CHAPTER FOUR

ACOLYTES AS ARTISTS

You fit into me
like a hook into an eye;
a fish hook
an open eye.

Margaret Atwood

The art of both Porter and Munro touches upon those aspects of women's lives that have been generally erased, ignored, demeaned, or mystified. There is a remarkable degree of audacity and candour about the way these authors recount tales of women entrapped under patriarchal conventions. The gynocentric works of Porter and Munro, in short, can be described as milestones in the history of global feminist literary tradition.

Both these authors show a rare insight in analysing and explicating the working of the female psyche. Despite the variations they work out in terms of themes and techniques and the differences in their disparate cultural and geographical situations, their writings bear out in ample measure shared concerns in respect of the treatment of female experience in fictional art. Above all, their essentially feminist assumptions can be called as extraordinarily complementary.
Weisstein cites Goethe's authority to show how the entire process of creation depends on the artist's inner perceptive skill to connect: "The world liberally supplies the subject matter (stoff) while the meaning (Gehalt) arises spontaneously out of the fullness of his soul" (1973, 125).

There is no doubt that both Porter and Munro deliberately find the 'Gestalt' in their works only in terms of an essentially feministic perspective. Discussing the political role played by feminist movements, Professor Olive Banks makes the following statement:

Feminism is [...] an active desire to change women's position in society. Linked to this is the view that feminism is par excellence a social movement for change in the position of women. Its privileged form is taken to be the political movement, the self-organization of a women's politics. So unquestioningly are feminism and a women's movement assumed to be co-terminous that histories of feminism are often written as histories of the women's movement, and times of apparent quiescence of the movement are taken as symptomatic of quiescence of feminism. (23)
Rosalind Delmar's remarks, on the other hand, justify the dire need of women's movements:

[... ] at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change in the social, economic and political order. (8)

Joyce Gillo, yet another feminist, goes on to classify those women's movements, in terms of the objectives such movements set before themselves:

There are three types of feminists - Reformist, Radical and Socialist. While Reformist feminists seek equality through freedom, Radical feminists perceive society as rooted in inequality based on patriarchy and the only way out, according to them, is by transforming the existing society. Socialist feminists, rooted more firmly in Marxist theory, wish to develop a strategy in order to jointly attack male domination and sociological injustices, thereby restructuring male-female relationships. (44)
In fact, the rise of Feminism as a movement in the 1910's signalled a new phase in the debate and agitation about women's rights and freedom that had been simmering for centuries earlier. Of course, people in the nineteenth century did not talk of feminism, but the advancement of woman or the cause of woman, woman's rights and woman's suffrage. They spoke of the woman movements, to denote the many ways women moved out of their homes to initiate measures of charitable benevolence, temperance and social welfare and to instigate struggles for civic rights, social freedom, higher education, remunerative occupations, and the ballot. Especially, the nineteenth-century women's consistent usage of the singular 'woman' itself symbolized the unity of the female sex. It proposed further that all women have one cause; one movement.

But to the twentieth-century audience the singular generic 'woman' sounds awkward, and the 'woman' movement, ungrammatical. At the precise point of time in the 1910's - which marked the height of the suffrage campaign - when the woman movement began to sound archaic, the word 'feminism' entered into popular use.

Nancy F.Cott points out the confusion caused by the varieties in people's attitudes, promoted by the usage of the word 'feminism' in the contemporary age.
Cott traces the etymology of the terms in the following manner, taking into account the sociological and historical developments at work:

Tying the Latin root Femina (woman) to the modern concept of an 'ism', and yet also connected with socialism in early English language usages, the term initially inspired confusion in the United States: Was this an ideology that men could join or a separate and antagonistic politics for women only, perhaps even threatening men with feminization? (15)

And despite the early muddle with regard to the definition of ideology, the very rapid and popular gravitation towards the term 'Feminism' about the year 1913, suggests that it was not just a convenient phrase, but a phrase marking a totally - hitherto unknown - new phase in the thinking about women’s emancipation. Nevertheless, in as much as the proponents felt Feminism was a natural corollary to the women involved in the woman movement which had existed earlier, and that the suffrage movement was born in the midst of this moment, it was greatly indebted to both.

As for the rise of Feminism in America, it had its roots primarily in the Black Civil Rights Movement.
Women's participation in these political and cultural movements, provided them with hitherto unknown non-traditional experiences, equipped them with radical ideas about themselves and instilled in them an awareness of the discrepancy between articulated egalitarian ideals and the evil perpetrated by unquestioned sexist practices.

As a movement of consciousness, Feminism aimed at liberating women from traditional ideals of submission and femininity that had been inculcated in them for centuries. Particularly, the Suffrage Movement provided a ready vehicle for propagating such a vision with imagination and ingenuity. Feminism relied on the existence and the networks of suffrage agitations to evolve itself into a movement. With nothing specific to sign, and nothing to jointly declare, it was even not a movement whose membership could be considered impressive, yet it quickly spread from New York to other cities in the United States, wherever intellectuals and activists grasped the term to connote their uncharted assertions and yearnings, hitherto remaining undefined in terms of palpable political goals such as the Suffrage Movement.

To start with, Feminists began insisting on the removal of all social, political, economic and other
discriminations which are based upon sex, and the award of all rights and duties imposed under the patriarchal dispensation.

Elaine Showalter defines the tradition of women's literature in terms of three periods - "'feminine' (1840-1880) when women wrote to equal men; 'feminist' (1880-1926) when they dramatized injustices against women and 'female period' (1920 ....), when "women no longer try to imitate women" (1985, 45). From a historical point of view, both Porter and Munro, fall in the third category.

Porter's feminist focus in art, lies in her creation of extremely self-reliant and exceptionally brave and still endearing and admirable women characters, living in the midst of an essentially arid, male-dominated world.

For instance, her "Maria Concepcion" illustrates the power wielded by a single, rustic woman, incidentally throwing light on the fact that even a physically demanding, powerful man like Juan, can be so effectively reduced to supine passivity and silence, when the woman decides to defy him.

Maria Concepcion, big with a child, discovers to her chagrin that her husband Juan, whom she had married
in the church in the high glare of publicity, is carrying on a secret illicit affair with Maria Rosa (the scarlet woman of the village) and feels righteously outraged. All on a sudden, she gets also deserted by her husband who flees with Maria Rosa, in order to participate in a militant revolution and her baby is born dead. Subsequently, Juan and Maria Rosa return to their native village and Maria Concepcion wreaks vengeance, ruthlessly killing Maria Rosa with her butcher knife, and adopts Maria Rosa’s infant to raise as her own, all with the benign blessings of the witnessing community.

