



REMEMBERING REALISM IN ALICE MUNRO'S *OPEN SECRETS*, A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORY

D. B. WANKHADE

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English
Shri Shivaji Arts, Commerce & Science
College Akot, Dist. Akola
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Alice Munro is a Canadian short story writer and Nobel Prize winner. Munro's work has been described as having revolutionized the architecture of short stories, especially in its tendency to move forward and backward in time. Munro's fiction is most often set in her native Huron County in southwestern Ontario. Her stories explore human complexities in an uncomplicated prose style. Her writing has established her as "one of our greatest contemporary writers of fiction, Munro's prose reveals the ambiguities of life: ironic and serious at the same time. Her style places the fantastic facts next to the ordinary, with each undercutting the other in ways that simply and effortlessly evoke life.

*Munro's highly acclaimed first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968, won the Governor General's Award, then Canada's highest literary prize. That success was followed by *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), a collection of interlinked stories. In 1978, Munro's published a collection of interlinked stories *Who Do You Think You Are?* This book earned Munro a second Governor General's Literary Award. Her most famous *Open Secrets* in 1994 is a pioneer work in literary art, it includes numerous pieces of prose as *Carried Away*, *A Real Life*, *The Albanian Virgin*, *The Jack Randa Hotel*, *A Wilderness Station*, *Spaceships Have Landed* and so on.*

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INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro is a Canadian author, master of the contemporary short story who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. She is one of the most read and talked author for the years.

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Munro has a long and creative career, ranging from the 1960s to this decade, and she is considered as one of the best writers alive. Her short stories have been commended by various literary scholars. Her *Open Secrets* with its various resemblances binding with fine facts and fancy, are worthy to attention.

Alice Munro's *Open Secrets* a short story collection was published in 1994. The praise at the back is very inexplicable and slightly non-committal, but having read the book, it actually manages to capture the one thing that connects these stories together i. e. unconventional women and freedom. The stories in this collection tell of women of various ages and places, of various conditions in life and various approaches to the significant and insignificant issues. One of the stories features an accidental letter exchange between a librarian and a soldier and the expectations that arise when he is due to return from the war. Another follows a woman that trails down her ex-husband to the other side of the world, and another a woman captured by a native tribe and being assimilated to their lifestyle.

Alice Munro's style and craft with which she creates stories is noble. The switching between different characters and time periods and the subtle indications of mood and emotion are catch worthy. Occasionally the scarcity of the words brought to aphoristic line of Bacon who also had the talent to set the tone and mood of the idea in just a few lines. There are many short stories in *Open Secrets* are *Carried Away*, *Spaceships Have Landed* and *A Wilderness Station* the intricate structure and flow of narration in those was incredible. However, there were also some things that put a damper on my mood. In some stories share some common elements. Upon reading the collection, the stories didn't appear to have any connecting features only the occasional mentions of the town *Carstairs*.

Alice Munro is an acknowledged master of the short story, and her newest collection has garnered the very highest praise. Most of the eight stories in *Open Secrets* take place in Munro's native Canada and particularly in the small Ontario town of *Carstairs*. Munro's exploration of her characters' varied lives reveals entire worlds of passion, joy, despair even exoticism and adventure beneath exteriors that are often deceptively mundane.

The central characters in the stories are all women: an emotionally adventurous librarian; a young woman kidnapped by Albanian tribesmen in the 1920s; a farmer's wife who yearns for gentility; a young born-again Christian whose unresolved feelings of love and anger cause her to vandalize a house; a spurned middle-aged woman who follows the man who rejected her to Australia and spies on him; a young frontier wife in the wilderness with her abusive husband. Munro explores female themes with great depth and power, but the range of her vision is not exclusively female: through the eyes of her fictional women she examines the



culture and values of her world while weaving complex, luminous, and poetic apprehensions of the milieu she has made so intensely her own.

