Today people have started thinking that women can do the traditional male jobs in a good way, in some cases, even better. Many people are against gender discriminations such as unequal compensation of men and women for the same amount of work with the same amount of training and experience. It can be said that women with their exceptional natural maternal instinct are able to survive in a ‘grinder’ of modern life even much better than men do. Women are that magical force that keeps men to face the difficulties of life. But this scenario is a recent one as earlier it was not like that; women were struggling a lot to establish her place and identity in society. In this tug-of-war with society, sometimes she was able to establish her identity and sometimes lost her identity. In the story “Boys and Girls” which was published by Munro in 1964 and included in her first story collection Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), she portrays a feminist notion of a search for one’s own identity. Here she unravels the process of the central character’s painful self-discovery.

5.1 UNDOING GENDER in “BOYS AND GIRLS”:

The story “Boys and Girls” is set in a Canadian backdrop with its post-colonial historical background. In this story, the central character, an eleven-year old girl, describes her life in a fox farm and her process of search for gender identity. From the vivid descriptions, we have come to
know how the girl used to watch her father pelting the foxes and helped him in the barn by feeding the foxes, bringing water and cleaning the watering dishes. The girl spent lot of time outside the home but did not help her mother with the household chores. Because of this, her mother is ardently negotiating with her husband about getting the girl to work more in the house. The girl does not like this fact. She secretly watches how her father shoots one of the two horses for fox food. At the end of the story the girl lets the second horse, Flora, to escape. But at last the horse was captured and butchered. The girl’s younger brother announced during the family dinner in the same day that due to his sister’s fault, Flora got away. But her father instead of being angry at her dismissed it with tenderness and even good humour by saying that she was “only a girl”.

Munro presents her character through direct descriptions and tries to show them in action. This fact is applicable to the central character of this story, a young girl, who is narrating the story about her life in a farm and her search for gender identity. We learn in the story that the girl is courageous, physically strong, adventurous and have strong imaginative sense. All these qualities are typical masculine qualities which Munro uses to define the narrator’s character. In fact all these masculine qualities are used by the narrator in her day to day life. As for example, after the girl’s younger brother fell asleep, she used to arrange herself
tightly under the bed cover and tell herself stories. She used to think as, she “rescued people from a bombed building, shot two rabid wolves and rode a fine horse spiritedly down the main street of jubilee”.

Actually these bedtime stories provide her the opportunity for heroism, boldness and self-sacrifice and all these qualities are usually male qualities. Another masculine hobby she used to practice was shooting. The girl was learning to shoot in reality, though she was not able to hit anything yet, this practice made her look manly not only in strangers’ eyes but ours also.

In the whole story, we come to know from descriptions of the girl that the girl used to help her father, just like a man, to take care of the foxes. Despite of her young age she is possessed with enough physical strength to carry out jobs, which involve hard physical labour. One of the work she used to do in the summer was to bring water for the foxes that also twice a day, after nine in the morning and then again after supper. Every day she went to the water pump, filled the drum and trundled it down through the barnyard to the pens, parked it, with her watering can filled the water and went along the pens. Sarcastically she thought about her younger brother Laird, who “came too, with his little cream and green gardening can filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes”. On the contrary his older sister
used to carry her father’s “real watering can” though she could not carry full of it but could carry its three quarters full. In this way the girl was able to demonstrate before her father that she was capable enough for doing a man’s work.

The girl in the story comes to a conclusion not only against the maternal domestic sphere in general but against the mother herself in particular. In the story she thought “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing, work done out of doors and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important”. The girl was keeping enmity with her mother because she felt that her mother wants to keep her within domestic work which the girl hated the most. The girl felt that her mother deliberately wanted to keep her away from her father’s work and keep her busy in the household instead. The young girl’s mind was never able to think about the mother and her domestic confinement. The girl symbolically rejected the traditional female gender role which was allotted to her as a child. In the whole story, at many places it is shown how in her adolescence the girls were compelled to face different types of social pressures into a role, she would never have chosen for herself. As “One time a feed salesman came down into the pens to talk to him and my father said, “Like to have you meet my new
hired hand.” I turned away and raked furiously, red in the face with pleasure”.

