



Alice Munro's Stories : A Discovery of Space

RATAN BHATTACHARJEE
Dum Dum Motijheel College
West Bengal State University
India

Abstract:

Alice Munro's stories were nearly all composed with a clarity and economy that made novel-writing look downright superfluous and indulgent. In spite of the charge of dullness in the presentation of characters and uneventful plot in many of her stories, the stories are quite engaging. She uses the fictional device to underscore both the subjective nature of storytelling and people's compulsion to use the art of storytelling to make sense of their lives and to make narrative order out of confusion. As this collection demonstrates, it's an art that she has mastered herself with virtuosic skill.

Key words: Canadian literature, short story, fiction, Alice Munro, *The New York Times*, Nobel Laureate 2013, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, *The Moons of Jupiter*, *Runaway*, *The View from Castle Rock* and *Too Much Happiness*, Nobel Committee, *Sunday Review of Books*

“A story is not like a road to follow ... it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and

again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you.” Alice Munro is the genuinely popular Nobel Laureate for Literature.

A.O. Scott nearly seven years ago raised the question of Alice Munro's ‘International Sainthood’ in the ‘Sunday Review of Book’ in *The New York Times*. Scott said, “More to the point, Munro's stories are composed with a clarity and economy that make novel-writing look downright superfluous and self-indulgent.” With Alice Munro the modern short story felt its way into a modern art again. It is an insistent presence in her writing, in her hand, it is a distinct artistic fact, definite and governed by specific laws. Munro is distinguished from the rest of her creed, may they be predecessors or contemporaries in the field of global fiction, in her uniqueness- both in terms of creative conception and critical execution of the same.

Jonathan Franzen much earlier in 2004 beautifully said, “Alice Munro has a strong claim to being the best fiction writer now working in North America, but outside of Canada, where her books are No. 1 best sellers, she has never had a large readership.” Alice Munro is the Pan –International short story writer with her 14 collections globally sold, discussed, read and awarded. She is deeply affiliated to her roots as well as well as to the many routes that she had traversed. She subscribes to the inner compulsion of the artist, a compulsion that is justification enough for her to write what she had decided upon to write, irrespective of form or generic categorization – to take visions as they come and be personally thankful for those that survive. She set a handful of her marvelous short stories in the damp British Columbian metropolis, and the urban geography is so exact you can practically map the city off her fictions. What is most important in these stories is that she is the genuinely popular Nobel Laureate who pictures the little sorrows, little joys, little

victories and little defeats. By touching upon human nature, she establishes the link between the individual and mankind.

The readers are also actuated by the same motives and passions. The stories in Alice Munro's wonderful Collections gain meaning, as the readers gain a glimpse into the spirit of mankind. In the light of various literary and cultural theories, new vistas of the cultural landscapes have opened up to enrich our understanding of life and the world.

Alice Munro beautifully narrates and explains facts about her fiction and her life. Now in her eighties, she notes that in old age, many people cannot resist rummaging through the past. When she was in her mid-sixties, she says, she began to take more than a casual interest in the Laidlaw side of her family, which she traced back to the Ettrick Valley in Scotland, an area that the 1799 Statistical Account of Scotland labeled as having "no advantage." During this period of ancestral interest, Munro travelled in Scotland for a few months, researching the family in cemeteries and public libraries, discovering that in every generation of her family, someone was a writer of letters, journals, or recollections. Munro says that as she put together this material over the years, the material began to shape itself into "something like stories." This is not surprising, given that she is, with little or no argument, the best short-story writer currently practicing that underrated art. The combination of the words of her ancestors and her own, she says, resulted in a re-creation of lives about as truthful as the past can be.

