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## **Nature&Gender in Alice Munro’s “Meneseteung” and “Before the Change”**

Submitted by

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## Abstract

Within the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, the paper seeks to delineate the vision of the contemporary Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro(1931-), in juxtaposing culture oppressing women, and manexploiting Nature through reading “Meneseteung” and “Before the Change”. The paper investigates the social dimensions oppressing women and the woman/nature bond in the selected works focusing on their affinity and their shared experienceof exploitation and oppression at the hands of men. In “Meneseteung,” Munro uses gender to oppose social trivialities and expected roles while in “Before the Change” she uses gender to oppose apparently religious arrangements till both female protagonists reach epiphany. While in “Meneseteung” Munro uses nature as the external environment with its non-humans, in “Before the Change” she concentrates on deep human nature. Both works of art depict the relationship between female characters and nature as a necessity for survival in a patriarchal society that reinforces dualism. Munro proves totally against the capitalist and patriarchal forces within the Canadian society, aims at a general social change and warns her readers against selfish schemes that subordinate both nature and women to men.

## Keywords

Nature, gender, ecofeminism, Alice Munro, woman/nature bond



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## Nature & Gender in Alice Munro's "Meneseteung" and "Before the Change"

### Introduction

Nature and gender were conceptualized by Simone de Beauvoir in 1952 (144). They are later refined and coined into ecofeminism by the French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne, in 1974 in an attempt to eliminate gender inequalities and express affinity between women's and ecological exploitation. It entices women to show ecological concern. This tradition echoes in every continent to describe women resistance movement, producing a number of texts (*Gyn/Ecology* by Mary Daly in 1978, *Women and Nature* by Susan Griffin in 1978, and *The Death of Nature* by Carolyn Merchant in 1980). Since then, the term has some green values across a number of disciplines and theories leading to diverse literary analyses.

As a field of literary inquiry, pastoral or ecological criticism emerged in the last two decades, and it appeared in no small part through the work of nineteenth-century Americans like Lawrence Buell (2005), Thomas Lyon (2001), Michael Branch (1996), and many others. It is an interdisciplinary approach that is famously defined and much quoted as "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Studies and scholarships in this literary field have been noticeably slow to recognize how cultures share or fight over nature or the wilderness. Nature/Culture duality generates a philosophical problem in the sense expressed by Levi-Strauss. In his book *The Savage Mind* (1962) Levi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, writes on the debate between culture and nature, confirming that there are "only two true models of concrete diversity: one of the plane of nature, namely that of the diversity of species, and the other on the cultural plane provided by the diversity of function" (124). Culture is "a social construct" while nature is separately functioning as an entity. His writings denote that women could be assimilated to nature and men to culture. Strauss shows culture's domination over nature.



A decade later comes Sherry Ortner tracing a Levi-Straussian footstep of the relationship between culture and nature, stating that nature and culture are both categories of the human thought because “there is no place out in the real world where one could find some actual boundary between the two states or realms of being” (73). Ortner defines culture as the product of the human consciousness; by means of systems of thoughts humanity seeks to assert control over nature (73). Her work suggests that both nature and culture are human constructs. However, in *What is Nature?*(1995) Kate Soper differentiates between “shallow nature” and “deep nature,” which are relevant in this context. While the former denotes the nature of one’s immediate experience of everyday life including animals, human bodies, the natural environment, and material resources, the latter refers to the condition for any human intervention in the environment or the biological realm (15-16). In *Second Nature* (1999), Michael Pollan indicates that American writers have a deeply entrenched habit of seeing nature and culture as inherently opposed (74). This deeply entrenched habit, though American, is relevant to Munro's stance in her short stories as this paper seeks to delineate.