“Could of fooled me”. Said the salesman. “I thought it was only a girl”. Here this use of gender comparison enhances the male gender and downgrades the female gender. The fact that the girl turned ‘red in the face with pleasure’, internalizes that her father masculinises her as she is doing a good job for him. For the girl comparing to a male worker is like buttering up her mind as she does not yet realize that this implication is for her own gender. Generally professional work outside the house is considered as a male domain, but the girl’s father indulged his daughter in outside work and thus unintentionally enhanced her spirit against her sexual identity, but the salesman quite oppositely brought her down to earth by lessening her own gender with offensive gendered implications- ‘Only a girl’.

With regard to Laird, her younger brother, the girl doesn’t want to realize that he is growing up and becoming a man. Once the mother said to her husband, “wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have a real help” though the girl was not able to hear what her father replied, but her entire feminine nature furiously protested. She felt that Laird can’t do those work which she is doing without any difficulty. She believed that Laird can’t be help to anybody, as he usually swung himself
sick on the swing, went around in circles, or tried to catch caterpillars. The girl’s perspective changed when she turned eleven years old, during a fight with Laird she realized her brother’s physical strength. She had to use all her strength against him. This was really hurting her. One farm worker Henry saw the fight and said “Oh, that is where Laird is gonna show you, one of these days!” For the first time the girl realized that her brother slowly and consistently began turning into a man. But her own feminism defends her saying that she “was getting bigger too”.

Another episode occurred when girl’s visiting grandmother enforced the fact that the female gender role is an entirely restrictive one. She said: “Girls don’t slam door like that………. …..Girls keep their knees together when they sit down”. And most surprisingly whenever the girl was asking some questions she used to say “that’s none of girls business”. The girl wanted to escape from all these gender based restrictions. So she tried her level best to avoid all these gender norms which her grandmother tried to impose over her: “I continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free”.

Now we realize that the girl was not only courageous and athletic, but also adventurous. On the day the children’s father was going to shoot one of the two horses, Mack, he sent both Laird and the girl out of the
stable to play around the house. The girl never saw her father shoot a horse. Dying out of the curiosity, she led Laird around to the front door of the barn, opened it carefully and went in. Fortunately, she got the opportunity to watch Mack being shot, when Mack’s legs stopped kicking in the air and he died, in a very congratulatory way the girl said “Now you’ve seen how they shoot a horse”.11

The process of shooting horse was not something the girl wanted to see, but as she admitted herself that it was better to see and know how the killing take place. This saying proves that the girl was a person of action and her need for being centre of attention. She did not want that other people can tell her how they saw a horse being shot; instead she wanted to tell them the process of killing a horse.

The girl’s most spectacular opposition works when she purposefully keeps the gate open for the female horse Flora which is about to be shot. Thus she saved a life for the time-being that was to be slaughtered by the narrator’s father for feeding the fox. It appears that the girl identifies herself with the female horse. She felt that like Flora she too, wants to escape from impending death. Her death does not mean her physical death but death in the sense of the end of her free-ranging activities, her likes and dislikes, her wishes and her opinions when she is pressed into the fixed female stereotype. Flora’s wild running also
represents the protagonist’s first rebellion against her father who was more attached to the authoritative gender pattern. In this opposition, the girl resembles to the Mare Flora, in contrast with the Stallion Mack who refuses to be fenced in. The following description of Mack and Flora was evidence of their attitude.

“Mack was an only black workhorse, scoot and indifferent. Flora was a sorrel more, a driver..... Mack was slow and easy to handle. Flora was given to Fits of violent alarm..... but we loved her speed and high-stepping, her general air of gallantry and abandon..... Flora threw up her head, rolled her eyes, whinnied despairingly and pulled herself through a crisis of nerves on the spot. It was not safe to go into her stall she would kick”.