Throughout Alice Munro's "Open Secrets" the narrator places considerable emphasis on Maureen's uncanny ability to interpret various forms of language—anything from spoken word to unspoken words, and even body language. This emphasis by the narrator on Maureen's capabilities to interpret language ultimately establishes Maureen as the detective tasked with solving the mystery of the disappearance of Heather Bell. Though Maureen is portrayed as a master in almost all aspects of language, however, the narrator emphasizes one facet of language which Maureen struggles with: profane language. Ultimately, it is the lack of mastery in this area—the only chink in her armor with respect to language—which results in Maureen coming up short in solving the mystery of Heather Bell's disappearance and unable to fully comprehend the "Open Secret" right before her eyes.

A particularly important scene in the story is the love scene between Maureen and Lawyer Stephens, because it juxtaposes Maureen's mastery of language against her only inadequacy with respect to language. The beginning of this scene emphasizes Maureen's language abilities by demonstrating her knack for interpreting the unspoken language of body language. After Marian and her husband leave Maureen's house following their meeting with Lawyer Stephens, Maureen's husband approaches her for sex. Before Lawyer Stephens has the chance to verbally proposition Maureen, however, the narrator provides Maureen's perspective on the situation through her interpretation of her husband's body language. This focus by the narrator on Maureen's ability to interpret the unspoken language of her husband is one of the strongest depictions of Maureen's interpretative language skills.

Alice Munro's stories are lucid and compelling. They are also extremely mysterious. They demand close attention a word skipped or a line skimmed can be the difference between bafflement and illumination but the prose is always supple, never knotty. It is one of this author's many subtleties that she avoids writing in a self-consciously subtle manner. Open Secrets is Munro's eighth work of fiction, and it develops the preoccupations - and the paradoxes of her earlier books. All her stories tell more than one story. All deliver more than they promise: they are colloquial but highly wrought, domestic but dramatic, sceptical but intense, vividly based in the life of small Canadian towns but able to reach across continents

The title-story shows Munro's gifts at full stretch: it is the most limpidly expressed piece and the most puzzling. 'Open Secrets' touches quickly on the drama of several different lives. A provocative young girl goes missing on a mountain hike; a middle-aged woman is troubled by her staid husband's sudden sexual voracity; and an uncomfortable married couple report to a judge with what seems to be an accusation but may be a confession. The interweaving of

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these lives is delicate and transitory. What has happened whether and how the girl was murdered is never spelt out, although a solution is obliquely glimpsed through hints and memories.

Despite these black complexities, Munro's stories are full of buoyant moments: it is a measure of her richness as a writer that she can throw off as asides passages that other authors would use as centrepieces. In 'Open Secrets' she gives a rapid sketch of a woman, Mary Johnstone, whom you were hardly supposed to mention in Carstairs without attaching the word 'wonderful': 'Whenever Maureen met Mary Johnstone on the street or in a store, her heart sank. First came that searching smile, the eyes raking yours, the declared delight in any weather - wind or hail or sun or rain, each had something to recommend it - then the laughing question. So what have you been up to, Mrs Stephens? Mary Johnstone always made a point of saying 'Mrs Stephens', but she said it as if it was a play title and she was thinking all the time, it's only Maureen Coulter.'

This scepticism and melancholy and humour give a taste of the small-town life, bristling with gossip and a sense of the past, in which Open Secrets is steeped. All but one of the seven stories have their roots in the same two nearby towns, and Munro evokes with wonderful economy the terrain from which these are carved the creeks and river flats and wildwoods and rock pools - as well as her urban landmarks: a drinking-fountain, a food store, a high-windowed library in which lovers shelter, and a piano factory that marks the boundary of one settlement 'like a medieval town wall'. The gaps and the continuities of this history are one of Munro's most important subjects. These stories, which talk eloquently of the unexpected echoes in the lives of different people, also speak of the dissonance in our own: our pasts, Alice Munro says, make us strangers to our selves.

