

Female Bodies as Objects of Sexuality in Patriarchal Culture: An Analysis of Alice Munro's "Lichen"

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi tubuh perempuan sebagai objek dari seksualitas laki-laki dalam kerangka patriarki dalam cerita pendek karya Alice Munro berjudul "Lichen" (1985). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan feminisme, penelitian ini menerapkan teori Ideologi Usia dan Kemunduran Narasi yang diperkenalkan Margaret Gullette. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana penuaan dikonstruksi oleh budaya dan bagaimana kemunduran narasi tentang penuaan dituliskan secara berulang dalam literatur. Melalui dua tokoh perempuan utama yang digambarkan kontras, Munro menunjukkan objektifikasi tubuh perempuan: tubuh istri pertama yang menua dianggap tidak memuaskan oleh suaminya, sementara tubuh muda istri kedua, yang diabadikan dalam sebuah foto telanjang, dianggap sebagai objek kepuasan laki-laki. Dalam ranah domestik, dominasi suami atas istrinya tersebut merefleksikan norma-norma masyarakat Kanada yang juga melatarbelakangi cerita, di mana laki-laki dipandang sebagai pemimpin dan perempuan sebagai pihak yang tunduk. Judul cerita ini yang berarti "lumut," yang merupakan metafora untuk rambut kemaluan perempuan, menyimbolkan nilai sementara yang dilabelkan pada tubuh perempuan untuk memuaskan hasrat laki-laki. Pada akhirnya, Munro mengkritik ideologi budaya yang melanggengkan objektifikasi perempuan. Narasinya menantang konstruksi sosial yang menundukkan perempuan pada ekspektasi seksual laki-laki.

Kata Kunci: Ideologi usia; narasi kemunduran; patriarki; *Lichen*; budaya Kanada

Abstract

This article examines the representation of female bodies as objects of male sexuality within a patriarchal framework in Alice Munro's short story "Lichen" (1985). Using a feminist approach, this study applies Margaret Gullette's theory of Age Ideology and Decline Narratives. The analysis explores how aging is constructed by culture and how the decline narratives of aging are repeatedly told in literature. Through the two contrasting, leading female characters, Munro portrays the objectification of female bodies: the older wife's aging body is deemed unsatisfactory by her husband, while the young body of the second wife, encapsulated in a nude photograph, is reduced to an object for male gratification. Within the domestic sphere, the husband's dominance over his wife reflects Canadian societal norms, which also becomes the setting of the story, where men are seen as leaders and women as submissive. The story's title, "lichen," a metaphor for female pubic hair, symbolizes the fleeting value placed on women's bodies to satisfy male desires. Ultimately, Munro critiques cultural ideologies that perpetuate women's objectification, challenging the social constructs that subordinate women to the sexual expectations of men.

Keywords: Age ideology; decline narrative; patriarchy; *Lichen*; Canadian culture

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is part of the social construction of society (Scarborough & Risman, 2017). As a fundamental aspect shaping social identity, gender formulates the concepts of masculinity, often associated with men, and femininity, frequently linked to women. A patriarchal system arises when power is held by men—considered the superior group—over women—viewed as the inferior

group. This control exerted by men over women can manifest as domination, oppression, or even exploitation (King et al., 2021).

The patriarchal system is perpetuated through various structures, one of which is sexuality (Shefer & Foster, 2001). Within this structure, heterosexual relationships are considered patriarchal because they place men in a higher position than women. For example, in pornographic content, women's bodies are objectified for sexual

gratification when men enjoy these bodies through certain media. Additionally, within this structure, women's bodies tend to be treated as property or objects of sexuality.

The issue of women's bodies being used solely as objects of sexuality in a patriarchal culture is frequently addressed in literature (Van Roosmalen, 2000). Besides representing reality, these writings also serve as social critiques of phenomena occurring in society. Even worse, the texts often depict the decline narrative of female aging, highlighting that the loss of attractiveness, the loss of productivity, and the loss of desirability are a site of punishment within patriarchal beauty standards. One such work addressing this issue is Alice Munro's short story titled "Lichen." This literary work is a short story included in Munro's collection "The Progress of Love," first published in 1985.

"Lichen" was chosen as the material object of study due to its clear and explicit depiction of women's bodies as objects of sexuality. Munro, a Canadian writer, often explores the realities faced by women and girls in her short stories (Bronwen, 1978). With her reputation as the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature recipient, she has been recognized as a "master of the contemporary short story" because, through her works, Munro indirectly critiques the culture present in Canadian society at the time (Alhuzali et al., 2022).

