



Contemporary Canadian Short Stories: A Study of the Artistic Oeuvre of Alice Munro

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ABSTRACT :

Canadian storytelling primarily owe an incalculable debt to few contemporary figures such as Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. These three writers of international repute have had a lasting impact with the New Yorker magazine. Munro in the above sphere gets highlighted. She spearheaded the literary culture with her enormous volumes of short stories around early 1980s, when the journal was at its peak and underwent decisive changes. Most importantly the establishment of this magazine and the way it focused the fictional career of Canadian writers parallels the literary development and the national identity as well. Contrasting with the setting and fictional fields of Gallant, Munro's stories finely focus rural Ontario and bring light from the regional to the continental flavour. Alice Munro's supremacy mainly lies in writing short stories which bear significance decipher meaning and thrive on relevance in her much-coveted and exquisitely drawn characters. The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to her in 2013 and held her as 'the master of the contemporary short story'. She is also regarded as the 'Canadian Chekhov' for her acute representation of realism and for her vivid imagery and matter of fact substances. Her stories are richly dense and at the same time mellifluous, forceful, enigmatic, economical, and stubborn. Her narratives conceive the subtlety of characterization and motivation revealing the intricacies in the softer stage of lives of ordinary people. Her delineation of characters is so consumed by nostalgia that the hunt of the inner-self speaks the inner reality of a diverse society and culture. She was also brought up in a bewilderingly and embarrassingly environment which she regards as "the collapsing enterprise of a fox and mint farm, just beyond the most disreputable part of town". She inherits the uncommon genius from her parents and grandparents which mirrors as a replica of the academic accreditation. She got a degree in journalism and also remained desirous of English literature. Ontario remained a shaping force and an unbounded open space for her cultural and literary significance. She went back to Ontario after her first marriage which ended in 1972 and married for the second time in 1976. In spite of having the responsibility of marriage and motherhood, she did innumerable attempts to create story with the tiniest essence appearing on tiniest entity. The unmatched publication of her stories redefines her technique embracing the mystery, closeness, and tension of everyday men and women's lives, based in the uncharted and ambiguous terrain of what is lovingly referred to as "Munroian world".

KeyWords: Story Telling , Characterization, narratives, mystery, closeness & men and women's lives.

Munro made Clinton her home, close to the boyhood home she shared with her second husband. She consistently derives meaning and substance from everyday life and effectively marks the rudiments of life in socio-cultural sphere, more importantly in the remote and the unexplored, in the revelation of sexual authenticity and cultural Christianity. She draws characters from communal behaviour and focuses their diverse pattern of living, habits and precisely scrutinise their own deeds, emotions, motives and consciences. Munro primarily delves into the feature that signifies the characteristic study of lower middle class people living in south western Ontario. The history of this region elongates from Ottawa River to the western end of Lake Superior which seems an enigma and speaks more about its hugeness and diversity. South-western Ontario is a distinct part of this enormous and diverse space. This fanciful name draws attention from the painter Greg Curnoe, a painter, gave it the intriguing name Sowesto. Many people agreed with Curnoe's assessment that Sowesto was a region of great interest but also formed mental obscurity. The country comprises flat terrain, intersected by numerous large, twisting rivers that are prone to floods and the boat's availability to transport on the river and the power provided by water-driven mills and as a result of which in the nineteenth century, a variety of minor and larger enterprises arose. Each location has a red-brick town hall with a tower, a post-office structure, a couple of churches of various religions, a main street with beautiful residences, and another residential part on the wrong side of the train. These places are reminiscences of Canadian glorious past.

The historical and geographical view of Sowesto takes us back to the memory of the well known Donnelley carnage during the nineteenth century when a large family was ravaged and their home burnt due to political antagonism carried over from Ireland. Some stories of Munro illustrate this vivid portrayal and historical picture of people living in the region itself which are riddled with repressed emotions, hidden sexual excess, lurid crimes, long-held grudges, strange rumours and outbreaks of violence. Basing the increasing perception of these innumerable memories, Munro's fiction gives the focal point of many of her women characters' *prima faci* denoting their internal realities concentrating characters' inner voice and mostly clinical matters wallowing in the seamier, meaner, and more vindictive undersides of human nature, the sharing of sensual secrets, the longing for vanished sufferings, and relishing in the depth and variety of life drawn everyone together. Munro was fascinated with local history, geography and her stories

primarily delineate the social maps of small –town rural Ontario. Reading Munro is to discover the pleasures of witnessing two worlds simultaneously: an inescapable rural folk and the shadow of her fictional world or the perception through which she wants to readjust the incongruity within the social and spiritual dispensation of western society.

