

Revelation of Self in Selected Stories of Alice Munro

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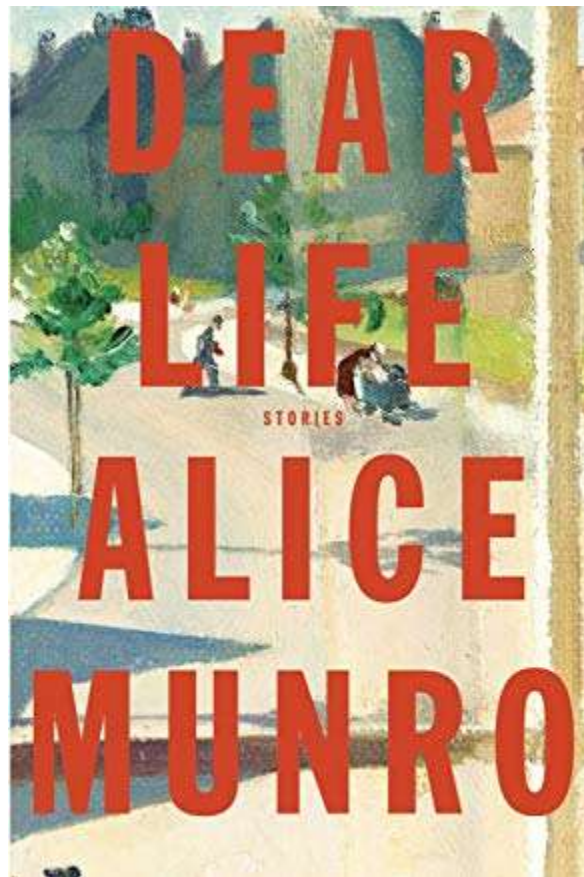
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Abstract

A woman writer presents her parents, siblings, her husband and the other close members of her family through her characters when she wants to describe her life. A woman's identity is always attached to the people; she never has her independent life to exhibit. Women's autobiographies deal mainly with the emotional disturbance chained with men and their marginalized social position. Alice Munro has become the master of short

fiction of Canada for exclusively writing short stories and stick on to the only genre of short story.

Alice Munro's work is translated into 20 languages and she has the distinction of having each new book sell better than the preceding one. Her perception on life makes each of her stories memorable to the reader. Alice Munro's readers are unaware of the fact that her own life history can be traced out by reading the stories which she has penned down through her works. She describes the close surroundings, rumours and present minute incidents about her hometown on paper and portrays in her stories recalling her own neighbourhood and her own people in her stories.

This paper aims at describing Munro's expression of inner feelings, trauma and her personal experiences through her characters in the stories.

Keywords: Alice Munro, Women, characters, autobiographies, independent, marginalized, short stories, personal experiences, inner feelings, trauma and perception.

Expression of Self by Women Writers

The expression of self for women writers is convenient in the form of autobiography. The autobiographies of women project psychic trauma of an ordinary homemaker to a woman in the pursuit of social status on par with man. Women writers making their own life sketches exhibit their courage and confidence to project the difficulties faced by the women in the society. So, the idea of expressing self has become a source for women to fight for their quest for identity.

Alice Munro's Works

Alice Munro's works provide an appealing insight into different ways of society through the form of short story. She describes about individual identity, gender relations, and relationship between people in the society. Munro tries to display the possibility of writing only reality into fiction and make her stories to become so natural to the readers. Munro's stories are combinations of memories, observations, innovation, sensible details happen in day to day life. She is praised for her focus on regional histories, for the distinctive Canadian feeling described in her writing. As noted by Graham Holcombe, "Alice Munro has done more than any living writer to demonstrate that the short story is an art form and not the poor relation of the novel". (Holcombe 3)

Munro's work has international reception, and this is proved through her short stories publishing in the New York magazine. She has anthologized many short stories in Canada. This prominent Canadian feminist short story writer is often called the regional writer because her fiction frequently centres on the culture of rural Ontario, Canada. Munro is called as a writer who supports women. She is a feminist fiction writer, uses the short story form as a medium to portray the sad conditions of women living in the landscape of small town,

Ontario, Canada where she has been brought up. Munro confronts society not only as a woman but also as a female artist.

Munro's Family

Alice Munro (Alice Ann Laidlaw) the eldest of three children of Robert Laidlaw and Anne Chamney, was born on July 10, 1931. The family lived in a farmhouse at the edge of Wingham, Ontario, the small town usually concealed in her fiction as Walley, Jubilee, or Hanratty. Munro's father a successor of Scottish pioneers, raised silver foxes and later, mink to support the family. For the first two grades, Munro attends the rough Lower town School modelled in Privilege, where she is the only child in her class to pass first grade.

