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An Image of Women in “Beach House Series” by Mary Alice Monroe

Khayrullayeva Nigorabegim Nematillo qizi

PhD student of English literature Department, BSU

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Abstract: This article demonstrates the place and role of the image of women in the bestselling of American modern literature, contemporary family saga called “Beach House series” by prominent writer Mary Alice Monroe. It discusses a genuine work of the novelist M.A.Monroe to explore how the author defined, reflected and shaped gender roles. This article discourses on the representation of feminist views in a sympathetic family saga “Beach House series”.

Key words: female images, “Southern” woman, “Swimming Lessons”, “Beach House”, “Beach House Memories”, woman question.

INTRODUCTION. Literature and art works have their unique characteristics of a specific time and issue. Literature cannot be repeated, but is always alive and it conveys messages to generations. In different time periods the same issues were presented differently by writers. Contemporary bestselling writer Mary Alice Monroe in her numerous works of literature either depicts the women characters’ own inner world, or their attitude towards the things happening in the world. The themes, issues and feelings that the author chooses to develop are shaped by various subjective, social and other features.

THE MAIN PART. Monroe’s early fiction, including *The Long Road Home*, *The Girl in the Mirror*, *The Book Club* and *The Four Seasons* evokes themes of strong women with

personal struggles who overcome tragedy and develop healing interpersonal relationships.

But, her new home in coastal South Carolina allowed her to witness the fragility and the beauty of nature surrounding her new home.¹ The quickly changing habitat of the region made her experience the necessary and the strong things, which she used in her books “Beach House”, “Lowcountry Summer”, “Time is a river”, “Skyward”, “Sweetgrass” and others. Many of the novels are richly textured and delve into the numerous complexities of the parallels and the interpersonal relationships of the life and land.

A devoted naturalist of South Carolina’s Low County, Monroe is in her element when describing the wonders of nature and the ways people relate to it. Hauntingly beautiful relationships between nature and people add texture to her novel. Monroe successfully combines elements of women’s fiction and romance in this emotion-filled family saga “Beach House Series”. It consists of 7 parts:²

¹ Epps Edwin. *Literary South Carolina*. Spartanburg, S.C.: Hub City Writers Project, 2004. “Mary Alice Monroe.” *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2012.

²Khayrullayeva Nigorabegim Nematillo qizi “*The characterization of Mary Alice Monroe’s fiction*”, an article 2021

The Beach House	(2002)
Swimming Lessons	(2007)
Beach House Memories	(2012)
Beach House for Rent	(2017)
Beach House Reunion	(2018)
On Ocean Boulevard	(2020)
The Summer of Lost and Found	(2021)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS. Women characters in Monroe's major novels, especially in Beach House Series bear an image of strong "Southern" women with personal struggles who overcome failure and standing up to regenerate distinctive relationships. For example, a protagonist Cara Rutledge in the novel "Beach House" represents a woman who in search of freedom has left her home in traditional Charleston, South to Chicago, North with great expectations:

"She had been only eighteen when she'd left Charleston for points north. She didn't care where she went, as long as it wasn't in the South. She'd had her fill of the unspoken but clearly understood expectations of a young woman, especially one from an old Charleston family. She would go to the college of their choice, find a husband and get married, then live somewhere in the South. Her whole life had been neatly mapped out for her.

But all along, she'd been studying maps of her own. She left home in a huff of tears and landed in Chicago. That soaring city on Lake Michigan suited her outspoken, rebellious ways more than the delicately mannered, cultured city of Charleston ever had. So she'd stayed, trading saltwater for fresh, her southern lilt for a midwestern twang, vowing to make a place in the world with her brains and wit, not her feminine charms."³

Throughout the family saga Cara is shaped "from a sweet blossom to a fine example of the flower of

Southern womanhood". In the second part of the saga "Beach House Memories" she was described free-spirited in her childhood years:

"She was like her father in other ways, too. She had his stubborn determination, his independent spirit, and, too, his will to win"⁴

In this novel Cara's mother, Olivia Rutledge undergoes sharp changes in her self-realization as a woman. New York Times bestselling author Dorothea Benton Frank defines the character Lovie in the following way: *"Beach House Memories—a poignant and emotional tale of a strong, passionate woman torn between duty and desire, between the traditions of the old South and the social changes sweeping America—will capture your heart. For Lovie, it is an empowering journey of seasons of selfdiscovery."*⁵ In the novel in each summer Olivia starts for the beach house on the Isle of Palms with her children Cara and Palmer. Despite the short difference in the distance (only some miles) between her historic house on Tradd Street in Charleston, the treasured, centuries-old family antiques that filled the Rutledge family's home and her seaside Primrose Cottage on the beach, she often feels like she was leaving all her problems behind where the earth was rooted and solid. The precious summers spent on the barrier island are Lovie's refuge. Here, she can escape with her children from the social expectations of her traditional Southern mother, and her overbearing husband's disrespectful attitude. Here, she entertains her lifelong vocation as a "Turtle Lady," caring for the loggerhead sea turtles that lay their eggs in the warm night sand and then slip back into the sea.