The opening of the story is brilliant and breathtakingly dramatic. Maria Concepcion, the wife of Juan the head digger at the excavations carried out at a buried city, goes hurrying down a path bristling with thorny and spiky magueys and cactus, carrying the lunch for her young husband as well as his employer. The heat, the dust, the lonely and forbidding landscape are all superbly evoked by Porter’s metaphorical, descriptive language:

She walked with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the
right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented [. . .] (CS 3)

Ironically enough, Maria Concepcion's sense of self-contentment, is utterly incongruent with her real-life situation. She does not suspect her husband in the least when she hears Maria Rosa and a man laughing together in a nearby corn field:

So Maria Rosa has a man! Maria Concepcion stopped short, smiling shifted her burden slightly, and bent forward shading her eyes to see more clearly through the spaces of the hedge. (CS 5)

Nevertheless, when she does catch a glimpse of the man at last, it turns out to be her own man after all, flourishing his hat before his new paramour as he goes through the ritual of seduction:

Juan Villegas ran after her, also laughing strangely, his teeth set, both rows gleaming behind the small soft black beard growing sparsely on his lips, his chin, leaving his brown cheeks girl smooth. When he seized her he clenched so hard her chemise gave way and ripped from her shoulder. (CS 5)
In this short story, Katherine Anne Porter portrays the plight of women at the hands of unreliable male partners, in the post-marital phase. In Porter’s America, the woman is merely a valued article of the man’s fancy.

As reality dawns on Maria, she stands numbed, not knowing what to do:

Maria Concepcion did not stir nor breathe for some seconds. Her forehead was cold, and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her pine. An unaccountable pain was in her knees, as if they were broken. (CS 5)

Maria does not interfere, but, as if mechanically driven by duty, she goes on to the buried city, her ears strumming, as if the bees were in her head and her body burning as if the cactus spines had penetrated under her skin:

Juan and Maria Rosa! she burned all over now, as if a layer of tiny fig-cactus bristles, as cruel as spun glass, had crawled under her skin. She wished to sit down quietly and wait for her death, but not until she had cut the throats of her man and that girl who were laughing and kissing under the cornstalks. (CS 6)
The protagonist’s method of dealing with the evil in the world is amply foreshadowed in the story through the deliberate, impassive manner in which she treats the chickens, "who twisted their stupefied eyes and peered into her face inquiringly" (CS 7).

Maria Concepcion takes the fowl by the head, and silently, and swiftly slices its throat with her knife. "Good God, woman, yo do have nerve", said Givens, watching her. "I can’t do that. It gives me the creeps" (CS 7).

Further, Maria Concepcion’s stern refusal to be brow-beaten by her drunken husband marks her out as one of Porter’s typically feminist protagonists.

Disaster follows disaster and Juan’s running off to the war in the company of Maria Rosa, is closely followed by the death of her new-born baby. Maria Concepcion is fashioned according to M.M.Liberman, as the very type of unevolved femaleness, as much of the earth on it, carrying within her the future of race and sex, is couched in brutal terms, not the brutality of original conflict. She gives only passing attention equally to the cruel thorns of nature piercing her flesh, to the incipient life within her,
and to mindless nature, stupid but alive around her neck. (68)

Soon she plans to murder Maria Rosa, a woman who lives in the world's way. While Juan can indulge himself in reckless romantic illusions as a revolutionary and a renegade husband, Maria Concepcion collects herself and charts out an adventurous course of her own.

Juan and Maria Rosa return home a year later, with Juan dressed up in the multicoloured finery stripped off from the dead soldiers in the war front, strutting about like a cock. Arrested for desertion, he is subsequently saved from execution by Givens. Soon after, Maria Rosa gives birth to his son, and Juan, confident that he can handle both the desirable women in his life, stands for drinks for everyone at the "Death and Resurrection" pulque shop. Afterwards, he has a look at his new born son and still later, in a drunken stupor, attempts to beat Maria Concepcion, asserting again his rights as the master of the household "by way of re-establishing himself in his legal household" (CS 13).

Grave's observation on the degradation in the tenor of Maria Concepcion's domestic life is touching, perhaps bordering on the sentimental: "Cares eat away her heart, the day presses on her with new toils; her
smiles become languid and few: her husband wonders at the gloominess of his home" (29-33).

Generally, men in Porter's fiction figure mostly as empty, vain and arrogant, dull, impudent and audacious. Here, Juan seems to derive a wicked and sadistic pleasure, harassing his life-partner, being intensely egotistic and utterly callous to others' feelings, resorting to a liberal use of corporal punishment and abuse in order to mortify and cow down the women at home.

Maria Concepcion, however, is not like any straw woman of Denver who may merely stage a wild protest against whoever Porter wants to abuse, saying, "why don't they stand on their feet?". She would rather set her world right at any cost, on her own solo effort. In the words of Porter,

Maria Concepcion, knowing all the events of that unhappy day, was not in a yielding mood, and refused to be beaten! She did not scream nor implore; she stood her ground and resisted; she even struck at him. Juan, amazed, hardly knowing what he did, stepped back and gazed at her inquiringly through a leisurely whirling film which seemed to have lodged behind his eyes. (CS 13)
Maria Concepcion re-establishes order in her world, only by throwing to winds all the restraints imposed on her, deliberately seizing upon the role of almost a super human being or avenging fury, dispensing her own kind of justice.

She binds the legs of her dumb chickens as if to go to market; but, instead of proceeding to the market, she runs falteringly through the fields and the disorderly establishments of Indians and their crops. Her confused inner, psychological state is effectively objectified through her stumbling and running through the ploughed, messed-up fields. In her hurry, she grows almost frantically unaware of her destination until, at last, she regains possession of herself:

She sat down quietly under a sheltering thorny bush and gave herself over to her long devouring sorrow. The thing which had for so long squeezed her whole body into a tight dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with shocking violence. She jerked with the involuntary recoil [...] as if the wounds of her whole life were shedding their salt ichor. (CS 13)

According to George Hendrick the ichor image is particularly significant here, because "ichor stands for the ethereal fluid of the gods" (18).
According to Joan Givner "The theme was Porter’s favorite one - a strong, queenly woman who is wronged and who, by her own exertion and resourcefulness, avenges herself and sets her world in order" (1987, 162). In fact, Maria Concepcion assaults Maria Rosa, her rival, with a butcher’s knife and kills her.

Interestingly enough, the acts of murder and flight of Maria Concepcion are not dwelt upon in Porter’s narrative. The scene suddenly shifts to Juan, who is stirred up from his drunken stupor by noises he cannot comprehend. Maria Concepcion looms in the doorway, knife in hand, then crawls toward him, ironically, as she had previously crawled toward the altar in a shrine; and she quickly puts away her earlier decision to kill him. Juan who fears for his own safety at first, slowly relaxes and feels an immense pride in her and is filled with a desire to protect her at any cost on hearing her story. In a scene set, at first, in the dark, then in a flickering candle light, with a heightened sense of nightly treachery, Juan prepares the poor creature, "the mad woman" as he calls her, for the police. When he threatens her in a loving manner, she responds only in fury:

"For me everything is settled now", she answered, in a tone so tender, so grave, so
heavy with suffering, that Juan felt his vitals contract. He wished to repent openly, not as a man, but as a very small child. He could not fathom her, nor himself, nor the mysterious fortunes of life grown so instantly confused where all had seemed so gay and simple. He felt too that she had become invaluable, a woman without equal among a million women, and he could not tell why. He drew an enormous sigh that rattled in his chest.

"Yes, yes, it is all settled. I shall not go away again. We must stay here together" (CS 15-16).

What Elizabeth Ammon says of Edith Wharton's women is perhaps equally applicable to most of the women protagonists in Porter's fiction: "'New Woman' of the turn of the century, yearning to break out of her constricting role and attempting a courageous rebellion" (28-29).

