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THE ENTANGLED RELATIONSHIPS IN ONTARIO: A STUDY OF ALICE MUNRO'S
"OPEN SECRETS" AND "CARRIED AWAY"

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ABSTRACT

Set in her home territory of Ontario in Canada, Alice Munro's works deal with the problems and moral conflicts in relationships. She exhibits great art in examining the impact of trivial events in an individual's life and the relation between memory and reality. Munro denies convergence of attention to a single character or event in her short stories thus creating jigsaw puzzles arranging familiar pieces. The short stories "Open Secrets" and "Carried Away" allows space to accommodate the outside world into the small town of Ontario. This paper attempts to analyse how the author portrays the development of human relationships in the most subtle places and neighborhoods and the consensus is achieved between perception and reality.

Keywords: Alice Munro, characterization, relationships, narrative.

The women writer hailed as the "Canadian Chekov", Alice Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013 for her brilliance in short fiction. Set in her home territory of Ontario in Canada, her works deal with the problems and moral conflicts in relationships. She exhibits great art in examining the impact of trivial events in an individual's life and the relation between memory and reality. Her short story collections like, *Open Secrets*, *The Love of a Good Woman*, *Hateship*, *Friendship*, *Love*, *Marriage*, etc. bring out the strangeness in familiar situations and experiences. Mostly set in Carstairs and Ontario, her stories hold an epic capability to instill fear and mystery into quotidian events juxtaposing realism with fantasy and romance. Munro finds Ontario as a place "back where nothing seems to be happening, beyond the change of seasons" and describes her home town as, "[t]he part of the country [which] is absolutely Gothic. You can't get it all down" (Kroller 200). In effect, her short stories evolve into complicated structures evaluating "the texture[s] of lived experience and the impossibility of accurate representation" (Kroller 251).

In the two short stories, "Carried Away" and "Open Secrets", from the collection titled *Open Secrets*, Munro ventures to present narratives that move in and out in the temporal space, unveiling the psychological and emotional development of each character. She presents overlapping interactions between her characters which often leave the readers puzzled along with the mysteries that present themselves in the backdrop of the plot. Her stories cannot be claimed by a single protagonist. There are several other characters that appear slowly in the course of the narrative and claim an equal space along with the seemingly central character. The mystery is not confined to the events but also allowed or rather forced to permeate into the depth of many

minds. Justifying the title of the collection, she makes it possible that the secrets or the solutions are plausible and permits them a dignity that is beyond the limits of the print word.

Munro's short stories in the collection are mostly centered on women. As she progress narrating the mystery, she takes subtle turns to plunge into the physical and psychological niches of the characters. She analyses the perils of specificity and the predictability in individuals and events that come with over-grown familiarity. In the title story, "Open Secrets", Munro narrates the mysterious missing of a girl, Heather bell, from a camping group, led by Miss Mary Johnstone. The story begins as Frances, who had been on such planned hiking trips in her childhood, narrates the weekend's incidents to her cousin and mistress, Maureen Stephens. As she narrates the incident, Maureen can almost quite precisely imagine how the trip must have been. Memories come to her involuntarily out of familiarity and the blatant mundanity of life. She sees that the disappearance might have occurred when the order of events were disrupted. She assumes that Miss Johnstone might have allowed Heather to get back the sweater she left at the farm which was unusual of Miss Johnstone's nature. As she fleets in and out of present and past, Maureen accounts how the disruption in the order of life have been the turning points in relationships. Maureen wonders, "Jobs, marriage didn't quite do it—just made you *act* as if you'd forgotten things...you could not begin to alter anything there" (Munro 132). For her and others, life is a preordained flow of events. Only unprecedented disturbances brought alterations, but a purposeful initiation of an alteration was impossible.

Maureen's relationship with her husband had lost its initial tenderness and turned into a life obscenely made up of compromises and complexities instigated from commitment. After her miscarriage and imposition of infertility, "the intimate part of her life with her husband came to an end. It seemed that he had been mostly obliging her, because he felt that it was wrong to deny a woman the chance to have a child" (Munro 154). Later as a sexagenarian, recuperating from a stroke, Stephens trivializes her into an object of his revived libido, "commanding" her with a "hiss of disgust" (Munro 149). She finds certain uneasiness in being addressed as "Mrs. Stephens" by Miss Johnstone describes "it as if it was a play title" (Munro 133) and make her long for her maiden name. The title "Mrs. Stephens" is reminder for Maureen— of a nostalgic past and the evidence of a passionless marriage. Her vision parallels with image of the hand of her husband, the hand of Theo Slater, an acquaintance, and of a burned hand on the stove as she stirs the custard for her husband after surrendering to Stephens's bout of sexual urges. The vision consolidates the subtle traumas of her life:

What she sees now isn't in any life of her own. She sees one of those thick-fingered hands that pressed into her tablecloth and that had worked among the feathers, and it is pressed down, unresistingly, but by somebody else's will—it is pressed down on the open burner of the stove where she is stirring the custard in the double boiler, and held there just for a second or two, just long enough to scorch the flesh on the red coil, to scorch but not to maim. In silence this is done, and by agreement—a brief and barbaric and necessary act. (Munro 153)

The vision strikes a parallel between her personal and social relations. The marriage of Marion and Theo is subtly compared to that of hers and Stephen. Maureen observes the authority displayed by Marion and the apologetic and slavish mannerisms of Theo. She finds her relationship contrasted in theirs and pauses to think over the lack of balance and its complicated continuity in their lives. As Stephens objectifies and vents out the social disability caused by the stroke on Maureen, she suspects that Theo must be have found an outlet for his frustrations in being submissive to Marion. She finds the disruption of order and balance in relationships effecting on innocent partners.

In her vision, her experience, intuition and fear are juxtaposed with each other. She subtly hints at a possible sexual assault and murder of Heather Bell at the hands of Theo Slater. Marion, like Maureen "performs" her wifely duty and takes the responsibility of creating an alibi for husband, going to the extent of providing a believable suspect. The vicious circle of imbalance and disorder thus goes on.

In the opening short story in *Open Secrets* titled, "Carried Away", Munro discusses relationships in a much more detailed manner. She introduces several characters of equal emotional and psychological depth and deliberates on how their lives overlap each other. She moves the small town of Carstairs to a global level

as she brings in the subtle effects of World War I, Spanish flu and emergence of Trade Unions into the personal lives of its dwellers. The story begins in 1917, when Louisa, the twenty-five year old librarian receives a letter from the war front. In the letter, soldier Jack Agnew, narrates the days when he used to frequent the Library of Carstairs. Their correspondence leads to an unfulfilled love affair. Agnew on retiring from the army turns to a factory worker where he later dies in an accident. The story ends with a peculiar and complex note, where the fifty-year old Louisa has a hallucination of Jack Agnew at a bus depot and he talks to her as though he never died.

In "Carried Away", Munro analyses the complexity of relations between sexes and the loneliness and anxiety of existence in the small town of Carstairs, suppressed by the cognizance of opportunities that await them beyond its boundaries. Munro implicitly portrays the effect of the World War I and emergence of Trade unions on personal relationships. In spite of being engaged to Grace, Jack Agnew starts an affair with Louisa and substantiates his confession in his letter: "I am not trying to worry you or get your sympathy either but just explain how the idea I won't ever see Carstairs again makes me think I can say anything I want." (Munro 11). As she gets to know the soldier, her interest in the war aggravates and also reciprocates the desperate soldier by sending him her picture. She moves out of her comfort zone and acts contrary to her usual self. Her life at Carstairs had been uneventful and limited to her daily job and drinking with the fellow boarders at the Continental Hotel. Agnew's letters inspires her to get out of her mundane life. Both Agnew and Louisa are victims of curtailed relations with their surroundings. The thorough familiarity of spaces make them believe that they are entangled in it and the relation that the built through letters provide with kaleidoscopic vision of what space unknown to each other. Rather than prioritizing the love of Agnew, she embraces the fear and uncertainty of life in the battle field and holds an excitement for the turbulence of the outside world: "Now she felt what everybody else did—a constant fear and misgiving and at the same time this addictive excitement. You could look up from your life of the moment and feel the world crackling beyond the walls." (Munro 11)

Louisa was a woman who never found love. She was forced to drift one love affair to another. Her first affair was with a married doctor who treated her for tuberculosis. It had tapered off through an exchange of letters. Quite ironically, it is letters that connect her to the next romance. The letters of Agnew were solace to her life caught with in the walls of the library and the Continental Hotel. She held on to epistolary love affair even while the shadow of death loomed over it. Jack ends the affair with another letter he anonymously leaves at the library. Like a pattern is fixed for her life, Louisa meets her future husband at the same library after Jack's death. In between the romances in her life she also engages in a brief emotional companionship and sexual escapade with Jim Frarey, another occupant at the hotel. Jim is the only confidant who knows her life story. It is Jim who appears at the end of her hallucination, bridging her fantasy and reality.

Munro's short stories are mysteries themselves. The intensity with which each of the characters share the narrative and the differences in their modes of surviving the complications of their small lives makes Munro's works unique. As an author she expresses quite partially and selectively. "Carried Away" and "Open Secrets" raises the question of consensus between memory and reality. Maureen and Louisa interpret their reality according to their experiences and memories, and complete the voids of their real life with dreams and fantasies. They detest order and balance but fail to timely realise and escape the process. Munro's characters are always in a quest for strangeness to escape the familiarity of life that engulfs them in the small town of Ontario.

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