Based on the explanation above, it is evident that there is a narrative about women's bodies being objectified within the patriarchal culture, in this case, in Canadian society, as depicted in Alice Munro's short story "Lichen." The current reality, which shows male dominance over women in all aspects of social life, underscores the urgency of analyzing this discourse in the present study. Therefore, using a feminist perspective, this research discusses how women's bodies are narrated as objects of sexuality within the patriarchal culture of Canadian society, particularly within the framework of female aging.

METHOD

This research focuses on examining the depiction of women's bodies as objects of sexuality within a patriarchal culture regarding the effect of aging in women and the decline narratives that follow. The scope of this study is the patriarchal culture in the private sphere of Canadian society, as the setting of the material object under study is a district in Canada, specifically Lake Huron. Therefore, the data analyzed in this research are sentences containing the decline narrative of aging women's bodies being used as objects of male sexuality.

The source of data for this research comes from the short story "Lichen" by Alice Munro, taken from her collection titled "The Progress of Love" (1986). However, the texts used for the analysis in the current study are taken

from a digital copy published by *The New York Times* in 1985. Using a feminist approach, the data were analyzed by applying the theory of Age Ideology and Decline Narratives introduced by Margaret Gullette.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In her book "Theorizing Patriarchy" (1990), Walby introduces her theory about the patriarchal system that has constructed the social life of society. According to her, patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices that exhibit domination, oppression, and exploitation by men over women. The use of the term "social structure" (1990: 20) in Walby's definition is essential, as it indicates the idea that the dominant position is rooted in the system of everyday life.

In the context of sexuality, Walby (1990) explains that there is a significant difference between those who view sexuality as a biological instinct inherent in all living beings and those who see sexuality as a social construct. According to her, those who believe sexuality is a biological instinct adhere to Freud's theory, while the latter group, who believe sexuality is socially constructed, align with radical feminism.

Within the realm of sexuality, heterosexual relationships reflect the patriarchal system because they position women below men. Walby (1990) then argues that sexual relationships are socially constructed by men based on their desires, not those of women. Furthermore, these relationships represent a primary form of male dominance over women. In general, societal systems, heterosexual relationships are seen as socially constructed relationships that reflect gender relations. Since these relationships involve both men and women, the patriarchal system is clearly evident.

Rich (in Walby, 1990) provides several examples that illustrate male dominance over women in heterosexual relationships. She explains that in the practice of clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris), women's sexuality is seemingly sidelined or even extinguished. Moreover, issues related to marriage and pregnancy among working women are often regulated by the government or their employers. Meanwhile, men exert control over women in various ways, such as through rape, prostitution, pornography, and other practices that position women as mere objects of male sexuality.

The short story "Lichen" explores the exploitation of women's bodies as objects of male sexuality within a patriarchal culture. Set in Lake Huron, a district in Canada, the story revolves around David, who is never satisfied and treats women's bodies as mere adventures. When he feels that a woman's body is no longer beautiful, he divorces the woman and moves on to another woman. After being divorced from his first wife, Stella, for eight years, David

takes his new wife, Catherine, to visit Stella. He visits Stella annually to celebrate his father-in-law's birthday, who is in a nursing home near Stella's residence.

While preparing a meal for her guests, Stella is shocked by David's revelation that he wants to divorce Catherine because he is infatuated with Dina, one of Catherine's students. David shows Stella a naked photograph of Dina and insists that Stella keep it hidden from Catherine. David also uses Dina's voice over the phone to satisfy his sexual desires. Although Catherine notices a change in David's behavior, she does not protest even though she knows he is having an affair. About a week later, Stella finds the naked photo of Dina on her windowsill, but it has faded to the point where the woman's body in the photo is no longer recognizable.

1. Age Ideology in Munro's "Lichen"

The representation of the patriarchal system in Alice Munro's short story "Lichen" (1985) is evident through the depiction of men as controllers of sexuality, using women's bodies as objects of their sexual desire. The story narrates how David, a husband from a Canadian family, treats the bodies of Stella, Catherine, and Dina as objects of his sexual gratification. The patriarchal culture is also clearly seen in their marital relationships, as David unilaterally divorces his first wife, Stella, then marries Catherine, while also having an affair with Dina.

According to Walby (1990), patriarchal practices can be carried out by men over women in two realms: private and public. The private realm is confined within the family, where the patriarchal system shows the dominance of the father or husband in a nuclear family. The public realm encompasses the social environment at large, demonstrating male dominance in restricting women's rights to express their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in public or to take on leadership roles in society.