This summer, however, is different. Visiting biologist Russell Bennett arrives on the island to make research on the loggerheads. What begins as a shared interest for the turtles advances into a love far

³ Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1st Gallery Books ed. p 59-60

⁴ Monroe M.A. Beach House Memories, 2012/1st Gallery Books ed. p 66

⁵ Monroe M.A. Beach House Memories, 2002/1st Gallery Books ed. p 3

more passionate and profound than Lovie has ever known—but one that demands her to deal with the most intense decision of her life. For Charleston's elite, divorce is an unforgivable scandal, and Stratton's influence is far-reaching. If Lovie dares to dream beyond a summer affair, she risks losing everything: her prominence, her wealth, even her precious children.

In the fourth part of the family saga, Cara reflects her memories on the family's old seaside cottage with her mother and builds on the following thoughts:

“Primrose Cottage had been her mother's beach house. No, Cara thought on reflection. More than her house. The cottage had been her mother's sanctuary. Her place of refuge. Her source of inspiration. Lovie had come here to escape the burdens of her social obligations in Charleston. On the island she was free to pursue her passion—sea turtles. Lovie had been the Isle of Palms's first “sea turtle lady.” She'd formed the first turtle team.”

Indeed, Olivia Rutledge's passion for turtles and the nature is unique. When Dr. Russell Bennet for the first time asks the reason of being extremely involved in the turtles, each summer studying their laying eggs and thoroughly putting her observations into notes in the Sea Turtle Journal, Lovie brings such explanation:

“It's rather like housework,” she began. “No, that's not quite right. I mean . . . How can I explain it? When a woman is in her home, she's always looking, or more, scanning, wondering if the pot's boiling, if she's out of milk, if the children are in view, if the doors are locked.” She was talking as much to herself as to him. “We women walk around our houses every day, day after day, picking things up, patting things down, observing patterns, changes. We tend our nest by being fully present. We pay attention to the details, over and over. Our motions are circular. Nonlinear.”

“It was like that for me on the beach. I'm sorry if my use of the possessive offends you, but that's how I

felt. I was tending my nests. This is my home. Each hatchling was a baby. Each one mattered.”

While reading the book we can see that at that time women were more indulged in the family duties rather than having a job and earning a degree. When Olivia was at college studying biology, her marriage with Stratton makes her leave college at the first year. However she continues studying turtles, she finds the nature and turtles too intimate to herself. To her, the turtles have taught to develop a hard shell against gossips, naysayers, or those who want her to fail.

Another woman character with a strong will in the “Beach House Series” is Toy Sooner. At the beginning of the saga Monroe portrays this 18 year old simple girl more naïve and poor. The conversation between Toy and Cara gives the same implication in the Beach House(part 1):

“I'm trying to figure so many things out right now,” she said, appearing a bit guilty. “It's so confusing. I'm going to be a mother soon but I'm still just a kid, you know?” Her voice went higher. “I—I—What am I going to do with a baby? How can I take care of him?”⁶

Yet the time shaped her as a woman of solid determinations. She's the kind of woman who wants the best for her loved ones, and for the better of society.

After Olivia Rutledge died, Toy had worked hard every day of those five years to make a better life for herself and for Little Lovie, her daughter. That had been a vow made at Miss Lovie's gravesite and a promise to her infant daughter.

“I did my best to keep my vow,” she said aloud to Lovie Rutledge, feeling her spirit hovering close tonight. “I finished college, got a good job and I've made a nice home for Little Lovie. All tidy and cheery, with flowers on the table, like you taught me. I want so much to be a good mother.” She rested her

⁶ Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1st Gallery Books ed. p 376

*chin on her knee with a ragged sigh as the longing from the dream resurfaced.*⁷

Toy Sooner has dealt with enough rough waves in her troubled past. It's only been through the enduring love of a close-knit group of women on this tiny island that she's finally started to find her footing. She starts working at the South Carolina Aquarium and loves her job that is to take care of species at the Aquarium. She is especially fond of the sea loggerheads and always is able to prove that she is capable of the responsibility. At the third part of the saga "Swimming Lessons" this character reveals herself coming out against particular difficulties. As new challenges in her career arise for this young single mother, the choices of her past will come up to her. Soon Toy will learn that, like the steadfast sea turtles she cares for, a mother must find the strength within herself to make it safely to shore.