That night the couple eat from the same bowl, as they had done before Juan's flight, symbolizing their reunion; and when the police come, Juan begins his first ever public defense of his wife.
As Janis P. Stout and other critics rightly point out, Porter did not wish to get labelled as a feminist:

Katherine Anne Porter disliked the word feminist, calling it a 'slimy' or 'dirty' word and insisting that above all that term could not be applied to her. She preferred to 'read her life' in individualistic terms rather than identify herself with a 'general women's movement' (169).

On one occasion, when Jane Flanders pointed out that there was a strong feminist flavour about Porter's "Old Mortality", she wrote a protest in the margin saying

I am a woman, that is a female, which is to say, a human female with strong feminine character. I am not anything ending in -ist. Say female, feminine, even womanly - I am not a member of a political or social party, but very feminine. (qtd. in Stout 169)

On reading Porter's "Old Mortality" Cleanth Brooks, in an essay, entitled "The Southern Temper", observes that Porter has "in her own nature a wide streak of the feminist" (qtd. in Stout 187). On her part, Porter took a strong objection to Cleanth Brook's
comment and she rendered in her own hand in the margin of the copy which Brooks had sent to her earlier:

[... ] "in admiration and with deep affection", "I resent this tag, and I am again astonished at Cleanth's strange lack of understanding of any irony or indeed sensibility or real intelligence in women" (qtd. in Stout 187).

Tillie Olsen has also observed that she "found in [Porter] what we now call by the name of feminism" and that the streak of feminism in Porter has been most clearly evident, perhaps, in "Old Mortality" (qtd. in Stout 187).

In "Old Mortality" one finds perhaps Porter's fullest and most imaginative portrayal of a feminist theme. Miranda is presented in it as a singular figure of authority, asserting her right to live the way she likes.

The story follows Miranda's psychological development and growing spirit of independence as she approaches her adulthood. She achieves this largely through analyzing the important women of her family, past and present, and observing the unreasonable or
contradictory responses that these women tend to elicit from the rest of their own family members.

The story entitled "Old Mortality" opens with Miranda and her sister standing before a painting of their Aunt Amy. "Quite often they wondered why every older person who looked at the picture has said, "How lovely", and why everyone who had known her thought her so beautiful and charming" (CS 173).

Amy’s physical beauty supposedly corresponds in every detail to her own family’s standard of female perfection:

First, a beauty must be tall; whatever color the eyes, the hair must be dark, the darker the better; the skin must be pale and smooth; lightness and swiftness of movement were important points. A beauty must be a good dancer, superb on horse back, with a serene manner, an amiable gaiety tempered with dignity at all hours. Beautiful teeth and hands, of course, and over and above all this, some mysterious crown of achievement that attracted and held the heart. (CS 176)

In particular, the most striking trait in all the stories the sisters hear about Aunt Amy, is her freedom
of spirit, and her extraordinary beauty which endows her with limitless freedom.

Amy develops the art of flirting with men to a high degree of sophistication, having mastered the skill of not only displaying her flamboyant beauty, but flaunting her sexuality while forbidding intimacy. She is thoroughly aware of the fact that her physical features strongly attract men and seems to relish the power her glamour has, at last, begun to wield over men's hearts.

As regards the social attitude towards female sexuality in the early decades of the twentieth century, one of the feminist critics has observed:

Sex outside of marriage in the 1910's was outlawry [sic] befitting Feminist aims to explode the understructure of conventional society. It involved in short, a remedial, transvaluation of values, erasing the boundaries between the "pure" and the "fallen" woman. It was a personal form of direct action as risky, as thrilling, as full of a paradoxical sense of play and deadly responsibility as throwing a bomb. (Cott 1987, 42)
Feminists attached a greater, liberal meaning and value to passionate heterosexual relationships than did any of the advocates of women's rights before them. Seeing sexual desire as healthy and joyful, they assumed that free women could meet men more easily as equals on the terrain of sexual desire, just as on the terrain of political representation or professional expertise.

Amy tells her uncle that she doesn't want to marry anybody: "What I really need is a good dancing partner to guide me through life" (CS 183), which is perhaps a wish for a strong man, who will make less fearsome her plunge into sexual experience, an aspiration that is highlighted by the Mardi Gras party.

When Amy starts from home for the masquerade dressed in a fashionable dress, her father observes sternly:

"No daughter of mine is going to show herself in such a rig-out. Its bawdy, "he thundered "Bawdy!"

Amy had taken off her mask to smile at him. "Why, Papa", she said very sweetly "What's wrong with it?

"There's all the difference in the world", said her father, "all the difference, young lady, and you know it."
"I see nothing wrong with it", said Amy's mother, firmly, "and you shouldn't use such language before innocent young girls" (CS 185).

Having passed for a celebrated belle herself in her own time, Amy's mother recognizes at once, that sensual appeal is one of the trump cards her daughter can play in the game of courtship.

"Part II: 1904" is set in New Orleans where Miranda and her older sister Maria are "immured" in a Catholic school, run by nuns, "dull good natured women, who managed to make the whole dormitory seem dull! All days and all things in the convent of the Child Jesus were dull, in fact" (CS 194).

Interestingly enough, the next thing that is heard of Miranda in the story is that she runs away from school at the age of seventeen, in order to get married.

In 'Section Three', Miranda is eighteen, married, and disillusioned. She comes back to attend uncle Gabriel's funeral, and meets cousin Eva on the train. Now, Eva is a foil to Amy, almost an object of ridicule at the hands of her family members:

Oh, Eva the trouble with her is she has no chin [ . . . ] . Eva's gone out for votes for
women, God help her. The nice thing about an ugly daughter is, she’s not apt to make me a grandmother [. . .]. (CS 208)

A vociferous supporter of Women’s Suffrage Movement in America, Eva cannot suffer her family glorifying Amy, while it chooses to treat herself with contempt.

By the 1910’s, Women’s Suffrage provided a platform which diverse people and organizations could comfortably, if temporarily, share. Now, as a movement of consciousness, Feminism intended to do away with the ideas of submission and femininity, that had been inculcated in women down the ages. The Suffrage Movement offered itself as a ready vehicle for propagating in practical terms, the feminist’s vision with imagination and ingenuity. In other words, a vote for Women’s Suffrage actually meant, on the one hand, a vote for equality of all human individuals, and on the other, ironically, a vote that highlighted the difference between the sexes.

It was the goal of ‘equal rights’ that enabled some women activists to make their own special contribution to the movement which sought to give women the same capacity as men so they could express their
differences. It was a just end in itself, but was also an expedient means to other ends. As Nancy F. Scott points out with characteristic perception: "'Sameness' and 'difference' arguments, 'equal rights' and 'special contribution' arguments, 'justice' and 'expediency' arguments existed side by side" (qtd. in Cott 1986, 54).

In spite of belonging to the Feminist movement, Eva suffers from a personal sense of loss and loneliness. Ultimately, she seeks solace only in the narrow independence, offered by her humdrum career: "I thank God everyday of my life that I have a small income. Its a Rock of Ages. What would become to me if I hadn't a cent of my own?" (CS 213).