According to Mellor, “Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor 1). Ecofeminism represents a connection between the natural and the social since it links the oppression of women to the abuse of nature. As women are oppressed and victimized by men, so is nature by mankind. In patriarchal societies, ecofeminists (Plumwood, “Dualistic Assumptions”8) see culture/nature duality lead to women oppression, nature destruction and social inequality. Ecofeminists suggest that nature and gender are social constructs that officially begin to apply through the binary oppositions such as male/female, nature/culture, reason/emotion, mind/body (Schultermandl174; Kerridge538)

Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) assures that “nature (referring to nonhuman animals, plants, and ecosystems) is included among those Others who/that have been unjustifiably exploited and dominated. ‘Nature is a feminist issue’ might be called the slogan of ecofeminism” (Warren1). According to Astrida Neimanis (2014), “nature is naturally inferior because it is natural, and



woman is inferior because she is natural, and the natural is inferior because it is feminine, which is inferior, which is natural [...] and so on”(3). Man considers woman the object, the body, the emotions and more connected with the private sphere, thus inferior to him. He considers woman ‘the other’ and so is nature. Ecofeminism manifests an adherence to the man/woman strict duality. Some ecofeminist reviews remark that man/ woman duality and nature/culture duality are focused on the differences between women and men. Greta Gaard believes in an ecofeminism that results from the binary opposition of culture/nature that lies at the heart of Western patriarchy(1979).

Within this context, “Meneseung” (1990) and “Before the Change” (1998) by the celebrated Nobel Prize Canadian short story writer Alice Munro, whose stories give the essence of a whole life, will be examined through an ecofeminist reading. The paper seeks to investigate the relationship between women and nature in culture through the perspective of a female writer. The rationale for selecting these two particular works by Munro has to do with the fact that Munro’s “Meneseung” and “Before the Change” depict the lives of her strong female characters who live within and without their traditional gender role. Each exhibits frequent shifts across two different viewpoints and are thus likely to cause some difficulty with interpretations. Each has a different meaning of nature, and each uses gender in a quite different sense. In both texts, Munro exposes their ancient patriarchal culture, one from a social point of view and the other from religious/ethical point of view.

This paper seeks to delineate the vision of Munro in juxtaposing culture oppressing women, and mankind exploiting Nature. It investigates the social dimensions oppressing women in Munro’s text on the one hand and the apparently religious dimensions oppressing women on the other hand. At the same time the paper reveals woman-nature bond in the selected works focusing on their shared experience of oppression and exploitation in the hope of promoting the notion that humanity has gone wrong when exploiting natural resources.



## Munro's "Meneseteung"

Published in Munro's collection *Friend of My Youth*(1990), "Meneseteung" is divided into six sections and based on Munro' love of the place of her childhood in the rural Ontario in Canada. She has spent almost her childhood between the arms of nature, breathing fresh air of the rural Southern Ontario. Her father's farmhouse has been surrounded by a breathtaking landscape. Employing a nonlinear plot, Munro uses narrative devices in "Meneseteung" such as flashback and flash forward to recount the life of Roth, a Canadian strong independent woman, living in the borderline between settled and unsettled country. She escapes a male dominated society.

Munro depicts the life of her female character who lives without her traditional gender role. From the start the narrator, taking snippets from the local paper *Vidette*, exposes the patriarchal Canadian society while introducing Roth, the main character:

*Offerings* the book is called. Gold lettering on a dull-blue cover. The author's full name underneath: Almeda Joynt Roth. The local paper...referred to her as "our poetess." There seems to be a mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and for her sex—or for their predictable conjuncture.(45)

Since gender is socially constructed by parents, relatives, neighbors and culture, the narrator hints at ignored gender roles ascribed to women. Though Roth's literary gifts are Ontario's treasure, the townspeople believe that Almeda Roth should give up these talents. They exercise power on her through isolation. What is expected from her is that she has a family, lives to support her husband ,yet none of which the woman has done. She achieves autonomy and self-determination. According to the townspeople, Roth defies the conventions of her Southern society by remaining single. Roth avoids womanly endeavors. She, instead, composes poetry as she is highly talented. During her childhood, she becomes traumatic after the death of her brother, sister and mother, and she could tell that she has occupied [herself] and allayed [her] griefs, which have been more than any sojourner on earth must encounter with many floundering efforts at its composition"(46). She finds vent of her sadness in composing



poems. She employs her hidden energy to produce something delightful. She freely chooses her social and cultural activities.

Since women's roles in society spring from the prevalent social and economic structure, Roth cannot do crochet work and embroidery. Instead, she produces ballads, poems, couplets about rural Ontario. Roth is interested in escaping the ancient domination of her patriarchal society. That is why she is looked at with contempt, and she is avoided as a match for someone. Unlike other nineteenth century weak women (the time Roth's story takes place), she is depicted as poised and confident. She constructs her identity along the lines of gender.

