



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND EGO IDENTITY OF  
PROTAGONISTS IN SELECTED WORKS OF MUNRO**

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**By**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
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**Chair: Assoc. Prof. Rosli b. Talif, PhD**

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Del and Rose are two of the most discussed characters in the fiction of Alice Munro as they undergo series of (psychologically significant) incidents and make novel-length stories. Since their publication, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1978) are examined from different aspects, and are argued to be the representation of social changes, feminist waves, class-bound and social stratification, cultural heritage and the like. In this dissertation, I try to depict the process of obtaining an ego identity by the protagonists and find an answer for the figurative ending of the stories. Ergo, I investigate psychological development and ego identity formation of the protagonists: examining chiefly stage

five of Eriksonian theory of personality development i.e., ego identity vs. identity confusion, and includes partial characteristics of all other stages supposedly happen thoroughly during a lifespan. The protagonist's process of identity development is mapped to interpret "Epilogue", the ending, and suggest a plausible future for these characters. In addition, four identity statuses of James E. Marcia (from 'being identity diffused' to 'achieving' an ego identity) emphasizing the divergence of conferred personal identity and constructed ego identity, are discussed to differentiate the kinds of identity challenged and developed by under study characters during their lives. Mapping their process of psychosocial development and the struggles the protagonists undergo (including their dysfunctional relationships and their uneven life) leads to the interpretation of the story as a quest to resolve their identity crises. In addition, through Marcia's concept of a foreclosed identity (which is an incomplete ego identity, needed to be re-examined) this study justifies the unique endings, in which dislike some cliché happy-ending plots, Del and Rose run away to begin a new future with no great promise of success.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera.

## **PERKEMBANGAN PSIKOSOSIAL DAN IDENTITI EGO WATAK UTAMA**

### **HASIL KARYA MUNRO**

Oleh

**Mehdi Hassanian Esfahani**

**Oktober 2010**

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Del dan Rose merupakan dua watak fiksi Alice Munro yang sering diperdebatkan apabila mereka mengalami turutan kejadian (berpsikologi ketara) yang membentuk novel-novel tersebut. Sejak penerbitan *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) dan *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1978), novel-novel tersebut telah dikaji dari pelbagai aspek, dan dianggap sebagai mewakili perubahan sosial, gelombang feminis, perikatan kelas dan susun lapis sosial, warisan budaya dan isu-isu lain yang sejajar dengannya. Dalam disertasi ini, saya berusaha untuk menggambarkan proses penemuan identiti ego watak-watak utama tersebut dan mencari jawapan bagi penamatan berkias cerita-certa terpilih. Oleh itu, saya meneliti perkembangan

psikologi dan pembentukan identiti ego watak-watak tersebut dengan mengkaji tahap kelima pembangunan keperibadian dalam teori Erikson iaitu identiti ego vs kekeliruan identiti, berserta dengan ciri-ciri separa peringkat-peringkat lain yang sepatutnya berlaku secara menyeluruh sepanjang hayat. Proses perkembangan identiti protagonis dilakarkan bagi mentafsir “Epilog”, iaitu penamatan novel, dengan mencadangkan masa depan yang munasabah bagi watak-watak tersebut. Tambahan pula, empat taraf identiti yang diketengahkan oleh James E. Marcia (dari ‘penyebaran identiti’ kepada ‘pencapaian’ identiti ego) yang memberikan penekanan terhadap perbezaan identiti keperibadian kurniaan dengan identiti ego binaan, menjadi bahan perbincangan bagi membezakan jenis-jenis identiti yang dipersoalkan dan dibentuk oleh watak-watak kajian sepanjang hidup mereka. Lakaran proses pembentukan psikososial dan perjuangan-perjuangan yang dihadapi oleh watak-watak utama tersebut (termasuklah kegagalan perhubungan dan kehidupan yang tidak teratur) memberikan tafsiran bahawa cerita terpilih merupakan sebuah pengembaraan untuk menyelesaikan krisis identiti mereka. Selain itu, melalui konsep cadangan Marcia berkenaan identiti yang tertutup (iaitu identiti ego yang tidak lengkap dan perlu dikaji semula), kajian ini menjustifikasikan penamatan novel-novel terpilih yang unik dan berlainan daripada plot – plot pengakhiran bahagia yang umum, di mana Del dan Rose melarikan diri untuk memulakan kehidupan baru tanpa harapan yang cerah.