Alice Munro's readers are unaware of the fact that her own life history can be traced out by reading the stories which she has penned down through her works: her growing up on the edge of the Wingham (Jubilee, Hanratty, Dalglei) father, a sometime fox farmer from Huron county stock, mother from the Ottawa valley: her mother's death some time ago from Parkinson's disease after a long decline, her father's heart problems. All these directly or indirectly projected in Munro's stories. Alice Munro has also projected her parents in many of her stories. She sympathises her mother's character and Munro's harsh treatment towards her mother in her story 'The Peace of Utrecht'. *Dance of the Happy Shades* is a collection of stories which depict Munro's own childhood experience.

Alice Munro through Her Characters

In her childhood, sometimes Munro has to help her father because her brother isn't old enough yet. She pumped fresh water, and walked up and down the pens, cleaning out the animals' drinking tins and refilling them. She enjoys doing this after the work she has to stay in the house to help her mother, and she is full of resentment and gives quarrelsome remarks. Talking back, it is called.

She hurts her mother's feelings and the outcome is that she would go to the barn to tell on Munro, to her father. Then he'd have to interrupt his work to give her a beating with his belt. Afterwards, she would lie weeping in bed and make plans to run away and again she comes out of that serious mood by recounting things she hears about in town and the incidents in the school. This part of Munro's life is depicted in two stories. 'Boys' and Girls' and 'Royal Beatings'

Boys and Girls

Munro's Story 'Boys and Girls' sets rural farm in Canada a place called Jubilee. The narrator is an 11-year-old girl, her younger brother Laird, Mother, Father, Henry Bailey, a farmhand who helps narrator's father. The story opens with the narrator saying her father is a fox farmer. He raises silver foxes, in pens, and in the fall and early winter, when the fur is prime, he killed them and skinned them and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders.

Alive, the foxes inhabited a world that the narrator's father has made for them. It is like a medieval town, with a gate that is padlocked at night. Along the streets there is feeding and watering dishes. Everything is tidy and ingenious; He has fitted a tin drum on a wheelbarrow, for bringing water down to the pens. This is the narrator's job in the summer, when the foxes have water twice a day.

Between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, and again after supper, she fills the drum at the pump and trundled it down through the barnyard and filled her watering can and go along the streets. Laird her brother comes too, with his little gardening can, filled too full and tried to carry. She has the real watering can, her father's; though she could only carry it three-quarters full. As the narrator supports her father in the story Alice Munro also supports her father in her life.

Narrator's mother always wants her daughter to help her in the household work. The narrator is given jobs to do in the kitchen and she would sit at the table peeling peaches that have been soaked in hot water, or cutting onions, her eyes smarting and streaming. As soon as she is done, she runs out of the house, before her mother thought of what she wants her to do next. But the narrator hates the hot dark kitchen in the summer, the green blinds and the flypapers, the same old oilcloth table and wavy mirror and bumpy linoleum. Where in her mother in turn complains to her father about the child.

Depiction of Her Father

'Working for a Living' and 'Fathers', focus on Munro's father. As an adult, her father raised animals, especially silver foxes and mink. In the two narratives, the stories of the protagonist's father and Munro's father coincide. In 'Working for a Living,' during the war the business of the protagonist's father fails, the way Munro's father did, but is saved by the mother who manages to sell their furs to American tourists. In the end, they give up the whole enterprise, and the father finds a job in a foundry.

'Fathers' is published in *The New Yorker* in August 2002. Set in the nineteen-forties, it uses the background of the Second World War both implicitly and explicitly to plot the growth of the narrator. The author recalls the days of school and specifically the relationship with two schoolmates, Dahlia Newcombe and Frances Wainwright. The figures of their fathers are compared to Alice Munro's own father. Dahlia's father is a violent man who regularly beat his children and wife. Mr. Wainwright is a gentle person belonging to the Salvation Army.

Royal Beatings

Alice Munro's father is severe and sometimes used corporal punishment, but never out of anger and without a reason. 'Royal Beatings' portrays tensions between a daughter (Rose) and step-mother (Flo) who finds a kind of release when the father whips Rose for her

impertinent behaviour is another aspect of the story. ‘Royal Beatings’ is based on beatings Munro received from her father and written only after his death.

