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POST COLONIAL READING OF MUNRO'S *CARRIED AWAY*: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

"This world is a wilderness in which we may get our station changed, but the move will be out of one wilderness station unto another." (Munro 336)

This enigmatic quote is a part of 'A Wilderness Station', one of the many stories in - 'Carried Away' which is Alice Munro's Man Booker Award winning short story anthology. It sets us on a journey through the unique sensations of Post-colonial feminist sensibilities that Munro lends easelessly to her work. The term, 'wilderness' and the desperate sense of solitude honed by the inner turmoil indicate that the real wilderness stays intact and never leaves a person by a mere change of geography and situation. This sense of being alone in company, the certain dissociation and the sense of "otherness" opens up ways to introduce the title of this article

INTRODUCTION

Born as Alice Laidlaw in 1931, in Wingham Southwestern Ontario, Munro began writing and publishing stories at the university itself and slowly rose to fame. Her gradual rise to success is a story in itself, how even after many of her short stories appearing regularly in Canadian Forum, Chateline and the Tamarack review, and winning the Governor General's Award for her first collection, *Dance of The Happy Shades* in 1968, she was such an obscure figure in Canadian literary circles that when in 1971, *Lives of Girls and Women* came out, she was called a 'new talent'! The late recognition of Munro has a lot to do with her choice of the genre namely, short stories.

Starting to develop as a national genre in the 1890s, the English-Canadian short story is still a fairly recent literary phenomenon, gradually having gained more popularity. Its most significant model of development was the American short story, which by the end of the nineteenth century with representatives such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, was far more cultivated. According to Reingard M. Nischik, today the short story can be considered to be "the flagship genre of Canadian literature". In contrast to the American short story, postmodernist short fiction never did bloom in Canada. Today coincidentally, the three most regarded and best-known English-Canadian short story writers are female: Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro, of which Munro is the only one to write exclusively short stories. Her success both nationally and internationally has helped to raise the profile of the Canadian short

story. Nischik also claims that Munro's attraction to the short-story format is linked to her particular writing aesthetics, which stresses the "fluidity, incompleteness, variability, and the ultimate inexplicability of human experience" (206) through the use of explanatory gaps, the construction of "worlds alongside", the contrasting of disparate interpretations, juxtaposition of past and present, the constant deferral of fixed meanings, etc. In brief, the contemporary Canadian short story can be characterized first by its diversity and vitality, since almost every Canadian writer has made a contribution to the short story. Second, by the high number of short-story cycles in Canada, which brings it closer to the novel; and finally, by the significance of the modernist-realist tradition of storytelling. In an interview Munro herself admits, "I have all these disconnected realities in my own life, and I see them in other people's lives. That was one of the problems—why I couldn't write novels, I never saw things hanging together any too well." She also cites a personal anecdote which made her choose her genre of writing. In The Paris Interview she says,

> The material about my mother is my central material in life, and it always comes the most readily to me. If I just relax, that's what will come up. So, once I started to write that, I was off. Then I made a big mistake. I tried to make it a regular novel, an ordinary sort of childhood adolescence novel. About March I saw it wasn't working. It didn't feel right to me, and I thought I would have to abandon it. I was very depressed. Then it came to me that what I had to do was pull it apart and put it in the story form. Then I could handle it. That's when I learned that I was never going to write a real novel because I could not think that way.

In due course of this postcolonial writing, we see the variety of ways, Munro presents her women and where she designates their place in society as they are subjected to the methodic use of institutions to formalize power over them; in most cases it is the exploration of issues such as marriage, sexuality, parental control and command chain in the family where the girl–child, as well as, the adult women in society have scarce mobility, voice and command positions. When Spivak asks, *'Can the Subaltern Speak?'*, Munro seems to validate the rhetorical question by creating numerous characters and spins stories around them where instances of failed and miscommunication abound. Some are not authorized to speak, others lack the courage to do so, some who do speak; can use the language of the Father or the Law, thus structure, thematic and character portrayal in Munro's work supports Post-colonial reading of people especially women.

Post-colonial studies mainly aim to depict the existential horrors of the subaltern - who is the marginalized character in a powerful hegemonic arrangement of society. In this particular context, women emerge as one common stereotypical victim of such domination, for whether it be the 'First World' or the 'Third World'; women are subjected to different levels of mental and physical trauma. She investigates the roles of women in her stories. She also explores the ideas of barriers - including class and generation gaps - and the effect of myriad relationships on her female characters. As all of her central characters are girls or women, it is inevitable that her stories explore situations from a female perspective, and are inclined towards a woman's outlook and discovery of feelings and attitudes from a feminine point-of-view. Her stories often include tales of women embroiled in tribulations due to sociological injustice and the struggles faced universally by women. Her stories therefore, even though enmeshed within her home territory of South Ontario, most strikingly elicit a unanimous nod of affirmative confirmation from women in any part of the world, for having experienced the verisimilitude of emotion, sensation and awareness; as her various protagonists. Those looking for a post-colonial feminist reading of Munro therefore, are amply rewarded and thoroughly engaged, looking for the relevant passages and links; the following study; thus proved worth the effort. Various issues raised by post-colonialism such as double consciousness, hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry and the feeling of otherness are the recurring motifs of Munro's stories.