Munro's story is divided into six sections, each of which has a Roman numeral and few verses composed by the main protagonist, Roth. Nature with its ecological surroundings is one way of accessing Roth's verses. For example, the first section starts with poetic words on the kind of plants spread in her setting. In one of her poems, Roth depicts a children's game of making angel wings using elements of nature: "White roses cold as snow/ Bloom where those "angels" lie" ("Meneseteung" 48). Likening children lying down in the snow to white roses and angels when they spread their hands to create wing shapes refers to Roth's non-violent protest tactic to occupy nature in its innocent form. In another poem, Roth reflects on the Canadian culture as transgressing nature. She lists a number of trees cut down in the original forest. Moreover, she furnishes the poem with "a general description of the bears, wolves, eagles, deer, [and] waterfowl" (47). She has some other poems about birds, wildflowers, and snowstorms (46). She uses some ironic verses deliberately for comic effect as it is marked by triviality. Verses of this kind are mainly composed about "what people are thinking about as they listen to the sermon in church" (46).

Women share with nature a common exploitation at the hands of male-dominated advance. They do share with nature a common feature of nurturing, caring and life giving. In "Meneseteung", the third person limited narrator states that Roth, after her mother's death, takes care of her father and nurtures him. Munro delves deeply in her character's personality. She makes an in-depth exploration of Roth's experiences. Munro delineates women's position in society



and their patriarchal relationships. In the minds of her townspeople, being young is an enough incentive to get married. Accordingly, they believe that Roth “is not too old to have a couple of children” and that “she is a good housekeeper” (52-3) when gossiping about her as a good match for Poulter. Here, all the townspeople views are coloured with male-female differences and that a female is related to domesticity while a male to publicity. Even her doctor advises her to get married if she wants her insomnia troubles to diminish and “not to read”. They wrongly believe that marriage is the healing cure for all woman’s problems.

In her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, Elaine Showalter states that:

The hypotheses of women’s culture have been developed over the last decade by anthropologists, sociologists and social historians in order to get away from masculine systems, hierarchies, and values to get at the primary and self-defined nature of female cultural experience (qtd. in Lodge 321)

Many fields developed theories on women in order to succeed in reaching the nature of her cultural experiences. The ‘self-defined nature’ of a female is learned within the institution of the family and through the necessity of a safe home located in the lap of nature. In Munro’s short fiction, the narrator is offering snippets of history from a newspaper, and that history is represented and dominated by men and by their points of view. In “Meneseteung” history is the force that gives presence its true essence.

Munro depicts Roth as a representative of the late nineteenth century Canadian woman through her lifestyle, rituals, and dress, through presenting snippets and clippings of nineteenth century period. Munro employs time shifts in which the narrator bounces back and forth between nineteenth century and late twentieth century, something that gives authenticity to the narrator’s story. She uses a nonlinear plot in which she employs flashbacks, and retroversion. Munro uses only one physical setting, namely, rural Western Ontario where two different time periods are juxtaposed.



In a twentieth century still male-dominated society, men control the environment. They overlook environmental sustainability through cutting trees and shrubs. They contempt ecological surroundings. In Roth's inner mind:

The countryside that she has written about in her poems actually takes diligence and determination to see. Some things must be disregarded. Manure piles, of course, and boggy fields full of high, charred stumps, and great heaps of brush waiting for a good day for burning. The meandering creeks have be straightened, turned into ditches with high, muddy banks [...] The trees have all been cleared back to the woodlots.(Munro, *Meneseteung*55)

Roth is more environmentally concerned than the rest of the male townspeople. The above lines describe people's attitudes towards nature and how nature is treated. Roth gives importance to nature, the countryside and non-human others , and their role in life than any other things. She is a lynchpin in the transformation into a sustainable world. Man violates and exploits nature for his purposes and ends. Jarvis Poulter, a widowed who arrived a few years before the main action of the story takes place, and who is the initial love interest for Roth, becomes prosperous through a number of businesses, namely, salt mining, brickyard, limekiln, stealing coal and water collecting. She is less profit oriented than Mr Poulter though she owns some properties in that place. In all his businesses, he is abusing natural resources for his own interest. He fails to respect the ecological limits, something which is about to cause an ecological crisis. In this sense, the social status of nature is liked with the social status of woman. Munro indicts human beings deeds which harm the ecological balance. She is fostering a moral duty towards nature.

