



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.3. 2022 (July-Sept)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY THROUGH HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN LORRIE
MOORE'S "TWO BOY" FROM *LIKE LIFE*

S. DEEPA

Regn. No: P5850

(Part-time Ph.D. Research Scholar)

Research Centre in English, Saraswathi Narayanan College
(Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University)

Madurai – 625022



Article information

Received:24/07/2022
Accepted: 29/08/2022
Published online:06/09/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.3.73](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.3.73)

ABSTRACT

Life is a synthesis of intricacies of relationships, both external and internal. Writers of all ages have drawn their tales based on the complexities of relationships that bind a character to life. Lorrie Moore, one of the famous contemporary American writers, especially known for her short stories, gives importance to human relationships in almost all her stories. The first story "Two Boys" in *Like Life* (1990) set at the backdrop of the Midwest, poignantly brings out the love-relationship of the protagonist, Mary with the two boys. By connecting herself with the boys, she really searches for her own identity. Instead, she fails to choose the worldly-links that she wants to establish with the boys, but she finds spiritual serenity after understanding the ephemeral quality associated with love-life which predominates with sexual encounters. It seems to Mary that the little girl is an angel and the message, "Forget it" is a message sent from Heaven which certainly as she hopes, would heal her traumatized 'self.' Searching for a true relationship in this world is a hard task not only to Mary but also to every human being and this is brought out by Moore in this short fiction in sardonic tone.

Keywords: Spirituality, trauma, serenity, ephemeral, love-relationship, existentialism, and butcher.

Introduction

Contemporary literature is a witness to modern man's sense of isolation, and his quest to redefine his identity by evaluating his self and relationships. In fiction, human relationship forms an important part of the very narrative structure. Life is a synthesis of intricacies of relationships, both external and internal. Writers of all ages have drawn their tales based on the complexities of relationships that bind a character to life. The rejection of relationship between individuals causes pain in individuals. So, they try to assimilate with the main stream of life by reforming the relationship or bridging the gap between different individuals. Lorrie Moore, one of the famous contemporary American writers, especially known for her short stories, gives importance to human relationship in almost all her stories. In the first short story, "Two Boys" appeared in *Like Life* (1990), Moore focuses her attention on bringing out a woman's inner turmoil for maintaining love-relationship with two men simultaneously. The woman searches for a spiritual fulfilment in her relationships with the boys, yet she

finds only carnal fulfilment which ultimately results in her guilty conscience and neurotic condition. So, finally, she seeks salvation by remaining a spinster throughout her life.

Discussion

Lorrie Moore had two major works to her credit as a well-known and highly respected writer when she published her second collection of short stories titled *Like Life* in 1990 though her first novel, *Anagrams* (1987) did not bring her fame. She was still less than thirty when she published *Like Life*. As she was being linked with other rising stars in the literary firmament, including Ann Beatrice, Amy Hempel, Jay McInerney, and David Leavitt, one critic discussed Moore's fiction alongside Leavitt's only to find both afflicted with chronic "tristesse", another compared Moore favorably with Leavitt and others in their generations: "She is... a fine writer [who] does with apparent ease what so few of her contemporaries seem able to do: She individualizes her characters so that each is clearly and understandably unhappy in his or ... mostly her own way" (Lee 217).

The stories in *Like Life* are association to places and so bifurcated into the Midwest stories and New York stories. The first story "Two Boys" set at the backdrop of the Midwest, poignantly brings out about the love-relationship of the protagonist, Mary with the two boys. The female protagonist, Mary is associated with dead animals and meat in "Two Boys." In this case the connection, both figurative and circumstantial, is butchery: Mary lives above the Alexander Hamilton Meat Company in Cleveland, Ohio, and is daily confronted with a river of blood in the gutter and "pale, fatty carcasses, hooked and naked" (4). The material and metaphorical attributes of this enforced contact are intermingled: the "refrigerated smell" (4) that follows her upstairs and into her apartment is both the actual stench of raw meat and a reminder or mortality, a spiritual taint. It also symbolizes Mary's sense of guilt which guttered like river of blood for she is make choices between her boyfriends through choices. Yet finding true relationships in life is too hard and one is always in "the vague shame and hamburger death of it" (4).