The fictional world of Munro bears resemblances with the growing mind of her visionary concern as a short story writer. Though her stories focus the outside surroundings such as Toronto and Vancouver and later to Australia, Scotland even Albania, she is more inclined to a long tradition of small-town fiction where anywhere else is an outsider and an alien, be it as near as Toronto or as far away as Sydney, Australia. Munro's university education in London and her marriage and living in British Columbia where her three children were born, kept her away from her native place. Reminiscing her past days, Munro thought of the entire environment where she finds herself in difficult situations and writing became a challenging task but she balanced these two and did not give up her profession of writing stories. This somehow entails that Munro had gone away writing stories all these periods. She published twenty one short stories prior to her debut collection "Dance of the Happy Shades" in 1968 and which won the prestigious Governor General's Award. Staying in British Columbia, she published her first two books and then in the early 1970, her marriage broke up there after she returned to Ontario where she engaged herself in creative writing. With the pre-eminence and her increasing popularity as a short story writer, she began to travel to England and Scotland then to Australia in 1979 and 1980 and celebrated her 50th birthday with a group of Canadian writers. These pleasurable and self-satisfying moments are obviously reflected in her compendium of stories which give a wide range of references from "The Moons of Jupiter" and her further stories.

Munro's travelling experience and her connectivity to her ancestral roots enabled her writing stories of a deeper and wider significance of past life. She simply leads an ordinary life but mainly focuses the inner compulsion of life acquiring grandeur in her narrative technique. Her artistry undoubtedly focuses the complexity of life portraying the inner self. Her fictional world makes readers aware of people of certain community and their perceptions. These perceptions are mostly reflected in the tales from the damp metropolitan of British Columbia and its urban geography. This unique feature lies in her stories and becomes an overriding concern portraying little sorrows, little defeat, little victories which are expressed so forcefully that negotiate the individual and the mankind.

Alice Munro's narrative technique and characterisation are linked with her life's experience and imaginative manoeuvres. She was a young child during the Great Depression. She was given the name Alice Laidlaw when she was born in Canada around the Second World War, and the years following the war, she attended the University of Western Ontario in London. Her first book's release in 1968 coincided with the flower-child revolt and the beginning of the women's movement. The themes of Alice Munro's stories, which span five decades from 1931 to 1981, include her autobiography and family history. She can trace her ancestry back to James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, who was a close friend of Robert Burns during the time of Edinburgh Literati in the late eighteenth century. Hogg wrote "The Confessions of a Justified Sinner," which might have been a Munro book. Her own genealogy is partially Scottish Presbyterian. Anglicanism also forms another aspect of family in the religious oeuvre and some of the worst sins of the Anglicans are said to consist of eating with the wrong fork. Munro's thought of inner reality and her artistry are finely blended with the character's accomplishments, passion, attitudes and social concern. These cults of human perception also feature in the later part of her stories. The sordid reality of human life becomes a point of concern in protestant culture. The post-war social life along with its protestant phenomenon in the small town Sowesto, reveal the peculiar and intimate connections between Munro's artistry and her imaginative concern. In a traditional protestant culture like that of small-town Sowesto, where forgiving is not at all an easy task, retributive forces are not persistent and harsh, and nobody gets away with much, human indignity and reproach lurk around every corner. Grace is bestowed upon humanity without any effort on our part, and faith serves as the doctrine of justification. Grace is everywhere in Munro's writing, yet it is oddly hidden: nothing is predictable. Detonating emotions, crushing predispositions, and puzzles that transcend. Astonishment leaps away. Malignant acts can have long-lasting effects. Redemption travels far when it is least expected and in peculiar mood. Her fictions are replete with analysis, inference, and generalisation concerning all of these philosophical components. Munro in her debut work mentioned in "Lives of Girls and Women" and speaks that "people's lives...were simple, dull and amazing and unfathomable deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (236).

Munro's artistry is very much riveting and captures readers' attention and the use of ironical expressions in her story telling uniquely reveal the unwarranted human psyche and the sarcasm that expresses the morbid reality of life. Munro's stories are also expressions of man's recognition of dual sentiments towards sex. Her fictional narrative discovers silence and secrecy, privacy and clinical affairs, and the amorous indictment. Each character is surrounded by a neon penumbra. In Munro's hands, a disorganised bed communicates a greater amount of meaning than any explicit in-out, in-out representation of genitalia ever could. Munro's narrative may not be about love affair or any sexual confrontations but her characters are always enigmatic about their sexual potentiality or else sexual repulsion. Women sometimes remain envious and also are accustomed to their sexual power of other women. In return, guys flaunt themselves, enchant, flirt, beguile, and compete. Munro's characters are highly alert about their stances of sexual affinity and the sexual chemistry that works in the subterranean level of a character's psyche.