In Munro's "Meneseteung," the environment is being raped every day, a fact that threatens the lives of the individuals. Likewise, Queen Aggie, an unmarried drinker, gets harassed by youths; they dump her into a ditch. She is slumped against Roth's fence. Munro presents a shocking description indicating the brutality of women abuse at the hands of men:

A woman's body heaped up there, turned on her side with her face squashed down into the earth. Almeda can't see her face. But there is a



bare breast let loose, brown nipple pulled long like cow's teat, and a bare haunch and leg, the haunch showing a bruise as big as a sunflower. The unbruised skin is grayish, like a plucked, raw drumstick. Some kind of nightgown or all-purpose dress she has on. Smelling of vomit. Urine, drink, vomit.(58)

Munro's depiction of the woman roughly dumped into a ditch indicates the raw nature of humanity. The narration is rich in symbolism and shows that nature and women are affected by the same system of oppression. Munro uses the figurative "heap up" to show utter collapse. She shows inter-connected relationship between women, earth and nonhuman nature as they are dehumanized. Behaving in a way less than animals, some young men abuse, victimize, harass and rape a drunk unmarried woman. This primitive act of barbarity shows the social collective oppression of women at that time and it also reflects male desire and their sexual assaults in the form of physical abuse. Here, Munro indicts male biased assaults directed against women through the use of simile and likening a woman to animals, plants and inanimate objects. Men, like Mr. Poulter and the town's youth are superior to nature with its elements and to women so that they should be the only dominators in their society. Both categories are controlled and corrupted by the same system of oppression. Munro tries to foster a sense of human responsibility towards the Earth.

The title of the story, "Meneseteung," refers to the name of a Canadian river. Though it does not appear on Ontario maps, one finds the name associated to the bridge that crosses the Maitland River. It is located northwest of Saltford (Google map). The name is mirrored in the title of one of Roth's poems in the story. The story summarizes Munro's fondness of mythology. She discards mythological references on the environment. She presents images in her short fiction which echo the power of their associations. For example, the narrator describes the atmosphere when Roth overhears noises in the middle of the night. It seems that Roth's worries and depression are reflected in the eyes of nature.

The night sky is clear, with no moon and with bright stars. Pegasus hangs straight ahead, over the swamp. Her father taught her that constellation— automatically, she counts its stars. ("Meneseteung" 56)



Pegasus, extracted from Greek mythology, is the immortal winged horse sprang from the blood of the slain Medusa. In a poetic way, she lets her protagonist create complexity and nuance. By introducing a mythic element, Pegasus, Munro directly foreshadows that there is violence and bloodshed taken place beside Roth's house. Munro employs animal imagery, a technique that echoes ecological thoughts, making the society itself subject to natural imagery. Moreover, Pegasus is the poets' horse and Roth is a poetess. Though she faces many challenges as a renowned poetess in her society, she dreams of flying on the winged horse. Yet, she resorts to poetry looking for her way of being in the world. Roth, too, puts words and images together, but she comes up with things that are the opposite of everything she is about. Both Roth and animals are dehumanised and abused in society. She is fully aware of the cycles of the months. Her human self seems to merge into the non-human entity of nature. The story of the stars and myth tells female punishment at the hands of men. Nature renews Roth's life and provides her with new and better insights.

Facing social pressures for not being married, Roth falls in love with Poulter hoping that he ,too, would reciprocate her love. Though she yearns to marry Poulter, the man never takes interest in her since she is an independent and self-reliant woman who deviates from the roles that society ascribed to her gender. She never relinquishes her self-respect. Yet, her endless waiting for Poulter leads her to fall a prey to social victimization and gossip:

May they surmise, and is this courting? Almeda Roth has a bit of money, which her father left for her, and she has her house. She is not too old to have a couple of children. She is a good enough housekeeper, with the tendency toward fancy iced cakes and decorated tars that is seen fairly in old maids.(52-3)

Like Hawthorne's Victorian puritanism, Munro's countryside people represent the restricted spirit of a cultural era from which Roth wants to escape its control. They gossip and taunt her that she is an old maid, a spinster and that she should have spent her past years in the proper thing—that is marriage. They assume that “all that reading and poetry [...] seemed more of a drawback, a barrier, an obsession”(53). Munro satirizes the way society views women who are not married. At the same time, Munro explores Roth's inner quest under the



patriarchal domination. She awaits anxiously for a sign of his interest in vain. Yet, the moment she panics and hurried to Jarvis Poulter's house, asking his help when she sees a murdered women near her fence, Poulter feels for the first time drawn to her vulnerability. During this situation, Roth has acted like a typical woman of her society-as opposed to the poised confident woman that Poulter has known in the past.

