

Rose's Search for Identity in Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Dr. Soundarya Joseph

Associate Professor, Department of English, Govt. Degree College for Women (A)
Begumpet, Hyderabad

Article Received: 28/04/2026

Article Accepted: 28/05/2026

Published Online: 31/05/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.591

Abstract

Alice Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* presents the life of Rose, a woman who moves through different stages of life while continuously searching for a stable sense of identity. Her journey from a small-town girl to an intellectually independent woman is shaped by class, gender, family relationships and social expectations. The novel explores the difficulties faced by a woman who attempts to move beyond the limitations imposed by her social and cultural environment. Rose's relationships with men further complicate her search for belonging and self-understanding. Her experiences of marriage, separation, loss and social displacement reveal the tensions between individual desire and social expectations. This paper examines Rose's journey as a search for identity and analyses how Munro represents female selfhood through fragmented experiences and changing relationships. It also considers the significance of the small-town setting in shaping Rose's personality and aspirations.

Keywords: Alice Munro, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Rose, identity, female selfhood, gender, class, social expectations

Who Do you think You Are? (1978) is the second novel of Alice Munro, selected for study in this dissertation. This novel won the Governor General's Award for Fiction in 1978 for Munro and was also nominated for the Booker prize in Britain. Structurally, this novel bears some semblance with the *lives*. From Munro's point of view, *Lives of Girls and women* is an "episodic novel" while *Who Do You Think you Are?* is a collection of "Linked stories" (Gerson 2) and the narrative strategies are developed in such a way by Alice Munro in these

two works that, they can be read as novels. Finally, these two long narratives by Alice Munro, can be called a collection of “highly enjoyable autobiographical sketches”, (Munro 184) to the extent that *Lives of Girls and women*, in full and *Who Do You Think You Are?* in part, are depictions of Alice Munro’s own feelings and concerns.

In this fourth volume of fiction, Munro does not let go of the feminist odyssey by holding on to the task of exploring the complexities of historical time, of class, or rural or urban place which shape women and male-female relationships. While the relationship between the two novels under study in this thesis, is much closer, the difference lies in Munro’s shift in the narrative technique from the first person in *Lives of Girls and Women* to the third person in *Who Do you Think You Are?* By doing so, the protagonist Rose is somewhat objectified for the reader and lacks the personal quality of the voice of Del who is the narrator in *Lives of Girls and women*. Such a shift in this piece of fiction calls for less sympathy towards the protagonist as the essence of the novel lies in the readers observation of the cracks and spaces in her psyche. However, the voice of female protest is still active in this novel.

As stated earlier in this chapter, this novel also carries the autobiographical note to the extent that it is the story of Rose which gels with Munro’s own childhood experience as a poor country girl struggling towards the intellectual life, of trying to escape the male-female order and social expectation of small town Ontario and it’s narrow-mindedness. Therefore, Jubilee in *Lives of Girls and Women* and West Hanratty in *Who Do You Think You Are?* are the fictional counterparts of Alice Munro’s birth place, Wingham.

This research paper traces the protagonist Rose’s odyssey in search of her true identity. For this purpose, she picks up the perspective of pride which comes naturally to the somewhat intelligent people like Rose who belong to the social class of small towns. The path chosen by Rose to tread upon, in the course of her long journey, is laden with the complications and complexities of the male-female relationships through the different phases of her life, from childhood to middle age. Through the course of this paper, it is revealed that Rose is a sort of bad luck charm rather than the good luck to the men she holds in her life because, in most of her relationships with men, the outcome was jinxed for the men as seen in the examples of her divorce and the sudden death of Simon. Therefore, Rose suffers from a chronic sense of disjunction and tries in various ways to attain: A sense of connectedness, some more successful than others. Her attempts to forge sexual connections are disastrous, mostly because she expects to derive her essential identity from them. (York 135). It is only

at the end of the novel Rose realizes that the only person she needs in her life is herself and that her real identity of self lies in her connections with her past in West Hanratty.