Mary wants to establish a love-life relationship at the correct moment, as she comes across two boyfriends whom she appreciates for their individuality. By connecting herself with the boys, she really searches for her own identity. Instead, she fails to choose the worldly-links that she wants to establish with the boy, but she finds spiritual serenity after understanding the ephemeral quality associated with love-life which predominates with sexual encounters. Living in Cleveland and travelling to other places, meeting her boyfriends, sending them greetings, talking to them over phone and writing them letters are new experiences to Mary. Hence, she enjoys them with some sort of amusement. She considers this new experience a necessary one as it unveils her inner-self. Yet she suffers from neurosis and has been guilt ridden for her connection with the two boys simultaneously. Uncertain human relationship or extra-ordinary human relationship may corrupt one's mind and the individual may suffer from some sort of psychological pain and sense of guilt as said by. This stage of self-consciousness is very crucial in a woman's life. About this feminist phase, Simone de Beauvoir says:

Woman can be defined by her consciousness of her own femininity no more satisfactorily than by saying that she is a female, for she acquires this consciousness under circumstances dependent upon the society of which she is a member. Interiorizing the unconscious and the whole psychic life, the very language of psychoanalysis suggests that the drama of the individual unfolds within him – such words as complex, tendency, and so on make that implication. (80)

Sexual symbolism is prominent in the passages concerning the meat company; as in "Joy" and "The Jewish Hunter" there is a powerful association between sex and death. Both female and male bodies are evoked in these descriptions. The displayed carcasses conjure images of woman as merchandize, but strings of "phallic" sausages (18) also portray men as faceless sexual entities, reduced to metonymical members. It is sex itself – meaty, visceral, palpable – that Mary sees represented in the butcher's goods, which explains why the smell of meat induces in her a "vague shame" (4). Making choices is the predominant psychological trait that Mary carries with. Therefore, she makes choices between the two boys by assessing their personality. The first boy whom Mary love is "running for a local congressional seat" (4). She works for him by distributing fliers and sticking posters on.

The allusion to 'making choices' runs throughout the text. Mary's "Number One" is a talkative person but Mary knows how to make him talk on or keep silence according to the situations which demands any one of them. For example, when he talks too much about his wife, Mary looks at him straight into his eyes which makes him stop immediately. He wants to be a faithful person to Mary. So, he reveals the truth about his life to Mary, he is married and living with his two sons fulfilling their needs and also looking for yet another business to run after selling some of his properties. Yet "he was liquidating" (4). At every critical moment, Number One wants to meet Mary to get solace from her hugs. Hence, Mary understands her place in the life of Number One who treats her as his mistress.

Therefore, Mary assesses her position in the life of her "Number Two". She compares the attitudes of the two boyfriends. She understands that Number One is rich enough to go to posh hotels, eat healthy and costly food, keep many girls around him whenever he wishes for. He also makes businesses, always engages in phone calls, and flies to many places. But Mary's "Number Two" is so meek and unworldly. That is why she like him much: "This was why she liked Boy Number Two: He was kind and quiet, like someone she'd known for a long time, like someone she'd sat next to at school. He looked down and told her he loved her, sweated all over her, and left his smell lingering around her room" (7). This shows that Boy Number Two also gets solace and comfort from Mary through sexual intercourses.

Number Two has faced a lot of disappointments in his life. Hence, he considers Mary as his 'savior'. The kiss of Mary comforts him a lot. Every time, when she kisses him, he becomes her little son: "Kiss me", he would say. And she would close her eyes and kiss" (7). Such human-bond is often expected by both of them whenever they are in low-temperament. Mary thinks that she could not give up both the boys, because she appreciates some of their attitudes fit to her likes and also her life. She says in elated terms about the boys: "Number One was rich and mean. Number Two was sighing, repetitive, tall, going on forever; you just wanted him to sit down" (7). Therefore, in her imagination, Mary creates yet another boy, "Number Three" who possesses the appreciative qualities found in One and Two: "It was inevitable that she splice and add. One plus two. Three was clever and true. He was better than everybody" (7-8).