Alice Munro is the first Canadian short story writer and the 13th woman writer to have won the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature. Alice Munro, who is now 82, is, as the jury of the Nobel Prize described her, a "master of the contemporary short story". She is acclaimed for her finely tuned storytelling, which is characterized by clarity and psychological realism, said the Swedish Academy in a statement. Munro has published many collections, including 'Who Do You Think You Are?' (1978), 'The Moons of Jupiter' (1982), 'Runaway' (2004), 'The View from Castle Rock' (2006) and 'Too Much Happiness' (2009). "Her

stories are often set in small town environments, where the struggle for a socially acceptable existence often results in strained relationships and moral conflicts – problems that stem from generational differences and colliding life ambitions,” the Academy said.

“Boys and Girls” was first published in 1968 in *The Montrealer*, before it was collected with fourteen other stories and published in Alice Munro’s first edition of short stories, “Dance of the Happy Shades”(1968). The story, narrated by a young girl, details the time in her life when she leaves childhood and its freedoms behind and realizes that to be a “girl” is to be, eventually, a woman. The child begins to understand that being socially typed entails a host of serious implications. Thus becoming a “girl” on the way to womanhood is a time fraught with difficulties for the young protagonist because she senses that women are considered the social inferiors of men. Initially, she tries to prevent this from occurring by resisting her parents’ and grandparents’ attempts to train her in the likes, habits, behavior, and work of women. This resistance, however, proves to be useless. The girl ends the story clearly socially positioned as a girl, something which she apprehends with some trepidation. The story is thus a feminist parable of sorts, where a girl bucks against a future that will prevent her from doing, socially, whatever she might please. Although most of Munro’s work does not have such clear and cogent feminist interest, this story eloquently attests to how women worked during this century to change their social position substantially.

Munro’s fiction writing evinces subtle but definite changes throughout her career, and one of the pleasures of reading her fiction is noticing these developments. Nevertheless, “Boys and Girls” is also representative of Munro’s work as a whole, as the story’s formal strategies can be linked to general trends in her writing. For example, Munro is known for her use of irony, and this story contains numerous ironic flourishes. As the girl protagonist is being groomed to curb her

wild behavior and pay attention to her manner of dress and her looks in general, Munro lavishly fleshes out the appearance of the mother, whose labor-intensive housework makes it necessary for her to ignore such things entirely. Thus, as the young girl is trained to be vain, an adult woman is presented whose lifestyle in fact precludes such vanity. The girl's mother ties up her hair and wraps it in a scarf, and favors simple clothing that suits her workaday habits.

Since the publication of her first volume, "Dance of the Happy Shades" in 1968, she has produced several important short story collections. Munro has been called a regional writer because many of her stories are set in rural Ontario during the Depression era, where Munro grew up, and evoke a bygone time of hardship and deprivation. Within this world, however, Munro's central characters often hold on to their sense of wonder and mystery about the world around them, as does the narrator of "Walker Brothers Cowboy." The family of the narrator—a young girl—has lost their fox farm, and her father has been forced to take a job peddling patent medicines, food flavorings, and poisons to the farmers who live in Ontario's backcountry, but the girl still looks deeply at the ordinary world and finds enchantment in it. Like many of Munro's works, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" also explores such universal themes as isolation, identity, and maturation.

Munro further delves into these issues in her collection "Lives of Girls and Women", again from the point of view of the narrator of "Walker Brothers Cowboy." This return to the narrator—Del Jordan—allows interested readers to more closely examine and follow one girl's path to maturity, and observe how her unique way of looking at the world influences the choices that she makes. "Walker Brothers Cowboy," however, also stands alone as a fine example of Munro's skill as a writer and her concerns as a woman. Extending the pattern she had developed in "Lives of Girls and Women," Munro uses the ten linked stories of "The Beggar Maid" to explore Rose's personal maturation. But whereas the structure of "Lives of

Girls and Women” pivots on Del Jordan's first-person reflections on her efforts to establish emotional and spiritual links with the people around her, “The Beggar Maid” relies on an omniscient third-person narrator to provide insights into the relationships and fissures, connections and reconnections that accumulate and interweave to shape Rose's understanding of herself and her world.

