

ALICE MUNRO'S WORLD OF SHORT-STORIES

NAVDEEP SINGH*

Alice Munro is far and wide recognized as one of the world's unsurpassed living writers of short fiction in English. Alice Munro is a Canadian author who suffuses her stories with the natural features and common life of her indigenous western Ontario. She was born in Wingham in south-western Ontario, in 1931. She grew up near the small town of Wingham in Huron County, Ontario in a red-brick farmhouse with her parents, a brother and a sister. She was a gifted child. Alice Munro is described as "Canada's Chekhov", "Canada's Flaubert". She is a wonderful teller of tales who has been called a writer's writer and many writers both in Canada and outside of Canada do love and think highly of her works. But Alice Munro is also a reader's writer. She writes with intelligence, depth, and consideration, carrying her readers with her in her explorations of character, in search of some kind of understanding, to reveal any mystery though no neat resolutions are given, still she tries to figure things out in an elegant, moving way.

Munro was a voluminous and a creative writer. She has authored fifteen collections of stories; she has also written television scripts. Many awards and prizes are to his credit. She has been honoured with Booker Prize for her over all contribution to fiction on the world stage. Munro has done more than any living writer to demonstrate that the short story is an art form and not the poor relation of the novel. The limitation of space does not permit detailed attention to each of her critical books and articles.

Many of Munro's stories are set in Huron County, Ontario. Her strong regional focus is one of the features of her fiction. Another is the omniscient narrator who serves to make sense of the world. Many compare Munro's small-town settings to writers from the rural South of the United States. As in the works of William Faulkner and Flannery O' Connor, her characters often confront deep-rooted customs and traditions, but the reaction of Munro's characters is generally less intense than their Southern counterparts. Her male characters tend to capture the essence of the everyman, while her female characters are more complex. Much of Munro's work exemplifies the literary genre known as Southern Ontario Gothic. Munro's work is often compared with the great short-story writers. In her stories, as in Chekhov's, plot is secondary and "little happens." As with Chekhov, Garan Holcombe notes: "All is based on the epiphanic moment, the sudden enlightenment, the concise, subtle, revelatory detail." Munro's work deals with love and work, and the failings of both. She shares Chekhov's obsession with time and our much-lamented inability to delay or prevent its relentless movement forward.

A frequent theme of her work, particularly evident in her early stories, has been the dilemmas of a girl coming of age and coming to terms with her family and the small town she grew up in. In recent work such as *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) and *Runaway* (2004) she has shifted her focus to the travails of middle age, of women alone, and of the elderly.

* Assistant Professor, Sikh National College, Banga, Punjab.
Correspondence E-mail Id: editor@eurekajournals.com

It is a mark of her style for characters to experience a revelation that sheds light on, and gives meaning to, an event. Munro's prose reveals the ambiguities of life: "ironic and serious at the same time," "mottoes of godliness and honor and flaming bigotry," "special, useless knowledge," "tones of shrill and happy outrage," "the bad taste, the heartlessness, the joy of it." Her style places the fantastic next to the ordinary, with each undercutting the other in ways that simply and effortlessly evoke life.¹

Dance of the Happy Shades was her first collection of short stories published in 1968 which introduced her measured, deliberate prose to the world and garnered the 1968 Governor General's Award for English Fiction. With its focus on the small town of Western Ontario and the vagaries of everyday life in a close-knit community, it encapsulated Munro's vision and proscribed the terrain she would explore over the course of the next 50 years. Its focus on moments of quotidian revelation, and the depth of Munro's empathetic vision, makes it a minor classic which signaled the Nobel laureate's incredible talent to the world.

Her next work came in the form of *Lives of Girls and Women* in 1971. This book was great literary success for the writer and drew the world wide attention. It is a short story cycle which records the exploits of a single character; Del Jordan, this collection focuses on small town life in Western Ontario, but introduces feminist themes and ideas which Munro would develop throughout her career. Its picture of small town desolation and isolation is powerfully moving and makes it a particular standout in Munro's canon. This book won the Canadian Booksellers' Award.

Who Do You Think You Are? is her next collection which bagged the Governor General's Literary Award for a second time. This book appeared outside of Canada as *The Beggar Maid* and was nominated for the Booker Prize. Its opening story, "Royal Beatings" had been published by *The New*

Yorker in March 1977 and was the first of many Munro stories to appear first in that magazine. This collection engages with themes of shaming and questioning within the small town milieu that Munro made her own. As in *Lives of Girls and Women*, the stories in this collection are interlinked and can be read as a novel.

Her next work came out in the form of *The Moons of Jupiter* which contains twelve stories that present whole landscapes and cultures, whole families of characters. It is her most loved work. It deals with how facts may change over time. The story is 17 pages in length and made up of 7 sections with the shortest section being the final one. Regarding this collection *New York Times* writes: "witty, subtle, passionate, *The Moons of Jupiter* is exceptionally knowledgeable about the content and movement-the entanglements and entailments-of individual human feeling. And the knowledge it offers can't be looked up elsewhere" (*New York Times*, 1982).

