

**A STUDY ON GENDERING AS AN UNCONSCIOUS PROCESS IN
ALICE MUNRO'S *BOYS AND GIRLS***

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ABSTRACT

Gender is the psychological identification of every individual, but it is influenced purely by socially constructed ideologies. *Boys and Girls* is a short story about a girl who is about to turn eleven and her brother. Their father is a fox farmer living in Canada. This story has episodes that intellectually bring forth the gendering of tender minds, so that they will grow up to be fit and function efficiently as per their assigned gender roles. The story follows first person narrative. The long living stereotypes are instilled in the children of the family through various incidents that are subtle to be noted as problems related to gender. This study delves into the process of shaping the young minds unconsciously by the elders who fail to deconstruct the ideologies that dwell in them and get flowed out unconsciously. The biased gender discriminating ideologies are transmitted from one generation to another both consciously and unconsciously, because of the lack of enlightenment on this unspoken subject of arguments. The little girl has a wild spirit of adventure, which is gradually lulled to sleep by the gender stereotypes and the story is a representation of the deliberately left, unseen and unspoken gender issues. This study is to examine how the characteristic attributed to the particular genders are made to be imprinted in the blank young minds as an unconscious process during the childhood through this short story. This study also aims at bringing into light the happening reality of gendering with this literary text as a channel of exploration.

Keywords: Gendering, Tabula rasa, Unconscious process

Boys and Girls is a short story written by Alice Munro and was published in the year 1968. The protagonist of this story is a girl who lives in a farm house with her family comprising of four members; her father, mother, and younger brother. Her father is a fox farmer. The girl assists her father in all his farm works, his brother being younger and playful does not involve much in such works. Her mother never steps into the farm unless it is inevitable and she mostly stays in the kitchen immersing herself in cooking. She tries to make

the girl stay inside the house but every time her attempts end in vain. The visitors to the farm believe that the girl is a boy because of her involvement in the farm works, which only boys usually do.

She has an upper hand over her little brother in the most childish ways possible. They sing before falling asleep and she tells herself heroic stories with herself as the savior of people in danger. She thinks herself riding a horse across the streets of the city, killing wolves and rescuing people from danger. Such wide imaginations come from her own self, uncorrupted by the politically discoursed ideologies of discriminations.

The girl imagines herself doing all the heroic deeds, accepted to be done only by men. The girl is not exposed to such stereotypes and has not yet faced the realities of the society awaiting her beyond the fences of her farm. Her mind is free of all such biased and discriminating ideologies and is a blank slate to be filled by her future experiences. "All that seems to me to explain itself very clearly if we compare the imagination of children to a *tabula rasa* on which our ideas, which resemble portraits of each object taken from nature, should depict themselves" says John Locke in his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which makes it apparent that gendering is a social process not biological or natural. The girl's mind is a *tabula rasa* and so it has its own space to be filled with the imaginings of her standpoint and acquirement of knowledge through her little acquaintances and endeavors. The beginning stage of the gendering process is clearly shown in the story, starting with the depiction of the child's ignorance about the stereotypes and other unjust convictions of the society.

The girl fetches water in tins and transports it using the wheel barrows. Her brother playfully joins her, but does not do things responsibly and it is most accepted for a small boy. She says her father never speaks much but her mother does share many of her life stories. The little girl's mind has the idea of winning her father's real appreciation for the responsible work she carries out. She takes things as easily as the land takes the drops of rain. The unspeakability of her father obliquely resides in her tender mind as the stereotype that men are less spoken and the quite opposite idea from her mother's behavior. The grown-up parents exhibit their stereotypically shaped behaviors unconsciously, but have conscious acceptability and voluntary submission to those ideologies without attempting to deconstruct them.

When the girl finds her mother in the farm, she thinks of it to be unusual. The young mind does not question the mother's uninvolved in the farm works, rather perceives it and

develops an impression about the humans considered to be the ones fitting under the gender category as her mother does. She always remains in the kitchen preparing fruit jam for sales. She needs her daughter to help her in the kitchen work and not out in the farm doing heavy tasks of lifting barrels and fetching water. The mother unconsciously fails to accept that her daughter is capable of doing physical activities as her son. This is an idea put into her mind when she would have been a child and that unconscious acquirement made her live the same way, so that she never opted for tasks involving much physical labor. The same is being done to the girl. These ideas linger in the young minds and they tend to occupy their consciousness unconsciously and end up in the rising of another generation with the same gender issues. The girl cannot figure out the actual problem concerned in this conversation of her parents. She thinks that her mother plots against her to rob her off the freedom and to make her do what she does not want to. The child is ignorant of the actual depth, but the impact of such things stays in her forever.

As she grows up, she finds that her mother is becoming more insisting about her role as a girl. Her eyes open to the fact that being a girl is not as same as being a child. She gradually gets aware of the fact that her younger brother is getting physically stronger than her, though she is elder and both are growing at the same rate in the same household. This appears new to her innocent mind, untainted with any of the gender stereotypes. Her grandmother during her visits tells things that a girl should not do. These things are being questioned on a surface level as a wondering by her and they are laid stronger at the deeper depths of her unconsciousness. The child thus changes into a girl, a term used to define a human with certain characteristics that are mostly, politically, and culturally built and propagated.

Her father shoots horse before butchering them to feed his fox. The girl is much intrigued by the murdering episode of the horses. She sneaks in to the barn along with her brother to witness the sight. The mere sight of blood oozing from the horse's body weakens her. She lets one of the horses named Flora escape from the farm, because she cannot withstand the brutal murder of the horse. It is she and her brother who sneaks in and watches the killing of the horse, but her brother does not react as she does. This is not because he does not feel bad about the brutal act, but he relates himself biologically with the men who shoots the horse especially his father and unconsciously imitates his behavior of being non sympathetic and brave. The father takes her brother along with him to catch the escaped horse and leaves behind her. This marks a very important change in the thought process,

self-assertion, gender identity and behavior of the girl. The way her brother brags about his hunt of Flora makes her decide that they are meant for the strong bodied men. The idea that aggressiveness is associated with testosterone has been proved wrong by many researches says Chris Barker with evidences, but that is the most common notion. The people accept this and act accordingly, similarly this girl changes her ways and starts dreaming of getting rescued by some men and her brother turns into the apparently wrong side of being a man.

The changes in the girl are not something explicitly imposed or compelled outcome, but an unconscious acceptance of the ideologies. She relates herself with her mother because of the physical characteristics and starts behaving like a girl. The process of gendering thus takes place very gradually and unconsciously during the childhood. The non analytical submission of every individual to such stereotypical ideologies is the basic reason behind the never-ending gender problems. This study thus proves through the characters of this short story considering it as a sample for human behavior and development in reality, that gendering is an unconscious and careless process happening everywhere. Through this process is how the so-called blank slate of all young beings are involuntarily corrupted with ideologies that necessarily need to be extinguished from the human collective unconsciousness for once and forever.

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