Roth's vulnerability to Queen Aggie's exploitation makes the man think of her as a possible wife match. Yet, his cruelty in dealing with the situation lets Roth Change her mind and abhor him. Checking the woman's body, Mr. Poulter "nudges the leg with the toe of his boot, just as you'd nudge a dog or a sow"(59). He instills in the woman a connection to the earth. The affinity between woman and earth refers to woman as a victim of male rage (in Griffin). Munro's language symbolizes that women and nature are affected by the same system of oppression. His harsh way of tackling the body of the abused woman completely disturbs Roth. She feels estranged from him. He maltreats the body of the woman as if she were an animal which adds to the ecofeminist issue—man's unjustifiable domination of animals /non-human world. Roth's society is one that is concerned with anthropocentrism and patriarchy and that society marginalizes women and nature with its ecological surroundings, and treat them with disrespect. Munro warns her readers against the selfish human schemes that subordinate both nature and women to men.

Munro's literary text reflects the lives of women in its entirety from early childhood, teenage, maturity, and old age. Roth was depicted in her social and familial situations in different stages. She breaks free from all the social bindings. She realizes the meaning of love and after a time, she recognises the illusionary nature of man-woman relationship. She displays an enlightened view that may be adapted by strong women. Unlike weak women who are unable to get out of their romantic notions due to emotional or may be economic reasons, she emerges powerful. She reaches epiphany: she realizes that for her to be herself, she has to get away and live alone. It seems that history repeats itself. What happened to Queen Aggie in the past reoccurs to Roth. The narrator refers to some youth abusing Roth in old age as the newspaper announces:



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It has been said that some urchins chased her into the water, and such is the boldness and cruelty of some of our youth, and their observed persecution of this lady, that the tale cannot be entirely discounted. (72)

Since Roth defies the conventions of her Southern society by remaining single, and since she cannot retain proper decency expected from her, she is bullied in old age and abused by men. She does not live up to the ideals of her male centered society. In the eyes of her community, she is described as an “eccentric” woman. This incident emphasizes the brutality of the human nature. She prefers solitude in nature rather than contact with abusing culture.

Munro delves deeply into the psyche of her female protagonists and exposes the sensibilities of the woman’s heart. “Meneseteung” reflects the lives of women in its entirety from early teenage, maturity, and old age. Roth was depicted in her social and familial situations in different stages. She breaks free from all the social bindings. What happened to Queen Aggie in the past as well as what happened to Roth in old age is an indication of the nasty human nature in contrast to the celebratory Southern culture. Since both women defy the conventions of society, both are abused. Both women suffered since they survive in a male dominated society. Yet they lived their own way.

### “Before the Change”

Similarly in Munro’s “Before the Change” social restrictions and male exploitation imposed on women are revealed. Munro depicts the life of unnamed female character who imposes meaning on her life and readjusts a sense of who she is to live peacefully in a patriarchal society. Munro shows how her twenty-four-year old female protagonist returns to her father’s house in rural Ontario after her break up with her engagement. The story comprises some letters written in a diary form, but never sent. Yet, they are all addressed to her ex-fiancé named “R., Dear R., Dear robin”(216,221, 224,235,240,228,229,224). The protagonist never mentioned the name of her ex-fiancé in full form, a sign of her contempt and derogatory attitude towards his hypocritically wicked manners. She is compelled by him to think of aborting her embryo, as pregnancy before marriage



would hamper his position as Minister of the Theological College. He selfishly wants her to undergo this painful experience just to maintain his reputation as a minister. Here, an unjust and unequal relationship between a man and woman is obviously blatant. It reveals the hypocrisy of the religious men at that time as the Minister leads a life of selfishness, deceptions and lies.

