



Social Realism and Post-War Canadian Society: A perspective on Alice Munro's Short Stories

Chinmaya Chirasundar Das

Lecturer in English, Banki Autonomous College Banki, Cuttack-754 008,
Email: cdas929@gmail.com, Phone: 9938758191

ABSTRACT :

Munro like modern contemporary writers, focuses largely on a vivid description of landscapes and makes the setting almost concrete and vigorous, the prominent feature of almost all the stories. The sources of these external ramifications range from straight-forward descriptions of landscapes, constructions, and terrestrial details to mesmerising places through dialogue and actions. This narrative feature may enact the primary element by being the first to present itself to the reader's imagination and the last to leave his memory. The author of a short tale cannot help but be impacted by the environment in which he or she simultaneously embraces a definite and unique response from the world with his or her own experience. The writer's response will be a thorough filtration of shaping ideas and a distinctive personal vision. Munro's fiction dealing with communities and places sometimes gives instruction and pleasure. Her fictive world concerning the post-war social milieu in Ontario elucidates different humanistic perceptions such as political, religious, psychoanalytic, and anthropological. Her short stories are also coloured by social and cultural factors. People's lives and conditions of living reciprocate and seem to be the basis of sociological expansion in the mid twentieth century. The economic output and the expansion of industry after the Civil War spurred the creation of the financiers and businessmen who once filled our literature, helping shift the drama in fiction from the dream of accumulating wealth or the agony of the needy and destitute to the sensibilities of the middle class and its dropouts in a time of relative affluence. With a few notable exceptions, literature and popular culture are marked by the feeling of psychological trouble that might be unique to a culture perceived by growing industrialisation and alienation from political processes that throw the individual back upon himself. The drama of power and vulnerability once played on the basis of literary sensibility and on the economic stage, also fills the facade of personal and social relations. This present paper tries to analyse socio-economic conditions and the stark realism that reflect the sense of vulnerability distinctive to women helps us understand life and culture in various terms.

(Key words: Realism, Post-war Society, Narrative, Economic Output , Vulnerability, Cultural Factors)

Munro's sense of storytelling helps us understand life and culture in various terms. In the first instance, her fiction deals with psychological studies of characters in the fields of humiliation, combativeness, and ambiguity in sexual and social life. The implications of drugs, social detachment, and the sense of being personally overwhelmed make many characters see social problems as personal crises resolvable only through a hard and hardening acceptance of life as an experience of force or submission. The societal and psychological impacts of characters create a process of internalisation through the mind's eye: an illustration of intricacy and inner conflict into which the generational struggle of man with society is condensed. The suitable proposition of these conflicts seems to be a way out in which the writer has attempted to contain and control aggression as a human fact and literary subject.

The world of Alice Munro serves as social realism to the situation of men and women. The idea of femininity and masculinity is projected in stark contrast in her stories. The narrow sphere of activity, the family that encircles many male characters, men who can confront disruptions in society only as represented by their annoyed female members of the family. The sense of vulnerability distinctive to women is almost perceived across the Canadian culture. The way of gaining male protectiveness and other benefits of civilisation are rarely projected in the fictions of Alice Munro. Her fictions offer a unique perspective on Gender and social disparity. Violence and social trauma turn up as nightmares of persecution or torture. Horrendous living condition and stigmatised world reflect characters' sensibility and bias often results in sexual domination and submission. Fascination with self – protection is an extended theme in Munro's fictional world. This also gives an inevitable impact on sexual love and sexual roles. The depiction also gives heroes and heroines for their sexual fulfilment rather than intimacy and emotion. They find themselves as failure in giving parental concern, express inability in recognising the bond and privacy between husbands and wives. Prominent characters put their role of masculinity in order to subvert the familial and societal aspects of female members. Aggression and vulnerability can check and balance in the reciprocation of peculiar connections. Conversely the victim attempts to avoid victimisation by becoming an aggressor. It would be an oversimplification to say that men and women are only attempting to repair or correct their lives by assuming the role conventionally assigned to the opposite sex.