In the short story "Lichen," the patriarchal system is depicted through the private realm, showing the dominance of the husband over the wife in a domestic relationship. At the beginning of the story, David, as a man, views Stella not as a whole person but only as a physical appearance, an object of sexuality. Moreover, the social attitudes of David show how female aging is experienced and understood. Aging is not merely natural due to the decline of some biological aspects, but more cultural (Gullette, 1997; Gullette, 2004). Aging is also gendered because women's bodies are scrutinized more harshly in dealing with the degenerative functions of the body, as female aging is framed as failure.

Even though David is Stella's ex-husband, he still feels entitled to comment on her body. The following quote illustrates how David considers Stella no longer capable of satisfying his desires. The phrase "there is nothing

underneath these clothes" (Munro, 1985) is a form of hyperbole that illustrates David's perspective that women are valued solely for their bodies.

As David turns the car into the lane, Stella steps out of these bushes, holding a colander full of berries. She is a short, fat, white-haired woman, wearing jeans and a dirty T-shirt. There is nothing underneath these clothes, as far as he can see, to support or restrain any part of her. (Munro, 1985)

In the following quote, it is evident how David judges women based on their age. He considers older women unattractive, even referring to them as "trolls." Trolls are usually referred to as mythical beings depicted in folklore that are typically very ugly. These cave-dwelling beings are also portrayed either as giants or dwarves. The analogy of trolls and David's wife goes beyond a simple metaphor, functioning as an ideological device that exposes patriarchal anxiety toward female aging. Ironically, David makes the negative comments about Stella's body to his younger wife. In this case, David interprets her wife's aging as intentional provocation. He even views the aging body as an intended failure.

"Look what's happened to Stella," says David, fuming. "She's turned into a troll."

Catherine, who has never met Stella before, says decently, "Well. She's older."

"Older than what, Catherine? Older than the house? Older than Lake Huron? Older than the cat?" (Munro, 1985)

The quote below clearly reflects age ideology, concerning the cultural views that appraise female values based on sexual attractiveness, youthfulness, and male approval. David's use of the word "stale" not only refers to a real biological condition, but biological construction that gives meaning to the aging female body as something disgusting and undesirable. It gives the meaning that the body has expired and lost its functions. Therefore, the quote below reveals how age ideology works smoothly but in a harsh way. It reinforces patriarchal power relations in viewing female aging.

"You know, there's a smell women get," says David, standing in the living room doorway. "It's when they know you don't want them anymore. Stale." (Munro, 1985)

The use of the word "stale" also implies that women who can no longer satisfy men's desires are considered worthless. Additionally, David's phrase "you don't want

them anymore” suggests that women can be “used” by men at their convenience. Once men no longer desire them, they can discard them easily. This aligns with the findings of a study conducted at the University of Western Ontario in 1986, the same year this short story was published. According to the study, in Canadian society, husbands are typically designated as leaders and providers of direction, while women are expected to be obedient, non-confrontational, always forgiving, and passive.

David’s objectification is not limited to Stella or Catherine; he also has long-term plans for Dina, who is still young. The following narrative excerpt shows how David has already planned his future sexual relationship and marriage with Dina:

David knows what he’s doing. This is the interesting part of it, he thinks, and has said. He knows that Dina is not really so wild, or so avid, or doomed, as he pretends she is, or as she sometimes pretends she is. In ten years’ time she won’t be wrecked by her crazy life, she won’t be a glamorous whore. [...] He knows that sooner or later, if Dina allows her disguise to crack, as Catherine did, he will have to move on. He will have to do that anyway—move on. (Munro, 1985)

In the excerpt above, it is evident how David imagines what will happen to Dina’s body in the next ten years. He believes that the young girl’s currently beautiful body will eventually end up like those of his first and second wives. Regardless, he enjoys his game of treating women’s bodies as objects of adventure. He has even planned that once Dina’s body no longer holds any appeal, he will move on to another woman who will become his next object of sexuality.

As Walby (1990) explains, in a patriarchal culture, men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. In terms of sexuality, the following quote illustrates how women’s bodies are exploited for men’s pleasure. It is explained that David satisfies his sexual desires through a naked photo of the young woman. He even tells one of his neighbors that satisfying these desires has become his new interest. From the description of the young woman’s body in the photo, it is apparent how women’s bodies are compared. When Stella, the older wife, looks at the young woman’s photo, the parts of the body that catch her attention are her breasts, long legs, and the area between her legs. Naturally, Stella, with her now-unattractive body, feels a tinge of jealousy towards the young woman.

“Don’t be dumb, Stella. Don’t be cute. You can see her. See her legs?”

