

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Alice Munro: A Master of Canadian Short Story

Dr. P. Satyanarayana

Vice-Principal,
Balaji College of Edn., Anantapuram,
AP, India

Abstract:

This paper presents about Alice Munro, 'master of the short story' who wins the Nobel Prize in literature in 2013. She has taken an art form, the short story, which has tended to come a little bit in the shadow behind the novel, and she has cultivated it almost to perfection. Munro's stories are often set in a small - town milieu where the struggle for a socially acceptable existence results in strained relationships and moral conflicts-problems that stem from general differences and colliding life ambitions. They focus on the weaknesses of the human condition. Her stories 'Sunday Afternoon', 'Family Furnishings' and 'Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage' picture some women who plays the role of impact factor in other people's lives.

Keywords: Ailing, autobiographical, closure, eclectic, furnishings, journalism, Rorschach test, salacious, shipping and the underdog.

Introduction:

All of us have read or heard many stories. They may be funny, sad, interesting or the other perceptions of man. The main elements of a short story consist of plot, characterisation, narrative technique, theme, tone, language, setting and atmosphere. The short story in Canada really developed in the late 19th century. Making a slow start in the 1830s, it picked up in the mid-nineteenth century when newspapers and magazines gave a fillip to its publication. A question often asked is what makes a short story specifically Canadian? Margaret Atwood opines, "The definition of 'Canadian short story' like that 'Canadian itself has a hard core with fuzzy edges. Canadian short story writers are eclectic in their approach like story writers elsewhere in the English-speaking world. The contemporary Canadian short story is a mosaic woven out of many strands. It had the sentimentality of romance and confronted life and society head on, Canadian short story is, more or less, no different from the short stories written the world over. Some of the important contemporary short story writers are: Margaret Eleanor Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, Ken Mitchell, Alice Munro and others. So the range and variety in Canadian short story is also limitless.

Alice Munro - Life and Works:

Canadian writer Alice Munro, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature on Thursday (10-10-2013), is an admitted short story addict who has garnered international praise for her tales of struggles, loves and tragedies of women in small town and rural Canada. She became the second Canadian-born writer to win the prize, although she is the first winner with a distinct

Canadian identity. Saul Bellow, who won the award in 1976, was born in Quebec, but raised in Chicago and is widely considered an American Writer. In addition to Canadians, short-story writers (and enthusiasts) might welcome Munro's win with a delight. In a literary culture that tends to lionize novels over shorter fiction, Munro has been a constant advocate for the power of the short story. In her interview with the CBC, Munro emphasized the significance of her win not for herself, but for the art form, short story.

Alice was born in Wingham, Ontario in 1931 to a family of farmers and now lives in nearby Clinton. Her father was a fox farmer and her mother was a teacher. She was a literary person in a non-literary town, concealing her ambition like a forbidden passion. She started writing in her early teens. When she escaped her childhood and got a scholarship to study at the University of Western Ontario, she studied Journalism. She published her first story; "The Dimensions of a Shadow" in 1950 while a university student. She dropped out of college to marry a fellow student; James Munro in 1951 had three daughters. After two years, they moved to Canada's Pacific Coast. She was a Sylvia Plath style depression by the time she was at 30. Marriage had fallen apart. She gave divorce to her husband James. She returned to Ontario in 1972 and married Gerald Fremlin in 1976. Her good fortune was to open a book store with second husband in Clinton in Ontario. Her second husband has died recently.

Only the 13th Woman in the award history of Nobel Prize to win, Munro has written 14 'phenomenal collections' of short stories. While helping with the business and raising three daughters, Munro wrote short stories for various magazines like 'The New Yorker', 'The Atlantic Monthly' and 'The Paris Review' etc. Let us discuss the various ideas of collection of short stories:

Dance of the Happy Shades (1968): It won her the governor's prize. In these stories, Munro's protagonist's wanderlust desires to explore beyond the borders of their sleepy town, Canada of the early 50s.

Lives of Girls and Women (1971): Munro chose to focus each story on the central character of Del Jordan, a young woman coming of age in the small town of jubilee. The protagonist's experiences are presented more or less chronologically.

Something I've been meaning to Tell You (1974): Here, we encounter Women struggling with a lovelorn past. These are stories of disappointment and longing, delivered in Munro's tell-tale honest tone.

The Beggar Maid (1978): It recounts the experiences of frustrated heroine, Rose, eager to escape her small town miserly. Many of the stories focus on her (Rose) relationship with various men, as she struggles to determine her true feelings toward each and in turn her future. We find a young woman trying to balance a desire for success and a desire for passion.

The Moons of Jupiter (1982): It provides a series of stories around the characters we've been coming to recognize as a signature to the author. The characters are dealing with familiar situations of ordinary life.