## **DEDICATION**

To Najme

May we never forget these days, including all semester breaks!

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 15 October 2010 to conduct the final examination of Mehdi Hassaniansfahani on his thesis entitled “Psychosocial Development and Ego Identity of Protagonists in Selected Works of Munro” in accordance with The Universities and University College Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

---

**Mehdi Hassanian Esfahani**

Date: 15 October 2010

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The struggle to establish an ego identity is one of the fundamental stages in one's personality development. Freud was the first psychoanalyst who categorized and proposed different phases for an individual's psychological development. Then, Erik H. Erikson and other Neo-Freudian psychologists suggested new and/or different domains for psychological development. Erik Erikson (1902 - 1994), learning psychoanalysis from and experiencing psychoanalytic therapy with Anna Freud, expanded Freud's idea to a lifespan development. Although his theory is ironically called from womb to tomb and covers one's whole life, adolescent issues were among his favorite research subjects, and also the most recurrent theme in his work. According to him,

... in psychological terms, identity formation [of adolescents] employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is, luckily, and necessarily, for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, "identity-consciousness."

Furthermore, the process described is always changing and developing: at its best it is a process of increasing differentiation and it becomes ever more inclusive as the individual grows aware of a widening circle of others significant to him, from the maternal person to "mankind". The process "begins" somewhere in the first true "meeting" of mother and baby as two persons who can touch and recognize each other, and it does not "end" until a man's power of mutual affirmation wanes. (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 22-3)



According to Erikson there are precisely eight prominent turning points or stages in one's psychological development. An individual who overcomes the crisis of each stage learns a lesson, also called a 'virtue'.

The first stage, which is 'trust vs. mistrust', happens during infancy when a child experiences a warm, protective, stable and attentive environment from caretakers (e.g. the mother's always available breast) or the lack of supportive environment due to the parents' neglect. This experience makes the child inclined toward either of the dispositions; trust or mistrust, and if the resolution is unhealthy, he/she would suffer from either the mal-adaptation or malignancy of that stage. For a healthy psychosocial development, there should be a balanced perception between the polarities. The person who embraces a state of 100% trust will become a gullible grown-up and suffer from mal-adaptation, while the one who fails to trust, suffering from the malignancy of the first stage, will face further difficulties in his personal and social relationships during adulthood. The latter will develop a sense of fear toward the world and this will influence all following stages of development, unless the crisis is resolved (somewhere in the future). According to Erikson, the balanced point of one's perception should be inclined toward the syntonic pole (the term he used to indicate the 'positive' disposition, which is 'trust' for the first stage). Having acquired a healthy ratio of each disposition, the child will hopefully learn the related basic value (or basic virtue) of the stage, i.e. 'hope' for the first stage, and will be convinced that his basic needs will be provided in this world.

The psychosocial theory of Erikson proposes that psychological development is a





lifetime process including eight stages. Each stage deals with two polarities and happens normally in a certain time or a moratorium (though it is not limited to any age). The consequence of the conflict between two dispositions or polarities, that is to say, the tendency of the outcome to each disposition is the criterion for psychological growth. Unhealthy outcomes or unresolved crises will affect later stages of life and cause problems. Table 1, derived from *Childhood and Society*, indicates the process of psychosocial development and the corresponding basic virtues.

**Table 1: Eight stages of psychosocial development and related basic virtues**

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	Basic Virtue	Age
1	Trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Infancy
2	Autonomy vs. shame and doubt	Willpower	Early childhood
3	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Play age
4	Industry vs. inferiority	Competency	School age
5	Ego identity vs. role confusion	Fidelity	Adolescence
6	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love	Young adult
7	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Adulthood
8	Ego integrity vs. despair	Wisdom	Maturity

Erikson asserts that psychological development is under the influence of society and culture. Depending on the environment, these stages appear in different forms and require specific decisions of behavior. This is why he based his theory of psychosocial development on observing individuals in a social context. He is also

well-known for his emphasis on identity development. He used the word ‘identity crisis’ for the first time to refer to the psychological troubles of adolescence regarding their understanding of their selves and the environment surrounding them. This phase is the most studied subject in his books, and as stated in his ‘epigenetic chart’, Table 4, there are eight minor struggles during adolescence leading to one’s identity formation. I will introduce the epigenetic chart in chapter two, and will use it through the following chapters.