In her ninth superlative collection of short fiction, “The Love of a Good Woman”, the setting is once again western Canada, and the subject matter is classic Munro: secrets, love, betrayal, and the stuff of ordinary lives. But as is usual for this master of the short form, the path she takes is anything but ordinary. The stunning title story is a case in point. A narrative in four parts, it begins with the drowning of a small-town optometrist and ripples outward, touching first the boys who find the body, then a spiteful dying woman and her young practical nurse.

Again mining the silences and dark discretions of provincial Canadian life, Munro shines in her ninth collection, peopled with characters whose sin is the original one: to have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The drama of deathbed revelation is acted out, again, between a dying man and the woman at his bedside in “Cortes Island,” when a stroke victim exposes his deepest secret to his part-time caretaker, in what may be the last act of intimacy left to him, and in the process puts his finger on the fault lines in her marriage. In the extraordinary “Before the Change,” a young woman confronts her father with the open secret of his life and reveals the hidden facts of hers; she is unprepared, however, for the final irony of his legacy. The powerful closing story, “My Mother's Dream,” is about a secret in the making, showing how a young mother almost kills her baby and how that near fatality, revealed at last to the daughter when she is 50, binds mother and daughter.

First of all, there is a unique impression of authenticity. There are certain conventions in fiction about what is regarded

as important or interesting; Alice Munro ignores them. She knows that tiny incidents can be the defining ones. She knows that spending a weekend with one's own daughter can be an unbearable challenge which almost drives you mad. These stories do not gloss over the mundane aspects of life we have to struggle with most. Second, Alice Munro's stories believe in human dignity and choice. Hers is a moral universe. It's not just the title story which shows us a person making a choice. We tend to just let things happen to us and pretend we cannot do anything about them; these stories show that sometimes we can. In the world of Alice Munro, the best route is not necessarily the shortest distance between two points.

Alice Munro grew up in Wingham, Ontario, and attended the University of Western Ontario. She has published eleven previous books. During her distinguished career she has been the recipient of many awards and prizes, including the W.H. Smith Prize, the National Book Circle Critics Award, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, the Lannan Literary Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. In Canada, she has won the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize, the Trillium Book Award, and the Libris Award. Alice Munro and her husband divide their time between Clinton, Ontario, and Comox, British Columbia.

We all know that there are quite a lot of people who believe that Alice Munro is one of the greatest short story writers alive because each one of Munro's stories is worth hundreds of lesser works. The prose is gorgeous, the vision expansive yet precise and humane. In "Jakarta", which can be any body's favourite, Sonje is such a good woman that she takes on the care of her lover's blind mother while Cottar continues a traveling, leftist journalist. But Sonje is not a fool though she may be a saint as her old friend Kent discovers. The collection contains such thought-provoking studies that it could influence the way we live our life.

Some stories of Munro burn with a kind of dry-eyed anti-romanticism--even the ones whose plots verge on domestic melodrama as in the account of a baby's near-death in "My Mother's Dream". This is also true of an adulterous wife in "The Children Stay". Densely populated, elliptical in construction, each story circles around its principal events and relationships like planets around a sun. The result is layered and complex, its patterns not always apparent on first reading: in other words, something like life. Alice Munro examines the everyday sort of person who must make certain choices and live with it. In reading this book I found myself asking questions and feeling slightly disturbed by my lack of certainty on many issues this book addresses. I love the way she uses language and her use of detail is superb. It will make you think and wonder and imagine all at the same time. These stories read as if this were Munro's problem too, as if she's given her best and now she's still got to give more and she's out of gas. The stories seem tired. Case in point: she replaces the brilliant connections and observations she used to make in a paragraph with ten-fifteen pages of incidentals. So much seems like padding. Anyone has a hard time topping themselves as they get older, granted. It is really hard for any mortal to write a book like "Open Secrets" in the first place, and it is doubly tough to try and top that.