Miranda meets Eva, by chance, on the train for the first time, since her elopement at the age of eighteen. To her shock, she realizes that there is no welcome for her in the family, especially from her father, and, feeling desolate, resolves to renounce her entire family, once and for all. Suddenly, a fierce rage for independence seizes her and she determines to liberate herself not only from her family, but from her husband and his whole family as well:

She did not want any more ties with this house, she was going to leave it, and was not
going to her husband's family either. She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. (CS 220)

In other words, Porter seems to be obsessed with the feminist theme of independence for women, to which she gives an eloquent expression in most of her works. It is quite possible that Porter's pronounced defiant posture towards a predominantly patriarchial society was occasioned by her own early experiences as a young woman.

Thus, though the story, "Old Mortality" consists of three sections, the work can be viewed as a presentation of three different interpretations of Feminism. Part I deals with Amy, who, by virtue of her sheer feminine charms and sexuality becomes the cynosure of all eyes, wielding a tremendous sense of power, especially, over the adults in society, though incurring the disapproval of the girls of her peer group. Part II presents Eva, utterly lacking in feminine embellishments, finding a recourse to prove her value, through her sheer political commitment to Women's Suffrage, and ending up with loneliness, depression and misery in the sphere of vital relationships. She however, manages to assert her independence as an
individual, through her quest for economic independence, a goal she achieves through a mundane job. Part III takes Miranda's quest for Truth to its ultimate, logical conclusion, namely, liberation from every bond, every obligation and every socially accepted norm or value. She comes very much into her own, in the end, overcoming all the familial and social apprehensions facing her.

Porter's Miranda also feels that her family members have hidden some vital truth from her and forcefully foisted on her their own vision of life.

At last, Miranda tells herself that she can at least "know the truth about what happens to me":

Ah! but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. (CS 221)

The above passage is highly metaphysical in its context. To the extent that she talks of her innermost feelings and her values, it is ontological. As regards
her final resolution to face life in realistic terms, in the absence of any final pronouncement on her part, it is existential. Only a woman can understand just how limited a young woman's orbit of thought and life can be. It is on this note of mingled triumph and failure that "Old Mortality" comes to a close.

The title "Old Mortality", despite its apparent clumsiness, seems to underline an existential condition of living, especially with regard to the Woman's existence. Perhaps, according to Porter, the Woman can register her sensibility in the most striking manner on earth, only in terms of her quest for beauty, materialistic pursuits, political power and search for liberty.

In the 1920's many nations in the United States laid down protection codes to ensure dispensation of equal rights through a constitutional amendment. In the words of Cott,

Even so-called 'protective' legislation if sex-based, the National Woman's Party (NWP) claimed, kept women away from equal opportunity: the laws, for instance, regulating hours, wages and conditions of work for women and minors, while none regulated men's, kept women classed with children as the
Opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA] (among women who considered themselves feminists) were mainly concerned with keeping sex-based protective labour and welfare legislation in force. (1986, 55)

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" restates one of the salient themes in Porter, through Miranda who is subjected to the pressures of a heartless patriarchal bureaucracy. In fact, Miranda, who is designed as a proto-type of the author herself, strikes the readers as eminently admirable and appealing, despite the extremely pathetic conditions in which she has to struggle.

The time is 1918, near the end of World War I. The story dwells on the sadistic torture inflicted on a woman in a work spot, at the hands of her chauvinistic male colleagues and superiors, her conflict in love, and finally, the solitude to which she self-consciously resigns herself.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" begins with Miranda’s riding away on horse back, crossing a bridge that separates her, once and for all, from the shelter of her communal home, ultimately securing for herself, a job and independence. By crossing the bridge she,
symbolically, ensures her own individual, professional career as a freelance reporter for a newspaper in a huge city, choosing to live all by herself in a small rented lodge. No longer moving within a traditional orbit, usually assigned to a daughter or wife, she stakes her claim to a vocational identity as a writer, and the unbridled passion of a determined lover. Against the menacing postures of the vast and imposing social structures surrounding her and the war and the plague dogging her times, she is firmly resolved to pursue her course as a career woman.

Miranda finds her newfound independence under threat from a variety of forces, which increasingly tend to apply strong pressure on her to conform to society's standards. This can be illustrated by the episode of the agents canvassing for liberty bonds, calling on her in her own office:

"Look here," he asked her, "do you know there's a war, or don't you?"

Did he expect an answer to that?

'Be quiet, Miranda told herself, this was bound to happen. Sooner or later it happens. Keep your head. The man wagged his finger at her, "Do you?" he persisted, as if he were prompting an obstinate child.
[...] "Yeah", said the younger man in a nasty way, "the war." Miranda, startled by the tone, met his eye; his stare was really stony, really viciously cold, the kind of thing you might expect to meet behind a pistol on a deserted corner. This expression gave a temporary meaning to a set of features otherwise nondescript, the face of those men who have no business of their own. "We're having a war, and some people are buying Liberty Bonds and others just - don't seem to get around to it," he said "That's what we mean" (CS 272).

Disregarding her plea of inability to buy the bonds, one of the agents who initially suggests that she can pay for the bonds in weekly instalments like most other people do, warns Miranda that she has much to lose by not signing up for the program.

Amidst all the badgering of these presumptuous agents, Miranda thinks about what she would like to tell them:

Miranda, desperately silent, had thought, "Suppose I were not a coward, but said what I really thought? Suppose I said to hell with
this filthy war? Suppose I asked the little thug, what’s the matter with you, why aren’t you rotting in Belleau Wood? I wish you were [. . .]" (CS 273).

Later, in another instance, Miranda meets with a lot of unkindness and abuse, when she chooses to express her own views. An indignant entertainer, on reading her critical review of his acting, verbally assaults her at the newspaper office:

He didn’t move his feet, but stood planted with a kind of inert resistance, and asked Miranda: "Are you the so-called dramatic critic on this hick newspaper?"

"I’m afraid I am," said Miranda.

"Well," said the little man, "I’m just asking for one minute of your valuable time." His underlip shot out, he began with shaking hands to fish about in his waistcoat pocket. "I just hate to let you get away with it, that’s all." He rifled through a collection of shabby newspaper clippings. Just give these the once-over, will you?

[. . .] "No, I don’t," said Miranda, as bluntly as she could, "and I can’t stop to talk about it."
Miranda handed the little man his clippings, they were mostly ten years old, and tried to edge past him. He stepped before her again and said without much conviction, "If you was a man I'd knock your block off" (CS 288-89).

Miranda feels, for once, the burden of her profession far too excessive for words:

There's too much of everything in this world just now. I'd like to sit down here on the curb, chuck, and die, and never " again see - I wish I could lose my memory and forget my own name [. . .] I wish" (CS 289).