Erikson does not comment much on gender differences; (except regarding ‘key images’, which are equivalents to Jung’s archetypes, grounded in cultural and social beliefs and traditions and are not very pertinent to this research). Therefore it is assumed that his theory is quite applicable to Rose and Del, the heroines of the novels under study.

Based on and to complete Erikson’s model for identity development, James E. Marcia suggests four identity statuses in the process of achieving a complete ego identity. Having based his theory on Eriksonian psychosocial development, he states that Eriksonian view of ‘failing’ or ‘achieving’ an identity is an umbrella categorization; as there are two different kinds of achieving and two different types of failing. He labels them, in *Ego Identity*, from lowest psychosocial development, as ‘identity diffusion’, ‘moratorium’, ‘foreclosure’ and ‘identity achievement’ to distinguish between conferred personal identity and constructed ego identity.

In light of these two theories, identity development of the protagonist of the selected fictions by Alice Munro will be discussed.

*Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (henceforth, *The Beggar Maid*) also published as *Who Do You Think You Are?* are accounts of the protagonists' lives from childhood to late-adolescence and adulthood. They provide a host of examples of the main character's personal behavior and social interactions, and also cover the pattern of their psychological growth, offering enough material for their character study and text analysis.

Alice Munro (b. 1931), a prominent contemporary author of Canada and winner of some governmental and international awards, portrays dysfunctional relationships and life of multi-layered characters. Set in the modern 20<sup>th</sup> century and in Canada, her protagonists, most of the time, share common problematic issues leading to their individual or social malfunctions.

In this perspective, the two texts under discussion are not only a record of the social and individual lives of their protagonists, but also of the development of their personality, and particularly identity development, through adolescence and adulthood. The attempt to study the novels is to find the significance of their beginnings and endings (especially the ending which is in contrast with normal/cliché endings) through mapping the psychological pattern of the heroine's growth. As a result, the (psychological) struggle of two protagonists narrated in each

story will be observed as a quest to establish an ego identity.

In this chapter, I state the problem, announce the objectives which will be accomplished through the thesis, introduce my approach and present the thesis structure within the scope of this study. To assess the significance of the study, cross-references will be provided relating to chapter two which includes a review of Munro's writings.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the fact that the principal characters of *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid* are chosen from ordinary people, with no specific differentiating characteristics, and are set in a typical contemporary milieu of Canada, they go through unique incidents and have remarkable experiences which construct the narrative; particularly the eventual action of Del and Rose, and the unpromising ending of the stories. This study delves into the psychological development of these two protagonists, particularly their ego identity crises, in order to reach an interpretation for their intricate and problematic life.

Through the Eriksonian theory of psychosocial development and Marcia's theory of identity statuses, *Lives of Girls and Women* gives an account of Del's personal and social life. Although she (almost) never leaves her country, she lives in her



interminable imagination and feels free to experience all she desires. She seeks for a new religion, is curious about relationships and questions traditional beliefs of her society. The novel covers her school age and adolescence, until the time she decides to call an end upon her previous life (including her sexual/romantic relationship), face the reality and start a new mature life.

Rose, the central figure of *The Beggar Maid*, deals with the same identification problem. She was born in the poor area of Hanratty, but refuses to accept the fact. As a result she tries to move away from poverty not only by leaving the town, getting married to a man from the upper social class and imitating upper class behaviors, but also by re-reading herself through narrating stories from her past. *The Beggar Maid* is the story of Rose, an outsider, and her stepmother. It starts from Rose's school age; narrates her migration to the upper social class of towners during her adolescence; and ends when she comes back to Hanratty as an adult.

In my study *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid* are assumed to be narratives of longtime struggles of two protagonists in search of an identity; a psychological stage which becomes a psychosocial crisis. Having resolved this crisis, the protagonists have the chance to finish their stories, and perhaps start a new life in the future.

### **Summary of the Conceptual Framework**



In Erikson's point of view "[t]he study of identity ... [is] so strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud's time" (*Childhood and Society* 282). Personality development is a key term in an individual's psychological development and identity formation is one of the most important stages in the Eriksonian perspective, which begins in adolescence, during the fifth stage, called 'ego identity vs. role confusion', and is likely to become a crisis. As each stage has one main obstacle to overcome, identity crisis is linked to eight different struggles (corresponding to eight major stages and their basic values) and is under the influence of one's surroundings, personal, cultural and social factors. One should face all of them, succeed the conflicts and pass the stages to develop an ego identity; otherwise, the stage becomes a crisis and he or she fails to gain a complete identity. If so, (as we will see about Rose) the trouble can continue to exist even within the next few stages, until it is solved and the 'virtue' or psychosocial strength of that particular stage (which is 'fidelity to one's beliefs, ideas and personality' for fifth stage) is gained.

