



Between the Dream and the Reality: Middle Aged Woman Cravings and Contentment in “Labor Day Dinner”

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The beauty of the middle years is that we are at a place in the journey where we can appreciate engagement in any work or play as an expression of our productivity and creativity.

--Linda Edelstein

Abstract

It is said that “Women were created from the rib of man...near to his heart to beloved by him” (*Testament*). Does woman being loved by man throughout her life at any age unconditionally? If not, what are those conditions to be fulfilled by woman – are a few rhetorical questions which the protagonist Roberta asks in “Labor Day Dinner” from the anthology of *The Moons of Jupiter (MOJ)*. How insecure a middle aged woman feels in a relationship can be experienced in this story. Alice Munro, Canadian writer who is also a Nobel laureate subtly depicts the middle aged woman craving for her man. She delicately presents the emotional pain in the process of craving and as a way out of finds contentment realizing the natural process of aging.

Key Words: Middle age, Craving, Contentment, Emotional pain, Unconditional

The emotional thought process of a woman differs than that of a man. Emotions “are predominantly a woman’s afflictions” (*WEB*). A woman defines love and affection to be extended by her man in her own terms from her perception. This definition has nothing to do with the world of man because “the word “love” has not at all the same meaning for both sexes, and this is a source of the grave misunderstandings that separate them” (Beauvoir 773).

“Men are expected to be thinkers and doers” (*WEB*). The state of mind of a man definitely influences the emotions of a woman to an extent at young age but the same behaviour devastates a woman who attains her middle age.

Middle age is the period of age beyond the youth and before the onset of the old age. It is a time when a person re-examines his/her life in retrospection, and evaluates his/her accomplishments. It is a crucial period in which many things get settle down. Some people may get satisfied by the harmonious human relationships they could nourish and develop and some others may get frustrated because of the disappointments and failure. Middle Aged women are in a more precarious state than their male counterparts due to many reasons which are quite obvious.

Alice Munro perceptively portrays the middle-aged women in many of her stories. She authentically sketches their lives and emotional experiences.

Middle-aged love - hate relationships

Munro focuses a middle-aged woman, Roberta's humiliation in this short story. Her man disregards and even humiliates her only because she attains middle age. So she has to struggle to hide the features of middle age to get attention of her man but every time she fails. Throughout the story she expresses and represents herself as a gloomy, restricted, and powerless woman. The story is narrated from the third person omniscient which enabled the reader to get through the view points of the different characters.

Roberta, the protagonist of the story, a middle-aged woman who has two daughters from her first marriage, lives with a man named George. He is a son of Hungarian immigrants a tough and hard-working farm owner. He gets puzzled why Roberta has become glum and tearful, when she seemed so calm and independent when he first met her. He never tries to understand that Roberta seeks his attention which missed early glory in receiving her. The vacuum between George and Roberta is due to George's behaviour as men "deny their feelings (bell hooks 2).

On the contrary, Roberta is eager to find out whether George is interested in her or not. When she finds him indifferent, she thinks that she might have become too old to fascinate him. She laments that "her skin looked like a piece of waxed paper that had been crumpled into a tight ball and then smoothed out" (MOJ 203). She becomes too sensitive to with hold his comments on her body. He even influences her to wear a dress of his taste. He uses to ask her, "Is that what you're wearing?" (206) and then Roberta replies, "Doesn't it look all right?" (206), he curtly remarks, "Your armpits are flabby" (206). Thus he callously reminds her that she has grown old without realizing that he is hurting her. Roberta struggles to satisfy him as she longs for his attention. When he awkwardly makes remarks about her armpits, she helplessly tells him "Are they? I'll put on something with sleeves" (206).

She applies cream frantically to her wrinkles, and her face breaks out in spots, like a teen-ager's. Dieting until her waist was thin enough to please produced a haggard look about her cheeks and throat. Flabby armpits —how can you exercise the armpits? What is to be done? Now the payment is due, and what for? For vanity. (206)

The writer meticulously traces out how the psychological distance between Roberta and George increases day by day. Roberta observes “I wonder if that’s what George is doing to me. He wants to be rid of me, then he doesn’t, then he does, then he can’t admit that, even to himself” (223). When George meets Roberta for the first time “she seemed to him courageous, truthful, without vanity” (225), but after being in love with him, he wonders at the colossal transformation in her behaviour, “How out of this could come such touchiness, tearfulness, weariness, such a threat of collapse he cannot imagine” (225). Roberta’s “colossal transformation” is due to her state of mind feeling that “she is inferior and dependent” (Beauvoir 725) on George emotionally, expecting middle aged love. It is evident that Roberta’s love meant attention and George’s love is understood as taking responsibility of Roberta and her two daughters.

Teenagers’ perspective on love-hate relationship

Roberta’s and George’s are two different views towards affection which are two opposite poles and created emptiness in their relationship. Munro depicts a third view from the point of Roberta’s teenage daughter, Angela. As Carrington rightly points out “Munro shows Roberta, the main character, first from her own third person point of view and then briefly from her lover’s and her older daughter’s” (155).