On the day when Flora was about to be shot, she broke away from the farm helper Henry. Flora was running free in the barnyard, whinnying, going up on her hind legs, prancing and threatening like a young horse. Flora’s free running actually symbolizes a freedom of the spirit and freedom of the existence. The horse that was locked in a dark stables for several long winter months, could not resist the power of space and fresh air and understandably went wild, when she was taken out on a bright spring day. May be a sense of impending end made Flora take advantage of a sudden freedom and enjoy the last moments of her life.
That may be the reason that the narrator, who was an independent-spirited girl, who was imprisoned in the old farm for eleven years, got inspired, when she watched Flora, broken free.

The climax of the story occurs when after killing Flora, the family was gathered at the dinner. This family gathering scene was the perfect example of ordered family life. Here Laird in a classical act of ‘male bonding’ brought forth the fact about her sister that she let Flora escape on purpose. It was for the first time that Laird talked against his sister. The father, having overcome his immediate disappointment feeling about his daughter’s unexpected and seemingly ill-advised act, responded in an unpredictable manner. But for the girl this reaction was more threatening than his fury or his strong criticism:

“No, never mind, my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humour the words which absolved and dismissed me for good. “She’s only a girl”.13

He said ‘Only a girl. This connotation was catastrophic for the girl. It was accepted that girls are used to behave irrationally and they are mentally paralyzed to take any decisions, so they cannot be held responsible for their actions. They can’t be blamed in the domestic sphere as well, as power is not on their side. On her father’s utterance,
the girl's reaction was unexpected and far graver. And that suggested the impact of socialization which change, create and re-create the human mentality, especially of women’s mentality: “I didn’t protest that, even in my heart. May be it was true”.\textsuperscript{14} Now the girl realized her place in the society. Her younger brother’s betrayal and his male domineering attitude hurt her very much. The realization came into her mind that she must behave as a girl but also has to feel and think as a girl and hence start to walk in the path of insignificance, and that’s what the ending suggests.

Basically “Boys and Girls” addresses the problem of attaining self awareness as a girl. This sense of self-awareness can be attained if she encounters shame and humiliation. Her dreams of adventures and heroism are not of the kind which belongs to girls and in reality her single act of courage and greatness \textit{i.e.} letting Flora escape was underestimated and misinterpreted, leaving her as ‘\textit{only}’ a girl. Munro has played with the word ‘girl’ and suggested its connotation throughout the story. The girl began to differentiate the world of her father and mother. Though she was introducing herself to her father’s world still it appears that she is facing some sense of self-definition. As for example, she was more happy when she was introduced by her father as ‘\textit{my new hired man}’, this comment protect her from the salesman’s remark, ‘\textit{I thought it was only a}
girl.’ Though this was belittling connotation, still her first encounter with this word was rather pleasurable. The girl found that to work with her father is far more important than working with mother. This can be seen in her choice of dwelling *i.e.* between the house and barn which was suggesting male-female differences. Both dwelling places suggest typical female dilemma between a sense of independence and submissiveness. She was considering that the out-door works were pleasant, desirable and ritualistically important, and on the contrary, household works were endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing. The girl’s mother always felt as if there was ‘no girl’ at all in the house, as the girl was always busy with her father and his work and was not helping her. Once when mother came out from the house to the barn to talk to her husband, the girl didn’t like that, as she was sure that mother had no business in the barn. The girl overheard the conversation of mother and father and it was the second time when the girl heard adults bringing up the theme of being a ‘girl’. From all these the girl came to the conclusion that the mother was fully against her and simply plotting against her. She also concludes that her father should not pay any attention to her mother’s voice.