"Royal Beatings," one of Munro's best-known stories, reveals the bonds of love and hate, brutalities great and small, within a family. Nothing is simple in this story, which features a surprisingly intricate plot as well as convoluted time and tense shifts. It begins late in the Depression years in the poorest section of Hanratty, where Rose lives with her father and stepmother, Flo, behind their grocery and furniture repair store. One day Flo relates an account of a previous thrashing, when three young men attacked the father of the grotesque dwarf Becky Tyde, who sometimes visits the store. The child Rose cannot fit Flo's story together with her present life, for they seem unrelated. Flo's tale foreshadows a second beating,

this time suffered by the preteen Rose—a brutal ritual which builds, erupts, and then collapses. When Rose talks back to her stepmother once too often, Flo goads Rose's father into punishing her. The narrative shifts into present tense to render a horrific account of the first "royal beating" that cheeky Rose endures, then switches to future tense to describe the ritual that will follow: a repentant Flo coming to her room to bring a salve for her back, a tray of food, chocolate milk. Years later, the adult Rose sees a television interview with an elderly man from Hanratty, someone from Flo's story, and is finally able to connect the strands of the past to the present.

"Bardon Bus" appears in "The Moons of Jupiter" (1982), a collection of eleven stories, all of which focus on "intense . . . moments" in the lives of the female protagonists, most of them middle-aged. The opening of the story sets the tone for what follows. Had the narrator been an old maid in another generation, she would have perhaps saved a letter and dreamed about an affair while continuing to milk the cows and scour the tin pails. She would have fantasized about surrendering herself completely to a lover who perhaps was a soldier, or "a farmer down the road with a rough-tongued wife and a crowd of children," or a preacher. Yet though she is of a later generation, and though her actions reflect that, her obsessions are the same. The narrator, writing a book on the history of a wealthy family, is staying in Toronto at a friend's apartment. As part of her research on the family, she recently spent a few weeks in Australia, where she met an anthropologist whom she had known slightly in Vancouver when she was a married college student. She, now divorced, and he, traveling without his third wife, embark on an affair that, because of the imposed brevity, seems perfect. On returning to Canada, however, she becomes obsessed with him, with the same intensity as the old maid of an earlier generation. The narrator, like other middle-aged women populating Munro's stories, is moderately successful in her career.

In the introduction to the Vintage edition of her "Selected Stories," Alice Munro notes that over the years since 1968, when she published her first collection, they have "grown longer, and in a way more disjointed and demanding and peculiar." These adjectives couldn't have been better chosen: "disjointed," to mark the way an individual story moves, not in a linear, temporal progression but by fits and starts, from a remembered past to something in the present and vice versa (for her and her protagonists, time is nearly always out of joint); "demanding," by way of putting the reader on notice that the sequences of the storytelling will not be obvious or predictable; and "peculiar" because Munro has made certain fictional places - and a fictional voice - unmistakably and distinctively her own.

Symbolism in Munro's story is very much integral to the thematic structure. In other words, symbols carry half the burden of the stories. The basic symbol in the short story "Boys and Girls" is quite interesting. For example, Flora, the horse, is a significant image in the story epitomizing youth, freedom and inexperience. The "odor of the fox itself" (imagery pertaining to smell) is something the narrator describes as "reassuringly seasonal" and a comfort to her at night. (Sight/Touch) Images of light and dark: the "brightly lit downstairs world," contrasted with the "stale cold air upstairs." Light = warmth and safety; dark = cold and fear. Further images of light and dark in her room provide the narrator and her brother with boundaries of safety. At night, as long as the lights are on, they are "safe." Henry Bailey's laugh (imagery pertaining to sound): the children "admired" the sound of "whistlings and gurglings...faulty machinery of his chest." Despite his sickness, Henry Bailey also provides a source of emotional comfort and protection. Description of the foxes pens as "a medieval town" (sight imagery): symbolizes the safety and security her father is able to provide, both for the foxes and for her. Description of the "hot dark kitchen in summer" (mostly sight but some sound imagery) shows that the narrator feels caged in by inherently

female tasks and contrasts directly with the freedom she feels when working outside, like a man.

