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Alice Munro: The Enduring Storyteller

Tanuka Chatterjee

Research Scholar

Department of English

Faculty of Arts

Banaras Hindu University

Abstract:

Alice Munro (1931 – 2013) has been deified globally for being an abiding storyteller. She writes about and redeems ordinary life and ordinary people, who she portrays as veritable cauldrons of mixed feelings. Boiling human lives down to singular and spectacular moments and revelations is her *forte*. The need to tell is apparent and palpable everywhere in Munro's fiction. That there inevitably is an epiphany or a revelation beneath Munro's black – and – white telling is what enthral her readers. Alice Munro emphasizes on the generative and regenerative dimension of storytelling, which is the defining trope of her fiction. Proclaiming storytelling as an essentially female talent, Munro improves upon the classical narrative structure of stories portraying women's lives. This paper proposes to examine Munro's technique of storytelling which, rendered through the dualistic medium of language and the plurality of meanings that radiate from it, assumes various shades of complexity and exhilaration.

Key Words: Alice Munro, stories, storytelling, language, narrative, re – telling, women.

The trope of storytelling is pivotal to Alice Munro's fiction as it is the chief engagement of her narrator – characters who organise and focalize the events comprising the short stories. It becomes the definitive endeavour of the characters who – intuiting a relationship between speaking and knowing – enter into narrative as a means of discovering and accepting the truth. It is also the prime activity of a large number of secondary characters whose telling is narrated by the chief narrators and thus incorporated within the main narrative. Whether seeking or eluding truth, all of these characters enlist narrative as the chief weapon in their tenacious and usually fruitless struggles for a reconciliation of their past and the present. As self – knowledge is the aim of most of the Munroian narrators and characters, storytelling proves to be the chief weapon through which they discover the truth in their fiction. Most of the characters remember their past and search for some significance or an explanation in their memories. Although memory is unreliable, the storytelling it produces is as close to truth – and to reconstructing, or representing, the past – as possible. The remembered and reconstructed past may be always indistinct (as the rendering of the past of quite a few characters suggest) but the truth of their fiction maybe retained and confined to that haze once memory is converted to telling. As storytelling is the predominant way through which the Munroian characters acknowledge the world, all these said characters are impelled to manage their pain, betrayal, loss, revelation and occasional glimpses of knowledge by telling. This echoes the genesis of Munro's own penchant for stories. The debilitating anxieties and despondency of her drab and quotidian adolescent life was effectively nullified by a riveting parallel world of stories and fantasies, which sustained her through the real world of her experience. In fact Munro's eldest daughter, Sheila, informs the reader – “Storytelling came to her so naturally and so early that she was ‘dazzled’ by what she could produce at fifteen or sixteen” and goes on to recall [Alice] Munro reminisce, “It

started as a redemption but pretty soon the art became more than a redemption, it was a wonderful experience. . . I was living it now, the whole movie thing, the whole involvement in this glamorous world” (169).

For Munro, the creative process begins on the documentary level – the desire to capture and fix reality – and ends on the imaginative level, where reality forms a continuum of seemingly objective perception and subjective interpretation. Munro always keeps us cognisant of the artifices of art – a story may be an interpretation of reality but should never be mistaken for reality itself. For Munro, the process of writing a short story is partly invention and partly remembering the way something looked, the manner in which certain difficulties resolved themselves, a certain feeling, emotion or experience. Writing can be a transformative and re-creative act, connecting the self to the continuum of life. In fact, Sheila Munro reveals: “Alice Munro didn’t have a self; she was always leapfrogging over herself with her writing” (225). However, telling stories through the medium of language is, according to Munro, the only fitting way of reclaiming the past. Munro acknowledges the limitations of language as she sees it as a hierarchical & dualistic construction. Any and every attempt to subject language to the ideological norms of accessibility and clarity is thwarted by the plurality of meaning that emanates from it. The somaticizing of language becomes imperative to any narrator who attempts to resuscitate experience through language and stories about the past. What one remembers of the past is suitably modified to urgently respond to the demands of the present. Munro resigns herself to the inevitable confines of her medium and comments upon its limitations instead of blatantly attempting to disguise it. Here, narrative is unable to conjure any integral and organic meaning from what is, essentially, a formless & chaotic past, but telling & re-telling stories, from a motley of angles & viewpoints, affords opportunities for retrospection and occasionally, for revelation.

