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The Portrayal of Urban and Rural Women in Alice Munro's stories -Runaway, The Moons of Jupiter, Who Do You Think You Are?

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Abstract

Alice Munro is one the greatest contemporary Canadian short story writers. She is well known for the accuracy and truthfulness that she gives to life in general but most emphatically to women. Munro in her stories depicts a world of rural life or small-town culture comparing it with the urban life largely as seen through the lives of women grappling with the physical and emotional complexities in Canadian cultural context. Munro novelizes the representations of women's struggles in most of her stories. The societal and cultural expectations on women, in Alice Munro's stories, have an influence on their identities, decisions and relationships. Munro's women, with their hunger for life and family, are frequently shown in the grip of the competing demands of individual desire and societal expectation. These different roles reflect the cultural norms of whatever era and place those women happen to be in small-net conservative towns where one should apparently not breathe (rural Canada), or more metropolitan, though still repressive environments the likes of which can be rarely seen. Munro shows how social pressures inform what opportunities and behaviours are allowed to women, greatly limiting the freedom and autonomy that is part of how we experience personal potential. This paper particularly throws light on Munro's portrayal of both rural and urban women in her selected stories.

Key Words: contemporary, Canadian, rural life, urban life, societal, cultural, identities, Munro's women, metropolitan, repressive, autonomy

In Munro's stories, women are supposed to settle down into traditional gender roles, around marriage and family and hearth. These expectations originate from the norms of conservative culture that accentuate a women's captivity in being a wife, mother and caregiver. In Munro's rural contexts, they are frequently policed by the tight-knit, insular communities in which women reside. Social Conformity is Key: Any deviation from the norms or expected practices might result in social ostracism and judgement. Under patriarchy, these narratives document the sacrifice of female subjectivity to generate and maintain a cultural continuity dependent on rigid beauty norms (Gilbert 691) as, "[Munro] portrays the nature of small- town life in which those societal demands for women are omnipresent, where [they] must fulfil

their roles in ways that emphasize family stability and social order before personal expression” (Howells 121).

Runaway is thick with Munro-style exploration of societal and cultural pressures, for instance how being a wife meant in large part conforming to her rural community's ideas of what that should look like. Carla is supposed to fulfil all her husband Clark wishes and should keep marry bond in a safe zone, even on her terms of not maintaining happiness level. In the countryside, surrounded by endless fields of breadbasket crops, Carla remains stranded between her house and her husband; there are no outside considerations or influences to challenge her lifestyle as a submissive wife. Carla faces immense societal pressure to occupy these roles, a process which eventually makes it all but impossible for her to ever push back against her circumstances and stand up as someone with both a self-interest and an interest in herself. Consider, Rasporich writes, how “Munro’s female characters frequently become trapped in socially well-defined marriage and family roles ensnared by the cultural values which constrain their autonomy.

However, at the same time, Munro's stories are simultaneously a map of how women act within and against these male-created expectations. Janet, the protagonist in *The Moons of Jupiter* reflects on her life choices and the expectations put on her as a wife and mother. Janet stuck to the expectations that had been put upon her, but her story also deals with what those choices cost and whether she was ever anybody's dream girl or just doing what women were told to do. To the South Pole, ever brighter, author Catriona Munro (based on the thoughts of Janet) sheds light on how women have long suffered this expectation versus control tightrope. McGill asserts, “Munro’s stories meditate on and illustrate the cultural expectations placed upon oppressed women expectations that consequently create a cacophony of tortured voices while these plots also dramatize these same women’s struggle for some degree of freedom from such circumscriptions... their rampant yearning for self-actualization and power-is an incessant narrative of soul-destruction” (McGill 143).

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* In that respect, the narrative of Rose bouncing between small town and bustling city underscores the cultural demands for women in different landscapes. In terms of actual spaces, urban environments allow Rose less restricted movement than rural sites yet simultaneously expect moderate total freedom and the freedom to comply with general expectations at all times related to appearance, behaviour and achievement. This is a theme that Munro revisits often, the pull of societal norms versus individual agency her women trying to finesse what society expects from them within these various social settings. Both larger cities and small rural places have a generalised norm for what women should look like, though it varies between their two. Moving into different worlds and settings, Munro deftly demonstrates the ubiquity of cultural norms, although she also shows that these too are influenced by locale.

Munro packs the world of assumptions about what society expects from women and that those societal conventions then limit their very sense of selves as well as scope for freedom in life. In her fiction, both as daughters and mothers and in their roles as artists or professionals, Munro constantly has women pushed into the dictates of this reality. In representing this struggle, Munro comments on the lack of deviations available to female social behaviour and highlights how we create our own personal narrative. by exist within these norms that still influences us deeply.