The Progress of Love (1986): This collection of remarkable short stories is conjuring a kind of density-moral, emotional, sometimes historical than care usually only be attributed to the full-length novel.

Friend of My Youth (1990): In this collection we meet the protagonists at a point of abrupt and jarring change in their lives. Each story is so rich in detail and so entirely unique.

Open Secrets (1994): It is a collection of short stories of autobiographical in nature.

The Love of a good Woman (1998): Munro brought yet another brilliant collection of stories on the subject she proves best-the lives of women. It contains eight stories.

Runaway (2004): Munro's 10th story collection is set in the barren, often isolated provinces of Canada and spans several decades up through the 70s. Against this landscape, Munro presents ordinary lives that disguise larger dramas. She delves deep into human belonging and exile.

The view from Castle Rock (2006): These are autobiographical stories that are woven round Ontario and its physical majesty and intricacy. The characters navigate their spaces with new eyes, a fitting homage to a place that played home to so many of Munro's characters.

Carried Away (2006): This Collection has contained Sixteen short stories. The noted story among these is "Differently". It is the story of a young woman named Georgia, who is reprimanded by her creative writing teacher for writing stories that involve "too many things going on at the same time.

Too Much Happiness (2009): This collection contains Ten Short Stories. The subject matter in most of these is objectivity, remarkably salacious. We have murder, duplicity, lust and self-mutilation-yet none are sensational. They are, instead, each used as an opportunity to portray a character is as much depth as possible. In 2009, Munro won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize for this.

Dear Life (2012): It is Munro's recent collection of Short Stories. Here, the reader is given 'a glimpse into the life of the author herself' as Munro rounds out book with four semi-autobiographical tales. Her prose is spare, graceful and beautifully crafted, her vision is expansive.

Thus, Munro who has been writing for more than 60 years, is the only the 13th woman to win the Nobel Prize. It is a long awaited triumph not only for Canada but for the short story, a form which causes two troubles for readers and writers alike. Readers expect stories to be easy to read and digest – after all, they're short! Writers believe short stories can be taken apart like a radio to figure out how they function after all, they are short!

Neither turns out to be true. And nowhere is it less true than with Alice Munro. Reading Munro, more than almost any other writer I can think of, is a personal journey. So the question of where to start with Munro is likewise personal-and just as easily answered by saying "Start anywhere! And don't stop". But that is not very helpful. So here, I have chosen

to discuss three stories from her different collections of Short Stories. They are “Sunday Afternoon”, “Family Furnishings” and “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage”.

Analysis of the Selected Stories of Alice Munro:

Sunday Afternoon:

It deals with the subject of Man-Woman relationship but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability and the self-awakening of women. It narrates the humiliating experience of the protagonist, Alva, a poor country-high school girl, working for the Gannett as a summer servant maid in their affluent suburban home. Wearing ill-fitting clothes, living among discarded furniture, she leads a mechanical life without any expression. Amid all this, Alva's poverty is objectified by the painful contrast between herself and Margerett, the Gannett's teenage daughters, when she is compelled to wear the former maid's ill-fitting uniform. Alva rationalizes her helpless envoy of Margaret's collection of expensive summer clothes of formals. Though Alva longs for such dresses, she consoles herself by saying that she had nothing to do with her. Alva had some desire that a normal girl of her age would have but she was denied of such privileges. A variant of the underdog theme which involves a conflict between urban culture and rural culture is clearly described and usually the rural characters are portrayed as morally superior. Aware of the difference between herself and the guests, fill the Gannett house on Sunday Afternoon. Alva doles out drinks and food till a cousin of Mrs. Garnett walks to her nonchalantly and kisses her passionately. He treats her, a woman-not as a maid. This was most unexpected but not unwelcome. This stranger's touch has caused her, her body was simply grateful and expectant and she felt a lightness and confidence which she had not known in this house. The barrier between the higher echelons of society and the lower strata has been eclipsed. At the basic instinct level, at the level of sex, gannets or all were equal. This small act leads to a sea change in Alva's attitude.

Suddenly Alva becomes confident, realizing that after all, there is not that much difference between her and Gannetts. For the first time, in a long time, Alva felt wanted, in some sense, equal to them, and felt exhilarated and excited. She has something to look forward to.

However advanced the society may consider itself to be , the basic human instinct remains the same-a low class woman is not worthy of any attention except as an object of sex. The story in a way deals with the subject of Man-Woman relationship, but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability as well as self-awakening of a woman, or rather a girl. There is not much action in the story. The account of the drab existence of a mind is spiced with a physical description of things and people minutely observed and colourfully presented. There is a twist towards the end of the story, a certain ambivalence which lends a fascinating peculiarity and uncertainty to the ending. The readers are free to make their own choice. The story is told in the form of third person narrative. The story is written from a female perspective.

