

Gender and Space in “The Albanian Virgin”

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Abstract Beginning with Coral A. Howells’ claim that “gender awareness” is crucial to Alice Munro’s writings, Dorota Filipczak explores the way gender and space are managed in one of the most unusual stories in the Canadian writer’s output “The Albanian Virgin.” Examining a rigid division into male and female worlds in the traditional Albanian society, Munro brings to light the only exception that violates sexual segregation: the construction of a sworn virgin. Unsexed as a result of her own decision, approved by the patriarchal world, the sworn virgin who consorts with men is looked at in the article from the perspective of Judith Butler’s critique of gender. Does the construction confirm Butler’s stance or does it undo her “undoing” of gender? Acutely aware of prohibitions and taboos that beset women in her own country, Munro creates a Canadian character who is then albanized to be later reclaimed and canadianized anew. Her story is mediated to the reader due to the framing provided by the narrator, a bookshop owner preoccupied with Mary Shelley, whose take on gender and space is both reflected and subverted in the choices of Munro’s women.

1 Introduction

According to Coral Ann Howells, “gender awareness” is one of the “distinctive features” of Alice Munro’s fiction (1998, p. 144). Munro, who came from a traditional and emotionally repressed community in Ontario, first set out to test the limits of socially constructed femininity in her debut volume of short stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), where she analyzed the collision between the role of a mother and wife and that of a writer. The female writer and narrator of the story entitled “The Office” utters memorable words in a conversation with her husband:

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A house is all right for a man to work in. He 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* [...] A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is [...] an offence against nature. (Munro, 2000, p. 60)

The quotation immediately alerts the reader to the fundamental injustice at home where the above state of things is simply natural and is hardly ever questioned. Couched in post-Victorian imaginary, the passage describes the man as the one who ventures into the outside world and brings a part of it (his work) into the household, where his privilege cancels everyone else's needs. The house becomes his other costume; it is more informal, supple and pliable, which comes as no surprise, for the passage culminates with a comment on the woman: "She *is* the house; there is no separation possible" (Munro, 2000, p. 60). So it is the woman who "rearranges" herself around the man, becomes his harbour and the womb in which he will experience renewal. The passage proves that the society has not gone too far from the era of "the angel in the house," an ideal which certainly affects the female writer's position. The description of her idleness—she "sits staring"—is certainly negative, whereas the space she is staring into is not connected with her husband or children and therefore strengthens the sense of her being dangerously cut off from her moorings, maybe even sliding into an unwanted and disturbing psychological state.

Del Jordan, from Munro's only novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), begins to question the supposedly natural state of things when she is a teenager. At this age, unhampered by life choices, she can still afford naive optimism. She distances herself from her mother's failure to be a success in defiance of circumstances, because as a woman of a younger generation, Del takes success for granted. She will not heed maternal advice:

I felt that [my mother's advice] was not so different from all the other advice handed out to women, to girls, advice that assumed that being female made you damageable, that a certain amount of carefulness and solemn fuss and self-protection were called for, whereas men were supposed to be able to go out and take on all kinds of experiences and shuck off what they didn't want and come back proud. Without even thinking about it, I had decided to do the same. (Munro, 1990, p. 147)

The reader can immediately sense the stereotypes that the narrator of the previous story collided with. Being "damageable" was a specifically female condition in Victorian times, hence "self-protection" was called for, especially when it came to unmentionable sexual issues. Men, like the protagonist's husband from the story "The Office," can go out and are "supposed" to do it. It does not really matter what kind of experience they have, it can always be "shucked off," the colloquial phrase here stressing the casual or even unwelcome kind of experience, which remains on the outside. It is easily discarded, rather than internalized and turned into a damage. Del's response to the obvious injustice is phrased in the words of spontaneous teenage rebellion: "I had decided to do the same." Unlike the narrator of "The Office," Del will run a risk and fly in the face of the socially accepted constructions of femininity in order to defy them because of their limitations. These two women

illustrate the basic concern of many Munroian heroines: “gender awareness” and the ensuing refusal to accept the post-Victorian double standards in light of which freedom to shape one’s own life comes naturally to a man, but is denied to a woman.

