

## **A Postmodern Analysis of Alice Munro's Short Stories "Chance", "Soon" and "Silence"**

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The pluralist nature of Canadian society is known to all; with its two official languages—English and French— this becomes quite apparent. The writers often talk about the diversity of Canada in cultural and ethnic spheres. Multiculturalism is what the major theme of Canadian writers has been till now. The plurality of cultures in Canada becomes an emblem of central Canadian identity which is a sum total of multiple cultures. In this respect Canada becomes an open postmodern paradox as a nation in itself. Alongside this multicultural celebration has been a constant desire to locate a premise which can defend an individual Canadian identity. Since to invent a Canadian national identity has been an ongoing process with Canadian writers the literature they produce certainly could be looked from the prism of postmodern as one finds ample evidence of focus on ethnic groups and challenges to homogenous identity.

Alice Munro highlights the rootlessness of contemporary life and psychological upheavals which are commonly felt. Alice Munro's stories often blend ordinary and fantastic, a simple and significant pointer to the genius she has. The narrative usually is bound to be all-knowing and omniscient which lends us an understanding of the world and its circumstances. Her stories are often loaded with such vast knowledge that they cross the boundaries of traditional short stories as per many critics. The paradox in her application of the genre never-the-less does not make her work disagreeable, rather she has added a new dimension to short story of present era. Her experimentation with the short story within postmodernist framework can be defended in the following lines:

The questioning of literature's claim to truth, the blurring of reality and the play of textual pleasure not only result in the disruption of representation but also that of the postmodern. Instead of the postmodernism manifests itself in phenomena that defy classification, such as the abject or the sublime, and in forms that resist definition: such as the short story. To write when there are no strict rules of representation means that the writer works blind 'in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done' (Lyotard 1984: 81). In other words the postmodern is always in a state of becoming so that its common characteristics are partiality, incompleteness and obscurity. (March-Russell, 2009: 230).

The subject in Munro's short stories is people. She depicts private experiences. She invents, reinvents continuously the familiar material of her own small story and every next presentation is as fresh and unique as the first—a vision of multiplicity rules... as she herself says in an interview, "The complexity of thing— the things within things— just seems to be endless." ... "I mean nothing is easy, nothing is simple". (The New Yorker 2001). The stories in *Runaway* are mostly "subtle". Characters surprise with unanticipated reactions and changes, their radically different behavior which is usually stupid and self-destructive. Her characters are unresolved puzzles, a labyrinth which finds no exit. One major theme in her stories is feeling of loss and rootlessness reflected in impulsive emotional outbursts. The main characters suddenly discover a stream of emotion and change their lives abruptly and quickly. Though this hardly leads to an achievement of a right place. Her character remains complex and complicated and hardly all her characters are likeable. In spite of all her stories of *Runaway* are lucid and vivid. The *Runaway* stories follow repeatedly the theme of running away and usually it is not suitable and acceptable. In this paper her cycle of three short stories that is "Chance", "Soon", and "Silence" from the collection *Runaway* will be looked at from the prism of postmodern art.

### Chance

Juliet is the protagonist in this trilogy of short stories which reads like a novella. In "Chance" Juliet is a scholar reading classics. While travelling to British Columbia in order to start her new life as a teacher she meets a fellow traveler— Eric. The major part of the story is told as a flashback of events while she travels to Vancouver to teach Latin at a private school for girls. At the very beginning the story reflects upon the oddity of relationships as we are told about Juliet's friend and colleague Juanita with whom she goes out to watch a movie— Hiroshima Mon Amour, in which the female protagonist is in love with a married man. Juanita later on confesses before Juliet that she too is in love with a married man, the father of a student. Juliet somewhat charged by the confession of her friend and somewhat influenced by the movie frames a similar type of story for herself and tells Juanita that it was only because of his wife's ill health that she ended up the relationship. In this story also we find Munro intermingles the real and unreal. However, what she lies about to her friend soon turns out to be the reality of her life as she receives a letter from Eric whom she had met in the train to Vancouver. This leads to her visit to his home/place which reveals how the romance has already ensued between the two. As in the postmodern fiction here too we find a question mark on the very idea of truth and actual since for a reader it becomes really difficult to demarcate truth. Which can be further elucidated in the following lines:

In decentring narrative as the site of original meaning, postmodernism also calls into question the relationship between the narrative account and the world that it describes. At various times... critics have been alarmed by readers' apparent inability to distinguish between the real and the copy. In the age of mass media, though, this distinction becomes ever less tenable: 'When the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever'.... (March-Russell, 2009: 226).