Echoing the Minister who exploits Hester in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the protagonist's ex-fiancé is free from the responsibility of the consequences of his immoral relation with her. Instead of the secure, happy and blessed life his fiancée awaits after marriage, he obliges her to abort their child and live forever sorry and guilty for what she does. He imposes on her a "determination-by-others" or, in Maria Mies's words, "a new heteronomy" (246). He is influenced by the other's views and about his reputation; he is under the sway of his colleagues and supervisors. Moreover, he expects her to be always available to him. From an eco-feminist perspective, the Minister's power, as a patriarch, exercised on her is emphasized in asking her to find a doctor to have an abortion in order that he maintains his reputation as a minister. In Western Canada, women's condition in society is constructed by men. He, as a patriarch, wants to deny her the right of self-determined motherhood, an issue discussed during the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, the unnamed narrator decides that she is the owner of her own person, and she establishes the right over the self. It is she who should decide by herself whether she wants to be a mother or not. She breaks off their engagement and she eventually gives her baby up for adoption, but never seen it nor does she know its gender.

Despite the unnamed protagonist is badly humiliated and abused by her ex-fiancé, she releases her kept tension through writing some letters, the most appropriate medium of communication, which are addressed to him but never sent. They prove to be confessional since they help her release her traumatizing feelings and get a better understanding of her situation. In the past under the false notion of love, she was submissive and yielded to his selfish demands. Yet, now she is in the healing process since she freely has chosen what she wants. Much to her shock and surprise, she finds out that her father performs illegal abortions for years:



Cracks like brown hairs in the downstairs washbasin and a disconcerting spot of rust in the toilet. Well you must have noticed. It's silly but the most disturbing thing I think is all the coupons and advertising flyers. They're in drawers and stuck under saucers or lying around loose and the sales or discounts they're advertising are weeks or months or years past(216).

She realizes that her father does illegal abortions for women. When she tells her dad that she believes in abortion, the dictator father's reply is "I don't want you to use that word again in this house"(227). When she negotiates with him, he reproaches her of being senseless: "You've got too loose a tongue and not enough sense. Too much education and not enough ordinary brain."(227). Their rough dialogue shows that they are not on friendly terms and that there is a break in daughter-father bond. It also reveals the hypocritical nature of the western patriarchs and the contradictions of the western Canadian society. On the one hand, the father/doctor expects his daughter to be silent and to pretend that she does not know what she already knows. On the other hand, the ex-fiancé Minister expects the protagonist not to question nor argue about the hypocrisy and the falsity of the church and religious men. Though she is against the painful process of abortion, she is asked by her father/doctor to assist him during an aborting as his assistant, Mrs. Barrie, is out of commission. Her father is sharing in woman oppression.

In the midst of the painful procedure, the narrator hears the patient pleading with her to "recite something." The poem that pops into her head is a catchy tune her ex-fiancé used to recite when they were dating. It is just a part of W. B. Yeats' "The Song of Wandering Aengus"\*(1899) that she remembers. Yet, the narrator makes some Changes in the lines of W.B. Yeats, replacing the pronoun 'she' with 'you' and 'her' for 'you'. It seems that she addresses the patient and her father/ doctor.

Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands  
I will find out where she has gone,  
And kiss her lips and take her hands.(qtd. in "Change" 232)



In the poem Rose chooses to recite, the title Aengus refers to the mythic god of youth and love. One day, he “caught a little silver trout” and “laid it on the floor” (Yeats 15-16). While he was preparing the fire, the trout turned into “a glimmering girl/with an apple blossom in her hair.” She called him by his name “and ran/and faded through the brightening air”(16). I think Munro intentionally does this pronoun replacement as a sort of projection of the female dilemma in a patriarchal Western culture. The protagonist addresses the patient of her painful experience and that she will regret the loss of her child in the future.

Munro is fascinated with inserting mythical figures and citing lines of verse in her fiction. I think the poem recital in “Before the Change” is not merely accidental but crucial to the rubrics of the whole meaning. The selected lines are a metaphor for the daughter, the patient and every female living in a patriarchal western society in which they are viewed as a gain or a possession. On the one hand, the selfish hypocritical ex-fiancé discards his own child and demands an abortion . Similarly the father/doctor who is an enigmatic stolid representation of cruelty and rigidity never approaches his daughter nor does her care for her. Throughout the story, a callous father-daughter relationship based on negligence and kept secrets is quiet blatant. Through the verses, she tells her father that he, too, aborts her through negligence and ferocity.