Munro's fictions also project the reality and the rationality of the Canadian literary imagination. The story teller assumes order in the making and finds hope in the desperation in her fictional creations. Twentieth-century Canadian fiction has always been at once more panoramic and more personal than either the English or the French. Although after World War 1, Americans might still take cues from the masters of the nineteenth century or such early twentieth century writers as Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, they were now faced with the task of being large and capacious at a time when the public world seemed to be in the danger of becoming too complicated for any one person to understand, let alone encompass. From

Walter Scott onwards, fiction writers have explored the place of individual action amid the pressures of historical forces and sweeping public events. Through the early twentieth century, writers of fiction could believe in the credential of historical forces, although even Marxist ideologies screwed up with the slippery enormity of World War I. Increasingly enough, during the 1930s, history seemed to become a nightmare where inner logic and its ways to adjust its perceived ideology could not hold sway over the demands of character and sensibility. During the 1940s and especially after the 1950s, the social history of Canada, or much before its prolonged time, became the theme of much psychological and sociological writing, in both fiction and nonfiction, allowing contemporary political conflicts between North and South over integration, industrialization, and the true setting up of Americanism to be easily displaced into a reconstruction of nineteenth century social detail. The onset of Cold War paranoia, the unwavering determination to eradicate all forms of heresy, including religion, particularly of the puritan variety, may have resulted from nostalgia for the simpler political and historical patterns of World War II, when everyone worked together for a common goal.

Apart from all these political and social happenings in North America, especially in Canada, the realism in Munro's fiction narrows down her autobiographical quest to seek and settle in Wingham, Ontario, with the reflection of her past life. Munro, obviously, is a writer who prefers to announce her own self in narrating her adolescence, married life, and travels across different regions in Canada. In Munro's settling in Ontario or British Columbia, her circumstantial details are very much expressive in her early fiction. Some selected stories, such as "The Office", "The Peace of Utrecht" and "The Ottawa Valley" are concerned with the autobiographical elements, which primarily focus on the considerable validity of her fiction and also on her enchanting craze for accuracy, realism and verisimilitude. Munro's stories also enlarge our understanding of social unrest and gender inequality prevailing in Canada as a post-war gendered settler society. Canadian fictional narratives have always placed a lot of emphasis on the country's homogeneity as an immigrant civilization since the late nineteenth century, and the main theme of Canadian fiction writers has been the experimental concern of Canada as a settler society. Authors of fiction added to this theme by writing about Canada's settlement frontiers. Explicitly, these stories focus on successfully taming the bush and turning this wilderness into a hospitable region of agriculture or farmland. These views are being contrasted with the view of Canada as characterized by coexisting in fiction dealing with gender-based society. Munro's story wittily gives the concept of the transformation of space and region into Canadian national importance and the rootedness of the immigrant community. Honouring the wilderness as a response to the exceptional Canadian landscape resulted in another relationship with primitive society, and the veneration of individuals who turned the wildness into a densely populated nation, highlighted a different relationship with the soil. According to this theory, changing the landscape was essential in forming Canada as a nation-state. According to some, the time of settlement played a significant role in the formation of Canada as a nation and has had a significant impact on Canadian identity. Writers of historical fiction about the settling of Canada viewed the process of changing the landscape as a good phenomenon. This on-going focus on the wilderness' transition may be due to the fact that much of Canada, especially in the west of Ontario, was still in the process of becoming a society until the second decade of the twentieth century. This changing perception of the wilderness as a necessary evil has persisted throughout the new immigrant community. The Ontario, which records much of Munro's fictional world, serves as the formative influence of her storytelling. The story "The Love of a Good Woman" is recognised as a tour de force in giving the story the pictorial, material, and sensible approach to the landscape and the view of Western Ontario. Various listed elements may be seen in Walley, Ontario, including photographs, churns, horse harnesses, and porcelain insulators. The writer's intention is to extol the museum's everlasting high-quality materials. The next paragraph adds:

Also there is a red box, which has the letters D.M WILLENS, OPTOMETRIST, printed on it, and a note beside it, saying, "This box of Optometrist's instruments though not very old has considerable local significance, since it belonged to Mr. D. M Willens, who drowned in the Peregrine River, 1951. It escaped the catastrophe and was found, presumably the anonymous donor, who dispatched it to be a feature of our collection (Munro 3)

This story highlights Munro's pre-eminence as a best storyteller, establishes her achievement, and brings laurel when it first appears in *The New Yorker*. Subtitled as "A Murder, a Mystery, a Romance," Munro manages the degree of sensibility and in giving the references, such as the box of optometrist's tools currently on display; Munro ensures the conditions of various people's lives. Openly viewed and extended, Munro still wants to depict pictures of the optometrist's tools and how these tools are placed in the museum and talks about the responsibility of people putting things together and highlighting the essence of instruments. Swiftly rendered and mysteriously delved into the whole story, "The Love of a Good Woman" places Munro's rural sensibility and her own attachment to the native place with a sense of projecting her autobiographical quest and her ever increasing relationship with people past and present more than any writer of contemporary Canada. The profoundest inclination, even after fifty years, still remains the same. From 1968 to 2006, Munro wrote 11 anthologies of stories and an astounding novel expressing the predicament of women living in a gender-biased society. In her much admired stories, there is the reflection of her intimate concern and profoundest portrayal of women with their inner constraints to be socially, politically, and economically balanced and much needed reconstruction of social and gender disparity. In fact, Munro's Wingham, Ontario is subject to the portrayed imaginary landscape that was created in the early years of her profession of distance and imaginative return. It has become a location that is well-known and has undergone extensive mediating. Munro's chronological fictions best deal with the social and geographical features of Canada around the mid-twentieth century. The setting of Munro's stories revives her past memories towards a functional society with liberty and freedom of expression. The locale of most of her stories is her native Ontario, which becomes a metaphor of liberty, equality, and fraternity cutting across all sections of life. She has a keen fascination with the surroundings' natural environments in Ontario. In an essay, "Everything Here is Touchable and Mysterious," Munro eulogises:

There is a short river the Indians called the *Menesetung* and the first settler, or surveyors of the Huron Tract, called the Maitland. From the place where the forks join, at Wingham, it winds about 35 miles, to flow into the lake at Goderich, Ont. Just west of Wingham it flows through the straggling, unincorporated, sometimes legendary non-part of town called lower town (pronounced Loretown) and past my father's land Cruikshank's farm, to make a loop called the Big Bend before flowing Zetland Bridge and that is the mile or so I know of it. (33)

Such lines are typical in creating fiction by using places and scenery to evoke the meaning she seeks out. This inner feeling and the creative self also find a place in the essay's final lines:

Because I am still partly convinced that this river—not even the whole river, but
this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures
you want. I name the plants, I name the fish, and every name seems to me

triumphant, every leaf and quick fish remarkably valuable. This ordinary place is sufficient; everything here is touchable and mysterious. (33)

Though the situations and surroundings evoke the autobiography and appear to be related with images to her past experience and observable facts, they reveal the mystery and inner reality: a concrete portrayal of the environment where she grew up, the social traditions and milieu where men and women were accustomed to orthodox life and their perceptions in the prevailing mid-twentieth-century Canada. Munro's fiction is an emotional reality because of her dedication to the past, which also gives her the impetus to restructure and harmonise the present. For insight into the current situation, she looks to the past. This gives her an unshakeable faith in the truth of her own inner reflection. Most of her stories' mythopoeic and realistic treatments come from recounting her people's historical experiences and their pursuit of material success. Her inward expression represents a paradigm shift that is beyond the scope of the human mind. Several of Munro's stories, including "Peace of Utrecht," "Sunday Afternoon," "Time of Death," and "Winter Wind," delve into the author's own search for meaning in life.