The novel *Who Do You Think You Are?* is a combination of themes of Munro's earlier collections, presented in a concentrated and more concise way. The social position of Rose is similar to that of Del in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Rose too:

lived in a poor part of town. There was Hanratty and West Hanratty, with the river flowing between them. This was West Hanratty. In Hanratty the social structure ran from doctors and dentists and lawyers down to foundry workers and factory workers and draymen; in West Hanratty it ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves. Rose thought of her own family as straddling the river, belonging nowhere, but that was not true. West Hanratty was where the stone was and they were, on the straggling tail end of the main street. (5)

This description falls in line with what Munro has to say about her own home town, Wingham. She says that her whole family seems to be living "outside the whole social structure in a little ghetto where all the bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers on lived" (Sheldrick Ross 23). Just like Rose who returns to her home town at the end of the novel, so also Munro, on her return to Wingham, realizes how much her birth place influenced [her] and how much it is [...] an important reality in [people's] lives" (Hancock 206). Therefore, Rose identifies herself and her family as living "in the poor part" of West Hanratty, an area located in a devalued position within a geographical stratification of people and class based groups.

It is once again the story of an aspiring artist, here the artist Rose is an actress, while both men and women in this work are viewed as playing roles in the theatre of life. The crux of the problem is that the path to achievement chosen by Rose, either for her success as an actress or for her overtly libidinous desires, is blocked all along despite her intelligence. Thus, Rose is made to realize her limitations as an ordinary human being, which is an answer to the question: "Who Do You Think You Are?" (18) asked by her stepmother Flo as well as her school teacher Miss. Hattie. This was not the first time in her life that Rose had been asked this question and in fact "the question had often struck her like a monotonous gong and she paid no attention to it" (263). Furthermore, the lesson that Miss Hattie was trying to teach

Rose here “was more important to her than any poem, and one she truly believed Rose needed. It seemed that many other people believed she needed it, too” (263). Munro’s own perception of the question “Who do you think you are?” (262) is indicative of the manner through which the educational institution encourages conformist behaviour:

[...] the first time someone says ‘who do you think you are?’ it is the teacher reprimanding a student in class, for trying to shine, to show off. I was brought up to think that that is absolutely the worst thing you could do [...]. So ‘who do you think you are?’ comes the minute you begin to let out a little bit of who you would like to be, as soon as you start sort of constructing somebody that is yourself. (54)

Ambition is encouraged only in children of certain class groups. Others like Rose, are warned not to construct an identity that is not in keeping with their class role, as such an affirmative, independent sense of self, would be perceived as pretentious and risky and success and upward mobility are perceived in both social and familial circles as abnormal transgression of class boundaries. Therefore, Rose realizes that her struggle is cautious and covert as she recognises that her actions would be viewed with contempt and condemnation not only by her family, but by other authoritative figures like her teachers at school.

The underlying feminist question of this work by Munro is not only “Who do you think you are?” but also a mocking address to society, What is it that you expect? Hence, the question of female identity and its struggle to exist, is the major concern of this novel. The heroine Rose discovers that she is a composite of both the men and women who shaped her life. For Rose, life is inevitably a theatre, but gradually she begins to understand the roles chosen are mere tricked out moments in time. The only reality that Rose seems to understand, at the end of the novel is that the individual life lived through the subjective, psychological reality of one and however, crazy or imperfect such a life may be, the person is special in his or her own right. The question of *personality* (emphasis added) underlies this work, intuited by Rose in the last act of caring for her aged stepmother, as not merely adopted disguise but the sum total of the people who have influenced it.

Therefore Munro’s feminist perspective presented through her heroine Rose, can be analysed from the view-point of the men and women who have influenced the development of Rose’s feminist perspective, from her early childhood through middle age and finally her

old age. Rose emerges, then, as Munro's new heroine who, by allowing herself to seriously accommodate Flo, her father and the people of her past, comes to know, to accept—to discover—herself. However, on a different level, *Who Do You Think You Are?* reflects the social injustice and impotence of being female, which explores what constitutes personal identity and concludes as the metaphysical irony of the individual losing to time and reduced to a caricature of a human being.

The aim of this research paper is at tracing the formative forces of Rose's feminist perspective in the light of the men and women who influenced it, from Rose's childhood through her adult life. The narrow-mindedness of the people in West Hanratty and the social injustice meted out to girls and women ever since her childhood days, in the name of conventional patriarchal value system and the victimization of women for sexual abuse, compel Rose to set out with vengeance to question the male order and rebel against the conventional image of women created by man.