A similar motif reappears in a completely different guise in a short story entitled “The Albanian Virgin” (*Open Secrets*, 1994), where Munro sets out to examine the gender agenda in the Albanian society of the 1920s, by writing about a Canadian tourist named Charlotte who becomes a member of an Albanian clan when her guide is shot by local mountaineers. According to Munro’s biographer, the author did research into Albania and adjacent countries, and she modelled Charlotte on a librarian captured c. 1900 by Albanian “bandits” (Thacker, 2011, p. 432). Charlotte’s misadventure provides her with access to the rigidly divided worlds of women and men, respectively, in the community of the Albanian mountaineers, for whom gender segregation is so explicit that the sexes do not even eat together, and the fact of sharing a bed at night is either denied or turned into jokes out of embarrassment. It seems that Munro, who consistently returns to the issue of what is and what is not accepted in a woman in the West—whether in the small-town reality of Ontario (Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women*) or the backward atmosphere of the unnamed city (in “The Office”)—has found an interesting point of reference in a exotic and additionally exoticized context.

2 Charlotte/Lottar as a Woman in Transit

Munro begins her short story in a significant way: “[i]n the mountains, in Maltsia e madhe, she must have tried to tell them her name, and ‘Lottar’ was what they made of it.” The sentence spells out the basic difficulty encountered by the Canadian character, i.e. her failure to stick to her foreign identity among strangers. Actually, Lottar, as we know her, is the heroine of a story told by an elderly woman (called Charlotte), who befriends Claire, the narrator. Claire has just separated from her husband in London, Ontario, and seems to be enjoying a room of her own, having set up a bookstore in Victoria, BC. Claire now spends most of her day in the space that used to be an enclave of male privilege in Victorian times, a space full of books that are not just supposed to please the common taste, but include sophisticated works not necessarily meant for average customers. The bookstore attracts an unusual couple, Charlotte and her husband Gjurdhi, who seem to be poor, though they face their condition with dignity and denial. It is Charlotte who comes to claim the reader’s attention because of her way of dressing, her idiosyncracies and her assertive confidence. Lottar, the heroine of her story, is her younger version, as the name suggests. She is a female traveller who experienced a cultural shock while being away from the Empire, to which she belonged in her own conviction.

When Lottar’s horse panicks at the sound of a shot and the female traveller falls and wounds her leg, the clan have to face “an embarrassing mistake” because they did not mean her to be a victim of their attack. As a nameless Franciscan explains to her, the death of her guide was the result of the blood feud between his family and

that of the attackers. The country is ruled by the traditional law (called *Kanun*) which sanctions vendetta; therefore, the mechanism of revenge operates in every generation of the family involved in the crime from the past. The Franciscan is a mediator between the two worlds, that of the men, with whom he can consort because of his sex, and that of the women, whom he can visit and talk to because of his role. Also, he can speak Italian, which is the only foreign language Lottar knows. Thus he becomes her informant and counsellor during her stay in Albania. Lottar slowly forgets her English, and learns “the language of the Ghegs,” migrating mentally into a different discursive world. This is reflected in the change of name, which the clanswomen pronounce differently. Symbolically, the name Charlotte (her official self) becomes amputated as she loses her Canadian identity. But the name is also extended by means of a new syllable, exteriorizing a sequel to the past that seems lost in the telling.

It is interesting that after her accident Lottar is transported on a stretcher tied to the horses' backs into the clan's territory, where she is handed over to an old woman called Tima, who dresses her wound. The place is described as an “outbuilding of the big house, called the *kula*. It was the hut of the sick and dying. Not of giving birth, which these women did in the cornfields, or beside the path when they were carrying a load to market” (Munro, 1994, p. 82). The comment points to the lack of special care for women in childbirth. Childbirth can take place anywhere; there are no special places for the woman in labour. She can travail on the road literally, a traveller who can find herself giving birth in an unknown area or during domestic chores. In a different way than the protagonist of “The Office,” the Albanian woman in labour “is the house” literally. The baby she is about to have is equal to “the load” she may be carrying to the market. Both must be taken care of by her alone. In contrast to birth, it is death that claims the attention of the community and is allocated a special space away from the living. Thus, death, which involves both sexes, is given a higher status than delivery, which involves a lonely woman often outside the house. The fact that the injured Lottar is placed in the “outbuilding” means that she is already in transit, moving either towards death or a change of status; at this moment she is a liminal figure on the periphery of the community.