Another crucial ingredient in Munro's narration is the study of religious impulse and the divergence of religious life in Scotch Presbyterianism. The famous lines from "Lives of Girls and Women" describes how religious passion permeates people's lives, "deep tunnels lined with kitchen linoleum" (Munro 277) and this tells her Scottish Calvinist upbringing. Presbyterian theology marks Munro's conception of religion implying her ancestor's belief and their connectivity to the cultural past. Although Munro has stated that her characters are not concerned with religion, ("interview with Hancock") but she has become increasingly immersed in ancient religious tales as a result of the critique of patriarchal framework. One should mark what Munro conceives of Scotch Presbyterianism and as her ancestry of her own family hails from a different group, an expanded knowledge of the Canadian history of the religion is due in the study of her short stories. In order to view the Presbyterianism in particular and religion in general, "Lives of Girls and Women", "Friend of My Youth" and "The View from Castle Rock" stand prominent. All three of these anthologies of short stories demonstrate

how Munro's ancestors' Scots Calvinist religion provided a crucial framework for both her intellectual growth and the protagonists' and narrators' insatiable quest. Theodore W. Jennings defines phenomenological theology as being largely scientific, experimental, and truth-based, and this is how Munro handles religious issues in her second collection of short stories, "Lives of Girls and Women" (1971). David Hume's description of belief in his "Treatise on Human Nature" as a lively idea associated with or coupled with the current perception, is further reminiscent of the phenomenological method used in "Lives of Girls and Women," which is also similar to that definition. The imaginary town of Jubilee in Wawanash County is the setting for this cycle of stories about the coming of age of a young woman (Del Jordan) and her contradictory difficulties with her mother (Ada) (a hypothetical Huron County relative). According to Coral Ann Howells, the Huron Tract's wilderness region was freed up for settlement by Scottish, Irish, and English-born pioneers, including Munro's ancestor, one of the Laidlaw brothers. Religion is prevalent in "Lives of Girls and Women," as seen by the story titles ("Heirs of the Living Body," "Age of Faith," and "Baptizing") and the names of locales and characters. By establishing her story telling in Scottish reformation history, Munro takes a step closer to developing her unique Presbyterian theology in the 1990's collection pieces like "Friend of My Youth". Two stories, "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass," are set against the theological radicalism of the Covenanters and their breakaway organisation, the Cameronians. Munro has agreed to use Selkirk, a border town in Scotland, as the setting for this second narrative, "Scottish Ancestor," which takes place at the site of the battle of Philiphaugh in 1645 between the Royalist force led by the Marquis of Montrose and the Covenanter army under Sir David Leslie. A holy conflict between Scotland and England is described in the narrative. The imaginary world created by Munro has a significant amount of Scots Presbyterianism. Munro's prior works demonstrate how, as her career developed, she became increasingly interested in the Presbyterian theology of her ancestors. In "A Desert Station," it is mentioned that Reverend Thomas Boston (1676–1722), who was known for his books and sermons and who Karl Miller described as a Calvinist, miserabilist, and a firm believer in original sin, existed (18). In "A Wilderness Station," Annie Herron (née McKillop), a Presbyterian Scottish immigrant to Canada, is perplexed by both legal and religious authorities because she has a personal relationship with God without the aid of a priest. James Mullen, the clerk of the peace, and Walter McBain, the minister of the Free Presbyterian Church of North Huron, are both perplexed by this. In the Calvinistic universe, "The View from Castle Rock" is dependent on youth, nature, grace, and eternity.

Munro's short stories reflect the complex interlaced bits filled with glimpses into alternative lives and women's quiet wisdom. Adolescent females try for more glamorous world and assume more fascinating, imaginative and charming. Munro's stories ultimately turn into the story of elopement, women who consider themselves as spies or aliens are able to flee and maintain silence and secrecy to be camouflaged resistance to conventional civility. Portrayal of these stories interprets a category of women's counter discourse suggesting an alternative field for women's prospects beyond traditional pattern of masculinity and gender regulations, drawing new ways to define women's disparities, not just from males, but also from one another, across generations, classes, and levels of education. Munro is always aware of the issues related to girls and women. Sexuality and desire become the female subjectivity; its contradictions appear as the major subject of her stories.