The first chapter "Royal Beatings" depicts Rose's childhood experiences and as we progress through the novel, we are made aware of the various influences upon Rose's developing psyche in the light of her relationships with men as well as women. In the beginning of the novel we find little Rose under the influence of her stepmother Flo and her father. Rose lived with her father, stepmother and half-brother Brian in a small house behind their store in West Hanratty in poverty during the Depression years. Rose's mother had died when she was a baby and "no books or clothes or pictures of her mother remained" (2). Rose had known only Flo for a mother. Flo at this time must have been in her early thirties and wore exactly "the same clothes that a woman of fifty, or sixty, or seventy, might wear" (12), while Rose "longed for roller skates and often pictured herself whizzing around in a plaid skirt, agile and fashionable" (6).

Flo and Rose were both a generation apart. The things Rose has said to Flo "are such that if Flo had said them to her mother, She knows her father would have trashed her into the ground" (19). Apart from this, Flo discovers in Rose her "smart aleck behaviour, rudeness and sloppiness and conceit. Her willingness to make work for others, her lack of gratitude. She mentions Brian's innocence, Rose's corruption" (17-18). In this context, Munro herself writes about Rose as being "poor and clever, radical and irreverent" (142). Therefore, it is this radical behaviour and her irreverence for the conventional patriarchal value system which constitute her social conditioning and injustice done to women so Rose rebels against the dominating patriarchal order in the society and it is also the reason for her flight from West Hanratty to the big city in spite of Flo's warnings about the "reckless dangerous life of

cities” (13). In doing so, Flo is trying to expose Rose to all the inequities of their life, an exposure which, ironically, is done in an attempt to protect Rose from degradation. Flo possesses a strong contempt for ambition and self-improvement, and she thus delights in seeing people with humility. Eventually, Rose learns that Flo was “trying to worn and alter her” (49) and therefore decides to leave West Hanratty and go to the city, much against her step-mother’s efforts and concern to withhold and protect her. Rose considers her transition from the rural life to the urban as a sort of symbolic emancipation. In this regard, Munro’s concern is specifically related to the social and psychological transition her characters undergo in adapting to their new milieu, adaptations which are accompanied by a sense of guilt and betrayal. Therefore, Munro expresses her own feelings concerning upward mobility and the guilt involved in crossing social boundaries:

[...] not only do we have this social system but we tend to make great leaps here and there or across it. There are all sorts of in-between classes that think they are classless. I think I am classless. Which, of course, isn’t true [...] if you come from a fairly low, a fairly underprivileged class of very limited expectations and then make a big leap into another class [...] there’s some guilt involved in this. (Hancock, 2006)

Therefore, like their creator, both Del and Rose do not completely escape their psychic sense of class position, and gender bias in the society, and they both experience an intense guilt concerning their departure and altered lifestyle.

On the contrary, Flo completely lived up to her husband’s expectations of being a dutiful wife and mother to his children. For Rose’s father, a woman ought to be:

energetic, practical, clever at making and saving; she ought to be shrewd, good at bargaining and bossing and seeing through people’s pretensions. At the same time she *should be naïve intellectually* [...] (60-61).

Flo is his idea of what a woman ought to be and on the other hand, Rose had:

not inherited the thing he took pride in and counted on – his skill with his hands, his thoroughness and conscientiousness at any work; in fact she was unusually clumsy slapdash, ready to cut corners. The sight of her slopping around with her hands in the dishpan, her thoughts a thousand miles away, her rump already bigger than Flo’s, her hair wild and bushy, the sight of the

large and indolent and self-absorbed fact of her, seemed to fill him with irritation, with melancholy, almost with disgust (61).

This being her father's perception of women, in connection with the terrible beatings she receives from her father, Rose understands the sexual implications of the whole ritual of reprimand which is a part of the primitive patriarchal order. Munro records the ritualized drama of the child-beating of the young Rose to show the patriarchal authority of father over daughter and Munro is quick to point out the sexual implications of this situation through Rose's younger brother Brian who escapes, "runs away, out the woodshed door, to do as he likes. Being a boy, free to help or not, involve himself or not. Not committed to the household struggle" (17).