The term 'Post-colonial Feminism' with reference to Munro's work can therefore be traced by the use of

the repetitive use of concepts of hybridity and duality, the use of gothic to represent the subaltern situations and the use of grotesque to project the horrors of the gross realities of life which Munro describes so often in her narratives. This kind of subjugation manifests itself in Munro's theme of dread, fright, psychological games, repression, madness, death and the all effacing atmosphere of gothic, particularly Southern Ontario Gothic. The Southern Ontario Gothic is a sub-genre of the gothic novel genre and a feature of Canadian Literature that comes from Southern Ontario generally characterized by a stark realism of the middle class residents of that area. A point in case would be the settings of many of her stories like Ladner's mysterious house in 'Vandals' and many elements of most of her stories are typical prototypes of the settings of the gothic castles of Anne Radcliffe in 'Mysteries of Udolpho'. Munro's depiction of the harsh crude realities pertaining to Gothic genre and description, invariably leads to grotesque, i.e. something which is very bizarre but succeeds in creating empathy in the reader. In 'Royal Beatings', Flo's fascination with the otherwise seemingly gross details of death is a perfect example,

> Flo liked the details of a death: the things people said, the way they protested or tried to get out of bed or swore or laughed (some did those things), but when she said that Rose's mother mentioned a hard-boiled egg in her chest she made the comparison sound slightly foolish, as if her mother really was the kind of person who might think you could swallow an egg whole." (Munro 2)

Later in the story when Rose's father gets ready to administer that 'Royal Beating', again the narration is graphic to the extent of appearing grotesque.

> He is beginning to warm up. He gives her a look. This look is at first cold and challenging. It informs her of his judgment, of the hopelessness of her position. Then it clears, it begins to fill up with something else, the way a spring fills up when you clear the leaves away. It fills with hatred and pleasure. Rose sees that and knows it. Is that just the description of anger? No. Hatred is right. Pleasure is right.... (Munro 18)

Herb Abott in 'The Turkey Season' deals with carcasses and the entire description of the Turkey Barn is clearly grotesque. Alternately, consider the description of the conversation topics that a character called Harvey in the story titled 'Differently'; "who told scandalous and indiscreet hospital stories, and was blandly outrageous about necrophilia and masturbation."(Munro 211-212) The 'South Ontario' landscape and the problems thereof immediately spring at the reader the very first story onwards, which is called, 'Royal Beatings'. *W*hen we see Munro revealing the strange, barely-suspected currents flowing beneath the smooth surface of what are fairly familiar familial incidents. Thus the exposition introduces the theme very effectively and the following stories 'Beggar Maid', 'The Turkey Season, 'Friend of My Youth', 'Differently', 'Carried Away', 'The Albanian Virgin', 'A Wilderness Station', 'Vandals', ' Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage ' brim over with these residual and potent emotions and the 'familiarly unfamiliar' way Munro treats them. Munro is a magician when it comes to her craft of writing. She simply picks up a random, simple incident which she witnesses or comes across and infuses it with a life of its own, what she does with her material can be termed as something which the Romantics termed as the - 'glorification of commonality'. She uses her material from autobiographical sources and thus the effortless ease at expressing it, in her Paris interview she states,

Memory is the way we keep telling ourselves our stories- and telling other people a somewhat different version of our stories. We can hardly manage our lives without a powerful ongoing narrative. And underneath all these edited, inspired, self-serving or entertaining stories, there is, we suppose some bulging awful mysterious entity called THE TRUTH, which our fictional stories are supposed to be poking at and grabbing pieces of. What could be more interesting as a life's occupation? One of the ways we do this, I think, is by trying to look at what memory does (different tricks at different stages of our lives) and at the way people's different memories deal with the same (shared) experience. The more disconcerting

the differences are, the more the writer in me feels an odd exhilaration.

Very often Munro creates binary opposites in her stories to emphasize the feeling of otherness. The creation of binary opposition structures also changes the way we view others. This is very similar to Bhabha's concept of the colonial discourse when he says, 'the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (Bhabha 70). But the position of the colonized is not as simple according to Bhabha and here he comes very close to the actual mindset of Munrovian females because the colonized is usually depicted as the 'other' who is the opposite of the colonizer's image but on the other hand, the colonizer is always trying to remove this otherness, to make him similar to him. Thus, he says, 'colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible'. (Bhabha 70-1).