Munro’s style of storytelling & narrative technique closely follows the modernist tradition of juxtaposing seemingly unconnected incidents to suggest a new meaning. Contradictory narration, the undeniable presence of multiple storytellers, and distinct leaps in time necessitate a diligent association with and interpretation of divergent material on the part of the reader. As Munro deliberately avoids intruding action as an omniscient author, the deceptively simple style and manifold narrative strategies complement the theme and establish a suitable framework for storytelling. A lapidary scrutiny of varied points of view and a compelling attention to detail characterises Munro’s later stories as her narrative strategies have grown more intricate over time. Who tells the story is as important as how it is told and Munro frequently writes a story from both the third – person and first – person points of view before deciding on which is more suitable. This presupposes Munro’s perfection of a more subtle and experimental narrative technique, involving a third-person limited narrator, as evidenced in *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) from that of the straight – forward narration by a first person narrator of her earlier works. The continual doubts, shifts, re – explanations and revelations serve to validate Munro’s moral integrity. Munro demonstrates an unsurpassable mastery of suspense in “Fits” as well as most of the stories comprising *Friend of My Youth* (1990). The title story of Munro’s 1986 collection *The Progress of Love* posits the shifting of the narrative action across three generations of contradictory stories. In these stories, the apparently random assemblage of the fragments of narrative give way to a calculated jumble; the main blocks of the narrative remain constant, as if certain incidents are put into circulation quite early in the storytelling process. These blocks are then reorganised, split and shifted about by the introduction of time-shifts, revelations, different narrative perspectives and points – of – view until a discernible order is declared.

Apart from Munro, few other short story writers have so stupendously navigated the occluded and ever-changing feelings that shift beneath our everyday lives. Even fewer have so subtly and veraciously disrupted and modified the classical narrative structure of stories about women's lives. Munro's perception of storytelling as being the flair of women is evidenced from her development of, and emphasis upon, female characters who tell stories to other women, particularly the mother or the aunt or the grandmother, who in turn, reiterate these stories to their young daughters or nieces. This reclamation of the oral tradition of storytelling brings to mind Trinh T. Minh-ha's vivid image of women's oral storytelling in the village marketplace, amidst the inveterate village gossip – "the story circulates like a gift, an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness" (Minh-ha 2). By this act, Munro signifies that, though disparaged and deprecated, women have a remarkable role to play in the evolution of a new and young generation, which would subsequently perpetuate the transmission of knowledge. Her characters, primarily, are unremarkable women in the visage of a child, a young woman, a mother, a surrogate mother or an old maid – women in varied societal roles who adopt vital social perspectives to the dominant social stances. Munro's storytelling, in delineating these narrator – characters, foregrounds the relationship between fiction and post-modern society. Rockwell has elaborated upon this notion: "to know the literature of a society is to know what sort of stories please them, and also, more significantly, to find in this mirror a reliable image of a number of hard social facts" (72).

However, Munro's depiction of communal issues is devoid of any political import – "no preaching for any particular morality or politics" – is what Munro swears by (Twigg, "Alice Munro: What Is" 32). Munro's stories are usually about women who, being quiet yet discerning visionaries as well as fortuitous survivors, manage to evade the jaded plots of their lives. Be it the mother in "Friend of My Youth" whose story has already been scripted by her daughter *and* by her own illness or Barbara in "Oranges and Apples" (*Friend of My Youth*) whose candidness prevents her from playing out her designated role in Murray's histrionic plots and fiascos. For these characters, storytelling, thus, becomes a key survival strategy and a strategic resistance to male dominion and violence as well as a prerogative of women to hoard secrets while managing to sustain themselves. These instances establish the fact that a story about women's storytelling is more explicitly a story about women's writing, which Munro champions. She continues to articulate a theory of women's writing in order to emancipate themselves with a more substantial knowledge of their craft & a deeper appreciation of the contributions made by women to the evolution of modern fiction. These traits impel Munro to join the ranks of other Canadian short story writers like Thomas McCulloch (1776 – 1843), Isabella Valency Crawford (1846 – 1887), Edward William Thomson (1849 – 1924), Stephen Leacock (1869 – 1944), Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862 – 1947).

Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You is a collection which demonstrates Munro's "new-found interest in and suspicion of telling as a source of power" (Heble 74). The sixth story "Tell me Yes or No" is about the process of telling. Munro shows the reader that what seems, in the fiction, to *be* and is presently occurring, may never really transpire at all. The stories of this collection assert that the significance of any event depends principally on its association(s) with other events which it recalls and those to which it looks forward. However, Munro's interest is more pronounced in focusing on what holds the story together rather than in showing how the narrative unfolds. This is echoed in Munro's introduction to the 1996 anthology of *Selected Stories*, where she avers:

What is important to me about the story is not what happens. . . It's like a view of reality a kind of reality that I can go into for a while, and I know right away if I can go into it [further] or not. Then, once I'm into it, I'll find out what happens. It's getting into it that's important, not caring what happens. A story is a spell, rather than a narrative. (7)

The story may fail but the faith in the importance of doing the story doesn't. Munro's stories may be like those her narrator – characters tell; Hugo's compelling story about Dotty has been delineated with an 'unsparing' and 'unsentimental' affection ("Material," *Something* 43). The narrator's voice in the story "Winter Wind," also collected in *Something*, second guesses her own creative process. Tackling the question of the ethics of storytelling, the narrator suggests that the act of narrating is intrinsic and intuitive in the individual regardless of historical, socio – cultural and geographical factors. However, this contention does not palliate the latent 'compunction,' which the artist feels when her autobiographical experience is directly addressed:

