

**Treatment of Human Attitude and Complexity in Alice Munro's
*Too Much Happiness***

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Abstract

Love is a complex and complicated concept which is quite difficult to explain. Its intensity and outcome is most uncertain. In today's modern world, love is referred as simply an illusion. Love has found its way to many literary works globally. Munro terms her female protagonists as crusaders who can go any distance to accomplish their goals. Munro takes immense pride to highlight the Canadian culture, its ethnic diversity and ways of living in relation to the people of Canada. In *Too Much Happiness*, Munro speaks clearly about love and its failure. Here, in this paper Munro has endeavoured to bring forward the various theoretical viewpoints associated with the female protagonists and societies in Canada. One of the major objectives of *Too Much Happiness* is to show the readers how the female transformation from despair to hope which in a way leads to woman resurrection.

Key words: love failure, female transformation, despair, hope, resurrection.

Alice Munro is one of the best and versatile story writers in Canadian literature along with Margaret Atwood and Mavis Gallant. In today's literary world, she is compared with the Russian story writer Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) solely for her treatment of topics such as love failure and work, and passion with time and small town locations. She takes immense pride to represent the Canadian culture, ethnic diversity and ways of living in relation to the people of Canada. She prefers to absolutely absorb herself in themes like the human complexity in her short stories. She co-relates her characters and realistic plot of story with her own life which was quite full of astonishments. Her major short stories incorporate the postmodern characteristics along with a realistic portrayal. Her firm rootedness to her region also enlightens her about the people who inspire her to include them in her remarkable short stories.

In *Too Much Happiness*, Munro uses the social issues like escape, alienation, identity, victimization, adultery, etc. These social issues provide a perfect background to her short stories. She tries to explore the huge realm of human psychology in her short stories. The narration in her short stories cannot simply be simply taken as stories but it can be interpreted as social awareness and solution to the daily problems. She gives minute description about the human complexity especially related to woman section. Thus, she explains in her own words about her short stories:

Naturally my stories are about women – I'm a woman. I don't know what the term is for men who write mostly about men. I'm not always sure what is meant by "feminist." In the beginning I used to say, well, of course I'm a feminist. But if

it means that I follow a kind of feminist theory, or know anything about it, then I'm not. I think I'm a feminist as far as thinking that the experience of women is important. That is really the basis of feminism (Munro. Interview by Feinberg, 2001).

In one of the essays from the book, "Anthologies and the Canon of Early Canadian Women Writers," its writer Carole Gerson adequately expresses the state of these women writers saying, "Early Canadian women fiction writers were therefore at a triple disadvantage as a marginalized sex working in a marginalized genre in a marginalized colonial culture" (59). These writers faced triple domination, one resulting from their gender, another from their choice of genre and lastly because of Canada's colonized status in the nineteenth century. Hence, Munro as a writer chooses typical Canadian characters to expose typical issues and follies relating to both physical and mental domination.

Munro's stories are complex narratives full of symbolism, motifs and imagery. These narrative devices serve multiple purpose of the writer. Some of the recurring symbols in her works are birds, animals, clouds, and snow. In one of her stories, "Wild Swans", the swans symbolise sexual freedom for Rose. In "Runaways" the dark clouds forebode Clara's failure whereas the Goat, Flora stands for freedom from patriarchal oppression. "Damsel in Distress", "revisits to the past", "broken and unhappy marriages", "old age homes" are some of the recurring motifs in Munro's stories. With her vivid imageries, she revokes the sense of smell, sight, and sound. This line from "Chance" which reads like, "sunlight, slipping down through the trees, makes coppery splashes on the smooth trunks of the arbutus" (84) seems to paint a picture

in words. Paintings and pictures also appear throughout Munro's works and serve as important symbols.

Human complexity in both male-female relationships arises due to disharmony in marriage. Munro's female protagonists are major victims of this system of alliance. Marriage can mend or break male-female relationships. As Munro is a social writer, her short stories depict marriage as that institution which influences the mind-set of the two sexes. Munro's females can be characterised as the oppressed, helpless and trapped who disregard their relationship with their husbands and try to shy away. Kate Millet regards the relationship between the two sexes i.e. male-female as the most dominant one. In her *Sexual Politics*, she remarks: "Social Caste supersedes all other forms of egalitarian: racial, political or economic, and unless the clinging to male supremacy as birth right is finally forgone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation" (25).

Though Munro believes in rapid change of woman's personality in her domain yet she is quick to caution that life should not be amalgamated with material and earthly gains. She stresses more on intellectual prosperity rather than materialistic pursuit. She addresses that life can be made enjoyable and simple by simply adhering to the basics. In connection to this philosophy, she also introspected her own life and discovers that "She was learning, quite late, what many people around her appeared to have known since childhood that life can be perfectly satisfying without major achievements" (n.p).