In this new collection of stories the finest yet from one of the most brilliant writers of fiction at work today whole lives, whole worlds, unfold with an ease, a richness, an absolute "rightness" that are breathtaking. These are stories in which women are central. They are about lovers found and lovers lost but lodged still in the subconscious, about secrets that change lives, about people whose histories are opening out or coming to an end. Their power accumulates layer by layer as time and reality shift, identities become uncertain, truths surface. A heart patient on a trip to her doctor on a hot summer's day has a revelation about the lasting power of an old love. A long-hidden secret sticks in the consciousness of a young woman, who, in an outrageous but entirely satisfying act, finally rids herself of its thrall. A romantic tale of capture and escape in the wilds of central Europe may or may not be true, but it comforts the hearer, who, on an adventure of her own, is fleeing her husband. Two childhood friends resolve their lives in a madcap and unexpected way on a memorable



midsummer's eve. A wonderful gathering of stories in which once again, as she does with each new book, Alice Munro surpasses herself.

Munro, an exemplary short-story writer, with exquisite sad tales, lonely eccentrics leading lives of quiet self-deception. Her heroines are often troubled souls with the unforgiving task of fitting into the rigorously confining community that spawned them, occasioning minor acts of rebellion and sometimes even acts of violence. Insurmountable obstacles seem to inhibit even the simplest communication words fail to form, letters never arrive, and strokes paralyze speech. Society seems to stand on the most tenuous of foundations, one based on "gossip, rumor, and the coldhearted thrill of catastrophe." With the poise and self-confidence of a true master of her craft, Munro presents stories laden with mysteries that are gradually revealed and some that remain obscured by ambiguity and time. A teenage girl vanishes into thin air; a jilted woman stalks her ex-lover to the far reaches of Australia; a good Christian vandalizes the home of an old neighbor. Munro expertly captures the vagaries of history and geography in this satisfying and immensely pleasurable collection.

The story, aptly entitled "Carried Away," is the first in Alice Munro's new collection, "Open Secrets," her eighth work of fiction. And in fact, all the stories in "Open Secrets" are lessons. Ms. Munro's work has always been ambitious and risky precisely because it dares to teach, and by the hardest, best method: without giving answers. Sometimes even the characters themselves have only a fuzzy notion of what their own stories mean. "Carried Away" isn't really about women making fools of themselves. And none of these eight stories are easy to predict. Just when meaning seems almost revealed, the story changes, veers, steps off a cliff.

The librarian, for instance, tells of the soldier who wooed her by mail during World War I, then came home and married another girl. After she confesses the details to the salesman and asks, "Do you think it was all a joke on me? Do you think a man could be so diabolical?" the salesman says, "No, no. Don't you think such a thing. Far more likely he was sincere. He got a little carried away. It's all just the way it looks on the surface." Then the salesman seduces her.

Few writers would dare such a move, and fewer still could make it work. But Ms. Munro does. The narrative fabric into which this horrible event is woven is tight with a sense of time and place, a solid realism that allows even the bizarre to appear normal. And, as it turns out, decapitation isn't the final twist in the story, or even the most bizarre. Two more follow, a marriage and a vision, and the story concludes with a flashback that proves what we may by now have suspected: Ms. Munro's fiction is out to seize to apprehend the mystery of existence within time, "the unforeseen intervention," the unique quality of a person's fate.



Human hesitation of mystery has to start with language, our technique for rehashing and examining experience for any traces of meaning. So in "Open Secrets" people are continually telling and hearing stories sometimes more than one at a time in confessions, letters, rumors, ballads, conversations, newspapers. But some parts of life aren't quickly comprehensive through language. Puzzles of love, time, death, spirit these are the open secrets, near-at-hand mysteries that can't readily be talked or written into clarity, but that nevertheless can be relentlessly turned and poked and studied until, with some luck, they yield something a lesson that's partial and ambiguous but likely also to be momentous. Every story in the collection contains some sort of startling leap, whether it's a huge jump forward in time, a geographical change or a sudden switch in viewpoint that changes the whole nature of the story. Mishaps and accidents twist through like killer tornadoes, throwing everybody off course. By thus expanding you might even say exploding the fictional context, Ms. Munro reaches toward difficult truths.

Perhaps the most exploded story in the collection is "The Albanian Virgin," which begins with the exotic narrative of a Canadian woman held captive in a remote Albanian village during the 1920's. But after five pages there is an interruption: "I heard this story in the old St. Joseph's Hospital in Victoria from Charlotte, who was the sort of friend I had in my early days there." The narrator is a young woman of the 1960's who has fled both a marriage and a love affair on the other side of the continent. And her narrative is interrupted from time to time by a return to the Albanian adventure. The result is a bold assault on the assumptions and expectations of traditional fiction, with remarkable success.