Exploration of Societal Pressures on Women’s Roles in Different Settings is admirable. The former is not unlike what we find in much of the work of Alice Munro indeed, the very thing which bursts Muñoz's elitist bubble where characters exist at odds with society or directly mapping their place into roles and moulds deemed acceptable by a broad scope of societal values. No matter the setting rural or urban Munro's women are products of their time and follow strict societal norms. These pressures, dictated by cultural conventions and societal norms of the communities in which these women exist,

differ across different settings ranging from the conservative small rural towns to larger urban hubs where the environment though more open, may still remain restrictive nature.

Societal norms operate so differently for the women in Munro backwaters that their particular varieties of paralysis easily go unnoticed. Such communities may be governed by ancient codes that dictate a woman to prioritize the family-life, as its keeper and moral gate-keeper. In such rural hinterland, anything beyond these roles is subject to scrutiny and judgement, ostracism or denouncement an outright failure. Women may be confined to traditional roles of the supportive wife and mother or the sacrificial caregiver, with no room for personal ambition, independence. Howells argues that Munro often delineates the social pressures facing women to be restricted within specific roles, relating it back to “the portrayal of rural life as a place where these expectations are concretized and enacted: a site that defines woman within role; which reinforces primarily disempowering self-referencing interpretations of what women may do with female bodies” (Howells 122).

Runaway is a prime example of this, where Carla's life appears to have been indelibly moulded by such pressures within her rural enclave. Carla Too busy with her home and farm located miles from anywhere, Carla is required to be the good doctor's wife; supportive and subservient. This is further emphasised by her remoteness in terms of geography Carla is almost entirely oblivious to any existence outside of her tiny environment and as a result, other ways of life and thinking are blocked from her. The societal expectation that she keeps the marriage together even if it makes her miserable mirrors the social norms of her rural setting, a place where being normal is prized above all else. A true example of how land in the country can represent entrapment, Carla sprawls and crumbles as her identity is restrained by those who cannot divide her from a wife. Munro's rural characters, says Rasporich, "live with an intense physical and emotional sense of isolation within their communities, where the standards range from limiting to suffocating.

On the other hand, in a lot of Munro's stories with urban settings, there tend to be different societal pressures at play that are equally confining. Cities may offer women greater independence and anonymity, but they also carry with them a new set of demands surrounding appearance, achievement, and social climbing. Women in urban contexts, on the other hand, may no longer be measured purely by their success as a spouses or moms, but rather by their overcoming of modern life challenges (be it via career advancement, social status, and/or personal relationships). With expectations from a different culture, although many of them still demand traditional values upheld by women for generations; the freedom urban spaces provide is tempered to fit new societal standards in some way.

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* Rose transitions between rural and urban economics reflects by shifting pressures of society and from the small-town life expected in Hanratty to a more anonymous city. The expectations of the town weigh heavily on Rose and she feels trapped by their hopes for her future: of a strong, moral life, following in her mother's footsteps as a disciple and wife. When Rose moves to the city, however, those expectations look distinctively different they are centrally concerned with achieving social mobility, acquiring a pleasing image, and living a fulfilling personal life. This is mirrored in the conflict between these two locales, demonstrating how societal alienation of women changes only in face and not in reality. Although McGill argues, “Munro’s depiction of the urban and rural underscores the pervasiveness across time of social demands on women, often crushing, following immediately upon liberation” (McGill 148).

Janet’s meditations on her life in a farming family, from urban to rural; again, point out that societal expectations determine not only who a woman is), but how she can be dependent on the current cultural moment. Janet understands these are reflections connections to her father, children and former lovers and how expectation has played a big part of her life decisions. Janet was brought up in a rural environment where the expectation was for her to be dutiful daughter, wife and mother with little room

for personal ambition or self-assertion. Yet, as she transitions to the city, different archetypes seem to follow her here: the expectations tied to her looks, how sociable a person she should be, and how emotionally available. The shifting pressures also serve to emphasize how women are judged by their roles and identities in a constantly changing societal ecosystem.

What surfaces most clearly in Munro's examination of such forces pushing on women to create and inhabit particular roles is how thoroughly oppressive the cultural matrix around gender can be. In any part of the world, rural or urban, women live inside societal norms which shape their identities and restrict their autonomy. The seeming freedom of city life turns out to be only another form of coercion, with its own new constraints, and the country preserves a kind of traditional puritanism which keeps each person in his place. In exploring the everyday lives and the circumstances surrounding all kinds of women in diverse social settings, Munro interrogates cultural practices that curtail options for a better life as well as a more autonomous self: it is both an intense examination on how to get through societal issues based on gender, born from her lived experience.