Many of the female characters are introduced by Munro who are filled with virtues but who could not survive male dominance. They are presented as escapists who had left their

families and lovers. The state of women appears quite pathetic in the short stories of Alice Munro who are devastated between social and family life. They find tough to forsake a relationship and venture into another which speaks of their emotional attachment to relationship. Marriage to them is simply a farce devoid of romance and mental attachment. In order to maintain their marital relationship and seek love, they sometimes resort to extra-marital affairs with married and unmarried men around them. They display very little intent to shun marriage and resolve to fight till the end. Thus, Munro presents them in her short stories as fighters (woman heroes).

In “Dimensions” (*Too Much Happiness*), Munro presents scenes of a failed marriage followed by a sequence of killings. It is a story based on Doree, a key female protagonist, who was married to a much older man, Lloyd. Doree tolerates the authority, instability and obnoxious attitude of her husband. She marries Lloyd after her mother’s sudden death. Her marriage to Lloyd was quite harmonious until she resists the absolute authority of her husband.

Almost all works especially short story collects such as *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), etc. depicts various human complexities such as environmental concerns, class prejudice, subjugation of women, etc. Like Margaret Atwood, she is also passionate, obsessive and dedicated towards ecological system of Canada. Observing her contemporaries, she had developed awareness about human behaviour and complexity. She adopts a simple way to counter this human complexity – firstly, by way of writing letting others known of it, and secondly, by creating awareness among the people especially the women. She uses her childhood experiences and memories of brutality and violence to educate the women.

Thus, her one of the major areas of concern is also ecofeminism which is becoming quite popular post the twentieth century.

Like many of her previous works, *Too Much Happiness* also speaks about a serious topic of life i.e. leading a mundane lifestyle. Frequent readjustments and drastic change of priorities in the lives of the marginalised Canadian women is no new thing to discuss. To elucidate her viewpoints regarding this reckless and havocking attitude, she quotes: “She sits in her usual ample armchair, with piles of books and unopened magazines around her. She sips cautiously from the mug of weak herb tea which is now her substitute for coffee. At one time she thought that she could not live without coffee, but it turned out that it is really the warm large mug she wants in her hands, that is the aid to thought or whatever it is she practises through the procession of hours, or of days” (118).

The themes of female exploitation and subjugation predominantly occupy almost all of Munro’s stories. These stories display the domination of women both in domestic as well as professional spheres. Also, across all her collections, Munro’s protagonists are shown to be subjects of domination in various stages of their lives. Be it a girl child, or an elderly woman, no one escapes social prejudices. Munro acknowledges that much work has to be conducted to make the women feel safe in the society where men see them as potential rivals in the path of escalating male domination. She like many of her contemporaries is vigilant of the woman’s progress and growth, and strongly believes that women can achieve complete freedom/emancipation when she can feel safe and sound in her own society (family) amidst men.

Munro is quite critical of the lives she sees the modern women lead. In fact, she detests the pitiable (illogical) state of a woman’s mind. She thinks that women possess poor mental

perception in comparison to men. Modern society has equipped men with lots of weapons to be used against women (although women are not quite aware of them). As Munro sees much scope and potentialities in women, she advocates fearless kind of life style. In short, she wants women to drape themselves in self-confidence and dignity. She, thus, proclaims: “Always remember that when a man goes out of the room, he leaves everything in it behind. . . when a woman goes out she carries everything that happened in the room along with her” (254).

Some of the popular institutions of patriarchy which Munro attacks in her fiction are the church, the male dominated literary world, class system, and the gendered society. She has depicted professional women like writers, nurses, mathematicians, and journalists fighting the social prejudices held against them, to prove their worth in the world. Their creative talents and professional competence is a source of continuous embarrassment and harassment they face from a male dominated society.

Alice Munro’s works are sincere attempts of dedication, sacrifice and love for her country i.e. Canada. Her short stories can be interpreted from several theoretical viewpoints. Her stories are full of complexity especially human complexity which has great scope for research in near future for budding scholars and researchers in the field of literature. Basically, her stories are full of experiences genuinely experienced by real women in their attempt to establish domestic harmony that resulted after enduring much pain and mental torture. In any society, it is the women who are at the daggers end and who are constantly inflicted by various degrees of pain and anguish. Munro in the 21st century is more of a philosopher and a crusader of feminism in particular and humankind in general. She wants to act as the catcher and direct women in the right direction with genuine survival motives. Thus, Munro’s storyline draw every reader’s

attention towards the nerve wrecking psychological experiences – which can only be endured by a sensitive soul such as the woman.

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