
Role of Women Protagonists in the Short Stories of Mavis Gallant

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Abstract

Mavis Gallant was a well known Canadian short story writer. She wrote many stories, essays, reviews, plays. Gallant was deprived from the love of her parents in her childhood. After the death of her father and mothers remarriage, she was sent to seventeen different boarding schools. She had experienced a difficult childhood. She hated her mother the most and therefore after completing her studies she decided to stay alone. The mental trauma she faced made her very sympathetic in nature. She became very serious on the issues related to women. Gallant depicted the plight of women in the form of a story. Her many stories seem to be semi autobiographical but she denies completely. This paper is an attempt to bring forth few prevalent problems stated in the short stories of Canadian women.

Keywords- Deprived, Childhood, Trauma, Sympathetic, Autobiographical, Prevalent.

Mavis Gallant, was a well known Canadian short story writer. She was born on August 11, 1922 in Montreal, Canada. Her original name was Mavis de Trafford Young. She was a fluent speaker of French yet, she writes everything in English. She had written many stories, essays, reviews, two novels and a play. But she got recognition as a short story writer. Her stories were regularly published in the *New Yorker* magazine for more than thirty years. Gallant went through a very difficult days of childhood as her mother got re-married soon after the death of her father. She had attended seventeen different schools. Mavis Gallant's father was a versatile painter, and so she too wanted to become like him and gain stardom in the world of canvas. But, soon she realized that it was not a cup of tea for her, rather she was much more miserable in it, and therefore she dropped the idea of becoming a painter. Later she figured out that writing, amuses her the most, and decided to work hard for it. She began reading as many writers works as she could.

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Mavis Gallant was fond of juggling with words from the very early age of her childhood till the later years of her life. As Martin mentioned in her article quoting the lines that she wrote in her preface to her *Selected Stories* as: “I invented rhymes and stories when I could not get to sleep and in the morning when I was told it was too early to get up, and I uttered dialogue for a large colony of paper dolls.” When Gallant grew up she chose to become a full time writer and make it as her career for a lifetime. She started doing her part time job as a journalist, during the free hours, she wrote many stories, but unfortunately none of them got published and were all rejected by the publishers. Though, later on all those stories got published in the reputed journals of Canada. Acceptance or rejection never brought her moral down. She kept on writing everything that amused her, or whatever she witnessed around her, mentioning every single detail. Because of this quality many critics have called her a realistic writer.

Mavis Gallant’s most of the stories are centered around women protagonists. Men are not given any lead role. Mavis Gallant though writes more about either children or women. Keefer points out that “... her work can be described as ‘women-centered’, and that her vision of human possibility has been largely influenced by her experience of being a woman and of having paid a considerable price to defy the limitations imposed on her by gender, it will be illuminating to look at Gallant’s response to one of the most significant social movements of our time – feminism.”

After completing her education, Mavis Gallant wanted to establish her own identity as a writer, as she was much interested in writing. To earn her livelihood after her divorce and separation from her mother she chose to become a journalist, and began writing for the newspaper column, and thereafter few stories too. After a while, accepting everyone’s criticism and refusal still, she didn’t lose hope, and kept on writing, and finally became successful one day when her story “Madeline’s Birthday” got published by the *New Yorker* magazine. That was the turning point that came in her life, and since then she never looked back. Her decision of becoming a full-time writer earned her name and fame across the globe. Gradually many of her stories got published and became popular among the readers. Alice Catherine Carls writes:

Gallant’s stories are like minefields, ready to explode, yet with no closeness, sentimentality, or warmth in sight. True feeling surges out of emptiness, loneliness, and mediocrity, self-contained awareness or confession shedding a disquieting light on a story that seemed to have told it all. With her sociological scalpel, Gallant cuts through layers of appearance and offers a vision of mankind that is neither reassuring nor futile.

Nothing could stop Gallant from becoming a writer, after her divorce and leaving the job as well as the country. Her determination and unshakeable attitude made her a successful Canadian short story writer. Her mastery in the use of language, narrative style and introducing

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her readers from both foreign and native world, made her achieve the position she deserved. Soon, her name was entered in the list of remarkable writers in the Canadian literary canon.