The Patriarch/doctor’s cruel brutality is reflected in the eye of nature the moment his daughter/unnamed narrator reaches his house. She wants to situate herself in the rural house in nature. During her journey heading to her father’s house, she notices that all natural surroundings work in harmony. Yet, the moment she reaches the landscape surrounding her father’s rural residence, she notices the gloomy results of his brutal actions:

The trees not turned yet, just rusting at the edges and the stubble fields like gold. So why does this benevolence landscape fade, in my father’s presence and in his territory (and don’t forget it’s in Mrs. Barrie’s presence and in her territory)? (215)

Nature as a living entity is always there in Munro’s selected works. Nature here is not a silent entity or a marginalized backdrop in “Before the Change.” It is self-articulatory and it answers back what the patriarchal western culture holds



for women. The father/doctor is exploiting women through performing abortion, thus ceasing life to exist. His brutal actions are linked with the natural degradation. At the same time, nature shows the sympathy and compassion that the western patriarchal world lacks. The darkened words used such as “rusting, fade” indicate a gloomy sad nature over what happens inside the doctor’s house. To brighten up her life, the protagonist decides to beautify the ugliness of her father’s house through painting. According to her, the house needs to be cleaned, the walls need to be painted, the old magazines need to be replaced (217). Painting as well as other external Changes, here, is a shallow decoration of the unpleasantness of reality and deception in a patriarchal western culture.

To undergo a deeper level of self-awareness, the unnamed protagonist resorts to past personal events. In a flashback, she records some of her early childhood memories in a letter addressed to her ex-fiancé. Deciding to live her own way, to defy her patriarch, and to ignore her expected gender roles, the protagonist goes out meeting boys while in school;

I gave up the idea of being a Girl of the Golden West. I went down to the dock and looked at lake boats, but I don’t think I went so far as dreaming of being taken on as a deckhand. Also I didn’t fool them into thinking I was anything but a girl. A man leaned over and yelled down at me: “Hey. You got any hair on it yet?”(221)

To escape the expected gender roles ascribed to all females, she goes down to a harbor, an element of nature and a symbol of quietness. She wants to free herself from her father’s shackles and to feel at peace with herself. Yet, she is verbally harassed and abused by grown-ups during her childhood. She confronts the opposition to her autonomous self and her female body. She faces two potentially conflicting beings, namely, her conscious being and her physical being.

Since in Western Canada women’s position in society is constructed by men, the protagonist is subordinated and humiliated by both her father in childhood and her fiancé in adulthood. Once she reveals her past life in unsent letters, she re-experiences her past pains either from her early childhood or her engagement and she is consequently healed and freed. Though they are no longer in contact, the unnamed narrator confronts her fiancé through writing. The



protagonist realizes the falsity of her relationship. She reaches epiphany and catharsis. Both men have played a major role in her life since her needs are subjugated to that of them. She is not what a young lady is expected to be. Unexpectedly, she has done lots of things about which her father knows nothing. She eventually silences her father and shares her past secrets with him. She confronts her father with her past lived experiences without giving him the chance to respond nor does she realize that he has a heart attack. Now both men have vanished from her life. The source of patriarchal authority in her life is no more. She is liberated from their dominance.

In a flash-forward, the narrator envisions the natural surrounding after the death of her father/doctor. Scientific technology is introduced to substitute activities related to nature. "There is a new grain elevator... Nobody walks now; everybody drives. The suburbs don't have sidewalks, and the sidewalks along the old backstreets are unused and cracked and uptilted by frost and disappearing under earth and grass"(221-222). There is a flourishing nature without man's exploitation or intervention. Yet, Munro refers to the appalling conditions of poor girls and oppressed women in western society. She refuses women's horrific working situations. They work as laborers in manufacturing and in war plant. The father /doctor used to have some girls as assistants. Yet, they leave his clinic either to get married or to join war plants. Their destiny in either cases is equally awful.

