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ANALYSIS OF THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN AND NATURE IN *RUNAWAY* FROM
PERSPECTIVE OF ECOFEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

With the increase of frequent outbreaks of epidemic and extreme weather in recent years, ecological problems have become a hot issue. Since human activities have a great impact on nature, the relationship between man and nature is the core of the discussion. However, man's control and unbridled use of nature is determined by the long-standing logocentrism of mankind, which is the root cause of all binary opposition and inequality, and leads to the plight of discrimination and unequal treatment of women and other vulnerable groups. Therefore, from this perspective, in the patriarchy society with logocentrism, women and nature form an oppressed alliance, and ecofeminism comes into being. From the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper analyzes Alice Munro's *Runaway*, expounds the similarities and connections between the oppressed female characters and nature, and discusses how women and nature are oppressed and treated unequally by men. Only by breaking the logocentrism in human thought can women truly obtain equality and rights, and human beings can learn to live in harmony with nature.

Key words: Ecofeminism, nature, women, oppression

1. Introduction of *Runaway* and Alice Munro

Alice Munro, a famous Canadian writer who has been called "the Chekhov of our time" for her rare artistic talent, has won the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, the 13th female writer in the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature to receive this honor. Munro's works mostly tell the stories of ordinary women. Through simple language and plain plot, they produce extraordinary artistic effects and reveal the inevitable tragic fate of these women with exquisite narrative skills. The theme of Munro's novels is always related to the dilemma faced by women, and focuses on depicting the female images and living conditions of small-town residents in Ontario. The main themes are love and sex, family relationship, responsibility and freedom, class conflict, growth and aging, and so on. However, the protagonist often ends up lost or even defeated. From this, the reader can see the development trajectory of women's growth. Most of her novels explore the complex human nature with simple language style, showing her special attention to the true state of life and the status and psychological changes of women.

Munro has been writing since her college days and has published 14 collections of short stories. Among them, *Runaway* (2004) can be regarded as Munro's representative work, which won Munro the third Man Booker International Prize and laid a solid foundation for Munro to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. It has won widespread acclaim and sold well both at home and abroad. The book is composed of eight short stories, which tell eight interconnected stories. The protagonists of the stories are all female characters who are eager to escape from life. They are always in the desire to escape and wait for the opportunity to move for love, marriage, independence and freedom. Opening a collection of stories of the same name, the short story *Runaway* focuses on the lives of an ordinary couple in a small Canadian town. Among them, Carla, a young woman dissatisfied with her marriage to her husband Clark, runs away from her family with the help and persuasion of her neighbor Sylvia. But Carla did not abandon her husband completely. On the way she suddenly regretted it and returned to the family. For Carla's return, some people think that this is because Carla's ego fails to get rid of the constraint of superego and can't take the step of female independence. Others think that Carla's move is the identification and return to the traditional family ethics. Others see Kara's return as the result of slave-like attachment psychology. Between escape and return, Carla turns from blindness to firmness, and from weakness to stoicism. This change in behavior and character not only reflects the multiple dimensions of the main body of the character, but also shows Munro's departure from and thinking about traditional feminist views.

A common theme in Munro's work, especially reflected in her early work, is the dilemma faced by a girl entering adulthood as she confronts her family and the small town in which she grew up. Munro pays more attention to the phenomenon of marital violence, and most of her works examine marital violence. It clearly shows the characteristics of the abusers under the rule of traditional masculinity. They are physically strong manual workers, independent, with strong desire for control, and have the power to surpass women both physically and mentally. As a result of their lower social class, they are under greater economic pressure. In social communication, they despise the social rules and are not easy to get along with the people around them, so they tend to have inferiority and closed mentality. Moreover, men are taught from an early age to be expressionless, to show no weakness, to be powerful, to be aggressive, to control their surroundings and others. They reject anything that would be considered feminine, and in resolving conflicts, they often try to control the other person through violence to gain more power and bring the other person to heel. When this type of husband tries to control his wife, the most direct means is violence. Due to the influence of the traditional patriarchal society on the definition of femininity, Munro's women are submissive, weak and other characteristics, so they cannot get personality independence and get rid of the influence of marital violence.

From Munro's description of marital violence, it can be found that in different social and historical stages in Canada, the public's attitude towards marital violence has experienced the process from acquiescence to interference, and then to the establishment of a complete system to provide assistance to both sides of marital violence. This process reflects the change of marriage ethics in the West, and also reflects the improvement of women's status and the respect for women's self-consciousness under the influence of feminist movement. With the awakening of women's sense of independence, women's way of living in the family has been quietly changed. The passive role played by women in the family has been observed and interfered by the society, and the intervention of public will has helped both sides of marital violence. It plays a very important role for the victims of marital violence to get rid of the economic dependence on the abuser and gain personality independence. People also recognize that marital violence is a symptom of men's personality defects, psychopathy and lack of self-control, and no longer see violence as a manifestation of masculinity.