Mavis Gallant's fiction depicted the life about the exiled men and women, fractured identities, disappointed romantic couples, characters who suffer from frustration or broken families. Here are few Mavis Gallant's stories which revolve around the life of women, who have their own dreams and vision to fly high up in the sky, and seek happiness in life, but sometimes have to adjust with the situation as they are not left with any other option.

The Other Paris

"The Other Paris" is a story about a young woman named Carol, who was an American, but came to Paris as she wanted to see the world's most romantic place and later on get married in its romantic aura as well. She holds very high dreams regarding marriage, and wanted to execute everything exactly in the same manner as she had learnt from her college lectures. In Paris, Carol joined the office where she met Mitchell Howard, another American guy. Both of them became good friends, and started dating each other. As the little time passed, Mitchell proposed Carol for marriage. She accepted his proposal keeping in mind that one day she will fall in love with him when the right weather conditions will exist. She kept on waiting for the right time when her love will bloom. "Love required only the right conditions, like a geranium. It would wither exposed to bad weather or in dismal surroundings; indeed, Carol rated the chance of love in a cottage or a furnished room at zero." She believed that weather plays a very important role in the growth of love, finally resulting into a strong relationship. If the weather is perfect, love will grow automatically which will certainly lead to a happy marriage. She thought that in Paris, "if she spoke to the right person, or opened the right door, or turned down an unexpected street, the city would reveal itself and she would fall in love."

Keeping all these silly ideas of hers in mind, she kept on moving forward in life trying to fall in love with Howard, and building a healthy relationship "All winter she looked for these right conditions in Paris. When, at first, nothing happened, she blamed it on weather. She was often convinced she would fall deeply in love with Howard if only it would stop raining. Undaunted, she waited for better times." In the meanwhile, she didn't missed any opportunity to visit the romantic sites, theatres, etc. where she could fall in love with him. But as the time was passing by she was coming to the conclusion that everything that was said about Paris doesn't seem to be true. Still, Carol didn't lose hope and was firm on her college lectures which her professor had taught. She ignored everyone's advice as she was very enthusiastic about marriage. In this story, Mavis Gallant tried to bring forth the very innocent picture of young women that how easily they can be trapped, and can be taken far away from reality. How easily they become the victims of their own fate, but the sad irony is that even after realizing everything still, they

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are not ready to acknowledge the fact, and keep on weaving every thread of their dreams to have a happy family full of love and passion.

Going Ashore

Mavis Gallant's another story "Going Ashore" also revolves around two women characters, Mrs. Ellenger and her daughter Emma. In this story both mother and daughter don't live at their home but kept on moving from place to place. Mrs. Ellenger was always looking for a male company so that there should be someone to take care of her and her daughter. This dependency of hers shows her unconfident nature and also multiple relationships with men. Gallant was considered to be a realistic writer. She tried to pen down everything that she saw happening around her. In this story too, she brought into sight of a single woman for whom it was difficult to bring up her daughter alone, providing her everything and see her daughter happy. Her motherly instinct forces her to have multiple relations with men, just to see a smile on her little daughter, Emma's face, and a secure future of herself. Mrs. Ellenger was on board with Emma to spend a vacation. Emma was enjoying being on ship. But soon her mother was running out of expenses and to continue boarding she needed a friend. Mrs. Ellenger approached a young good looking man, Eddy, a bartender, on ship but was not able to get her company for long. He didn't even joined for lunch at the beach. Emma was aware of the sadness behind her mothers face, which she tries to hide from her. In fact she too herself tried her best to make a match between her mother and that young man. Mrs. Ellenger tried her best but unfortunately she was unsuccessful this time, which her daughter noticed and convinced her that to be happy she doesn't need a man in their life. She handled the situation very diligently and assured her mother that they don't need any men in their life. They both can be happy together, giving each other a comfortable company. Mrs. Ellenger wanted to enjoy all the luxuries in life and wanted to provide the same to her daughter. She was so possessive for her that she never leave her alone, didn't send her to school even. Though she was mocked by other fellow passengers for this deed but she didn't paid much attention to them. Emma continued reading the same books again and again. In this story Gallant also tried to put forward the plight of single mother whose first priority for her child is to ensure good food, good clothes, and a good place to live rather than focusing on education, and that what Mrs. Ellenger was doing for her little daughter. She didn't wanted to stay away from her daughter even for a small span of time, which Gallant herself missed during the childhood when she was bereft from the love of her mother.