And how is anybody to know, I think as I put this down, how am I to know what I claim to know? I have used these people, all of them, but some of them, before. I have tricked them out and altered them and shaped them any way at all, to suit my purposes. I am not doing that now, I am being as careful as I can, but I stop and wonder, I feel compunction. (201)

The Moons of Jupiter (1982) is about what stories can do, about the relationship between knowing and telling, between truth and narrative. The women of this volume, bewildered and deeply irresolute, are constantly fumbling for the knowledge of an unknowable male other: be it the narrator in "Bardon Bus" talking her way through a broken affair or Lydia narrating the details of her abusive relationship with Duncan to a psychiatrist in "Dulse." Time and again, it is through stories, through placing themselves and the other characters within the narrative, that these women seek absolute knowledge and an effective resolution of their incertitude. To tell, they hope, is to know. Even though some of these characters are temporarily relieved of the pressures of their apprehensions, the failure of representing the narrative truth signifies that the stories these women tell must remain sketchy and finally devoid of the truths they are pursuing. The characters of Julie and the unnamed narrator in "Hard Luck Stories" (*The Moons of Jupiter*) are self conscious storytellers, whose manner of telling affords a crucial look into Munro's understanding of the intricacies of the narrative act. They are not merely remembering and retrieving the past but 'creating' captivating stories for the reticent and predatory Douglas. This can be better appreciated by Munro's remarkable analogy in her essay "Making it Real": "Everybody knows what a house does and how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining what a story does for me and what I want my stories to do for other people" (5). Munro effortlessly scrutinizes the impulses, patterns, potentialities and limitations of narrative as well as the unremitting struggle Julie and the narrator make with their material to find its truth in themselves. In this supremely meta – narrative work, Munro proclaims the troubled and fitful relationship between narrative and experience and ascertains the numerous versions of lies, qualms and deception that all narratives can discern. This highlights the storyteller's essential paradox – that of the prevarication of the speech-act. The nexus of lies that are interspersed throughout the

narrative of the story is attributed to the fact that the storyteller is dishonest with himself as well. However, it is art which weaves the truth out of this confounding pattern of lies.

In the story “Meneseteung,” Almeda Roth observes “Some things must be disregarded,” (*Friend of My Youth* 66) which highlights Munro’s belief that the art of storytelling lies as much in knowing what must be left out as put in, even though Munro is resolutely against the sins of omission. Towards the end of the same story, the narrator understands that she can’t retrieve her mother’s experience completely from the recalcitrance of the past, yet it is the process of storytelling that allows her an invaluable insight. However, the process of storytelling itself resists formal structuring. In every formed work of fiction (here, the short story), two opposing forces are predominant: the constructive forces of a shaping form & the resistance of the shaped materials. This tension between the potentialities of a story & the language with which it is confined is readily apparent through much of Munro’s body of work. What the different versions of a story reveal are the limits of knowledge. Every story inevitably belongs to a community of stories related by a variety of narrators and any story worth telling will surely be repeated. In fact, it is half the art of storytelling to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it. Munro complicates her stories with arduous conundrums, with unanswered and unanswerable questions which are aggravated by the re – tellings of the story as its possible meaning is unsettled at every stage in the process of telling. Also, the inexorable digressions and detours in the process of telling precipitates new meanings, versions, resonances and signification within the same story. In “The Flats Road” (*Lives of Girls and Women*), Del Jordan observes the devolution of fresh experience into impassioned and unpredictable fiction through narrative repetition. In the title story of *Friend of My Youth*, the narrator (and storyteller) and, by extension, Munro, as author, placates herself with a story that elaborates on what might have happened instead of narrating what happened precisely. The unnamed narrator reconstructs, in a series of layered episodes, the story of the two Grieves sisters, Flora and Ellie, with whom her schoolteacher mother boarded in the Ottawa valley years before. The mother told her daughter about the sisters, and the story proper is thus a retelling (rather, layers of re – telling), another performance of the original narrative act. The fictional structures created by Munro obfuscate easy closure & encourage multiple contradictory meanings; this creates room for the interplay of shifting multiple human interests and multiple meanings.

In the process of storytelling, Munro, on one hand, highlights the ordinariness and the intricacies of mundane life and yet, on the other hand, introduces extraordinary events obliquely amongst neighbourly gestures. This tendency constitutes a “strange mix of humiliation and self exposure that makes for a bumpy life and fine fiction” (“Introduction,” Gibson viii) which has come to characterize Munro’s fiction. A captivating portraiture of the emotional subtleties of the narrator – narratee relationships in Munro’s stories help her art in transcending the individual experience to reach the universal. I cannot do better than reiterate Munro’s assertion in the “Introduction” to *The Moons of Jupiter*: “I make them [stories] with such energy and devotion and secret pains, and then I wiggle out and leave them, to harden and settle in their place. I feel free. Next thing I know I have started assembling the makings. I am getting ready to do the whole thing over again” (iv). So, without an origin or a conclusion or any definite moral, Munro tells her delightful stories like an eternal storyteller.

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