In 'Royal Beatings', the division between Hanratty and West Hanratty emphasises not only the apparent division between the two parts of the city divided by invisible lines between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', but also accentuates the feeling of 'otherness' which is felt by the marginalized sections very often- "Rose thought of her own family as straddling the river, belonging nowhere, but that was not true. West Hanratty was where the store was and they were, on the struggling tail end of the main street." (Munro 5). In another story from the same original collection, 'The Beggar Maid', there again is a sense of alienation and otherness when Rose takes Patrick to her own house,

> …she felt ashamed on more levels than she could account. She was ashamed of the food and the swan and the plastic tablecloth; ashamed of Patrick, the gloomy snob, who made a startled grimace when Flo passed him the toothpick-holder; ashamed for Flo with her timidity and hypocrisy and pretensions; most of all ashamed for herself.... (Munro 52).

Rose, who according to Bhabha, in this case is the 'degenerate types' somehow wanted to get rid of her ties with her life in West Hanratty and adapt herself completely as a part of the world Patrick, came from, but even that was becoming repressively difficult for her. She suddenly finds herself being very defensive of her birthplace and acknowledges,

> Nevertheless her loyalty was starting. Now that she was sure of getting away, a layer of loyalty and protectiveness was hardening around every memory she had, around the store and the town, the flat, somewhat scrubby, unremarkable countryside. She would oppose this secretly to Patrick's views of mountains and ocean, his stone and timbered mansion. Her allegiances were far more proud than his. (Munro 53).

In her theory of post-colonialism, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak uses the term 'epistemic violence' which refers to the Western way of looking down and sometimes even destructing the colonized community's way of knowing or simply the subordination of its knowledge. This epistemic violence becomes a powerful tool of domination in Munro's hands. Many of her characters exploit the insight they have about the weaknesses of the relatively weaker characters to their impending advantage. In 'Royal Beatings' for instance, Flo uses this knowledge about the short tempered nature of her husband and the helpless dependence of her step daughter Rose, to control her, and later uses the same knowledge to comfort her,

> Flo will put it down without a word and go away. A large glass of chocolate milk on it, made with Vita Milk from the store… She will turn away, refuse to look, but left away with these eatables will be miserably tempted; roused and troubled and drawn back from thoughts of suicide or flight by the smell of salmon, the anticipation of crisp chocolate, she will reach out a finger, just to it around the edge of one of the sandwiches (crusts cut off!) to get the overflow, get a taste. (Munro 31)

This causes Rose not only to become increasingly resistant to her pretentious affectations but also gradually is wracked by guilt over accepting her peace offering .Thus being subjected to 'epistemic violence' consistently, makes Rose a victim who allies with her

perpetrator with little knowledge of such a circumstance thereby constricting her knowledge and subordinating herself to the aforementioned 'epistemic violence'.

The oppression singles out women. Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase 'a double colonization' which refers to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. The otherness of outsiders which is a very frequent occurrence in the post-colonial discourse is visible in the last paragraph of the representative story 'Carried Away', 'the town was full of the smell of horses. As evening came on, big blinkered horses with feathered hooves pulled the sleighs across the bridge, past the hotel, beyond the streetlights, down the dark side roads. Somewhere out in the country they would lose the sound of each other's bells.'

It is also visible in the complexes of the colonized subject which Rose feels when she gets a scholarship to the university and lives with Dr. Henshawe,

> In Dr. Henshawe's charming rooms there was always for Rose the raw knowledge of home, an indigestible lump, and at home now her sense of order and modulation elsewhere exposed such embarrassing sad poverty in people who never taught themselves poor. Poverty was not just wretchedness, as Dr. Henshawe seemed to think, it was not just deprivation. It meant having those ugly tube lights and being proud of them. It meant continual talks of money and malicious talk about new things people had bought and whether they were paid for. (Munro 30).

The treatment of her short stories is extraordinary because of the simple language, effortless style and undemanding fluidity which she uses, as she herself said in the interview:

> I read this about myself, the unadorned style. It's just like your clothes are plain. And I don't think of my writing this way. I don't deliberately keep it that way. There are writers I admire like, say, Nabokov; if I wrote like that I would be perfectly happy. It's not an artistic decision.

Despite such an austere style, she projects the existential angst and the rootlessness embedded in her characters by the use of irony and paradox, for instance, in 'The Wilderness Station' when James Mullen mentioned the condition of Annie to Reverend Walter McBain, "I asked her what she thought would happen to her now, and she said, well, you will try me and then you will hang me. But you do not hang people in the winter, she said, so I can stay here till spring" (Munro 333).