Munro's story depicts the psychological process of women seeking self and life meaning in the pain after experiencing violence and suffering, and reveals the deep connotation of women's self-pursuit through the description of the growth of women's consciousness in marital violence. On the one hand, the changes in the fortunes of the heroines reflect the positive significance of the feminist movement. On the other hand, women's exit from the tragedy of marriage not only needs social intervention and the change of living environment, but also needs active self-repair. Munro's stories reflect her attention to the state of individual existence, the analysis of the power that is difficult for individuals to control in the process of seeking the independence and

integrity of personality, and the exploration of human universal psychological appeal and complex human nature, which are touching and thought-provoking.

2. Literature Review

Since its publication in 2004, the story *Runaway* has attracted extensive attention from scholars at home and abroad. Many scholars have made various analyses on this text. On the one hand, in terms of content and theme, many scholars have made detailed discussions and analyses of the female characters, female awakening consciousness, female dilemma and marriage relationship in the story from various literary perspectives such as existentialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Gothic perspective. On the other hand, from the language and artistic effect of the text, many scholars have made a detailed analysis of the narrative strategy, narrative art, text construction art, and the application art of letter form in the story. Among them, many scholars have noticed the image characteristics and even its mythological metaphor used by the author, and many scholars have analyzed the story from the perspective of feminism, but there are not many articles that link the two together and give a complete explanation of the natural image and female role in the text from the perspective of ecofeminism. At present, most of the literature analyzing the text from the perspective of ecofeminism only select a few obvious images, and many details worth exploring in the story are usually omitted. Therefore, from the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper will analyze the similar dilemmas faced by nature and women in the patriarchal society with logocentrism and the alliance of The Other formed by the oppressed.

3. Ecofeminism in *Runaway*

As the first part of the story collection, *Runaway* demonstrates the distinctive characteristics of feminism. The heroine Carla is a typical woman who suffers oppression and unequal treatment. In the process of telling Carla's story, the author uses a lot of natural images, which are more or less related to the destiny of the heroine Carla. The followings are some example analyses of the main images mentioned in the story.

3.1 About Flora

Flora is a goat Clark brought back from a trip to the farm to buy a horse tackle. Clark had heard that keeping goats and horses together could calm and soothe the horses. Later Flora and Carla become closer. Carla was worried when Flora got lost and waited for her to return. However, Flora disappeared again when she returned and saw Clark and Sylvia. Flora's experience has many similarities with the heroine Carla. Many scholars have fully analyzed this aspect, so this paper focuses on the analysis of some rarely noticed details.

When Flora was lost for the first time, Carla always worried about Flora's safety, "Carla was afraid that wild dogs or coyotes had got her, or even a bear." (Munro, 13) However, Clark was indifferent. "He suggested, not for the first time, that Flora might have just gone off to find herself a billy." (Munro, 15) If Flora was regarded as an equal life or even a family member who got along with them day and night, Carla's concern was reasonable, while Clark was more indifferent and even made some speculations. However, as mentioned above, "They had meant to breed her someday but there had never been any signs of her coming into heat." (Munro, 15) Clark held this view despite knowing that Flora had no signs of estrus, apparently overstating the importance and attraction of males and sex to females, and reflecting the superiority of males under patriarchal ideology. If Flora is really in danger and needs to be rescued, his self-righteous thoughts will undoubtedly reduce Flora's chances of survival, but Clark clearly doesn't care, just as he doesn't care about Carla. What's even scarier is that this is still true in human societies. Men's sense of superiority and objectification and disregard of women will put women in an unequal and even dangerous situation. In fact, superiority is the embodiment of inequality, and the feminist movement, as well as much of the world's important efforts to fight for rights, are aimed at eliminating all kinds of inequality. Carla has been in a state of inequality and even oppression in her marriage to Clark for a long time, and Flora, as a goat, is often the object of human domination and exploitation. "Carla's behavior with the horses was tender and strict and rather maternal, but the comradeship with Flora was quite different, Flora allowing her no sense of superiority." (Munro, 15) Equality without superiority makes them understand each other better. Being oppressed, Carla and Flora formed a weak alliance, and the equality between them made them closer. "At first she had been Clark's pet entirely following him everywhere, dancing

for his attention... But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla, and in this attachment she was suddenly much wiser, less skittish—she seemed capable instead, of a subdued and ironic sort of humor.” (Munro, 15) The implication of this description is very clear. Flora starts out as Clark's pet, but as she grows wiser, she realizes that she and Carla are kindred spirits. Carla had a dream about Flora's escape. “In the first dream Flora had walked right up to the bed with a red apple in her mouth, but in the second dream—last night—she had run away when she saw Carla coming.” (Munro, 13) According to urban dictionary, red apple refers to a weakness or flaw in any person causing the individual to be vulnerable or destroyed to any extent. The term derives from the red apple which poisoned Snow White in the tale 'Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs'. In this story, red apple refers to both Flora's innate weakness as an oppressed class and Carla's inability to escape from difficult situations and give in to Clark's unequal treatment. Although she had the opportunity and the conditions, she lacked the courage and determination needed to control her own destiny, which is Carla's red apple.