Alice Munro’s “Royal Beatings” is about the love-hate relationship between a stepdaughter (Rose) and her stepmother (Flo). The story begins by immediately introducing both the main characters, Flo and Rose by recounting how Flo entered Rose’s life after her mother death. In doing so the narrator introduces the reader to Flo’s personality in the view of Rose. Rose thinks that Flo is idiotic, hates her, and is just downright annoying.

The story progresses by getting into the deeper issues that causes these two characters to dislike each other. As Rose grows older, her opinion of Flo is influenced by the typical rebellious teenage selfish attitude. The description of Rose’s growing personality in the story represents pre-teens’ attitude towards their parents apt to be. “Roses nature was growing like a prickly pineapple, but slowly, and secretly, hard pride and scepticism overlapping, to make something surprising even to her.” (WDTYA 121).

Rose’s newly superior attitude she has towards her step-mother created a complex hostility between their relationships. Rose pushes Flo’s patience with her deliberate lack of respect to her stepmother. The scene can be described as the ‘Royal Beating’ the story is a result from Rose’s back talk to Flo. Flo compels Rose’s father to imply strict discipline on her as she has lack of respect on elders. Though Flo complains to her husband regarding her daughter she also showers love and affection towards Rose. However, Flo’s maternal traits for Rose quickly become clear when the Royal Beating begins.

Flo seems to have had an immediate change of heart for her step-daughters punishment, showing sign of remorse for getting the father involved. Although it is not stated, Flo’s quick change of heart maybe remembering her own beatings as a girl by the end of the beating Flo involves into a conflict with her husband for imposing such a severe punishment on Rose. Flo suddenly changes her heart shows that the beating actually brought Flo and Rose closer together.

Description of Her Home-Town and the Controversies

Alice Munro describing her families living conditions the place, the people in the story ‘Royal Beatings lead to rise of controversies from the people of her hometown.

Munro describes it as a place occupied by factory and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves and a bridge which separates the two sides of this small town, and just on the west side of the bridge is the only place where the real families live. This essay is written by Munro in 1982, in the wake of the controversy aroused in Wingham, her native town, after the publication of *Who Do You Think You Are?* (Particularly “Royal Beatings”).

“Dear life” Narrates Ill-treatment Meted Out to Munro’s Mother

The person I would really have liked to talk to them was my mother, who was no longer available. I did not go home for my mother’s last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behavior, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say about some things that they can’t be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time. When my mother was dying, she got out of the hospital somehow, at night, and wandered around town until someone who didn’t know her at all spotted her and took her in. If this were fiction, as I said, it would be too much, but it is true.(www.newyorker.com)

Alice Munro has pointed out that her “first really painful autobiographical story... the first time I wrote a story that tore me up was *The Peace of Utrecht*’ which I didn’t even want to write” (www.newyorker.com). It depicts Munro’s mother’s death. At the opening of ‘*The Peace of Utrecht*’ the protagonist, Helen, returns to the town where she spent her childhood in the spring following her mother’s funeral, which she did not attend. There she spends three weeks in the company of her sister, who has nursed her mother through the physical and mental downfall caused by an incurable disease, until her death. After years of absence her mind struggles to make contact with the past, in the midst of the new impressions caused by people and objects once familiar. The simple act of re-viewing those memories implies a degree of alteration of the events that she shares with her sister and a symbolic separation from the sisterly communion.

Alice Munro and Her Setting of Stories

The stories ‘*The Ticket*’ and ‘*Home*’ present a succession of life stages for the protagonist, with many correspondences to Munro’s life. In ‘*The Ticket*,’ just before her first wedding Munro ponders the marriages of other women in her family and concludes that only aunt Charlie married for love. The same aunt gives Alice a significant amount of money, in case she decides to get out of her marriage. Since marriage at the age of twenty takes the protagonist away to the West Coast, in ‘*Home*’ she returns to western Ontario, after ending her first marriage (like Munro in real life), and finds herself unable to relate to the place, since it has changed. Munro’s stories share the definition of the self- they mainly insist in autobiography as the central aim. She reinvents people’s lives and events into stories.

General Perception of Women Writers

Women writers when the project their own lives in the stories give utmost importance to mother and daughter and their family relationships. They write about the psychic trauma of an ordinary homemaker to a woman in pursuit of social status on par with man. Women writers around the world who expresses one self convey a common message of courage and willpower to prove their strength and suffering in the male-centered world. A woman writer presents her parents, siblings, her husband and the other close people of her family when they

express their self in their stories. Munro described the close surroundings and display the past events gossip or street chat, opinions, small narratives, of her hometown and her own people and life experiences into a record and portrays in her stories as an act of remembering her own community. All these have become settings for Alice Munro's stories.

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