In the chapter "Royal beatings", Rose remembers her father as "King of the royal beatings" (1) and apart from this, another instance of excessive beating is by three useless young men, Jelly Smith, Bob Temple and Hat Nettetton who prepared to give old man Tyde a horse whipping, in the interests of public morality" (10).

It is not, however, so much the sexual implications of the beating which is Munro's or her character's central interest, but the large theatre of the gothic, embracing both sexes, which is the peculiar feature of life in West Hanratty itself: a primitive and grotesque arena in which Rose's part is only marginal in the greater play of things. In a place like West Hanratty, people made their own savage and exciting entertainment as even told by Hat Nettetton at a later stage in an interview on television. During her father's beatings, Rose realizes that: He is like a bad actor who turns a part grotesque. As if he must savour and insist on just what is shameful and terrible about this. That is not to say he is pretending, that he is acting, and does not mean it. He is acting and he means it. (22).

In return, Rose plays her part with "the same grossness, the same exaggeration, that her father displays, playing his." She plays his victim with "self indulgence that arouses, and may be hopes to arouse, his final, sickened contempt" (23). At this early stage in her life, Rose takes the "royal beatings" as acting lessons which initiate her into the spirit of drama and theatricality which ultimately lead to her successful career as an actress. Furthermore, the lesson that Rose learns from royal beatings is that men can get away with their sins without having to pay the price. While Rose receives beating for not participating in domestic work, her brother Brian escapes and is not even questioned about it. The three horsewhippers who beat old man Tyde to death escape punishment and later rise up as respectable male

members of the community. This sort of discrimination adds up to Rose's frustration and strengthens her cause to become more rigid and stubborn in her behaviour and makes her rebel against the existing social norms of small towns like Hanratty.

As for Rose, the beatings she has from her father are royal beatings – nothing more and nothing less, except that the reward she received for endurance amounted to nothing while Hat Nettleton the horsewhipper who committed a sin was interviewed on television for being the “Oldest resident. Oldest horsewhipper. Living link with our Past” (30). All this discrimination results in the development of Rose's character from her childhood onwards, of which Munro gives a clear picture when she says: Rose's nature was growing like a prickly pineapple, but slowly, and secretly, hard pride and skepticism overlapping to make something surprising even to herself. Before she was old enough to go to school (6-7).

Apart from the royal beating, a further influence of Rose's father upon his daughter can be seen in the chapter “Half a Grapefruit.” The chapter is based on the truth that Rose is a liar and a hypocrite. Rose struggles with these traits in her character and her father's knowledge of her person, her “gaudy ambitions” and her shame at his disapproval. She understands that part of her disgrace in his eyes is that “she was female but mistakenly so, would not turn out to be the right kind of woman” (61). The reality of the problem is that Rose combined and carried on what he must have thought of as the worst qualities in himself. The inheritance that Rose receives from her father amounts to: All the things he had beaten down, successfully submerged, in himself had surfaced again in her, and she was showing no will to combat them. She mooned and daydreamed, she was vain and eager to show off; her whole life was in her head. (61) Therefore, Rose's inherent nature has been passed on from her father—an influence which is paternal and not maternal.

Rose spent her childhood in the poverty-stricken West Hanratty during the Depression years. The old men who gathered to gossip on a bench outside Flo's store, suffered from what was called “the foundry disease”: They had worked all their lives at the foundry in town, and now they sat still, with their wasted yellow faces, coughing, chuckling, drifting into aimless obscenity on the subject of women walking by, or any young girls on a bicycle (4).

Apart from their jokes about women the town was also full of practical jokes played by men on women. What seems to be a joke for the boys or men of the town turned out to be an instance of social injustice to women and mockery of their inferior status. In the first instance, Becky Tyde was a victim of her father's bad temper. He was a family tyrant who beat all his children and his wife as well and especially Becky because of her deformity caused by Polio. Becky was "a big-headed loud-voiced dwarf, with a mascot's sexless swagger, a red velvet tam, a twisted neck that forced her to hold her head on one side, always looking up and sideways" (7). What is noteworthy in Becky's case was that she was never allowed to go to school after she was affected by polio and later on it was learnt that the reason that Becky "was kept out of sight was now supposed to be her pregnancy, and the father of the child was supposed to be her own father. Then people said it had been born, and disposed of" (9). This vulnerability of women and the moral degeneration in West Hanratty is what Rose tried to oppose and escape from. This in turn made her a rebel.