Note how Munro uses verbal irony to signify spring, a traditional time for rejuvenation, as the time of death. Her dialogues and narration also bear the element of self-revelation; they portray typical Munrovian inner conflict as her characters belong to two worlds at any given point in time.The way Munro plays with time as an ornamental as well as necessary technical tool to symbolize the stream of consciousness of her characters and also interesting is the memory bank on which she so heavily relies upon. As she says, "Sometimes I get the start of a story from a memory, an anecdote that gets lost and is usually unrecognizable in the final story." She keeps her readers completely engaged by making her high pace style of narration, by her own admission.

> In my own work, I tend to cover a lot of time and jump back and forward in time, and sometimes the way I do this s not very straightforward. I want the reader to feel something is astonishing. Not what happens but the way everything happens. These long short story fictions do the best for me.

However, the raw material is itself a fragment of memory, thus, it can never be systematic. Many of her dialogues are written in the stream-of-consciousness- When Rose is engaged to Patrick, she is caught in a very complicated situation since deep inside she knows that she doesn't love him, but when she returns to Hanratty for the weekend and is recognized by the high society people as one of them,

> this woman had never spoken to Rose, never given any sign before of knowing who she was. Paths were opening now, barriers were softening. And Rose- oh, this was the worst, this was the shame of it- Rose, instead of cutting the dentist's wife, was blushing and skittishly flashing her diamond and saying yes, that would be a lovely idea. When people said how happy she must be she did think herself happy. It was as simple as that. She dimpled and sparkled and

> turned herself into a fiancée with no trouble at all…. (Munro 54)

Such emotional turbulence is a defining trait of the modern artificiality peculiar in contemporary society, and Munro succeeds in describing it so aptly. Her writing is often classified by some scholars as autobiographical but Munro herself terms it as 'personal'.

She also makes use of the epistolary form of writing as a way to let us know what is going on in the minds of many characters. Reading these letters always seems liking sharing the personal space of a character as the letters of Annie which reveal her gradual breakdown in 'A Wilderness Station', the importance of letters in 'Differently', the exchange of letters between Jack and Louisa in 'Carried Away', the mischief done through letters in 'Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage' by Sabitha and Edith which ironically resulted into Ken and Johanna being happily married.

Margaret Atwood does justice to her when she says in the introduction to *Carried Away*

In Munro's work, grace abounds, but it is strangely disguised: nothing can be predicted. Emotions erupt. Preconceptions crumble. Surprises proliferate. Astonishments leap out. Malicious acts can have positive consequences. Salvation arrives when least expected, and in peculiar forms. (xiv)

Carried Away is a panorama of the life and people of Ontorio and the way Munro treats this landscape is astonishing. There is hardly a vein of a small town environment which escapes her; she is well acquainted with the compound emotions, social complexes and the reactions of these people which are reflected in the accurate descriptions in her stories. The Post Colonial feminist aspect of her writing is underscored highly as she is a woman spinning stories from her "personal" account and lending them a voice which their gender denies them otherwise; being units of the structures that over-rule and overlook them. In her own words,

I always have to know my characters in a lot of depth- what clothes they'd choose, what they were like at school, etc… and I know what happened before and what will happen after the part of their lives I am dealing with. I can't see them just now, packed into the stress of the moment. So I suppose I want to give as much of them as I can… and underneath all these edited, inspired, self-serving or entertaining stories, there is, we suppose some bulging awful mysterious entity called THE TRUTH, which our fictional stories are supposed to be poking at and grabbing pieces of. What could be more interesting as a life's occupation?

What she says about her characters is quintessentially true and sums up this article as an apt authority speaks about the central characters; mostly women ,the double subalterns -who not only find a voice in her writing but also render most of these voices loud enough to resound in the readers' minds until much later. Be it Rose and Flo from 'Royal Beatings' trying to adjust the physical realities of their respective dreams of adolescent romantic love or readjusting the moderate lifestyles or be it Georgia and Maya from 'Differently' who might be poles apart temperamentally yet seem to have a bond of mutual dependence that grapples searches for honest answers when faced with a common interest in a man, Munro knows what they want to say and how they would do it. Not just that, she also knows how exactly women would conduct epistolary exchanges, be it the Librarian of 'Carried Away' or the couple of friends, Edith and Sabitha who play God in Johanna's life in 'Hateship, Friendship, Courtship ,Loveship,…' In Munro, therefore, those who seek the voice for the silent subaltern, find a voice that is loud and subtle all at once. She creates a metaphorical refuge for these characters in the pages of her stories where they have immense value and tremendous worth, an eager voice and a willing audience.

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