Further as Juliet travels to Horrace House she reads Dodds in the train the book she has already read before but as she opens the book now things appear to her both different and obscure. Things change their meaning.

She grew tired watching, and she picked up her Dodds, opening it just anywhere, because, after all, she had read it before. Every few pages seemed to have had an orgy of underlining. She was drawn to these passages, but when she read them she found that what she had pounced on with such satisfaction at one time now seemed obscure and unsettling. (Munro, 2006: 65)

Not only does the story become a comment on the multiplicity or duality of meanings other paradoxes also form the centre of the text as we can easily locate its function when Eric, being a fisherman who is supposed to work on boats, locates stars on the sky. He states:

“That’s your start,” he said. “Take the two stars on the side of the Dipper opposite the handle. Got them? Those are the pointers. Follow them up. Follow them, you’ll find the polestar.” And so on.

He found for her Orion, which he said was the major constellation in the Northern Hemisphere in winter. And Sirius, the Dog Star, at that time of year the brightest star in the whole northern sky. (Munro, 2006: 71-72)

Juliet then informs him about the Greek mythological beliefs associated with these stars. As she narrates:

She told him that Orion was blinded by Enopion but had got his sight back by looking at the sun.

“He was blinded because he was so beautiful, but Hephaestus came to his rescue. Then he was killed anyway, by Artemis, but he got changed into a constellation. It often happened when somebody really valuable got into bad trouble, they were changed into a constellation. Where is Cassiopeia?”

He directed her to a not very obvious W.

“It’s supposed to be a woman sitting down.”

“That was on account of beauty too,” she said.

“Beauty was dangerous?”

“You bet. She was married to the king of Ethiopia and she was the mother of Andromeda. And she bragged about her beauty and for punishment she was banished to the sky. Isn’t there an Andromeda, too?”

That’s a galaxy. You should be able to see it tonight. It’s the most distant thing you can see with the naked eye.”

... “Who was Andromeda?” he asked her.

“She was chained to a rock but Perseus rescued her.” (Munro, 2006: 72)

Here rational and irrational aspects are ironically juxtaposed which bear clear resemblance to the postmodern paradox. “The drift from logic to illogic recalls also the short story’s tendency towards mutability and the legacy of oral and romantic traditions” (March-Russell, 2009: 225). The narrative constantly shifts from past to present in an abrupt manner. The discussion from stars moves to Whale Bay—place where Eric lives— with a jump and culminates in the union of Eric and Juliet by Chance.

### Soon

“Soon” is the sequel of “Chance” however could be read separately as well. Munro is able to maintain the essence of the stories in connectivity and in parts too. Juliet comes to meet her parents and she brings along her daughter Penelope who is only thirteen months old and we are also told that Juliet is not married. She lives with Eric and together they have brought up this child. The story begins with the description of a painting which Juliet buys as a Christmas gift for her parents. Though this incident is a memory of past it connects the fragmentary past with the present visit of Juliet and this painting— I and the Village— opens the story with an assertion of disorder, unreliability and complexity which shrouds the existence but is celebrated in art (postmodern art):

Two profiles face each other. One the profile of a pure white heifer, with a particularly mild and tender expression, the other that of a green-faced man who is neither young nor old.... A hand that is probably his offers up, from the lower margin of the painting, a little tree or an exuberant branch, fruited with jewels.