The fact that the narrator remains unnamed throughout the story could be symbolic of her search for an identity throughout the story. In this coming-of-age story, the narrator lives in a society that has defined roles for girls. They were expected to be lady-like in their behavior and to learn the skills needed to be a good housewife. At the beginning, the narrator is a tomboy who likes to help her father with the outside work rather than helping her mother with housework. Her mother complains about the narrator's behavior because it's out of character for a young lady. Over the years, the narrator feels the pressures of her mother's complaints and society's expectations. She begins to think about her looks, worrying whether she'll be attractive. The last trace of her resistance to society's mores are seen when she allows Flora, a horse her father wants to kill, to escape. Her father isn't angry at her because "she's only a girl". This statement sums up what society expects of the narrator, and she realizes that she must fit within the confines of that society. As she gets older, the narrator realizes conformity to society's expectations.

She made us curious to think what happens when a girl gets dumped. This is the problem faced by the main character in Alice Munro's "An Ounce of Cure." The narration is first person point of view with the protagonist, an unnamed teenager, serving as the narrator. The setting is a conservative southern town in 1960s. The town does not really like drinking. When the narrator was in the seventh grade, she signed an alcohol abstinence pledge. Her mother never drinks and her father has an occasional beer outside of the house. Surprisingly, almost no teens drink either. The narrator babysits and has been labeled as really reliable. She primarily babysits for some new people in town who do keep alcohol in their house. At the beginning of the school year, the narrator goes crazy about a boy named Martin. She thinks of him as her Prince Charming. He gives her the "first kiss." In two months,

he dumps her for another girl. The narrator is heartbroken. She cries and thinks about him constantly. One night, she tries a half-hearted suicide attempt. She takes six pills and stops. Each pill represented her feelings: sorrow, anguish, depression, heartbreak, confusion, and frustration. Mom notices something is wrong. She tells her mother about Martin. Without thinking about the daughter's feelings, she just tells the narrator that it was for the best. The next weekend, the narrator babysits for the new people, the Berrymans. She spots the alcohol in the kitchen. It is like a hidden treasure that might help her heart. She pours a glass full of vodka with a half ounce of scotch. She drinks the entire thing and is satisfied that it has helped ease the hurt. Of course, then it hits her. She is drunk. She vomits everywhere including on the new rug and herself. She has friends over who help her. The Berrymans come home early, and she is fired on the spot. She tells the Berrymans everything from the boy to the suicide attempt to the drinking to the throwing up. Mr. Berryman takes her home and makes her tell her mother everything. Her mother tells a friend and all of the narrator's friends tell their friends. By Monday morning, the narrator has earned a new reputation which makes it sound like she is totally irresponsible and sinful. The incident changes her. In the end, she forgets about Martin. What changes her? It was the reality of the situation. If what happened to her happened at parties, it was not worth it. The girl goes off to college and gets married. She comes back home for a funeral. Martin has become an undertaker. They see each other and give each other a knowing smile.

The narrator here is a dynamic character. As the story evolves, she changes and matures after her horrible drinking experience. She faces the problem of accepting who she is and learning to live in the present and make good choices. She is able to survive that Saturday night and make a new beginning.