Rose

"Rose" is a story about a young girl who lives far away from the city life at the house of the narrators and Germaine's grandmother. Gallant introduces Rose to her readers as a thirteen

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year old girl, “with long hair that lies in ribbons on a velvet coat. The coat has braid trimming and gilt buttons. She wears a fur beret. She carries a muff.” In the whole story the narrator is unknown. She too was a young girl who visits her grandmother’s house during vacations. But this time she came to know that somebody else was too residing with her grandmother, which made her curious to see and meet. Therefore, the narrator decided to meet her grandmother along with her mother and younger sister Germaine. She is narrating the story that how she came across to see the girl named Rose, who was so special and dear to her grandmother. Narrators uncle, her mother, everyone knew about Rose, and were very keen to meet her but everyone hid their feelings from her. When the whole family reached to their grandmother’s place they saw the room of Rose, which was well equipped with all the necessary things that she may require. Her mother told her that they have heard, that she had a monkey face and a smile. But no one had ever seen her until now. Rose herself was aware of her looks, and tries to hide herself from everyone’s site. Sometimes, she hides behind the curtain, sometimes behind the wardrobe or many times ran towards the backyard. She cries when alone. But was scared to come in front of everyone, just because of her look. Gallant depicted the plight of such young and sensitive woman, who looks ugly, and how difficult it is for her to survive, where she knows that, everyone will make fun of her. How she wanted to hide her identity from her own family members. Identity crisis is also an issue, on which Gallant had talked about in her stories. Women and their children, how they keep moving from one place to another, just to build up their own identity after the separation from their husband or from their parents. She tries to bring forward the thought that how difficult it is to survive alone in this cruel world, when you have no one to worry about. Gallant herself had lived all alone from her very childhood days till her last breath. And, therefore she very easily sympathizes with such characters. At last, even after hiding for so long, only Germaine was able to see her and cries, “Jolie! She has pretty hair, but an ugly face. She smiles like monkey.” But the narrator could not accept the presence of Rose and was not ready to accept that she was her cousin, just because she “never saw her. She had no legal reason to exist.”

Acceptance of Their Ways

This story of Gallant, talks about the life of a paying guest. She had tried to show that how difficult it is for a young girl to live her life as a paying guest. Mavis Gallant after completing her education left her home, as she hated her mother. She decided to work and earn on her own. She herself stayed as a paying guest for many years in Canada, and even when she decided to move to Paris. Mavis Gallant knew very well about the restrictions that are imposed on paying guests and they had none other choice than to agree. “*Acceptance of Their Ways*” is also a story of young girl named Lily Littel, who was a paying guest at Mrs. Freeport’s house but

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she always treated Lily as her servant. Round the clock she was on her feet serving Mrs. Freeport. Both of them were opposite in nature. Whatever Lily was fond of, it was useless in the eyes of Mrs. Freeport. Lily was fond of going on excursions, live a high profile lifestyle, wearing branded clothes, or any such thing which she sees others carrying, amuses her. She tries to copy others. She spends too much money on her sisters as well. “But Lily had no regrets. Illiberal by circumstances, grudging only because she imitated the behavior of other women, she became drunk, an old forgotten Lily-girl, tender and warm, able to shed a happy tear and open a closed fist.” But Mrs. Freeport doesn’t appreciate such things at all. She loves to live in a natural way in full discipline. Mrs. Freeport had a friend named Mrs. Garnett, she too was very concerned about her looks even after the passage of her husband. She loves to see everything well maintained. Mrs. Garnett was fond of reading, and therefore always carries a book along with her. Rather than participating in any kind of gossip, she loves to spend her time in reading even at the dinner table. Lily hated both the women, but was helpless as she was merely a paying guest. She wanted to take revenge from them because of their treatment towards her, but at the end consoles herself as her inner conscious, and the ideology, she believes in doesn’t allow her to do so. “Her nature was generous, but an admiration for superior women had led her to cherish herself. An excellent cook, she had dreamed of being a prisoner, but decided to leave that for the loonies; it was no real way to get on.” Gallant writes that at the end you are not left with any option and choice but only to tolerate and accept every single thing, and move on in your life as Lily had decided. Gallant added, “If Lily had settled for this bleached existence, it was explained by a sentence scrawled over a page of her locked diary: “I live with gentlewomen now.” And there was a finality about the statement that implied acceptance of their ways.”

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