During the winter when the girl turned eleven, she again began to hear the same theme her mother discussing with her father in front of the barn. Now for her the word ‘girl’ did not seem angelic and brightened.
For the first time she began to realize that girl was not, as she supposed simply what she was; it was that she had to become. As the narrator says, "It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me." She realized that people expected her to follow a certain code of behaviour which is pertinent, typical and socially acceptable for a girl.

The girl got a third chance to feel directly a social pressure associated with the word ‘girl’ when her grandmother stayed with the family. The grandmother introduced her some code of behaviour which as a girl she had to follow. The girl was not ready to follow this decorum and continued to slam the door and sit as awkwardly as possible. Here we can witness a conflict between regarding herself as the essential and the social and the pressure to accept her as a static object.

The word ‘girl’ was skillfully used twice in the story at its first and final usage of the word with ‘only’. It seems that in “Boys and Girls” a state of becoming a girl was associated with a sense of irremediable detachment and failure. At last when once again the girl encountered the word ‘girl’ with its intended meaning, her destiny was blocked; her father told finally ‘She is only a girl’ which released and dismissed her for good. For the girl, the meaning of the label ‘only a girl’ was not only a loss of
her status as the father’s helper but also a loss of her own identity and freedom of choice.

“Boys and Girls”, was written at the beginning of the ‘second wave’ of feminist involvement with literature and it contributed in gender relations in a rather different manner. Here the characterization of the father and the mother is very ordinary. Presentation of female’s interior and male’s outer space is in a very symbolic manner. The conflicting characters of the male and female horses, family members and classed rural society with socializing forces influence the girl and her dreams. Reingard M. Nischik says- “The story demonstrates the restrictive, de-individualizing forces of an essentialist gender concept during the adolescent phase of development. At the same time, it also points out positively valued, liberating opportunities for women to rebel against dominant male codes of behaviour.”

All these social forces bring internal changes in the girl. When the girl watched her father pelting the foxes on a regular basis and especially after she watched Mack being shot, apparently without any emotions on his side, she claimed that she was used to seeing the death of animals and that she accepted it as a necessity by which the farmers lived. When she witnessed Mack being shot, this develops first time an estrangement from her father, though she was surprised by new sentimental feelings that
filled up her heart. She “felt a little ashamed and there was a new wariness, a sense of holding off in my attitude to my father and his work”.17 This attitude later on climaxes in her impulsive revolt against her father when she deliberately let Flora escaped. Here Munro gave us a clue that how a seemingly masculine girl began slowly turning into a sensitive young lady. On the contrary, her brother Laird was initiated into the male role as he joined his father in hunting Flora. He was feeling proud as symbolically having arrived at male adulthood. *Laird lifted his arm to show off a streak of blood.* He said that *they shot old Flora, and cut her up into fifty pieces.* Thus her younger brother and other companions finally join the socializing forces which suppress her every character, speech, actions functioning as a socializing agent. These forces push her towards a certain code of behaviour and emphasize a highly different view of the sexes and their strictly separate spheres of action and development.

We can find out the references of two types of calendars in the story, these calendars very honestly discriminate between men and women on a symbolical level of meaning. On the kitchen door we can see the historical calendar showing scenes from nature and of Canada’s colonial past, this way it was demonstrating domestication on a national level and thus indirectly representing mother’s personal domestication, as
the kitchen was shown as the perfect example of domestic existence. Other calendars of Henry Bailey were fixed in the male portion of the barn where the girl’s mother hardly visited. Probably these calendars represent pornography, exhibiting female’s naked body as an object for the male’s curious gaze and desire and thus representing female’s immoderate form of domestication.