A sensitive person in the early stages of a nervous breakdown and involved simultaneously with two men, Mary is both over-sexed and guilt-ridden on the subject of sex. Her sense of herself as greedy and base is fed by a friend's reaction to her two-timing: "You hog" (8) – an image that also intensifies Mary with the pig carcasses on the Hamilton Pork Company premises. Afflicted with a doubly negative self-image – as pig and pork, the emblems of unconstrained appetite and resistless object of consumption – she compensates by dressing in white and reading Bible poetry in the local park, trying to remain "unsullied" by grass stain, dog mess, or undue proximity to couples "making out" (3). Many symbolic allusions given in the text indicate that Mary is totally out-of control of her psyche and mind and she suffers from a sense of guilt and her existential peril is explicit in many passages. According to Rogers and Thompson:

Existentialism is about the experiences of living as a human being. It is about engaging with the world and dealing with two features of life – the situation in which we find ourselves and the constant desire to go beyond ourselves, planning and shaping our future. (x)

Returning home from these supposedly purifying afternoons unavoidably, however, involves reentering the world of sexed identities through the male-dominated butchery business: "men unloading meat in for of her building" (3-4), men wearing "red-stained doctors' coats" (4) – masquerading as healers although they deal in death. The struggles between birth and death and it is death that gives a release run in the story as in Moore's other stories. The way the story cuts between Mary's passing encounters with these "meat men" (7) and her interactions with the other men in life, her two unsatisfied boyfriends, implies that Mary regards her lovers as potential butchers who may prove capable, figuratively, of making her bleed and carving her up.

Mary makes choices between the two boys. But she thinks that something is lacking in both the boys. So, she goes beyond her real world and imagines for a third one who is perfect devoid of the flaws that One and Two possess. The attitudes of Mary reveal that Mary not only wants to establish relationships but also tries to establish her individuality through these relationships. Hence Moore has incorporated some images through

colors in "Two Boys" to reiterate how far Mary is emotionally shattered when she is confused to carry out her life with one of the boys. The blood image used in the text remains the readers that Mary suffers from guilt conscience and this resembles the Bible' story – Jesus hung on the cross who voluntarily carried the sins of others and bled to give redemption to the people of the world. Like this Mary's sin is washed away by the blood of the animals to give her redemption: "Every day she attempted not to stop in the blood that ran off the sidewalk and collected in the gutter" (4).

The white color which Mary prefers to paint the walls of her room, the white color furniture, her preference to wear white dress, and the appearance of a little girl in white indicate that Mary wants to keep her inner-self pure from guilt. The words of the little girl in white who spits at Mary near her feet, saying "Message from outer space" (6), Mary's soiled white petticoat, and reading songs from the Bible while sitting in the park indicate that Mary wants redemption in life. She wants to escape from the bitter looks of other as well as her guilty conscience, for she knows that she involves herself in sexual relationship with the two boys simultaneously and making choice between the two. She considers it a sin and so she wants to go away from the boys in order to assess her 'self'. She plans for a trip to go to Canada to get some kind of solace from mental turmoil.

Searching for a true relationship in this world is a hard task not only to Mary but also to every human being and this is humorously brought out by Moore in this short fiction, "Two Boys". Before leaving for Canada, Mary meets Number One and informs him about her departure from his life. She opens up her heart to him saying: "I'm saving myself for marriage.... Not yours" (10). Mary clearly indicates to Number One that she does not want to play a role of a mistress to him. She says, "My life is very strange" (8). However, Number One does not want to give up Mary from his life. So, he consoles her thus: "you're not the only woman who has ever been involved with a married – a man with marital entanglements. He usually called their romance a *situation*. Or sometimes, to entertain, *grownuppery*.... This is what happened in love. One of you cried a lot then both of you grow sarcastic" (11). But she gets aghast and nauseated when he makes such comments about their relationship. Number Two, according to Mary is a little better than Number One, because he gets sullen and worried when she informs him about her trip to Canada.