In this week's "London Review of Books", the sacred Canadian cow was slaughtered. LRB staffer Christian Lorentzen authored a caustic takedown of Alice Munro. Alice Munro is a genius and she is such a good writer that nobody bothers any more to judge her goodness. Her reputation is beyond dispute and it is a complete consensus. But Lorentzen essentially and justifiably criticises the dullness that makes her stories depressing. The events are predictable and the prose sanded to an uncommon smoothness. Lorentzen calls her an 'epiphany -monger' in her early work and accuses her of heaping on tedious false leads and details for details's sake. Her characters are sad - one reading about them grows attuned to the ways of life that is shabby or grubby. Nearly everyone heads towards cancer or a case of dementia that would rob them of the memories of the little adulteries committed by them. There's no doubt that one of these days some contrarian punk of a critic will chase a bit of momentary glory by arguing that Munro is overrated, but that critic is rare. The first task in executing such a takedown would be locating a Munro sentence that was sloppy, dishonest, unnecessary or dull. The chances are roughly equal to those of finding a mango tree bearing fruit in a field in western Ontario in the middle of winter. If there were such a tree, in any case, Munro would already have found it, and would moreover know who planted it and with what eminently sensible, or crazily impractical, purpose in mind. Her fascination with the human and natural history of her native ground — the land that lies roughly between Lakes Erie and Huron, not too far from Michigan, and is sometimes called Sowesto — is inexhaustible.

In "The View From Castle Rock," she writes, closer to a nonfictional first person than usual, about traveling the territory with her husband, a geographer, and with "special maps" "sold to accompany a book called "The Physiography of Southern Ontario.'" The title sounds almost parodically dry — especially to those Americans who persist in viewing our wild and mysterious northern neighbor as an empire of blandness —

but in Munro's hands those maps come to resemble poems, runes or magic spells. In "The View from Castle Rock" there is an authenticity which removes the dullness. "The landscape here is a record of ancient events," Munro observes. "It was formed by the advancing, stationary, and retreating ice. The ice has staged its conquest and retreats here several times, withdrawing for the last time about 15,000 years ago. Quite recently, you might say. Quite recently now that I have got used to a certain way of reckoning history." This is indeed the secret of her genuine popularity as a fiction writer. Norman Mailer, Updike and Roth were the three great male narcissists who dominated the post war realist fiction. But what Munro is unique for is that she is a master at pulling universal truths from even the grubbiest, most gothic farm kitchen sinks and we are right to love her for it. She uses the fictional device to underscore both the subjective nature of storytelling and people's compulsion to use the art of storytelling to make sense of their lives and to make narrative order out of confusion. As this collection demonstrates, it's an art that she has mastered herself with virtuosic skill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back : Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. New York: Routledge.

Auerbach, Erich. 1974. *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Blau, Peter M. 1920. Ed., *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure*. N.Y.

China, P.R. 2010. "Post modernism or Neo –Realism: On Parody in David Lodge's Campus Novel *Small World*." *Canadian Social Science* 6.3: 133-142. Print.

Fortunati, Vita, Rita Monticelli, and Maurizio Ascari. 2001. Introduction. *Travel Writing and the Female Imaginary*. Bologna: Paltron.1-16. Print.

Franzen, Jonathan. 2004. "Runaway: Alice's Wonderland", "Sunday Book Review", *New York Times*. November 14, 2004 <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/books/review/14COVERFR.html>.

Jefferson, Douglas, and Graham Martin. 1982. *The Uses of Fiction*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Kakutani, Michiko. 1994. "Love Found and Lost, Amid Sharp Turns of Fate." Sunday Book Review. *The New York Times*. September 6, 1994. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/06/books/munro-secrets.html>.

Lashkin, David. 2006. "Alice Munro's Vancouver." *The New York Times*. June 11, 2006. <http://travel2.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/travel/11footsteps.html>.

Mclaren, Leah. 2013. "Why it's perfectly okay to hate Alice Munro." *The Globe and the Mail*. May 31, 2013. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/why-its-perfectly-okay-to-hate-alice-munro/article12284482/>

Pritchard, William H. 2001. "Road Map Not Included." Sunday Book Review, *The New York Times*. November 25, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/25/books/road-map-not-included.html>

Scott, A.O. 2006. 'Native Ground', ' Sunday Book Review' *New York Times*. December 10, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/10/books/review/Scott.t.html>