In the chapter "Privilege", she gives another instance of incest committed by Shortie McGill upon his sister Franny McGill. Franny McGill is a pathetic character who is a victim of tragedies ever since she was a baby. She was "smashed against the wall, by her father, drunk, when she was a baby" (34). It was probably the idea of some big boy at school who dared Shortie and challenged him to assault his sister sexually and one thing was certain: The idea could not be Franny's. She had to be caught for this, or trapped. You couldn't say caught, really, because she wouldn't run, wouldn't put that much faith in escaping. But she showed unwillingness, had to be dragged, then pushed down where they wanted her (34).

The way Shortie and other boys at school used her would continue till "she would be pregnant, be taken away, come back and get pregnant again, be taken away, come back, get pregnant, be taken away again" (35). On the other hand, Franny as victim was "simply stunned, bewildered by continual assault" (35). Finally it was decided that Franny should get sterilized by getting the Lion's Club pay for it but the tragedy is that Franny died suddenly of pneumonia, solving the problem. The act performed on Franny had "no general significance, no bearing on what could happen to anyone else. It was only further abuse" (36). When Rose told people of these things in later years, "they had considerable effect. She had to swear they were true, she was not exaggerating" (36). Thus, Rose was exposed to the vulnerability of woman and male violence early in life.

Further, Rose's experiences at school helped her to learn "to manage in the big fights that tore up the school two or three times a year. Her inclination was to be neutral, and that

was a bad mistake; it could bring both sides down on (her)” (36). She tried not to attract in any way “the attention of the big boys, who seemed like wild dogs, to her, just as quick and strong, capricious, jubilant in attack” (37). Another lesson that Rose learns in school is that from “places like West Hanratty girls move up more easily than boys” (38). In this regard, the noteworthy feature is Rose’s friendship with the three big girls in the Entrance Class. Donna, Cora and Bernice. Of these three girls, “it was Cora Rose loved” (40). She was an illegitimate child whose physical attraction is alluring to Rose. Being in love with the older, sensual, imperial school girl, Cora, Rose experiences a version of “Sexual love, not sure exactly what it needed to concentrate on” (44). However, Rose realizes that there was: some sharpness lacking, some urgency missing, there was the incidental difference in the sex of the person chosen; otherwise it was the same thing; the same thing that has overtaken Rose since (46).

It is quite probable that Rose has these set of feelings for the wrong sex because, she was able to learn from earlier experiences that no boy or man in West Hanratty was decent and appealing enough to claim such love from her. She has witnessed the worst experiences involving men and therefore turned in the opposite direction to vent her feelings. Thus, she develops latent lesbian love for Cora. Rose’s loyalty to Cora is so strong that she steals candy from her own store to give it to Cora and win her over. It is this love for Cora which was irritable to Flo: It was love she sickened at. It was the enslavement, the self abasement, the self deception. That struck her. She saw the danger all right; she read the flaw. Headlong hopefulness, readiness, need (48).

The point that Flo makes in the remark is that “the enslavement, self abasement, the self deception” are as much a part of lesbian relationships as they are in heterosexual relationships. In return for Rose’s gesture of the small secret gift given to Cora, the latter returns the candy in the family store only as an act to enhance her own image and it is this very act that makes Rose aware of the pitfalls of love, the awful dependence of the lover and power of the loved. In this early scene from Rose’s life, Munro depicts the vulnerability of first love and also makes the chapter “Privilege”, an authentic feminist depiction of young girls, romantic love for one another, which is the learning experience for Rose. However, in a later chapter in the novel, Rose plays the role of the beloved with vengeance, in her relationship with Patrick whom she marries and divorces. Thus, the chapter “Privilege” is also an episode of the unjust sociological and psychological reality a growing up woman is exposed to, which preoccupies Munro in *Who Do You Think You Are?*