Thus, Alice Munro has clearly represented the upper class people's mentality over the poor in this story.

There is a woman behind every man's success is the popular hearsay. But there is a woman behind another woman's success or failure is what Alice Munro says in her other stories, namely Family Furnishings and Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage.

Family Furnishings:

It opens with the name Alfrida, the name of the narrator's aunt. Alfrida is the cousin of the narrator's father and she seems to be a charismatic figure at her household. The narrator senses the difference between the visits of other relatives and Alfrida. The visit of other relatives is quite formal; everybody behaves very formally at the table during dinner. It is not that they are not capable of talking or chatting at the table but they all feel a kind of restraining in their family circumstances. Away from the table, they are normal and discuss all odds and events of their lives.

When Alfrida visits their home, everything is quite different. Even the preparations of dishes differ from the others. Alfrida is a woman working for a magazine and she writes for the newspaper. She has an air of liberty around her. She moves around not bothered about her relatives, discusses politics with her cousin and chats with the narrator's mother. She represents her aunt, the narrator's grandmother. The narrator also mentions that Alfrida is not beautiful with her skinny body and ugly teeth. There is one letter between the narrator and Alfrida which makes Alfrida's visit to the narrator's home. The narrator gets scholarships in the same place where Alfrida lives. Both of them do not get the opportunity to meet or rather the narrator does not bother to meet Alfrida even when Alfrida herself invites her to her home. Towards the end of her course, she goes to visit Alfrida and finds her living in a house stuffed with old fashioned furniture. Alfrida reveals that they were all her mother's, that is, the family furnishings preserved by her aunt after her mother's death.

The year after, the narrator is seen as a woman with the name of a popular writer, a fame she has gained after the publication of her first novel. After the divorce, the narrator is free from the family bonds. Alfrida's relationship with her father has diminished the narrator's relationship high with Alfrida. The narrator, after seeing the old family furnishings in Alfrida's home and after listening to her mother's decease has incorporated the character of Alfrida in her novel. Afraid is happy about it and the narrator not denying that it is not afraid at all. But she realizes that everything of Alfrida is included in her novel.

Thus, in "Family Furnishings" the heroine (narrator) doesn't stay at home to take care of her ailing mother, but wins a college scholarship, moves away to the big city and sets about becoming a writer.

Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage:

Alice Munro won a National Book Critics circle Prize for this story and is a three-time winner of the Governor General's Prize, Canada's highest literary honour. This story begins with a woman Johanna Parry booking a ticket for herself and shipping the furniture in the train to a place called Golynia Johann Parry is a plain looking woman with an unfamiliar accent of language. She appears like a nun with the bossing around attitude. She is looking

after the girl Sabitha, the grand-daughter of Mr. McCauley in his house. The furniture she is shipping belongs to his son-in-law, Mr. Boudreau with whom he is not on good terms.

Johanna Parry, the simple woman, working sincerely in McCauley's household is misled by Sabitha and her friend, Edith. Sabitha has the habit of writing letters to her father, Mr. Boudreau for his reference to her care for Sabitha with her letter to him. Edith and Sabitha in curiosity open the letter and find Johanna's letter. When there is a reply from Mr. Boudreau, there is no note for Johanna. Edith and Sabitha were disappointed and they add a note for Johanna out of sheer sympathy.

Edith and Sabitha make fun of Johanna's physical appearance and they are sure that Mr. Boudreau would not mind for Johanna. But Edith assumes that Johanna has a soft corner from him and hence she adds a note to Johanna. Now Sabitha has returned from a holiday with her cousins and is full of romance. With the same ecstasy, she persuades her friend to add a love note at the end of the letter. To their disappointment, there is no reply from Johanna to Boudreau after this note.

But there is a rapid change soon after that Sabitha who was under the care of Johanna now shifts to her aunt's place in higher education and Johanna packs the furniture belonging to Mr. Boudreau and leaves for his place. When this news reaches Edith, she feels shaky.

Johanna, from the last note assumed that Mr. Boudreau is in love with her and she leaves Mr. McCauley with an intention of marrying Mr. Boudreau. When she reaches his residence, she finds him suffering from Bronchitis and is only semi-conscious. She has the intelligence not to talk about love at that moment and attends to him in his sickness. With the nursing of Johanna, Boudreau recovers and he cannot understand the purpose of her arrival. He is completely innocent of her purpose but keeps quiet and accepts her assistance as he is weak both physically and economically.

Towards the end of the story, at Mr. McCauley's funeral, it is pronounced that he is survived by his granddaughter Sabitha, his son-in-law Mr. Boudreau, his wife Johanna and their infant son, Omar. Sabitha has taken over to the fashion of the city and is entirely altered. But again when this news of Mr. Boudreau, Johanna and their son Omar reaches Edith, she has the fear of being found out.