Being a woman, Miranda finds it extremely difficult to succeed in her career as a journalist. Adding to it all, she and Towney have to endure the ignominy of a demotion to do the "Woman's beat" because of their refusal to print a torrid scandal, at the instance of the pathetic pleas of a young girl's mother. Refusing to expose other human beings, all of whom are women, to an anonymous, sensation-seeking mass readership in order to promote her own chances, Miranda finds it hard to manage her inner emotional conflicts against the backdrop of the impersonal, professional establishment.
The series of conflicts Miranda faces, culminates in a prolonged illness, so severe, that the world nearly collapses all around her as she delves deep into the inner reaches of her self. Ironically, it is in her delirium that she experiences the supreme bliss of oblivion, and complete independence, utterly free from the compulsions and impositions of the world around. Shorn now, totally, of the every day pressures and tensions that had hitherto wracked her spirit, Miranda finds herself reduced to a mere fragile particle, bent on self-preservation:

Silenced she sank easily through deeps under deeps of darkness until she lay like a stone at the farthest bottom of life, knowing herself to be blind, deaf, speechless, no longer aware of the members of her own body, entirely withdrawn from all human concerns, yet alive with a peculiar lucidity and coherence; all notions of the mind, the reasonable inquiries of doubt, all ties of blood and the desires of the heart, dissolved and fell away from her, and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that relied upon nothing beyond itself for its strength; not
susceptible to any appeal or inducement, being itself composed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live. (CS 310-11)

As for Miranda’s moments of experiencing complete independence, they tend to border now, on the spiritual, totally devoid of temporal fluctuations and pressures:

Miranda, alone too, questioning nothing, desiring nothing, in the quietude of her ecstasy, stayed where she was, eye fixed on the overwhelming deep sky where it was always morning. (CS 311)

At the end, Miranda banishes all thought of Adam, her lover, now dead from her consciousness because she also realizes the danger and futility of entertaining such a deep feeling for someone lying buried, and steels herself to face life with an armour of cold indifference.

It is also highly ironic that Miranda’s resolution of the conflicts in her personal, inner life coincides with the Armistice. War and the sacrifice of the living are now complete; the plague is over:

No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy
guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything. (CS 317)

Porter presents the sufferings of women in the complex world of business and war, run by heartless chauvinists. At every turn of life, women are pressed into the service of the war machine, which makes callous demands of their labor as well as sexuality. Nevertheless, whenever the women manage to come through such a nightmarish world, Porter’s art expresses the hope that they will all be like Miranda, liberated, independent, new women, capable of establishing and ensuring a world of peace and stability, despite all odds.

Being essentially a short story writer, Munro shows a rare insight in revealing in all its intricate details, the working of the female psyche. In her Lives of Girls and Women, Friend of my Youth and The Moons of Jupiter, she probes the subtle aspects of the female experience.

Lives of Girls and Women presents the development of an optimistic child who ripens into a lonely adolescent at first, and goes on to depict the maturing
years of the protagonist who learns to accept her isolation and recognize her existential identity.

When a copy of *Lives of Girls and Women* was sent to Showalter by McGraw Hill Book Co., the latter responded, expressing her unique sense of thrill on reading Munro:

Thank you for sending me Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*; I had seen some enthusiastic reviews. Reading such a strong novel of the female consciousness makes me feel rather like an astronomer who had predicted the existence of a comet, and then watching it appear - it's very exciting to read beyond androgyny. (qtd. in Showalter 1986, 15)

"Feminist fantasy" according to LeGuin and Jackson:

[... ] explores the problems of being for women, in a society which denies them not only visibility but also subjectivity. It scrutinizes the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs: the subjugation of women is not a 'natural' characteristic, but an ideological process. Feminist fantasy explores the
contradictions elided by the (patriarchal) real; for example, that women are both inside patriarchal ideology, as the essential Woman, and outside it, as the (repressed and denied) experimental subjects. In the encounter women as active subjects become perceptible, and the feminine construct of patriarchy, Woman, is revealed as a negotiation inimical to women as subjects" (qtd. in Francis 76-77).

Erotic fantasy is a significant component in Munro's fiction. She is much interested in the forms that women's fantasies take and in relating such fantasies to women's concept of themselves. Yet it is also true that Munro's protagonists have intelligence and ambition which lead them to weave flamboyant plots out of their own mundane lives that are so unsettling when viewed against the traditional images of femaleness and femininity.

Del Jordan, the heroine of *Lives of Girls and Women*, has the habit of listening to the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcast on the radio in her native, small South-Western Ontario town of Jubilee, and it is through her peculiar addiction to such programmes that she ends up creating her own unique world of fanciful ideals. She goes on endlessly making
and unmaking such imaginary worlds, with herself as their centre, of course, a transformed self which exists beyond gender. For instance, Carmen shares the glory of both the hero and the patriot in splendid isolation:

Yet I loved most of all Carmen, at the end. Et laissez moi passer! I hissed it between my teeth; I was shaken, imagining the other surrender, more tempting, more gorgeous even than the surrender to see - the hero's, the patriot's, Carmen's surrender to the final importance of gesture, image, self-created self. (Lives 1)

This passage clearly shows Munro's exposition of the flamboyant quest for the self, as is the case with adolescent girls in their elevated moments of ecstasy. It clearly captures in language the vivid moments of desire, anticipated sexual surrender and utter transformation of the existing mundane self in a glorified moment of feminine fantasy.

The above passage is also illustrative of Addie Jordan's feminist discourse which postulates a kind of feminine subjectivity in which the 'maternal, romantic-sexual and intellectual' capacities of women are represented as being "in competition for a fixed psychic space" (qtd. in Francis 159).
In the title story, "Lives of Girls and Women", we find Del’s feminist mother gravely cautioning her daughter, about the whimsical fancies of men, and the utterly worthless and transient rewards that await the gullible women:

"There is a change coming I think in the lives of Girls and Women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really, than domestic animals. He shall hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel force, a little closer than his dog, a little dearer than his horse. Tennyson wrote that. It’s true. Was true. You will want to have children, though." [. . .]

"But I hope you will-use your brains. Use your brains. Don’t be distracted. Once you make that mistake, of being - distracted, over a man, your life will never be your own. You will get the burden, a woman always does" (Lives 173).

For Del’s mother romantic desire initiates little more than an ensnaring dependency on men. She warns her daughter saying that in marriage a woman invariably gets
landed with the burden of bearing children. The most vital thing for a woman is to use her brains in striving towards achieving her self-respect.

Del rejects almost every cause her mother espouses, and questions each of her values on account of her intense involvement with Garnet French, Jubilee's 'outsider', someone her mother would least approve, under the present circumstances. In short, the chapter entitled "Baptizing" concentrates on Del's infatuation with a man, which she indulges herself in, more in an illusory protest against her mother's eccentric ways, than out of any personal preference for an exceptional individual.

[... ] I did not want to be like my mother, with her virginal brusqueness [...]. I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon. I felt trapped, stranded; it seemed there had to be a choice where there couldn't be a choice.

(Lives 178)

As Ferguson and Folbre observe, Del's adventurous exercise of her sexual freedom, is at least, partly indicative, of her quest for her own sexual identity as well as her endeavour to define the true nature of sexuality from a feminine - and hedonistic - point of view:
Sexual freedom is important because women need to define themselves as sexual subjects, not sexual objects. We have to find ways to combat the commoditization of sexuality which oppresses women (e.g. the fight against pornography which associates sexual pleasure with violence against women) without falling into a puritanism which discredits the right to sexual pleasure as an end in itself. (331)

Del gets quickly engulfed in her passion for Garnet, mainly loving his body and preferring his separation from the world of Jubilee, utterly abandoning her scholarly ambitions. She goes all out for only the excitement of a world, hitherto totally unknown, which provides, meanwhile, an escape from her mother and chooses to dwell on the hitherto inaccessible, yet mystifying, and powerful dark world of the instinct:

I loved the dark side, the strange side, of him, which I did not know, not the regenerate Baptist; or rather, I saw the Baptist, of which he was proud, as a mask he was playing with that he could easily discard. I tried to get him to tell me [. . .] about being in jail. I would pay attention to the life of his instincts, never to his ideas. (Lives 217)
On the other hand, in wanting more than his darkness to be recognized, Garnet French intrudes on Del's pristine world with a hidden agenda, laying ultimately, his claim for permanence. He wants to get married, to have children, to have Del join that part of his life which she has meticulously chosen to avoid.