Abortion as a repeated motif in "Before the Change" goes beyond the factual level of ending a life. It is an extended metaphor in Munro's story for the other losses in nature. It denotes the submissiveness and abuse of women in western Canada during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The father/doctor aborts females in the same way he aborts greenery in nature. He ceases life everywhere. Nature forces are back again after the death of the doctor. Beauty of nature is emphasized once the doctor's death is announced. It is noteworthy mentioning that the first time the brutal doctor's name is uttered is after his death only when one of his special clients is calling to have an appointment. I think Munro wants to say declaring the death of Dr. Strachan, the perpetrator of abortion, connotes the end of women exploitation, a rebirth for females and flourishing for natural surroundings. The



abolition of oppressive patriarchy in human society, in this case the doctor and the ex-finance, leads to a rebirth to both females and nature.

## Conclusion

Mainly occupied with female issues and women themselves, Munro addresses contemporary issues for the subordinate position of women and nature for a general social Change. She delineates the social dimensions oppressing women and the woman/nature bond in the selected works, focusing on their affinity and their shared experience of exploitation and oppression at the hands of men. Since society defines women by gender, Munro emphasizes that to adopt a new way of life and to break the traditional boundaries is still quite hard to be accepted in a patriarchal society. In “Meneseteung,” Munro uses gender to oppose social trivialities and expected roles while in “Before the Change” she uses gender to oppose apparently religious arrangements till both female protagonists reach epiphany. Munro depicts the life of her female protagonists who lives within and without their traditional gender role. Each imposes a meaning on her life and readjust a sense of who she is to live peacefully in a patriarchal society that reinforces dualism. While in “Meneseteung” Munro uses nature as the external environment with its non-humans, in “Before the Change” she concentrates on deep human nature.

To delineate her ecofeminist vision, Munro employs rhetorical devices such as providing clues and direct foreshadowing that make readers are sure of what is to happen. She uses much omissions and hidden events left to the readers’ imagination. She utilizes figurative language, mythical figures, flashback and flash-forward, short verses either quoted or composed by the female protagonists. Both works of art depict the shared destiny of female oppression and nature deterioration. Their affinity is a crying call for survival in a patriarchal society that reinforces dualism. Munro is rethinking of ways in which people see themselves and others within the world as if she calls for the end of women and non-human nature oppression. On the other hand, she seeks a new fair man-woman relationship, where everything shall be equally shared. It is time that humanity starts to comprehend the integrity of the whole universe. Munro proves totally against the capitalist and patriarchal forces within the Canadian society.



## Notes

\*The last line of this poem is the title of an anthology and a short story by the same title written by Ray Bradburg in 1953.

\*\*This paper follows MLA Handbook (8<sup>th</sup> ed.)

<https://owl.purdue.edu>.

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## "الطبيعة" و"النوع" في قصتي الكاتبة أليس مونرو "نهر مينيسيتينج" و"قبل إحداث التغيير"

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### ملخص:

من خلال الإطار النظري للنقد النسوي البيئي تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحديد رؤية الكاتبة الكندية المعاصرة أليس مونرو في موازاة الثقافة الفاهرة للمرأة مع استغلال الإنسان للطبيعة من خلال قراءة قصتها " مينيسيتينج" و " قبل التغيير". تتقصى الورقة البحثية الأبعاد الاجتماعية التي تقهر المرأة وعلاقة المرأة بالطبيعة في العملين المختارين مع التركيز على تجربتهما المشتركة في القمع والاستغلال على أيدي رجال. فكشفت مونرو تناقضات الثقافة الكندية التي تتوقع سكوت المرأة والتظاهر بجهل الأشياء التي تعلمها جيداً الأمر الذي انعكس على الطبيعة.

استخدمت مونرو "النوع" في قصة "مينيسيتينج" لمعارضة التفاهات الاجتماعية والأدوار المتوقعة من المرأة في حين أنها استخدمت النوع في قصة " قبل التغيير" لنقد مخططات دينية ظاهرية في المجتمع إلي أن وصلت الشخصية الرئيسية في كل عمل على حده إلي مرحلة الاستيعاب الكامل. جسد العملان العلاقة بين الشخصيتين الرئيسيتين والطبيعة كضرورة للتعايش في مجتمع ذكوري يعزز الثنائية.

أثبتت مونرو أنها ضد القوى الرأسمالية والذكورية في المجتمع الكندي وأنها تهدف إلى تغيير اجتماعي كما حذرت قراءها من المخططات الأنانية التي تتسبب في خضوع كل من الطبيعة و المرأة لرجال.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الطبيعة، النوع، النقد النسوي البيئي، أليس مونرو، رباط المرأة و الطبيعة.