In the hotel room in Canada, Mary "imagined the cool bridal bleach of the sheets healing her, holding her like a shroud, working their white temporarily through her skin and into the thinking blood of her" (12). Again, the colors such as white and red indicate Mary's growing psychological tension. In her search for faithful human relationship, she experiences only worldly relationship in which sexual interest is predominant. This makes her to wish for salvation through death. Her confusion grows once again, after she arrives back at her place and is received by Number Two with usual warmth. Now she needs to decide on choosing her lover: "It suddenly seemed to Mary that she would have to choose, that even if you didn't know who in world to love, it was important to choose" (14).

Mary assesses the qualities of both Number One and Two: Number One is rich, but he is not charitable and Number Two is not rich enough but he readily makes charity and offers coins to beggars. Mary understands that this alone is not sufficient to choose her partner. She realizes that she has no heart-felt relationship which she expects from her boyfriends. Number One always thinks about the welfare of his wife and the two sons. Number Two is too selfish to understand Mary's feelings or to spend for her. Mary arrives at this conclusion not from her own experiences but from some outer influences. Moore has created the images like the little girl, which is an alter ego of Mary and the girl's confrontation with Mary and the butchery shop with its men to show Mary's psychological turmoil and the consequent revelation of the meaning of life and death. This is correctly pointed out by Keifer in terms of psychological science:

In the first stage, which is that of becoming a dual person, personal efficiency is generally impaired by mental conflict and physical strain on their marginal existence. In the second stage, which is that of a demoralized person, their unsocial sex activities and respected violations of social code often brings out irreparable loss of status. With the result that eventually these individuals tend to lose all contact with respectable elements of the community and liable to resign themselves to a life in which there are almost no opportunities or incentives to regain the stability of the life organization. (62)

In fact, the little girl is the alter ego of Mary and the words of the girl are certainly Mary's inner voice. The girl explains that she is waiting for her boyfriends to come and kiss her. But none has come and so the girl arrives at a conclusion that "They're unreliable. The girl spat, but away from Mary, more in the direction of the music institute. They're dead" (18). The girl, now, is not ready to wait for anybody and makes her way back to home. The act of the girl is a revelation to Mary about the 'unreliability' found in her boys' love. It seems to Mary that the little girl is an angel and the message, "Forget it" is a message sent from Heaven which certainly as she hopes, would heal her traumatized 'self.' Universal in character, human relationships play a vital role in this story. There is a "...sense of dispossession and exile consciousness is a sore at the heart of human relationship" (Pathak 112) set in the story finally.

Conclusion

The actualization of self is the ultimate end of Mary, the protagonist of "Two Boys" who search for her 'identity' and also spiritual fulfilment by establishing human relationships. As she finds that her boy-friends lack something that she wishes them to possess, she imagines for a perfect third boyfriend who possesses the best qualities of both the boys. However, she is guilt ridden for she has love-relationship with both the boys simultaneously. So, she is mentally disturbed and psychologically affected. In order to overcome her guilty conscience, she prefers to wear white dresses, to paint the walls of her house in white and to read the songs from the Bible. The little girl in the park gives Mary salvation through her acts and words. Hence, Mary decides to shun away from normal life in which she needs to keep human relationships in-tact. In the art of winning the challenges of existence, she finally keeps herself away from all human bonds and finds spiritual fulfilment in her secluded condition.

References:

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. Penguin, 1972.
- Keifer, Otto. *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951.
- Lee, Don. "About Lorrie Moore," interview with Lorrie Moore, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 165, 2003, pp. 216-18.
- Moore, Lorrie. "Two Boys." *Like Life*, Vintage Books, 1990, pp. 3-19.
- Pathak, R.S. "Identity Crisis in the Novels of Salman Rushdie." *Quest for Identity in Indian English Writing Part I: Fiction*. Bahri Publications, 1992.
- Roger, Nigel and Mel Thompson. "Preface." *Understanding Existentialism*. Macmillan Company, 2010.