With so many examples Munro gives us clues that how a seemingly masculine girl began to transform into a sensitive young lady. Core changes began to occur in the girl’s internal world. The girl described how she decorated her part of the children’s bedroom, making it fanciful and she was trying to separate her section from her brother’s section. The most drastic changes came in her bedtime stories. Although the story might start off in the same old way with breathtaking danger, fire or wild animals and for a while she rescued people, but later things began to change as she was rescued by somebody. Usually this somebody was a boy from her class at school or even Mr. Campbell, her teacher. Now like any other normal girl, she was more concerned with what the girl looked like - what dress did she wear and how long her hair was. As the girl worked out these details in her mind, the original excitement of the story was lost. All these facts proved the original claim
that the narrator was a ‘girl’ which in the middle of other things, means resigning to a male defender.

Girls usually have soft heart and emotional personality. We can find two episodes where this girl exposes these qualities. One is the episode when the girl allowed Flora escape and the other episode is when she cried while her father questioned her about that positive gesture. As far as the girl was concerned she could not understand why she disobeyed her father when instead of shutting the gate, she opened it as wide as she could. She didn’t decide to do so in advance instead just did it impulsively. The girl was aware that her father had paid for the horse, that the family needed the meat to feed the foxes and these foxes were needed for their living and that all she did had created more work for him. Obviously, the girl did not wish the horse to die. It may be the reason that the horse that was about to lose her life, reminded the girl about herself who was about to lose her freedom of choice and concept. Flora was broken free may be because she sensed the looming end, and that’s why she ran away as she did not want to die. This unwillingness of horse symbolized the girl’s unwillingness to work in the house for her mother. With the death of Flora, the girl is about to lose not only her freedom, but her entire future would die. That may be the reason the girl feels so closely attached to Flora who leads her own subconscious that reflexively
help Flora’s escape. On the other hand, it seems that she had lost the gender battle for the more attractive and prominent position in the family, which was reduced by the use of the word ‘girl’, used dismissingly twice in the story.

At the end of the story we come to know that the girl was equally emotional like any other girl. During the family dinner Laird opened the secret as to how Flora escaped, and when her father asked her about the truth, she approved quietly, swallowed food with great difficulty and began crying. This was the typical female reaction of a girl. Tears that flooded her eyes, demonstrate the emotional aspect of being a girl. Crying in public or showing sensitivity in public by a boy is not acceptable in established social norms but it is perfectly fine for the girls to cry in any place at any time, for whatever reason. The tears suggest her resignation. Perhaps her sensitive feminine nature is challenging her feminist desire to stay strong as a man. Munro allowed her central character cry only once in the whole story and she intentionally saved this episode until the end of the story. By using this technique Munro disclosed a strong conflict between the two parts of the girl’s self: masculine and feminine.

The conflicting end of the story “Boys and Girls” suggest the competing gender concept at work and thus bring before us the question
of gender hierarchies. Actually in this story Munro has shifted the emphasis from the incidents of the story to ask questions and thereby demand new judgments and solutions. The binary opposition between male and female in the story is constantly weakening, as for example the father calling his competent daughter a ‘hired man’ and the daughter feeling ill at a pressure of stereotypical role distribution. The girl is not yearning for ‘either / or’ but on the contrary in an early post modernist stance she demands an ‘and’. Munro recorded the humiliated and anguished psychology of a girl child who was compelled by society to become a definition- ‘a girl’, which she viewed as a joke on her. At the end of the story the child found herself no longer free to help her father outdoors, but was forced to do the household work with her mother. The climax of the story occurred when the girl freed a horse that was about to be shot and thus she got the title ‘only a girl’ by her father.

The story presents before us the disagreement between the girl’s status as a real human being and her being called a female. Although it does not seem that there is any real resolution to the situation of the girl in the story and it seems that the girl is conforming to social rules by adjusting her fantasies. For the girl the horse was the symbol of freedom and the death of the animal meant the end of her dreams, freedom and a
loss of her identity. She was partly champion when she tried to save the horse by opening the gates as wide as she can.

Munro wants us to think deeply about how social rules and expectations modify one’s conceptions. She asserts female sensibility which is an aid to life (sustains life) rather than eliminates life.
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12. Ibid., Pp.5-6.

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17. Alice Munro, “Boys and Girls”,