Stella puts the paring knife down and squints obediently. There is a flattened-out breast far away on

the horizon. And the legs spreading into the foreground. The legs are spread wide—smooth, golden, monumental: fallen columns. Between them is the dark blot she called moss, or lichen. But it’s really more like the dark pelt of some unlucky rodent. (Munro, 1985)

From the excerpt above, the naked photo of the young woman, used to stimulate David’s sexual desires, can be classified as a form of pornographic media. Dworkin (in Walby, 1990) explains that pornographic content is one medium that demonstrates sexual harassment by men against women. In this context, the young woman’s body, exploited through the image, constitutes sexual harassment, illustrating male power over women.

The passages from the short story illustrate how patriarchal culture is constructed by society to reinforce the view that, in terms of sexuality, women’s bodies are always objectified by men. Marriage is depicted merely as a means for men to legally enjoy women’s bodies. When these bodies are aging and can no longer satisfy men’s desires, women are abandoned and deemed boring (Clarke & Bennett, 2012; Choi, 2005).

2. The Decline Narrative of Female Aging in Munro’s “Lichen”

“Lichen” is not the only short story by Munro that addresses themes related to women (Black, 2013). In many of her other works, Munro critiques the patriarchal culture of Canadian society by highlighting the victimization of women due to gender injustice (Hammill, 2003; Henderson, 2003). However, the ideology within a work cannot be readily extracted without a thorough examination. In the following narrative excerpt, Munro explains the analogy of lichen in this short story.

She remembers what she said when she first saw it. She said it was lichen. No, she said it looked like lichen. But she knew what it was at once. It seems to her now that she knew what it was even when David put his hand to his pocket. She felt the old cavity opening up in her. But she held on. She said, “Lichen.” And now, look, her words have come true. The outlines of the breast have disappeared. You would never know that the legs were legs. The black has turned to gray, to the soft, dry color of a plant mysteriously nourished on the rocks. (Munro, 1985)

When considering the title, “lichen,” which means moss, Munro selected it with a specific intent. In this short story, moss is used to symbolize the hair on a woman’s genital area. As seen in the sentence above, Munro describes pubic hair as resembling moss growing on rocks,

with the vagina symbolizing the rocks. Like moss, pubic hair is also considered by Munro to eventually lose its allure. She analogizes it to the color black fading into a lighter shade.

Besides the title, the ending of the story also carries a significant meaning for the overall narrative. According to Udasmoro (2017), the ending of a story tends to embody the author's ideology, serving as the essence of a narrative. This is because, in the conclusion, the author often conveys their message, either explicitly or implicitly, to the reader. In the following closing narrative excerpt, it is described that Stella rediscovered the naked photo of the young woman that David had given her. As the photo lay in the sunlight for days, the body in the image had faded. It is explained that the lines depicting Dina's breasts had faded, and even the shape of Dina's legs no longer appeared like legs.

She said it was lichen. No, she said it looked like lichen. But she knew what it was at once. It seems to her now that she knew what it was even when David put his hand in his pocket. She felt the old cavity opening up in her. But she held on. She said, "Lichen." And now, look, her words have come true. The outline of the breast has disappeared. You would never know that the legs were legs. (Munro, 1985)

Since the short story is written from a third-person perspective, Munro, as the author, plays a role in conveying her views through the perspectives of certain characters. In this final part, through Stella's viewpoint, Munro elaborates on the idea that, ultimately, women will lose their appeal over time. For instance, due to aging, a woman's body undergoes changes that render it no longer attractive or capable of satisfying men's desires. The devaluation of women's bodies in the eyes of men also leads to their search for new "adventures." Through this short story, she critiques the Canadian cultural norms that place men in a superior position relative to women.

CONCLUSION

In Alice Munro's short story "Lichen" (1985), women's bodies are represented as objects of male sexuality within a patriarchal system. By applying Margaret Gullette's theory of Age Ideology and Decline Narratives, this story is analyzed from a feminist perspective through its sexual structure. In the private realm, as the family sphere, the dominance of the husband over the wife is evident in their domestic relationship. The Canadian societal culture, which tends to position husbands as leaders and women as submissive objects, is clearly depicted in this short story.

The representation of women's bodies as objects of sexuality is first illustrated through the character of the

older wife. David views the wife's aging body, which he considers no longer attractive, as incapable of satisfying his sexual desires. Marriage is portrayed merely as a means for men to legally enjoy women's bodies. Additionally, the young's body, immortalized in a naked photograph, represents the objectification of women's bodies, as it is exploited solely for men's benefit.

The age ideology and the decline narrative of female aging conveyed by the author in this short story are reflected in both the choice of title and the concluding section. The word "lichen," meaning moss, is chosen by the author to symbolize pubic hair. In the concluding paragraph, the author explains that, like moss, pubic hair eventually loses its appeal for satisfying male desires. Based on this explanation, it can be concluded that Munro aims to show readers that women have been consistently objectified as mere objects of male sexuality.

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