At the upper margin of the painting are dark clouds, and underneath them some small tottery houses and a toy church with its toy cross, perched on the curved surface of the earth. Within this curve a small man (drawn to a larger scale, however, than the buildings) walks along purposefully with a scythe on his shoulder, and a woman, drawn to the same scale, seems to wait for him. But she is hanging upside down. (Munro, 2006: 87)

Juliet already knows the strangeness of her family –Sam and Sara— from the rest of the society to which they belong however the visit illuminates her about her own oddities and breaks with social norms such as – she is a mother of thirteen months old baby girl and has not been married yet, lives with the father of the girl and one more important aspect of her life is that she is a non-believer— a woman who believes all established religions are sham. These aspects of her life are revealed in her conversation with her father who has to quit his job because of her and also when she finds her Christmas present kept upstairs “leaning against the wall.... Face out.” (Munro, 2006: 97). Kept away from the gaze of people particularly Irene –the helper who keeps her parents’ house— because her father probably thinks “it would disturb Irene” as her mother tells her later. Afterwards a conversation with Don— the minister and friend of Sara who questions her about her faith and about her daughter also reveal her disbelief:

“...Which church do you go to in Whale Bay?”  
“We don’t go. We don’t go to church.”

“Is there not a church of your sort handy?”

Smiling Juliet shook her head.

“There is no church of our sort. We don’t believe in God.” (Munro, 2006: 119)

As postmodern questions all the notions of grand narratives including that of religion similarly Juliet becomes a physical embodiment of the postmodern.

### **Silence**

In “Silence” Juliet is a middle aged woman who longs to see her daughter and to meet her she travels from Buckley Bay to Denman Island. Her daughter— Penelope— is twenty years old and she has “been on a retreat” for six months at the spiritual balance centre. Juliet works for the Provincial Television Channel “interviewing people who are leading singular or notable lives and deftly directing panel discussions on a program called *Issues of the Day*” (Munro, 2006: 126). She is eager to meet her daughter however conceals her emotions in front of others. With a complete break in the text Penelope’s message to Juliet figures which says, “*Hope to see you Sunday afternoon. It’s time.*” (Munro, 2006: 128). Juliet hopes that it meant time to come back home but still she leaves it up to Penelope to decide. With the help of directions provided by Penelope Juliet reaches in front of a church. She enquires about her daughter and is greeted by a woman named Joan. When Juliet asks her about a note from Penelope, Joan informs her that Penelope is not there and she cannot tell her where she has gone, she tells her:

“I can’t. I don’t know. But I can tell you one thing that may put your mind at rest. Wherever she has gone, whatever she has decided, it will be the right thing for her. It will be the right thing for her spirituality and growth.” (Munro, 2006: 130)

Juliet finds that Penelope had left in search of a religion for herself and cure for loneliness and unhappiness. She is broken and starts to cry and beseech before Joan. Penelope gets in touch with Juliet a couple of weeks later in an absurd way. She sends a birthday card which bears no signature on 19<sup>th</sup> of June that is her own birthday. Juliet at first thinks that the card has been sent to Penelope by someone who had her name and date of birth on register but when Juliet checks the envelope, she finds Penelope’s name written in Penelope’s own handwriting, but the card carries no address which could help Juliet to trace her. Juliet goes to meet her old friend Christa and with her she shares the agony of the trip to Denman Island. Time passes swiftly and Juliet is hardly able to know about the whereabouts of her daughter. The tie between the mother and the daughter is almost completely severed however, there remains this obscure card which Juliet receives again in the month of June without “a word written inside.”

The narrative moves backwards when Penelope is only 13 years old and had gone on a camping trip to the Kootney mountains of British Columbia with a friend from Torrance House, and the friends family. We are told about the rift between Juliet and Eric because of a disclosure about Eric and Christa who had lived together while Juliet had gone to visit “her dying mother” when Penelope was just a year old. However at the end the two are reconciled to each other. Eric leaves as usual for the fishing boat and weather being unsuitable his boat goes missing and his body is

recovered after a long search on the third day. His body is mutilated by some animal after being washed ashore and therefore they decide to burn it on the beach. Juliet is asked if she would light the pyre. She retorts back:

... that they had it wrong, as the widow she was supposed to throw herself into the flames. She actually laughed as she said this, and those who had asked her backed off, afraid that she was getting hysterical. (Munro, 2006: 142)

Here we find allusion to the cultural practice of Sati in East during past and also an intermingling of conscious and unconscious, sane and insane which form the human self. More references figure in the story with allusion to a certain incident related to cremation ceremony while Juliet watches the pyre on fire she is thinking about someone else:

She was not quite there. She thought of whoever it was— Trelawny? — snatching Shelley’s heart out of the flames. The heart, with its long history of significance. Strange to think how even at that time, not so long ago, one fleshly organ should be thought so precious, the site of courage and love. It was just flesh, burning. Nothing concerned with Eric. (Munro, 2006: 143)

This is a direct allusion to the incidence of Shelley’s drowning and his heart being snatched by Trelawny from the flames which then he gave to Mary Shelley who kept it pressed between the pages of a book. In fact the whole episode of Eric’s death on board a boat and his cremation seem to be a revision of the episode related to Shelley’s death and here we find history and fiction overlap and intertextuality seems to work forcibly.