Munro's settings are often rural and the culture seems to always shrink to limit a woman's life on her own. These tiny, remote societies are very traditional, and they have cultural norms originated in strong patriarchs; if someone gets out of line with society, he faces the scorn or banishment from his community. For women that reside in these environments, such as Pilkington, the avenues to express personal freedoms are all but forcibly closed off by the close-knit community and stoic social conventions placed before individual will. Even if they don't directly influence the story, the nature of the rural landscape often happens to express a sense of isolation or strangling entrapment precisely by cementing their anthropologically discrete communities as cut off from larger social and cultural source dynamics that might serve them better.

The rural locale of *Runaway*, where Carla resides with her husband, Clark, an equally absent rancher reminds producing a set-up that will further underline the cultural pressures dictating her role within the institution and restraint outside of it. Her world is meant to be small and the farm where she lives alone embodies this. The physical desolation of the land reflects her emotional and mental solitude in a marriage where she is expected to serve as obedient wife, nurturing helpmeet of husband, regardless that she secretly dreams not only of escape but of an autonomous life. Munro's rural settings often are portrayed as a beautiful but oppressive environment where women are not allowed their own freedom, trapped in the confines of society as expressed by Howells, "rural locations provide indelible landscapes; traditional culture that sees respect for individual autonomy as conflicting with cultural values favouring conformity and domesticity. For Carla, this means trying to escape a marriage while living in an environment that keeps making her feel just as trapped as she always has been.

However, in contrast to these rural locales, Munro also juxtaposes the urban with rurality which allows women a certain anonymity and freedom. Living in urban environments can provide some escape to women from the close meshed lives of closely related communities where there exists almost no space for them, the women, to try different notions of themselves without being judged by those with whom she shares a home and stroll. But as Munro suggests, this newfound freedom also comes with new social pressures, especially about looks and material wealth. She can liberate herself from the traditional female identifications that encumber her in rural society, but she is now faced with all of the expectations attached to urban life where freedom has its price.

In *Who Do You Think You Are?* Rose's trajectory from small-town Hanratty outward to the built environments she eventually inland embodies that home-to-home tension between geography, cultural indoctrination and personal choice. Even in Hanratty, Rose is limited by the traditional values of her society as she is forced to be married, remain chaste, and accept a domestic role. The rural small-town culture would not give more space to Rose to discover what makes her unique and highly different from

the traditional norms placed on her. Though, as Rose migrates to the city, she discovers more freedom and builds a life of her own where she sheds her skin and reveals parts of herself previously-hidden away. But, as McGill argues, "Munro's treatment of urban life reveals that lack of traditional pressure does not translate to freedom from society at large as an urban setting itself is a kind of social force and cultural pressure" (McGill 139). The city presents Rose with new sets of expectations about her looks, job and relationships that seem to suggest that personal freedom, too, is always negotiated within the rubric of societal norms.

Similarly, Janet's urban life in Toronto is closely associated with *The Moons of Jupiter*. As she heads to the city to see her father in his final days, Janet reminisces on her life and societal expectations of herself as a wife, mother, and daughter. In the urban landscape of Toronto, Janet is given the space to reflect – to shed some of those cultural expectations she was raised with in rural Ottawa and "[think] through how I want my life to look. The city is a point of departure for Janet where she can make sense of the path that has led her here, to contemplate how cultural expectations from where she comes from have shaped the life decisions she's made. But, like Rose, Janet is constrained by the bustling clamour of city life where success and status reign afresh as yardsticks for identity and liberty. As Rasporich observes, "Urban contexts in Munro are frequently contexts in which women strike moments of reprieve from traditional expectations, but they also import new forms of cultural coercion that problematize their chase for personal freedom" (Rasporich 89).

In the end, Munro looks at place, culture and personal freedom with an eye for how it is possible to subvert society to find that what you seek is more complex than adherence to idea of societal norms in specific locations. Where rurality so often stands in for limits or a lack of choice, urbanity provides several interludes of freedom, though they are equally counter-balanced by their own kinds of social demands. Personal freedom, in Munro's stories for women is always weighed against the values and expectations of the society she lives in. With subtlety, Munro explores the female experience in sparsely populated landscapes as well as urban spaces critiquing societal structures that dictate to women what they should and shouldn't do with their lives for allegedly failing to balance the demands of both place, culture and a woman's pursuit for personal freedom.

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