"*The Moons of Jupiter*" was originally published in *The New Yorker* on 22 May, 1978, with a slightly different version being republished as the title story of Munro's fifth collection that came out in 1982. "The Moons of Jupiter" has been included in the author's own compilations three times, in 1996, in 2004 and in 2006, which makes the work range among those that have been republished the most. Furthermore, "The Moons of Jupiter" counts among the stories that generated Munro's international breakthrough during the years around 1980."²

Another major work of critical acclaim by Munro was *The Progress of Love*, which was published in 1986, bagged the Marian Engel Award. These stories are set predominantly in rural south-western Ontario, and further evince a preoccupation with region, and the lives of women. *The Progress of Love* is a distillation of much of her work, exploring the problems of time and the narrator's relation to it, in a prose that is perfectly instinct with wonder and compassion. It

also won the Governor General's Award. It is a collection of 11 stories.

The collections *Friend of My Youth*, *Open Secrets*, and *The Love of a Good Woman*, show her continuing development as a writer and extended her fame beyond Canada's borders. In 1995, she won the W.H. Smith Award in Britain and in 1999; the National Book Critics' Circle Fiction Award in the U.S. *Runaway* won the 2004 Giller Prize and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* contains nine stories, and it was published in 2001. These stories are highly praised by *Sunday Times*, *Independent*, *Evening Standard* and *New Statesman*. All these collections of short stories helped her to win accolade all over the world.

Another collection of short stories and also the winner of the Giller Prize by Munro was *Runaway*. It explores life throughout rural Canada, and reflects on the breakdown of relationships and love affairs. Munro's tendency to write about ordinary lives and their mundane tragedies is to the fore in this collection, in which every story tells of estrangement and reconciliation. There are eight short stories in the book. Three of the stories ("Chance", "Soon", and "Silence") are about a single character named Juliet Henderson.

The View from Castle Rock is a book of short stories by Canadian author Alice Munro, published in 2006 by McClelland and Stewart. It is a collection of historical and autobiographical stories. The first part of the book narrates the lives of members of the Laidlaw branch of the family tree of the author, starting from their Scottish origins in the 18th century. The second part consists of fictionalized tales inspired by events in her own life.³

Munro's next collection of short stories was *Too Much Happiness* which was published on August 25, 2009 by McClelland and Stewart's Douglas Gibson. As with most of her work, the collection

focuses on the strength and vulnerabilities of women. It is a collection of ten superb stories. Her latest publication is *Dear Life* (2013). In addition to her short stories, Munro has also written television scripts. *How I Met My Husband* was televised in 1974. Again, in 2005, the same was dramatized as *Historica Radio Minute*. Her television plays are *A Trip to the Coast* (1973), *Thanks for the Ride*, CBC, (1973), *The Irish* (1978). Many of Munro's stories have been adapted for radio and film. The 1983 film version of one of her most anthologized stories, *Boys and Girls*, won an Oscar for short film in 1986. A television movie of *Lives of Girls and Women* was produced in 1994. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Paris Review*, and other publications, and her collections have been translated into thirteen languages. At last, after a long period of her short story career, the authorities of Nobel Committee conferred her with the highest prize, known as The Nobel Prize for literature in October, 2013.

Munro's stories often focus around coming of age tales and deal with rooted customs, traditions and family. However, her stories are not just for those who can identify, but also for anyone who understands human nature. Her characters are faulty yet real; her stories are filled with eloquent prose yet ordinary situations; they bring you into the lives of the characters without forcing the story onto the reader. It is this talent that makes Alice Munro not only a natural storyteller, but an incredible writer as well.

Selected Stories, a volume of short stories by Alice Munro, published in 1996, collects stories from her eight previously published books. In this collection Alice Munro presents women and their place in society in a variety of ways. Some critics call her a feminist writer or "a writer on the side of women" (Myszor, Frank *The Modern Short Story* Cambridge: CUP, 2001). Feminism itself is "a doctrine or movement that advocates equal rights for women" (Collins Dictionary of the English Language) and literature is a versatile

medium for the promotion of women's rights in the 20th century. Using the short story form she portrays women living in small-town Canada; she is a modern Canadian writer and was brought up in this landscape. In addition to investigating the roles of women, Munro's stories also explore the idea of barriers-including class and generation gaps-and the effect of relationships on her female characters. As all of her central characters are girls or women, it is inevitable that her stories will explore situations from a female perspective, and be inclined towards a woman's outlook and discovery of feelings and attitudes.

Though some critics have claimed that Munro's work are limited in range, as they only revolve round the women and problems faced by them, but despite this fact, the sincerity and devotion that Munro has shown remains unparallel and

matchless in English literature. Her works are the critique of human life, she has left no stone unturned. She is widely hailed as one of the greatest living writers. She has received numerous accolades, including three Governor General's Awards: for *Dance of Happy Shades*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* And *The Progress of Love*. One can rightly opine that through her art she has opened up new possibilities of genre. She dwells on her experience, which is common to all.

REFERENCES

- [1]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Munro.
- [2]. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Moons_of_Jupiter_\(short_story\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Moons_of_Jupiter_(short_story)).
- [3]. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_View_from_Castle_Rock.