After middle schooling in West Hanratty, Rose writes the Entrance and goes across the bridge to attend high school in Hanratty proper. Here, Rose is far too conscious of her inferior social status of belonging to the wrong side of the Hanratty river. Initially, Rose faces a constant struggle to overcome her inferior social position and “was wanting badly to align herself with towners, against her place of origin (51). Here again, three boys from her school play a dirty joke on a girl called Ruby Carruthers. Horse Nicholson, Del Fairbridge and Runt Chesterton made an agreement to get Ruby to satisfy their sexual desires. Each of the boys without the knowledge of the other took his chance at Ruby Carruthers under the Verandah of the place she lived in and finally Ruby “got into a bad mood, sat on the Verandah steps with the dirt from underneath all over her clothes and in her hair,” and finally exclaimed “I think I got a right to know who I’m doing it with” (56). As a result of such fowl play the three boys had their laugh and it was Ruby who was condemned as the carrier of V.D. for being sexually loose in character. All these practical jokes upon women amounted to unbearable misery and frustration in Rose. Such acts were outrageous for her – no doubt then that in the future course of the novel, Rose reverses the role so that she gains the right to play jokes with the men in her life at their expense and also at the expense of her own sexuality. What remains to be seen is whether Rose is successful in her endeavour.

Furthermore, with regard to the incident involving the three boys and Ruby Carruthers, in later years when Rose attends the Centennial Year Reunion, she learns that Del Fairbridge had become an undertaker, Runt Chesterton had become an accountant and Horse Nicholson had made a lot of money as a contractor while Ruby Carruthers died of breast cancer. Although Rose was “Young in years” she was “old in bitter experience of life” (66). Such was the irony of being a woman while men got away with their mischief, women paid with their lives in the conservative patriarchal value system of small towns like West Hanratty and even for that matter, in Jubilee in Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*, as seen in the deaths of Miss Farris and Caroline.

Having so far traced the formative forces upon Rose’s developing psyche, Rose’s real odyssey in search of the self begins in the chapter titled “Wild Swans.” It is for the first time that Rose departs from West Hanratty to Toronto all alone. The wild swans mentioned in the chapter and Rose’s migration from town to city, is symbolic of her sense of freedom and emancipation, however temporary it may be. This chapter records an episode of Rose’s first sexual encounter with a stranger on train who claims himself to be a United Church Minister. In this context, Flo’s warnings to Rose about the white slavers and false ministers in disguise fell on deaf years because Rose hardly believes “anything Flo said on the subject

of Sex” (47) Given Rose’s fondness for theatrics, the fact or fantasy of this experience is vague, but the perverse sexual titillation of the female is demonstrated in Rose’s sexual pleasure and surrender to the groping fingers of the man besides her, on the train. In addition to this, her victimization is in doubt for, in Rose’s perspective, the man is as useful to her as an active object of pleasure as all those other instruments used for sexual gratification, like: “a stranger’s hand, or root-vegetables or humble kitchen tools that people tell jokes about; the world is tumbling with innocent – seeming objects ready to declare themselves, slippery and obliging” (84). If Franny was the unwilling tool of pleasure for the boys in the schoolyard and Ruby Carruthers obliged the three boys under the porch, here, the roles are reversed for it is a man in the disguise of a minister who is obliging Rose. Thus, the first sexual encounter with the supposed to be minister is the genesis of Rose’s sexual misadventures that she carries out in the rest of the novel.

References:

- Gerson, Carole. "Who Do You Think You Are?: A Review/Interview with Alice Munro." *Room of One's Own*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1979, pp. 2–3.
- Hancock, Geoff. *Canadian Writers at Work: Interviews with Geoff Hancock*. Oxford UP, 1987.
- Howells, Coral Ann. *Alice Munro*. Manchester UP, 1998.
- Munro, Alice. "The Newcomers Script." *The Alice Munro Papers: First Accession*, University of Calgary Press, 1986, p. 184. Television Series.
- Munro, Alice. *Who Do You Think You Are?* Penguin, 1981.
- Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. *Alice Munro: A Double Life*. ECW Press, 1992.
- York, Lorraine. "Gulfs and Connections': The Fiction of Alice Munro." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 35, 1987, pp. 135–46.