Being in transit has many other meanings in Munro's texts. The narrator of “The Office” leaves home in search of a room of her own where she could write undisturbed, for at home her needs are incompatible with the demands her partner and children make on her. Similarly, Del insists on going out like a man in order to experience the world. In this she subconsciously repeats her mother's choice to go “on the road” (Munro, 1990, p. 54). Much as Del resents the fact that her mother sells encyclopedias, Del also hits “the road” in order to gain knowledge of the world rather than remain at home. Even before her mishap, young Lottar also refuses the shackles of convention connected with the travel in the company of respectable and dull people who “worried about being in strange places—what had they come for?” (Munro, 1994, p. 84). What bothers Lottar most is that her companions may have summoned Dr. Lamb from England to meet her, and an unwelcome marriage prospect already looms in sight. She is ready to run the risk of an expedition into the unknown with the guide in order to disrupt the monotony of imperial routine.

When Lottar recovers, she can move to the part of the house occupied by the women, and she is from then on constrained to take part in various household chores. Here she notices another detail that begs for attention. The Albanian women do not sit down in order to do the knitting. This is done on the way to the spring, in transit. An analogy can easily be spotted here. A woman who is involved in a creative effort, be it maternal, like giving birth, or practical though on the verge of artistic creation, has to be on the move. It is the woman's being on the road that matters, rather than the product of her body or her hands, which should "never be idle" (Munro, 1994, p. 87), according to the saying of the clan. This prevents the local women from experiencing the condition described by the narrator of "The Office." They cannot sit "staring into space, into a country that is not [their] husband's or [their] children's" (Munro, 2000, p. 60).

It is the custom of Albanian women to compete with one another in who is going to carry the heaviest load to the market or achieve something else that is equally difficult. Munro observes here a regulatory mechanism that plays into male hands, for while women compete and work incessantly, the men do nothing in particular, and whatever they do is not the women's concern. While women decorate the clothes they sew or knit for the men, their recipients clean the guns or ornament them, and take part in the blood feuds which punctuate their lives. Munro trivializes the *Kanun* which still has power over remote parts of Albania. Men go to the killing with "a lot of laughing, singing and firing off the blanks." Women are not allowed at their councils or on their expeditions. The only serene moment Lottar recalls is when young girls and broad women bathe together in the river after harvesting tobacco. It is then that there is a lot of merriment; they splash water on one another and treat Lottar as their equal. The fun combined with hygiene seems to be the only time of freedom and carelessness.

3 Sexing the Space

It is not accidental that Claire, who is the listener to the story, wrote her MA thesis on Mary Shelley's later novels. In fact, she is much more taken with "the impetuous Mary" and women who surrounded her. Thus the bookshop owner is really a researcher into the life and fiction of yet another woman who had to combine her passion for writing with the female role, an undercurrent that flows throughout Munro's fiction, as we have seen in "The Office" and *Lives of Girls and Women*. Mary Shelley's take on Gothicism, moreover, involves the effects of gender segregation and their being reflected in space and movement, which is also the Munroian concern. *Frankenstein* illustrates the drastic separation of the private world of female experience and the public world of men (Mellor, 1988, p. 116). Men can travel, gather experience and cultivate their minds, while women stay enclosed in their private emotional space. Men can also err dangerously and confess their errors, sympathy and absolution being granted to them as a matter of course. Women, in turn, are exempt from the dangerous knowledge that might render them

unsuitable as guardians of innocent lives they will eventually mother. Munroian heroines claim a similar right to err while making their choices outside home. They need to create a space of their own making rather than hold on to the one that has been charted out for them.

While the space inhabited by local people is managed in a different way in “The Albanian Virgin,” men and women will not travel together. A woman carrying “the load” to delivery has nothing in common with a man who has to avenge his kin or travels to a council connected with another blood feud. While men and women could share the same space physically when eating or being on the move, they would not communicate or remain together then. Their perspectives would never meet, because the community has invested in regulatory mechanisms that keep the male and female worlds apart. Thus Charlotte/Lottar is bound to confront the world where the female role is as circumscribed as in the conventional, imperial reality that she left of her own will in order to err dangerously.