The protagonist of Munro's stories is either a woman or a girl. Their voices have always been the metaphorical projections of the anxiety and confinement of their lives. Women always experience social crises and a disjointed social life. Her female protagonists always seem to have battled against conventional reality and situational differences. In spite of the patriarchal social pressure, they maximise their reasonable instincts by not burying their desires within the restrictive, politically sensitised world. The divisive life between their inner selves and the adaptation of the outer world leads to the social and familial incoherence. Some of her female protagonists remain aloof and independent, but a majority of them cry out and protest against the age-old beliefs and patriarchy. Munro's narrative discourse has always been an ideology to distance the disharmony of the inner-self from social discontents. Her storytelling appears more appealing and raises the question of the practise of a way of life in a faith-based community, transforming historical lore rather than inflicting any specific ideology and thus giving the radical belief a solid appeal and durability. Her characterization, plot, and narrative art seem more continuous because of their discontinuity and fragmented nature. The stories seem fragmented, and the characters' movements seem inconsistent and fragile. These sometimes cause a gap and silences become inoperative in their expression of private thoughts and anguish. Stories of women and girls remain untold, and feminine fantasy remains buried. Protagonists always want to succeed one after another in the embattled field of sex and gender. In the bourgeois middle class society, purity is always associated with the female, for the maidenhead of the male is too abstract to be believed in. Not only is virginity a fact provable in court only in a girl; for the middle class mind, only femaleness has anything symbolically to do with purity. There is a natural demand for purity in its most tangible scene—for the enraptured hymen—where morality is increasingly connected with sexual continence, where being good is the same as being chaste, and where marriage is the fulfilment of love.

Munro's fictional world also deciphers the idea of the "human heart," which is to say, the psychic complexities and dark self-deceits, but especially in the moment of love. Her fiction reflects both the psychological and the erotic, dedicated not to the unwinding of an action replete with sharp reversals and recognitions but to the exploration of a moral choice. The setting remains ordinary bourgeois life, for them, provincial life, a world remote from the court and the great centres. She could conceive, without difficulty, a simple domestic scene in the midst of Canada; her story feels the need for a bucolic background, defined by that compromise between the pastoral and the genteelly realistic.

A unique feature in Munro is that the female is portrayed as pure sentiment, while the male as naked phallus, proliferates endlessly. In the end, even the intelligence to seduce for which the male protagonist figure originally stands is travestied in favour of women's inner feelings; though the male is still permitted to express his opinions, they are shown as being irrational, childish, and unrelated to life and common sense. It is not difficult to comprehend why a woman would have promoted and embraced this mythical narrative about the traits of the sexes and their intricacies. Why a woman, too, should have accepted this insult to their nature and place in a society that is puzzling, but they don't oppose, in fact, accept it, even repeating in their own novels, the sentimental feminist cliches. Perhaps it seems to them, on one level of consciousness or another, a symbolic restitution for the injustices they had no intention of reforming—rather like the wealthy Victorian's self-satisfied weeping over the plight of the poor. In the end, the male and the female arrive at a mutual pact, based on guilt and resentment, to castrate him further—to turn him into a dejected brat instead of a sexual predator. The acceptance by the male of the female image of him, first as seducer and blackguard, then as bad boy, follows naturally upon the female's acceptance of the male's image of her as sexless saviour; and perhaps, after all, the former travesty is a revenge for the latter one, rather than the social indignities visited upon them.

The tradition of fiction by women writers in Canada has been a long and effective one, and this has been dominated by women writers. Short fiction provides a platform for women in the fields of social reality and gender dichotomy in the Canadian social and cultural sphere. It gives a certain height and flavour to their story-telling. The historical evolution, the unfamiliar circumstances, peculiar weather conditions, and uncertain survival in the region make the writings more fictive and accessible. The descriptive events and stories of the surroundings and lives create a fable, particularly in the Canadian literary genre. The Canadian short story established itself as a special genre at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In Munro's fiction, the human psyche dealing with the absence of platonic love makes the conditions less passionate in puritan minds. It also projects a society without a heterosexual solution, and its human psyche seems completely unsatisfactory and doesn't depict any real consummation between men and women. The fiction and the narrative art that Munro has always focused on, contradict the traditional and post-war society that needs the healing paranoia between conscious and unconscious, impulse and reason, and society and nature. Yet those cleavages are more deeply felt, declared, and visible in the pattern of Canadian historical life represented by the Frontier mass in other countries. Finding a pure replacement for adulterous passion and marriage is equally the curiosity and the fear of American influence on Munro's fiction. The anti-sentimentalism that is simultaneously erotic and immaculate, a marriage that does not bind its members to society or sin, grows emotional while still serving as a sustained myth for the union of the ego with the id, the thinking self with its suppressed desires.

