,” (*Maid*,210) This last statement proves that she herself knows that she has spoil her life doing that thing which she does not want.

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