4 Beyond “Gender Trouble”

Considering Claire’s concern with Mary Shelley’s life and works, it is not surprising that she is avid to listen to the story of a female traveller and absolute gender segregation in Albania. However, in Albania there is an amazing exception that Lottar becomes aware of:

One night, when Lottar served one man his food [...] she noticed what small hands [the guest] had and hairless wrists. Yet he was not young, he was not a boy. A wrinkled, leathery face, without a mustache. She listened for his voice in the talk, and it seemed to her hoarse but womanish. But he smoked, he ate with the men, he carried a gun. (Munro, 1994, p. 89)

The “man” in question is a woman dressed like a man, and therefore accepted as an equal in the male company. “His” voice can be heard in the talk, even though women are not permitted to participate in the exchange. This is how Lottar discovers the Albanian social construction of a virgin, that is, a woman who renounces her traditional female role and sexuality. After such a woman puts on male clothes, she may not only perform male tasks but also consort with men, and enjoy the pleasures of togetherness and conversation but without a sexual relationship. It seems that the total elimination of sexuality is meant to prevent the possibility of unclassifiable liaisons. A woman referred to as “he” after becoming a virgin is no longer an adequate partner; a liaison with her might be seen then as homosexual. Thus precautions seem to have been taken to exclude the behaviour that would be unacceptable in a traditional society. The construction of Albanian virgin does not overlap with Judith Butler’s performative model (1999, p. xv). Referring to Butler, Young and Rice state that “unlike the drag queen the change of dress for sworn virgins inaugurates” (2012, p. 69) the transformation into a man. It is neither heterosexual nor lesbian. Thus it cannot be easily accommodated by Butler’s concept of “undoing gender,” which suffers from limitations connected with the

lack of crosscultural perspective. While Butler’s repository of concepts is anchored in the Western culture of Europe or America, her approach fails to register the cultural and historical diversity of both continents. Albania is a case in point. While territorially European and quite old, the concept of the Albanian virgin eludes easy classifications. Sanctioned by the traditional code of Albanian law, the *Kanun*, the construction of the virgin is the only way to bridge the gap between the segregated worlds of men and women. This is how a woman can enter the male space, by forsaking the communal space of women, and their concerns, labour and emotions.

5 “The Gender of Choice”

Sarah Salih notes that Butler warns against understanding gender performance as a voluntary and theatrical act of choice. Salih quotes the following from *Bodies That Matter*:

If I were to argue that genders are performative that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its right place at night. (Butler qtd. in Salih, 2001, p. 35)

And yet Munro repeatedly insists upon the theatricality of gender, disguises and costumes. It is particularly clear in the various rites of passage that her heroine Lottar undergoes within one day. First, when she is dressed as a bride, Lottar finds herself

disappearing into a white blouse with gold embroidery, a red bodice with fringed epaulets, a sash of striped silk a yard wide and a dozen yards long, a black-and-red wool skirt, with chain after chain of false gold being thrown over her hair. (Munro, 1994, p. 91–92)

The choice of words is highly relevant, for Lottar “disappears” into her new costume. Her hair is dyed black, and her face is sprinkled with flour. The excessive artificiality of this folk look is supposed to petrify her into an Albanian bride poised to marry a Muslim on the strength of an arrangement between the clan and the man in question—all without Lottar’s consent or even knowledge of what is happening. But for the intrusion of the domineering Franciscan who disrupts the preparations, the marriage would have gone ahead. Instead, upon the priest’s urging, Lottar agrees to become a virgin and thus avoid compulsory marriage. The wedding dress is taken off, and Lottar dons “men’s trousers, worn and with no braid, and a shirt and a head scarf” (Munro, 1994, p. 93). The clothes are plain and practical enough; they also allow uninhibited movements. Lottar is freed from the burden of womanhood at the cost of losing her right to give birth to sons, the clan’s priority as far as women are concerned.