Angela the teenage daughter of Roberta records her mother’s disturbance in her diary. She thinks that George is a truly selfish man who makes her mother depressed and so exclaims “I have seen her change” (*MOJ* 221). Angela realizes that her mother’s relationship with George is incompatible as it is one sided love and her mother is always dogged by a sense of insecurity. Angela clearly observes her mother’s transformation from a confident woman to a dependent woman and laments,

From a person I deeply respected into a person on the verge of being a nervous wreck. If this is love I want no part of it. He wants to enslave her and us all and she walks a tightrope trying to keep him from getting mad. She doesn’t enjoy anything and if you gave her the choice she would like best to lie down in a dark room with a cloth over her eyes and not see anybody or do anything. This is an intelligent woman who used to believe in freedom. (221)

As Angela and Eva the daughters of Roberta never, help George in the farm-work. George accuses Roberta for being too liberal to her daughters. Thus, “Roberta’s attitude has affected not only her own behaviour but her daughters’ also” (Carrington 157). Angela remarks that if one loses one’s identity by the name of love towards a man, she does not want to have any part of it. She develops a sort of aversion towards love itself. She also develops a sort of aversion on George too. Thus, the emptiness between her mother and George has allowed Angela to give a new definition of love that love means losing one’s identity.

On the other hand, Roberta's younger daughter sometimes, has "silent fights" with George. Though Roberta immersed in her own emotional battling she silently identifies her daughters behaviour towards George and worries that "George would hurt her children, not physically but by some turnabout, some revelation of dislike, that they could never forget" (*MOJ* 226). She struggles to create comfortable environment to build rapport between George and her two daughters. She instructs her daughters, "that he is to be accommodated, his silences respected, his joking responded to" (226).

It is marked that George is not like what Roberta anticipates him to be; instead he is quite amicable with the two girls. On their way to Valerie's house, when Angela and Eva ride at the back of the truck Roberta asks them to get down. But George says that "it would be ignominious for them to have to huddle down on the floor in their finery. He said he would drive slowly and avoid bumps" (204).

Munro perceptively illustrates how the life of a woman becomes an ordeal when she ends her relationship with her first husband and starts living with the other man. She has to sacrifice her desires, change her attitude, in order to procure harmony with the man with whom she gets into a relationship. Roberta expects a kind of tenderness from George that he showers on her daughters, but it does not happen what she expected for,

After speaking in such a friendly way to the girls, and helping them into the truck, he might speak to her when he got into the cab, might even take her hand, brushing away her undis-closed crimes, but it did not happen. Shut up together, driving over the hot gravel roads at an almost funereal pace, they are pinned down by a murderous silence. (205)

Roberta is forced to believe that George has lost interest in her as she is aging. After a long desolation, she disseminates the fact that aging is not her fault, as it is a natural process of life. She further relates, "You don't stop in time, don't know what to do instead; you lay yourself open to humiliation" (206). She indulges in self-pity. She even thinks of leaving George and "live alone, wear sleeves" (206).

Munro portrays George as a typical human being who is not a dork and decimal figure. He takes the initiative to break the silence by referring to "A GIBBOUS MOON – an offering" (235), a place where once Roberta and George spent happy days. But she is not the earlier Roberta as much water has flown under the bridge "she doesn't reject the offering with silence, but she doesn't welcome it, either. She is polite" (235).

The genius of Munro lies in the way she concludes the story with an accident that acts as a catalyst to reflect the true relationship between them. On their way home, in a spur of moment they escape a big accident where they are grazed by death with the "ghost car" (235). It seems as if a sudden lightning appears and disappears at once. At this moment of critical discovery along, Roberta and George do not frighten but "What they feel is not terror or thanksgiving —not yet. What they feel is strangeness. They feel as strange, as flattened

out and borne aloft, as unconnected with previous and future events as the ghost car was, the black fish” (235). Ryan Melsom is right when he comments that,

The haunting gap between indifference toward the uncontrollability of one’s own life and the fear of loved ones’ deaths is not one to be symmetrically bridged, or transcendently figured out, but rather driven along like a finely crafted “edge.” Eva’s final questions — “Are you guys dead? . . . Aren’t we home?” — are ultimately open questions, because for both Roberta and George, depending on your point of view, either answer is correct. (31)

Munro uses the nature as a suitable backdrop to the human beings as the moods and emotions of the human beings are symbolically reflected in the nature. She depicts “the shaggy branches of the pine trees are moving overhead, and under those branches the moonlight comes clear on the hesitant grass of their new lawn” (MOJ 235). “The clear moonlight” represents the relaxed relationship of Roberta and George and “the hesitant grass” refers to the conceited arguments. In the words of Debarshi Prasad Nath, “the image of the moon nearing the time of fullness conveys the idea of both being and becoming” (9). There were many dilemmas about herself and her daughters’ future in the mind of Roberta. She is in mere chaos till she experiences the sudden narrow escape from the accident but all of a sudden like clear skies everything gets resolved with a small jerk. As Carrington rightly asserts “the total power of death silences all her egocentric arguments” (158). Regardless of the entire vacuum which Roberta is getting through vanishes at once with a realization of contentment that they are strong in their relationship. Munro uses terror as technique in order to resolve Roberta’s assumed issues.

Conclusion

It is quite natural that women are dependent on their husbands and the dependency increases as the woman attains middle age. At times, dependency coupled with insecure feeling perplexes exceptionally middle aged women. The notion that men lose interest in women after certain age results in emotional separation in their relationship. Middle aged thought process and state of mind of a woman can be well explored in “Labor Day Dinner”.

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