Sensing Del's inveterate resistance to establishing any kind of constraining relationship in marriage, Garnet proposes to baptize her himself in the river of passion of which both of them partake. However, the playfulness passes quickly and both become suddenly aware of the serious clamour for preservation of their own respective, well-guarded individuality, deep within themselves:

He pushed me down again [. . .] I held my breath and fought him. I fought strongly and naturally [. . .] . But when he let me come up just long enough to hear him say, "Now say you'll do it," I saw his face [. . .] and I felt amazement, [. . .] that anybody could have made such a mistake, to think he had real power over me. I was too amazed to be angry, I forgot to be frightened, it seemed to me impossible that he should not understand that all the powers I granted him were in play that
he himself was - in play, that I meant to keep him sewed up in his golden lover's skin forever, even if five minutes before I had talked about marrying him. (Lives 234)

As Del walks back home, away from Garnet French, she increasingly grows aware of her isolation and her power, the loss and the gain, side by side. In short, life has become possible now without her mother's values or Garnet French:

Cities existed, telephone operators were wanted; the future could be furnished without love or scholarships. Now at least without fantasies or self-deception; cut off from the mistakes and confusion of the past, grave and simple, carrying a small suitcase, getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers, I supposed I would get started on my real life. (Lives 238-39)

Del goes out in splendid, self-discovered isolation, to meet the future with a rare touching sense of determination.

"Bardon Bus" is a woman's story about romantic fantasy and sexual desire, as she tries to find fulfilment of the self through love. It is a thirteen-
part fragmented work of memory, paradoxically, painful and consoling, and evokes, for the unnamed narrator, a whole succession of scenes of a time she has spent with her ex-lover, "X".

The story opens with an unusual flash-forward fantasy of a life-long fantasy, based on an unsatisfied need for love. The fantasy presents the reader with the narrator’s secret imagination; yet it is set very much in the past:

I think of being an old maid in another generation. There were plenty of old maids in my family.

There I come back again and again to the center of my fantasy, to the moment when you give yourself up, give yourself over, to the assault which is guaranteed to finish off everything you’ve been before. A stubborn virgin’s belief, this belief in perfect mastery; any broken-down wife could tell you there is no such thing. (Moons 110-11)

In the process of narrating the development of the plot, the protagonist gets released from her painful illusions and superstitions about her ex-lover.
The thematic undercurrent in the story is a woman's self-surrender before male power. The narrator, for instance, talks of her friend Kay, who has often been in love:

She takes up a man and his story wholeheartedly. She learns his language, figuratively or literally. [. . .]

In none of this is she so exceptional. She does what women do. Perhaps she does it more often, more openly, just a bit more ill-advisedly, and more fervently. Her powers of recovery, her faith, are never exhausted.

[. . .] When love is fresh and on the rise she grows mystical, tentative; in the time of love's decline, and past the worst of it, she is brisk and entertaining, straightforward, analytical.

"It's nothing but the desire to see yourself reflected," she says. "Love always comes back to self-love. The idiocy. You don't want them, you want what you get from them. Obsession and self-delusion" (Moons 116-17).

According to a feminist Schulamith Firestone, "the phenomenon of 'love', means little more than the pivot
of women's oppression" (126). Firestone argues further that the concept of love is a kind of ideological cover-up or disguise, of the relation of power that prevails in heterosexual relationships.

Kay in "Bardon Bus" personifies the comic mode of women's romantic fantasy and is alive to the fact that she herself has played a similar game with her own lover.

In this story, the middle-aged narrator has a short-lived affair with X, a man who has liaisons with several women, apparently without any inhibitions. Dennis the friend of X, tells the narrator, her own view of the options open to men:

"I have a new theory about the life of women. I used to feel it was so unfair the way things happened to them."

"What things?"

"The way they have to live, compared to men. Specifically with aging. Look at you. Think of the way your life would be, if you were a man. The choices you would have. I mean sexual choices. You would start all over. Men do. It's in all the novels and it's in life too. Men fall in love with
younger women. Men want younger women. Men can get younger women. The new marriage, new babies, new families."

[...:] "A woman [sic] your age can't compete", says Dennis urgently. "You can't compete with younger women. I used to think that was so rottenly unfair" (Moons 121).

Several feminists are of the view that in any patriarchal culture, men assert their dominance, through the relative ease with which they make their sexual choices. According to Jessica Benjamin, a feminist:

Male rationality and individuality are culturally hegemonic [...]. Further, [...], male rationality and violence are linked within institutions that appear to be sexless and genderless, but which exhibit the same tendencies to control and objectify the other out of existence that we find in the erotic form of domination. That is, the male posture in our culture is embodied in exceedingly powerful and dangerous forms of destructiveness and objectification. (63)

Further, radical feminism is profoundly concerned with the issue of female sexuality, condemning the
manner in which women have been made the objectified victims of male lust, both within and outside the institution of marriage.

Dennis’s conversation with the narrator in "Bardon Bus" highlights the universal capacity of women who can readily come to terms with their own peculiar predicament in a profound sense, unlike hedonistic men who run after superficial pleasures:

"It’s probably biologically correct for men to go after younger women. There is no use whining about it."

"So the men have this way of renewing themselves, they get this refill of vitality, while the women are, you might say, removed from life. I used to think that was terrible. But now my thinking has undergone a complete reversal. Do you know what I think now? I think women are lucky ones! Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because they are forced to live in the world of loss and death! Oh, I know, there’s face-lifting, but how does that really help? The uterus dries up. The vagina dries up."

[. . .] "I’ve seen so many parts of the world and so many strange things and so
much suffering. It's my conclusion now that you won't get any happiness by playing tricks on life. It's only by natural renunciation and by accepting deprivation, that we prepare for death and therefore that we get any happiness. May be my ideas seem strange to you?"

I can't think of anything to say.

(Moons 121-22)

The unnamed narrator of the story musters different scenes from a romanticized past in a kind of reconstruction that provides merely a fleeting comfort, ultimately leading to despair:

[. . .] I filled the space quickly with memories of his voice, looks, warmth, our scenes together.

I was swimming in memories, at first. Those detailed, repetitive scenes were what buoyed me up [. . .]. The images, the language, of pornography and romance are alike: monotonous and mechanically seductive, quickly leading to despair. That was what my mind dealt in; that is what it still can deal in. (Moons 123)
Such an unrealistic concoction made out of pure illusions cannot by any means provide adequate or lasting comfort to X.

Millett and others have their own view of the historical development of feminist thought:

[. . .] the rule of men was not enforced by means of visible coercion, but rather through the continued reproduction of an ideology that reinforced a separation between male and female roles, and then created or sustained a set of beliefs about the roles thus created. Among these beliefs were the most cherished of ideas, namely, that of physical and emotional love between men and women. Sexual love was revealed as a crucial part of the ideological structure that perpetuated male power over women, with their full participation. "For women to fall in love with men was no metaphor, but an action that each time it was repeated reinforced their subordination, both individually and collectively" (qtd. in Eisenstein 14).