Since she now belongs to neither sex, Lottar cannot stay with either women or men. She has to mount a slope where she resides in a provisional shelter, and is given the job of minding and milking the sheep. Lottar thus combines female

preoccupation through the connection with milk, and male freedom of movement. Even if men visit her to give advice, share a cigarette, talk and laugh with her, she spends her nights alone. Nobody will ever venture into her bed. Nor will she experience the togetherness of communal sleep with the women. Of the females, she is visited by girls only, who come over to get the milk, and who become quite “wild” in the absence of their mothers. Men never appear at the same time as the girls, but much later, seemingly to relax, but also to offer Lottar small gifts. Interestingly, this is the only acceptable way she can experience togetherness and sharing in the male company. Yet, she has to be adequately defeminized to enable the luxury of relaxed communication between the two sexes. Her clothes and carelessness of image are a part of that, and so is her casual lifestyle. The bonus of the situation for Lottar is that the priest often visits the men who come to talk to her.

It is interesting to juxtapose passages from Munro’s story against the actual cases of Albanian virgins documented in journalism. Demick (2011, p. 95) provides an example of Sema Brahimi who “decided to become a man” at the age of fourteen. Her family and friends began to refer to her by means of masculine pronouns, while she confessed to a journalist “I’ve not had a bad life as a man.” Dresscode was a very important element of her metamorphosis; Sema/Selman wore a suit to “his” brother’s wedding and had chosen a wife for him. The woman who decides to become a virgin does not have to be one in the technical sense of the word, but it is the decision to take a vow of chastity that turns her into one. In other words, the decision is not determined by physical factors, but by the woman’s personal choice, and it is perhaps the only choice she is allowed to make in order to defy patriarchy on the strength of male approval. The reasons why women embrace this role are connected with the avoidance of an arranged marriage or a decision to fill in the void in the family left by the death of the father. Also, women who give birth to girls only are not highly respected. Hence, it is not unusual for a girl in a family of many girls who has a living father to become a virgin. Thus the decision is not a question of following one’s non-normative sexual desire or subversive practice. It is a rational act of will that strengthens the gender segregation. It takes place because the welfare of the family or a female individual threatened with unwanted wedlock occasionally requires an exception that is strictly controlled by the patriarchal law.

6 Conclusion: Out of the Closet

As she has parted with other costumes, Lottar is bound to part with the costume of the “sworn virgin.” The Franciscan arrives at an unusual time of the day in order to see her alone and convince her to leave the place in his company. He escorts her to Skodra to hand her over to a bishop. Upon Lottar’s request that she might stay in his house and do the chores, the Franciscan refuses because it is impossible for a priest in Albania to have a female servant. Sworn virgins can journey alone on male business, but not with a priest. Hence Lottar is referred to as his male servant. Also, he insists that Lottar should not speak.

When Lottar re-enters the previous identity, she can hardly speak her own language. Significantly, a tub is brought out into the yard for her to bathe in outside the British Consulate. This invites a comparison with her residing in an outbuilding for the sick and the dying on the territory of the clan. She is a liminal person. Also, she must be appropriately groomed to be returned to the previous condition. "Her clothes taken away. Probably burned. Her greasy black, vermin-infested hair cut off" (Munro, 1994, p. 109). Again, Lottar steps out of the role defined by her disguise to find out that a holiday from her previous self has estranged her completely. When she prepares to embark and cross the ocean, she finds out that the nameless Franciscan, whom she tried to summon uselessly in longing and farewell after they parted, is now waiting on the dock.

In Canada Charlotte and Gjurdhi are disrobed from their costumes totally. They have both made a cultural transit. She stopped being a sworn virgin from the Albanian community. He stopped being a priest and became her husband. A city-dweller who is Claire's customer refers to the couple as the Duchess and the Algerian; both wear cloaks, and their unusual choice of clothes always attracts attention. At some stage Claire visits their apartment, but when she tries to track them down much later, they are no longer there. Have they discarded their cloaks and gone out in search of their new selves? Claire will never know. Neither fitted in with the conventions in a rather traditional city. Charlotte was too much of an intellectual, as Claire found out during their conversations, while Gjurdhi was too much of an exotic stranger. According to what is predictable, they shucked off another experience and moved on "proud," to recall Del Jordan's youthful comment. Like Del at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*, they vanished into the open space of their own making which defies the closure connected with fixed identity.

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