Jameson argues that postmodern fiction tends towards pastiche. Like its counterpart, parody, pastiche, relies upon mimicry for its effect, but whereas the former is written in order to satirize, pastiche is ‘devoid of laughter and of any conviction that .... Some healthy linguistic normality still exists’. Postmodern pastiche is inherently intertextual... postmodern pastiche delights in its reproduction of disparate material. (March-Russell, 2009: 229).

Penelope is unaware about her father’s death and when she comes back from camping Juliet goes to Vancouver in order to inform her though she is afraid when she listens to the details of her father’s death but soon the impact of this news vanes away from her memory in the “large spotless house” of Heathers. Juliet feels that she too is dismissing Eric by moving away from where she lived with Eric, yet he always remains closer to her existence as a live memory than anyone else. But after a passage of time she realizes that Eric is dead which totally unnerves her and this time Penelope consoles her during her distress. Once more the linear narrative is disrupted, and the narrator discusses Penelope’s disappearance from her mother’s life for five long years. Now Juliet receives no cards on Penelope’s birthday. Juliet finally resolves to discard any more fretting over Penelope’s absence and moves to another place though she takes along Penelope’s contents which she had meant to dispose off with earlier. Christa dies, Juliet keeps her job on television but, after some time resolves to resume

writing her thesis for her PhD and thus gives up the job. For some time people recognize her as “the lady that used to be on television” however soon she becomes one amongst the ordinary people. She changes her ways of living; her hair style, her eating habits and also starts gardening like her father realizing a connection exists between herself and her parents. She leaves her thesis and starts investigating the Greek novelists:

She had given up on her thesis and become interested in some writers referred to as Greek novelist, whose work came rather late in the history of Greek literature (starting in the first century B.C.E., as she had now learned to call it, and continuing into the early Middle Ages). Aristeides, Longus, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius. Much of their work is lost or fragmentary and is also reported to be indecent. But there is a romance written by Heliodorus and called the *Aethiopica* (originally in a private library, retrieved at the siege of Buda), that has been known in Europe since it was printed at Basle in 1534. (Munro, 2006: 151)

Here we find that the theme of separation from one’s child becomes her main interest and we could easily establish a link between Juliet-Penelope relationship with Ethiopian Queen and Charicleia. “In ... ‘The literature of Exhaustion’ (1967), Barth had argued that literature had nowhere to go but an endless recycling of its history, themes and motifs” (March-Russell, 2009: 231). It highlights the continuity of time and here the same story is being retold about the ordinary people:

In this story the queen of Ethiopia gives birth to a white baby and is afraid she will be accused of adultery. So she gives the child— a daughter— into the care of the gymnosophists— that is, the naked philosophers, who are hermits and mystics. The girl, who is called Charicleia, is finally taken to Delphi, where she becomes one of the priestesses of Artemis. There she meets a noble Thessalian named Theagenes, who falls in love with her and, with the help of a clever Egyptian, carries her off. The Ethiopian queen, as it turns out, has never ceased to long for her daughter and has hired this very Egyptian to search for her. Mischance and adventures continue until all the main characters meet at Meroe, and Charicleia is rescued— again— just as she is about to be sacrificed by her own father. (Munro, 2006: 151)

The relation between the two stories is evident particularly when Juliet by chance comes across Penelope’s friend Heather who not aware about the breach between them shares the information about Penelope’s five children and place of residence. Juliet ultimately is sure about Penelope’s safety and is comparatively at peace with herself. Thus the analysis of these three short stories in various ways becomes a pointer towards the presence of postmodern elements within the works of Alice Munro.

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### References

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