The plight of the woman in love is suggested by the fact that willy-nilly she assumes the role of a
victim or a slave, as exemplified by the vulnerable, dependent narrator, when she falls for X:

I am at a low point, certainly. I cannot deal with all that assails me unless I get help and there is only one person I want help from and that is X. I can’t continue to move my body along the streets unless I exist in his mind and in his eyes. People have this problem frequently, and we know it is their own fault and they have to change their way of thinking, that’s all. It is not an honorable problem. Love is not serious though it may be fatal. (Moons 126)

It is only towards the close of the story that we find the narrator waking up to face the reality around and succeeding in coming to terms with life, simply by just letting go of love:

There is a limit to the amount of misery and disarray you will put up with, for love, just as there is a limit to the amount of mess you can stand around a house. You can’t know the limit beforehand, but you will know when you’ve reached it. I believe this.

When you start really letting go this is what it’s like. A lick of pain, furtive,
darting up where you don't expect it. Then a lightness. The lightness is something to think about. It isn't just relief. There's a queer kind of pleasure in it, not a self-wounding or malicious pleasure, nothing personal at all. It's an uncalled - for pleasure in seeing how the design wouldn't fit and the structure wouldn't stand, a pleasure in taking into account, all over again, everything that is contradictory and persistent and unaccommodating about life. I think so. I think there's something in us wanting to be reassured about all that, right alongside - and it was with - whatever there is that wants permanent vistas and lot of fine talk. (Moons 127-28)

For achieving a state of 'recovery', the replacement of the narrator's initial "misplacement" is required. The narrator realizes that it connotes a kind of renaming or redefinition of her relationship, in the light of a fortuitous epiphanic understanding of her experience:

I think about my white dream and how it seemed misplaced. It strikes me that misplacement is the clue, in love, the heart of the problem,
but like somebody drunk or high I can't quite get a grasp on what I see.

What I need is a rest. A deliberate sort of rest, with new definitions of luck. (Moons 128)

In "Hard-Luck Stories", there are three short accounts given by Julie and the 'narrator'. These stories highlight the uniformity of the plight of women in the male-dominated arena of life. The narrators of these stories pour out the bitter experiences they have encountered, from the different men in their lives.

The narrator gives an account touching Douglas to Julie, with Douglas remaining totally oblivious of his role in the story as the man that she "was in love with", who metes out to her a very bad treatment. Douglas has already duped the narrator earlier, prior to taking on Julie. The narrator, herself a divorcee, had been exploited by the self-obsessed Douglas to counter Caroline, whom he is in love with still, though he refers to her as "a sexual monster" (Moons 194). Things take a dramatic turn as Caroline "arranged to have (her) old lover (Douglas) and her new together, just to stir things up" (Moons 195). In her own turn, Caroline is treated without any attachment by Martin, her current beau.
As the narrator completes her story, Julie says she would like to discuss a confidential problem, which cannot be shared in any other context:

It is a question, more than a problem. The question is: Should Julie herself try living alone? She says her husband Leslie is cold-hearted, superficial, stubborn, emotionally stingy, loyal, honest, high-minded and vulnerable. She says she never really wants him. She says she thinks she might miss him more than she could stand, or perhaps just being alone would be more than she could stand. She says she has no illusions about being able to attract another man. But sometimes she feels her emotions, her life, her something - or - other - all that is being wasted.

I listen, and think this sounds like the complaints many women make, and in fact it sounds a lot like the complaints I used to make, when I was married. How much is this meant, how deep does it go? How much is it an exercise that balances the marriage and keeps it afloat? (Moons 183-84)
Hearing the above account, the narrator realises at last, that she is not alone in her reaction to the plight of a lack lustre marriage.

Perhaps Juliet Mitchell's words sum up the feminist's justification of articulating the hitherto-silenced areas of feminine experiences:

what they thought was an individual dilemma (was) a social predicament and hence a political problem. The process of transforming the hidden, individual fear of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political - this process is consciousness raising. (61)

Kate Miller too endorses a similar objective on behalf of the feminists:

To become aware of the effects of male domination, women had to undergo a process of education known as "consciousness-raising". Developed by radical feminists in the late 1960's, consciousness raising was a means of
sharing reliable information about female experience. (33)

When the narrator asks Julie whether she had ever been in love with someone, she simply says she once thought she was, with a boy she met by chance on a beach, but it turned out to be all nonsense, and soon evaporated:

He told me he was a psychology student at U.B.C. but he had dropped out because they were all behaviorists there. I didn't know — I didn't know what a behaviorist was.

"So," he became my boyfriend. [. . . ] He could only meet me one day a week, always the same day. We didn't progress very far. The upshot was — well, the upshot was really, that I discovered he was in a mental hospital. That was his day out. (Moons 187-88)

When Douglas enquires the narrator of the consequences of her seeing this seventeen-year-old patient, Julie answers simply: "I got over it I think when I got pregnant" (Moons 188).

Ironically, after completing her narration of her encounters with the mentally retarded patient, Julie goes on to narrate how she was jilted by
a second, would-be lover years later, belonging to a home of "ordinary functioning miserable mixed-up people" (Moons 189), run by a man, named Stanley, a psychologist:

I’d get sometimes three letters a day from him, rhapsodies about myself and how much I meant to him and confessions of self-doubt and how he didn’t want to turn into a guru and how good I was for him because I was so aloof and wise. What rot. I knew it was all ludicrous but I won’t deny I got to depend on it, in a way. I knew the exact time of day the postman came. (Moons 190)

Nearly six months after the start of this affair, Julie receives a phone call from one of the women in the group:

[... ] she told me all hell had broken loose. Some woman in one of the groups had confessed to her husband she was sleeping with Stanley. The husband got very mad, he wasn’t a group person, and the story got out and then another woman, and another and another, revealed the same thing, they confessed they were sleeping with Stanley, and pretty soon
there was no blame attached, it was like being a victim of Witchcraft. It turned out he'd been quite systematic, he'd picked one from each group, and he already had one in the group I was in, so presumably it wasn't to be me. Always a married woman, not a single one who could get bothersome. Nine of them. Really Nine Women. (Moons 190)

As regards Stanley's sexual misadventures, Julie, the narrator describes her in the following manner, reeking of bitter irony. On learning the fact that Stanley's wife herself was not lacking in physical beauty, she says:

She was a nice-looking rather nervous girl with lovely long legs. I used to meet her sometimes and think: little do you know what your husband's been saying to me. And there were all those other women meeting her and thinking, little do you know, etcetera. Maybe she knew about them all, us all, maybe she was thinking: little do you know how many others there are. (Moons 191)

Though such bitter experiences do reduce these insecure women to a state of hopelessness, they, at least,
are cut to the quick again, soon after the Stanley episode and realize the imperative need for making the right choice, with regard to their sexual partners. However, the sheer choice in this regard itself poses a new threat to these women, as it bristles with the potential of a possible risk of landing on the wrong kind of love. It is highly ironic that these women feel even more frustrated and insecure, after episodes such as the above.