The failure of sentiment and the evasion of passionate fulfilment of love and the unaccepted virgin protestant serve as the two cardinal and astounding facts of the history of Canadian fictional writing. The artistic presentation of unconsummated love and the dark aspects of human impulses and erotic desires in loneliness make his bond with the rest of the world stronger. Particularly in Canada, where a nation of rootless men confronts not only the vestiges of older cultures but also the wilderness, this loneliness is most deeply felt yet most hysterically denied. And here is the artist, the sole aristocrat in a world that has denied the aristocratic principle. Canadian fiction writers are not privileged enough to define their own middle class values

against a surviving tradition of gallantry. The sentimental love religion seems to retain the softening of Puritan rigor, and novels in Canada could not have been even printed if the church of the pilgrims had not first relinquished its social control.

The concept of gender and its pervasive influence on North American society and its overt criticism of patriarchal ideology are explicit in Munro's stories. Munro's tacit admittance of major influential writers such as Flannery o' Connor, Carson McCullers along with her peculiar and intimate connections to her own environment South-western Ontario offer close-up view of her fictional narrative and infliction of gender as well. She helps to legitimise a fundamental challenge to mainstream values and to orthodox roles, including gender roles. Munro's lens through which she presents her stories and the world to the reader has a different focus than expected. The fictional writings of Alice Munro create a spell of characters such as old men and women, obsessed children, young people inappropriately in love or devoting their lives to impossible endeavours, which authenticate the personal and the troubled self in society and family as well. Her fictional narratives of characters, their existence, their socio-economic circumstances, and the operations of their interrelations, though limited, get wider context. Starting from "Open Secrets" and the stories in it and her later stories the characters' multiple voices speak of a split between aestheticism and realism and find the possibility of space in reconstructing gender and a troublesome social world.

Munro's feminine fantasy abounds in domestic life and structures the surface under reality. Her stories are reflective and diffuse the vast domain of life, living, human relationships, and falling in love, and these involve characters from various societal, cultural, and political backgrounds. Munro's description of various aspects of domestic life allows her to render memories and autobiographical elements. For instance, Munro recounts the furniture of the house in "Royal Beatings" while depicting the scenario where Rose's father was about to beat her, performing a theatrical act in the ordinary existence of life.

She tries again looking at the kitchen floor, that clever and comforting geometrical arrangement, instead of looking at him or his belt. How can this go on in front of such daily witnesses—the linoleum, the calendar with the mill and creek and autumn trees, the old accommodating pots and pans?... Those things aren't going to help her, none of them can rescue her. They turn bland and useless, even unfriendly. Pots can show malice, the patterns of linoleum can leer up at you, treachery is the other side of dailliness. (5)

The cultural and gender diversity in both private and public life are reflected in Munro's stories. In Munro's stories, the transition of women from daughterhood to motherhood—whether it is public or personal—seems symbolic and appears to be taking the place of the traditional marriage ceremony as a sign of adulthood. But according to women's perspective, becoming a mother is the more significant transition where the two situations complement one another. Gender implications and suggestions analyse the situations that are created for women. When attempting to comprehend the past and its effects on current relationships, including romantic and sexual ones as well as those between parents and children, it can occasionally seem helpless. Thus, the hunt for symbols that accurately represent the present reality begins. These symbols can then be used to form a new framework of belief that will serve modern human needs and point the way to a future that is viable.

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