In this story, the teenage girls literally playing a practical joke on a strong-minded housekeeper, Johanna are seen. At first Johanna was peaceful, self-contented housekeeper with the stronger mind for discipline at home by looking after Sabitha. But once she receives the letter there is a subtle change in her which was not obvious to others. She continues to be the housekeeper until Sabitha remains with her grandfather. Once Sabitha is taken by her aunt, Johanna feels the urge to live for herself and she finds this to be the right time to go in search of her love with Mr. Ken Boudreau. Unaware of the girl's joke, she reaches Boudreau's place. But she is intelligent enough not to reveal her purpose immediately. She takes it as her responsibility to relieve Mr. Boudreau from this debts and she shows him the right path to lead a decent life. Economically weak, Boudreau is vulnerable to Johanna's decision and assistance and can be seen at the end, vulnerable to her love. The girls did not

have any intention of getting Johanna married to Mr. Ken Boudreau. Edith speculates why they did it at all. The whole twist of consequence dismayed her. It seemed to be fantastic but dull to her. Munro concludes the story with stress on the proverb, "Character is destiny/fate".

Critique:

Alice Munro in these three stories gives a small revelation of women, their personal histories both complex and simple; unfold in the rich detail of circumstance and feeling. She has also unfolded the secret that women are the important factors of other women in this world. They play a keynote in twisting the fate of women unintentionally and sometimes consciously as in the case of Johanna and Alfrida. Alice Munro provides the deep pleasure and rewards that the women deserve in this world in her works. Her reputation as a major short story writer is solidly based on her collection of short stories. She is often branded as the author of 'fragmented fictions'. The stories of Munro were written between the years 1977 and 1978, they appear to be fragments, following no linear sequence or chronological order. However, each story is complete in itself and it can be read in any order. Any type of reading brings out the meaning which Munro says once. Munro is an excellent short story writer who networks her stories and produces them as great literary pieces. Like Munro, many of the women in her stories grew up in small towns in Canada and at some point, faced a decision about whether to stay or to leave for the wider world. Munro has given us prismatic portraits of ordinary people who reveal their intelligence, toughness and capacity to dream, as well as their lies, blind spots and lapses of courage and goodwill.

Such descriptions are delivering not with judgemental accountancy, but with the sort of 'unsparing unsentimental love' harboured by a close friend or family member. There is always awareness in her fiction of the subjectivity of perception, and the kaleidoscopic permutations that memory can work on reality. In "Friend of My Youth", the story of a twice-jilted woman named Flora is remembered by a friend, and that friend's account, in turn, is framed by her daughter's thoughts on the subject, turning Flora's sad tale into a kind of Rorschach test for the pair of them. In story after story, passion is the magnet or the motor that drives women's choices. Love and sex, and marriage and adultery are often mirrors that reveal Munro heroines expectations.

Some of Munro's more recent tales have a changed the elliptical narratives she pioneered years ago for a more old-fashioned, stage-managed approach. Compared to her earlier works, many of her stories, "Dear Life" (2012) features tightly plotted-even contrived-narratives and more closure than in the past. The highlights of this volume (Dear Life) were four final entries, which she described as "the first and last-and the closest-things I have to say about my own life"-from a hard scrabble childhood in a Ontario farming community, to early marriages and a movement to British Columbia, followed by divorce, a new marriage and a move back to rural Ontario. In 2010, Munro had revealed that she was suffering from cancer. Early this year, she said that she was "probably not going to write anymore because I am getting rather old". But after the Noble, she told CBC she will reconsider the vow.

Conclusion:

There is finesse to Munro's writing that makes even her most painful stories appeal like moments of redemption in the midst of utter loss. Her stories focus on the frailties of the human condition. The Swedish Academy of Nobel Prize hailed Munro as master of the Contemporary Short Story, a genre rarely awarded. Several Critics referred to her as 'Canadian Chekhov', comparing her to Russian master story teller 'Anton Chekhov'. After winning the Nobel Prize, Munro has said she writes about the "Underbelly of relationships". The Swedish Academy's permanent secretary, Peter Englund, announces the Nobel Prize called Munro, "Master of the Contemporary Short Story". Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper congratulated Munro on Twitter "On behalf of all Canadians".

Works Cited:

1. Hesse. M.G(ed): 'Women in Canadian Literature', Ottawa, Borealis Press, 1976
2. Manorama Trika (ed): 'Canadian Short Stories' New Delhi, Pencraft International, 1999.
3. Parameswari. D (ed): 'Studies in Canadian Women's Writing', Chennai, emerald Publishers, 2008.