The context of "Hard-Luck story" is also highly ironic in the sense that the women figuring in it are themselves promiscuous, whereas they expect loyalty in love from their lovers, and feel desperate when they cannot find the kind of lovers they would prefer to have:

Do you remember you said then about there being two kinds of love, and the one kind nobody wants to think they’ve missed out on? Well I was thinking then, have I missed out on every kind? I haven’t even got to tell the different kinds apart. (Moons 182)

Listening to the narrator’s story, Julie recognizes two kinds of love, namely, the straightforward kind of marital love that exists between the narrator
and Douglas, her husband, and the unnatural liaison between Douglas and Caroline "a sexual monster", according to Douglas. The narrator is, Douglas's wife, herself permissive, who would still like to exercise a complete hold on her husband but feels frustrated as Douglas cannot apparently extricate himself from Caroline. The following conversation between the husband and wife throws light on the unpredictable, and irrational basis of all sexual relationships, inside or outside marriage:

"And I thought, why should I be surprised? Isn't this just what you always hear? How love isn't rational, or in one's best interests, it doesn't have anything to do with normal preferences?"

"Where do you always hear that?" Douglas said. "It's standard. There's the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That's the kind you're supposed to get married on. Then there's the kind that's anything but intelligent, that's like a possession. And that's the one, that's the one, everybody really values. That's the one nobody wants to have missed out on."

"Standard", said Douglas.
"You know what I mean. You know it's true. All sorts of hackneyed notions are true" (Moons 195).

In short, the main burden of the "Hard-Luck Story" is that women, in general, are eager to identify themselves with the feelings and experiences of fellow women, irrespective of the rightness or wrongness of their own sexual conduct in the name of universal solidarity of women. Such a perception is in keeping with the observations of Judith Clavir a metaphysical feminist:

One woman's experience is all women's experience, because all women have a bond which is eternal, biological and historical. Women's culture with its rituals, poetry and magic is an expression of their very body chemistry; and it is this chemistry with its limitless energy that patriarchs of all classes, nations and eras of history try to dominate and control. This biology and this oppression bonds together all women who have ever lived. (404-05)

At the close of the narrator's story, the entire company stops at an old country church, where Douglas
puts his hand on the narrator’s shoulder, in a way that Julie may not notice.

The narrator mainly, Douglas’s wife, needs the continued reassurance of her man’s physical proximity and subtle gestures of love. Unfortunately, Douglas fails in this regard, and as he moves closer to Julie in the church, the narrator feels a vague sense of anxiety and insecurity invading her once again:

[. . .] He brushed his hand down my back and settled at my waist, applying a slight pressure to the ribs before he passed me and walked up the outer aisle, ready to explain something to Julie. [. . .]

I hadn’t expected there would be any announcement from him, either while I was telling the story, or after it was over. I did not think that he would tell me that I was right, or that I was wrong. I heard him translating, Julie laughing, but I couldn’t attend. I felt that I had been overtaken - stumped by a truth about myself, or atleast a fact, that I couldn’t do anything about. A pressure of the hand, with no promise about it, could admonish and comfort me. Something unresolved could become permanent. I could be
always bent on knowing and always in the dark, about what was important to him, and what was not. (Moons 196-97)

Miller, a psychoanalyst, suggests that even in the age of feminism, the new women continue to draw vitality and energy from the traditional strengths of women, who belonged to a period of patriarchal subordination. Women learned their emotional skills, at least to some degree, as a result of their age-old subordination:

Most women do have a much greater sense of the emotional components of all human activity than most men. This is, in part, a result of their training as subordinates; for anyone in a subordinate position must learn to be attuned to the vicissitudes of mood, pleasure and displeasure of the dominant group. (qtd. in Sacks 419-23)

Thus, both Porter and Munro assume a stance closely bordering on the feminist, challenging the patriarchal code, time and again, in their art, and are extremely keen on bringing to light, hitherto unarticulated areas of 'female' or 'feminine' experiences.

The following comment of Matilde Joslyn Gage, an avowed votary of the feminist cause, has a certain
prophetic ring about it, hinting at almost a kind of ultimatum to patriarchal modes of thinking and feeling:

It has become one of women's first duties [. . .] to call public attention to its (society's) false doctrines and false teaching in regard to the origin, condition and subjection of the woman. She has engaged in too many battles, weathered too many storms [. . .] let those who fear, hide themselves, if they will, until the storm is past. Let those who dare defiantly rejoice that they are called upon to bear still more, in order that women may be free. A brighter day is to come for the world, a day when the institutions of the woman's soul shall be accepted as a part of humanity's spiritual wealth" (542).

The truth and strength of the above assertion stem mainly against the backdrop of successive ages of silence, powerlessness, betrayal, and victimization of women at the hands of men.

Perhaps a latent tendency to assert the rightful claims of feminine sensibility explains the high-pitched tone of anger, assertion, defiance and impatience expressed in Porter's fictional art, in sharp contrast to
Munro’s moderate tone of mature self-assurance, since, with the sweeping strides of women’s progress achieved in the recent past, there has been a considerably increasing accent on articulation of areas of female experience hitherto remaining silenced.

Porter’s art can be described as more pronouncedly feministic of the two authors compared, affirming the view that women should be regarded as peers to men in all spheres, physical, psychological and intellectual.

Women in Munro’s short stories are also intensely alert and well aware of their rights as individuals. However, far from remaining as mere docile domestic ornaments of households, these women have already emerged forth in the wider arena of life, as extremely successful and vibrant intellectuals whose sensibilities have found enormous acceptance in the world of men. In essence, Munro’s vision can also be distinctly recognized as essentially ‘feministic’, but only in a pronouncedly more ‘modern’ sense, representing all the major concerns of modern women in general, stressing heavily on the increasing need for greater recognition of their sensibility, bordering on the delicate and the refined, often mindful of the feelings of the men involved with them too.
"The artist", says Freud,

is originally a man who turns from reality because he cannot come to terms with the demand for the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction as it is first made, and who then in fantasy-life allows full play to his erotic and ambitious wishes. But he finds a way of return from this world of fantasy back to reality, with his special gifts, he moulds his phantasies into a new kind of reality, and men concede them a justification as valuable reflections of actual life. Thus by a certain path, he actually becomes the hero, king, creator, favourite he desired to be, without the circuitous path of creating real alterations in the outer world. (qtd. in Welleck 82)

It is interesting to note that Munro's "Bardon Bus" and "Hard Luck Stories" dwell on erotic experiences and fantasies of female protagonists who ultimately develop into realistic artists whose experiences are eminently realistic and comparable to those undergone by a good majority of women of the contemporary age. The Freudian insistence that an artist, bares his/her nudity or erotic fantasy, before the public at large through
his/her writings or other forms of art, can be seen exemplified through several characters in Munro. However, this Freudian view can be seen as more relevant, in the case of the works of Munro, rather than Porter as none of the latter’s passion-charged women ends up as an artist or writer. Also, there is, surprisingly, no such explicit delineation of erotic fantasies in Porter’s art.

What the two writers share in common is not only their gyno-centrism, but more importantly, the sensitive and detailed examination and analysis of contemporary women’s condition and stature, and interrelationships and sensibilities of men and women, entering into the delicate worlds of intimate relationships. Even while doing so, of the two writers in question, Munro seems to be much more urbane, cool, patient, objective, mature and self-controlled than Porter whose protagonists often tend to end up in comparative terms, as crude propagandists of the women’s cause, erupting like irate volcanoes, obviously triggered by the combustion of the times in which they were designed and cast in art.