3.2 About Horses

In this story, there are many other animals besides Flora, such as horses. The horse is a natural image, but it is also a typical animal that has been tamed and ridden. Because of its dual identity, the role and characteristics of the horse in this story is also worth analyzing. The horses in this story live in a stable rather than a wide prairie, being fed and ridden, so most of them are images of being oppressed and tame. “The horses had seen Carla go across to the ring and they had all moved up to the fence...” (Munro, 13) The submissive horses in the stable are very close to Carla because of the closer relationship between women and nature. The downtrodden status of horses is suggestive of Carla's life. One of the gifts Sylvia gave Carla as a friend and confidant was about horses. “Swimming reminded me of this because it's a little replica, you know, it's a little replica of the horse they found under the sea.” (Munro, 25) Sylvia is well aware of Carla's situation and hopes to help her escape. She gave the gift of horses to Carla because she subconsciously believed that horses and Carla had similarities and connections, and hoped that Carla could become a rider and escape from the oppressed situation. In fact, however, the real oppressor was Clark. His profession suggests that he is destined to be the archetypal oppressor. “Clark was the best riding teacher they had... One day she came into the stable and saw him hanging up his saddle and realized she had fallen in love with him.” (Munro, 34)

And Carla's reaction to seeing the saddle, a vehicle for domination and tamed, hints at the tragic end of Clark's domination and domination. However, one horse is different, Lizzie. She was ignored and treated unfairly by human beings without making any mistakes. Since then, she was emotionally hurt and began to fight back against human beings and was different from other horses in many ways. “They came over to the fence to watch her. All of them except Lizzie, who capered and snorted a bit, had the sense to understand that her attention was elsewhere.” (Munro, 17) Lizzie didn't care and curry favor with her owner like other horses. She has independent cognition and ideas, and does not bow to oppressors, nor does she conform to social status. Lizzie is the rare sober minority of the majority, and is typical of Carla's fate. They are both in a similar position of oppression, but if Carla had taken Lizzie's attitude, her life would have turned upside down.

3.3 Other Images

There are also many interesting images in the story, such as flowers. Carla's neighbor and friend Sylvia, as a woman, views Carla as equal, respectful, appreciative, and friendly. She would describe the beautiful things associated with Carla as flowers. “Nevertheless, Sylvia saw it as a bright blossom, its petals spreading inside her with tumultuous heat, like a menopausal flash.” (Munro, 24) She likened Carla's kiss to a flower and said it was very moving. The same image of flowers, however, is not the case for Clark. “Last spring, she went out once and picked him a small bunch of dog's-tooth violets, but he looked at them—as he sometimes looked at her—with mere exhaustion, disavowal.” (Munro, 35) Carla had patiently introduced Clark to the names of various plants, but Clark could only remember a few. He was as indifferent to the flowers she picked as he was to her. Clark is indifferent to Carla, the heroine, so he doesn't care much about her charms or hobbies. As with the flowers, he lacks appreciation and respect for the heroine. Such a relationship was not destined to bring Carla happiness. Sylvia, on the other hand, had always been sympathetic and supportive of Carla. The other gift she brought back

for Carla was a small stone on the grounds that she just wanted her to have a tiny piece of this land. As for the meaning of this sentence, it may be that Sylvia hopes Kara can form an alliance with the oppressed nature and find strength by relying on each other with the oppressed group, or it may be that Sylvia hopes Carla can get rid of the identity of the oppressed. Because having land means that humans feel they have a right to the natural world, Sylvia wants Kara to have the power to control her own destiny.

The description of another scene is equally worthy of note. "The sun was shining, as it had been for some time... It occurred to her that she must tell Clark about this—that perhaps they had chosen what was for some freakish reason a very wet and dreary corner of the country, and there were other places where they could have been successful." (Munro, 37) When Carla got on the bus and set off on her escape route, she saw the beautiful scenery along the way and realized that her home environment paled in comparison. It seems that Carla is reflecting on her and Clark's choice of residence, but it is also a description of Carla's life situation. In the wave of the feminist movement, women all over the world are fighting for their rights and new lives, just like the sunny landscape, yet Carla's choices have trapped her in a swamp, as dark and damp as her and Clark's home, with no hope. It also suggests that Carla's future back with Clark must be equally bleak.

4. Conclusion

Runaway tells the story of the heroine Carla's several escape success and failure. In addition to running away from Clark, Carla also tried to run away from her parents. In this paper, Carla's relationship with her parents is not analyzed in detail, but Carla's position in her relationship with Clark is mainly considered. However, the oppression of women is not only from her husband and marriage. Since the launch of the feminist movement, there are still many oppressions and unequal treatment of women in the world. Women in various difficulties are still waiting for rescue and trying to save themselves. *Runaway* is of great practical significance. Munro hides the difficulties and opportunities of women's life in her words and gives readers great space for thinking and discussion.

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