Munro's productive career spans over six decades. This was also the period of social transition in Canada. It brought about changes in social and political lives among men and women. Munro's stories steadfastly portray the inner social conditions of women living just before and after 'The Great Depression' which created crisis in the social and political domain of life. This social transition not only brought changes in various regional communities, but also made women wary of their social reciprocation and status of living. To speak of two developments which occurred in Canadian provinces that women were given the chance to cast the vote and another event which remained more important that Quebec was given its provincial status. The stories of Munro minutely focus the unheard voice of women and their social and cultural disparity existing in a diverse community. A careful study of Munro's fiction simply connotes the unfathomable artistic quality of a writer who reflects the social history of women and speaks for gender equity in a society where women's inner potentiality and exploration remain at helm. Though Munro is not a staunch feminist in true sense, but remained more conscious of her ideology about social upbringing and political privileges of women. Munro's female characters always hold the ideology to remain at par with their counterparts in getting freedom and fulfilment. Munro's perception about the stories for women is her own experience as she got experience from her childhood days to her old age. She doesn't consider it to be significant, nor assumes herself to be anything other than a woman—especially because there are so many wonderful tales about girls and women. There are so many encouraging tales about young girls and women when somebody seems to be curious to listen, even though one might not be a woman. When Munro was a young girl, she had no sense of inferiority at all about being a woman. When someone spent her teens, he or she must feel to assist more about supporting the male to meet his needs and so on. And this might have been successful because she lived in a region of Ontario where women did the majority of the reading and story-telling and men were working outside on vital tasks and did not come inside to listen to tales. She thus felt really comfortable and happy.

Munro's artistic work regularly explores her attachment to Huron County, a rural area of Ontario, which she frequently visits from British Columbia and finds mesmerising. 1973 saw her return to that location. She was filled with echoes of the interesting environment, characters, events, names, and references. Her stories reflect events, memories, and the people. Characters like "Mr. Willens" from her 1950 story "Story for Sunday" and "The Love of a Good Woman" are repeated by Munro. While attending the University of Western Ontario, Munro simultaneously published her works. Her academic background also left an impression on some significant works, including "Wenlock Edge" and "Who Do You Think You Are" (1978), "The Beggar Maid" (1979), and "Family Furnishing" (2001). When Munro returned to Huron County in 1975, her aesthetic struggle with the region's physical characteristics, cultural conventions, and most important, her memories of it, led to the creation of strong stories. When she returned to Ontario, she continued to write in the same manner as when she was in British Columbia: elaborately, matching the form and structure with the experiments with ideas. She did so, nevertheless, with a higher feeling of urgency, as shown by her first project, "Places at Home" (an unpublished essay for a photography book), and "Who Do You Think You Are"?. In an effort to fit the plot that already exists in her preconceived notion, Munro, who considers herself to be a methodical writer, repeatedly re-evaluates her ideas in a story, starts draughts, rejects beginnings, accepts characters and scenes, and then starts over. Readers have long believed that Munro writes stories more admirably than anyone else, at least since "Dance of the Happy Shades" won her a prize in 1968, but Munro never seems to be totally sure or pleased. The two most evident indications that her uncertainties peaked in the middle of the 1970s and early 1980s are restructuring and rewriting. The story "Meneseung," which links rural Ontario with Munro's storytelling,

appears fascinating. Almeda Joynt Roth, a nineteenth-century woman poet from rural Ontario whom Munro conceived and constructed as a separate character despite the fact that she has a connection with two historical precursors, is the subject of the story. In the spring of 1990, "Friend of My Youth" was set to republish this story in a revised form after it had previously appeared in *The New Yorker*. The Maitland River, known in Ojibwa as Meneseteung, empties into Lake Huron after passing by the farm where Munro was raised in Lower Wingham, Ontario. This river frequently appears in her writings. Meneseteung, a story from the 1980s, has received substantial critical acclaim and, more importantly, in its ambiguity it leads toward the late Munro, whose writing we take up today. The stories of Munro act as maxims of human ideology and living which have been rightly mentioned by Constance Rooke:

More than any other writer I know, [Munro] has made us see how human beings turn life into anecdote – and how creatively, how perfidiously we mine out familial pasts in order to present to others a beguiling persona. She celebrates this tendency, and she castigates herself for it as well. Against her knowledge that we must construct ourselves in this fashion, Munro places her desire to be faithful to the past. She is concerned about exploiting it, about using the other to serve the self. And while she knows that art is a salvage operation, and therefore an act of love, she knows too that it lies and that we cannot finally disentangle the generous and self-serving elements of art. (158-159)

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