Although known for her intimate portrayals of women's lives, Monroe's writing has gained added purpose and depth with her move to the South Carolina Lowcountry:

*"Living on Isle of Palms provides a stimulating place for me to think and to write. I've always been interested in nature, but living on the island and near the wetlands has influenced by work. I draw themes for my novels from nature and the parallels with human nature. And, in my own small way, I hope that by bringing to life the beauty and mystery of this fabulously varied ecosystem and various endangered species in my stories, readers will perhaps be inspired to support efforts to protect them."*⁸ The following extract from the novel "Beach House" confirms a powerful kinship between human and animals:

The turtle finished laying her eggs and began shoveling sand into the nest with her hind flippers. Then she turned and tossed sand violently to

camouflage her treasures. Lovie and Cara stepped back, giving her a wide berth to finish hiding her nest.

*The loggerhead was steadfast as one by one more than one hundred leathery eggs slipped into the sand. While she worked, great streams of salty tears flowed down from her eyes. A mother's tears, Lovie thought to herself. The tears of duty, love and commitment. The tears of resignation and acceptance. And, too, the tears of abandonment. For this sea turtle would finish laying her eggs then leave the nest, never to return.*⁹

Bold, fearless, strong, and a loyal wife. There is no shortage of qualities to love about one of Mary Alice Monroe's most famous female characters, Olivia Rutledge. In "Beach House series", Lovie is a formidable defender of her family. It becomes obvious in her most conversations with Russell:

Olivia: "I know what it's like to have your work—your passion—go unappreciated. You can deal with strangers feeling that way, but when it's your loved ones, the hurt goes much deeper. It somehow diminishes you."

He was quiet a moment, then said, "So Stratton doesn't support your commitment to the sea turtles?"

"Hardly." She didn't dare to go on, to tell him how her husband didn't respect her work in their home, either.

Or else when her husband Stratton beats and breaks her ribs, she considers and decides not tell the truth. She explains her injuries that she had fallen down the porch stairs in the dark. *"What happened between husband and wife behind closed doors stayed behind closed doors"*¹⁰

The author in throughout the book centers around a woman's life—family sagas. What could be more interesting to write about than the changes and

⁷ Monroe M.A. "Swimming Lessons", 2007/1st Gallery Books ed. pp 10-11

⁸ <http://www.maryalicemonroe.com/> "Mary Alice Monroe Books page". Archived from [the original](http://www.maryalicemonroe.com/) on 2008-08-02.

⁹ Monroe M.A. Beach House, 2002/1st Gallery Books ed. p 144

¹⁰ Monroe M.A. Beach House Memories, 2012/1st Gallery Books ed. p 219

challenges of families. Any part of the Beach House Series is not an exception. In the second part “Beach House memories” Lovie decides to make a divorce with her husband because of his disrespectful manner and his intimate affairs with other women, in addition, for the reason of that Stratton beat and broke her ribs after getting to know Lovie’s close relationships with biologist Russel Bunnet. Looking for her mother’s tending, Lovie announces to her about the planned divorce. Yet her mother Dee Dee does not support her at all. As a mother she advises her to make peace with her husband and do whatever she needs to do to fix her marriage:

“Darling, I raised you better than this. Whether you’re from Charleston or Aiken, or anywhere else south of the Mason Dixon Line, you hold inside of you the strength of Southern womanhood, handed down to you from me, your grandmothers, and beyond. You carry it in your genes. Listen to your mama, now. We women are the heart and soul of the family. The husband may be the trunk and our children the branches, but we are the sap that keeps it alive. Our family roots run deep. We do not rip them out. We cannot.”¹¹

Since then Lovie follows her mother’s suggestion during her life. She gives up her love, her interests for the sake of her family and the children. Through the book this character leaves a sympathetic impression on the reader with her constant kind and caring behavior for her loved ones.

CONCLUSION. Mary Alice Monroe has created a family saga about relationships, courage, nature, and life lessons as the legacy passes from one generation to the next. Marking a considerable development in her evolution as a novelist, in “Beach House Series” the author artfully blends both women’s fiction with environmental messages and metaphors—thus tying together her life as a writer and conservationist. Reading about the emotional dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship with a conservationist’s efforts

to protect endangered loggerhead sea turtles we discover what is most important in life. Her novel, *The Beach House*, was adapted into a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie starring three-time Golden Globe nominee Andie MacDowell, Minka Kelly, and Chad Michael Murray. “The Beach House Series” has quite a few praises one of which can remarkably define the value of the book: “With its evocative, often beautiful prose and keen insights into family relationships, Monroe’s latest is an exceptional and heartwarming work of fiction.”¹²

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¹¹ Monroe M.A. *Beach House Memories*, 2012/1st Gallery Books ed. p 303

¹² —*Publishers Weekly* starred review ¹²

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