Marcia's contribution to Eriksonian theory is significant in the sense that it interprets the kind of identity individuals achieve. Proposing two kinds of identity achievement and two types of identity failure, Marcia comments on the strength of the basic value and its influence on the individual's psychological development. According to him, there are four statuses for identity development: 'identity diffusion' (also called identity diffusion or identity confusion in Eriksonian terminology) is the state of ignorance, when a kid is not worried about having an identity yet. 'Moratorium', as presented in Table 2, is the stage in which an individual begins his/her quest for identity and undergoes the exploration of alternatives. The result could be either 'identity foreclosure' or 'identity achievement'.



In Marcia's theory of identity status, 'identity foreclosure' is an unwelcome outcome; a shallow identity in which there is a commitment without exploration of alternatives. One may obtain a foreclosed identity due to fanatical support of a person or in most cases; it happens when the individual gives up the quest for a genuine identity and follow the traditions or customs of his/her society.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

Studying Alice Munro was, at first, based on my personal taste. She is among the prominent Canadian authors and one of my favorites: I found her style delightfully fascinating, making me go over her fiction again and again. Besides, the two fictions under study share the same characteristics; they both approach the personality development of their hero in the social context, albeit from different points of view. The question about the ending is true regarding both of them, as well as their story as a quest for identity, and some more similarities which will be discussed in the following. Considering all literary works of Munro, there are a couple of other short stories which share partially the same traits with these selected novels, but unfortunately I found them too short and inadequate in terms of characterization to be discussed in this thesis. Therefore, the only long fictions of Munro will be discussed here.

*Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) is a novel about Del Jordan. It won the Canadian



Booksellers Award. And *The Beggar Maid* (also published as *Who Do You Think You Are?* in Canada) (1978) regarded as a semi-novel, is a collection of interlinked short stories about Rose, the protagonist. This book won the 1978 Governor General's Award for English Fiction and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 1980.

Both books include interlinked stories about the hero in almost the same milieu. Although the first one was published as 'a novel' and the second one was introduced as 'a collection of short stories', they both follow the same tradition of 'short story cycles' proposed by Ingram as "a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others" (13). This study analyzes the fictions from the same perspective, and will call them simply 'novels' to avoid lexical complexity.

In order to find, follow and interpret different traces and issues of identity development, this study will use psychosocial theory as the main framework, practicing Erikson's idea that "[t]he intrinsically psychosocial nature of identity ... means that it can only be studied effectively if viewed both from the perspectives of society and individual personality, each in relation to the other" (Stevens 61-2). The theory is centered on eight stages of psychological development, where crises (may) happen and should be resolved. Identity development begins from the fifth stage, and may continue during adolescence and adulthood. Accordingly, this stage, i.e. 'ego identity vs. role confusion' (or as later called 'identity vs. identity confusion'), is the most important issue during an individual's psychosocial development, and also in



Eriksonian point of view. However to map the psychological progression of the protagonists, other stages which are under the influence of or influence identity crisis will be discussed in addition to a partial development of some aspects of all stages, suggested in the epigenetic chart of Erikson; Table 4. This chart is the gist of Erikson's theory which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Furthermore, from the phenomenological aspect of Eriksonian theory, James Marcia's idea of four identity statuses will be examined as an alternative way of psychological measurement to study the process of identity achievement of the characters. The essential elements of his theory (which are demonstrated in Table 2) are introduced in the methodology section.

It is worth mentioning that in this thesis, due to the primary texts under study and their protagonists, I limit myself to Erikson's principles regarding the crises of youths and his theory of ego identity achievement. From Neo-Eriksonian point of view, I also limit myself to James Marcia and his theory of identity statuses.

### **Objectives of the Study**

As an interdisciplinary research, this scholarly work could be regarded as an academic case study of Del and Rose from an Eriksonian perspective. It mainly focuses on two fictions narrated by Alice Munro, to reach an interpretation for the