It's no coincidence that almost every story in "Open Secrets" has as its time frame the span of an entire life, for these stories draw upon the complexity of a mature, long-vigilant sensibility. And lifelong learning isn't easy. In "Vandals," a woman perseveres in a troubled marriage: "She learned, she changed. Age was a help to her. Drink also." The only real guard against despair, against the "devouring muddle" and a life of "arbitrary days," is to make a narrative of the self, constantly reinterpreting the accumulated life. People whose lives have not panned out, like Millicent in "A Real Life," who talk her friend Dorrie into marrying a stranger, can thus achieve a compensatory wisdom, limited but powerful, and vaguely mystical.

In the title story, Maureen Stephens's supposedly lucky marriage has taken a sexually horrifying turn. And when a local girl disappears from a hiking trip, the lost girl reminds Maureen of how girlhood itself vanishes. She remembers her own secret recklessness. "To be careless, dauntless, to create havoc that was the lost hope of girls." She experiences odd hallucinatory moments when she sees things that "seem to be part of another life that she is leading," as if she were "looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think

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of trying to tell it." "Open Secrets" is a book that dazzles with its faith in language and in life. Sex and self-defense

Still, even an apprentice magician knows that the best effects come when sheer talent is strengthened by careful study of the craft. And Ms. Munro whose work has been critically acclaimed since her first book, "Dance of the Happy Shades," won Canada's Governor General's Award in 1968 is a master at hers. Speaking by telephone from her home in Clinton, Ontario, Ms. Munro, 62, moved easily through the stories in her latest collection, "Open Secrets," in much the same cross-cutting style that she uses in the stories themselves. Consider, for example, "The Albanian Virgin," which takes place, in part, in a landscape quite different from her usual settings in rural Ontario, the Scottish countryside of its inhabitants' ancestors and the farther reaches, in Canada or Australia, to which their descendants sometimes flee.

There is, of course, a hidden local connection. "I got interested in Albania," Ms. Munro explained, "because I heard a story, which I've never been able to verify, that a librarian from Clinton, traveling in Europe in the 1920's, was captured by bandits in Albania." Ms. Munro's research led her to a book called "High Albania," in which she came upon a chapter called "The Albanian Virgin" that set forth the restrictions imposed on women in some of the remote villages of that time. It also described an escape route: by forswearing sex and marriage, a woman could become a kind of honorary man, living as she pleased. "She could smoke and booze and spend her life polishing her weapons," Ms. Munro remarked with a laugh. Then she added, more seriously, "I hadn't seen another society where such a clear distinction is made, with the sexual role of the woman defining her inferiority."

Although Ms. Munro was quick to point out that "I never write about an idea," she acknowledged that she has always been interested in "the way women circumvented the rules," even as they took it upon themselves, in many cases, to enforce them. And she remains interested in the distinctions between sexual and emotional intimacy that prevailed in earlier generations, particularly that of her mother. "That rejection of sex as something necessary but unpleasant, something you would avoid if you could when I was younger I thought it was simply a bad part of a Puritan heritage, but it was pure self-defense. Sex changed your life well, it could now too, I guess -- but then it changed your life in a way you didn't recover from." Yet marriage was a woman's goal. "Sex was unpleasant, but marriage was another thing altogether."

Despite her willingness to explore the bleaker aspects of her characters' relationships, Ms. Munro is also intrigued by the notion of "high romance." In "The Albanian Virgin," the story of the kidnapped Canadian woman is told by Charlotte, an elderly bohemian, to Claire, who

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has fled her husband and is unsure about whether her lover will follow her. "The two stories combined there are a romantic fairy tale and a sort of romance worked out in real life," Ms. Munro said.

With a few strokes of her pen, Munro has the unerring ability to familiarize us with a foreign country or the entire life of another person. Even if you've already read these latest stories in the New Yorker, you'll want to luxuriate in their gorgeous prose again and again. Munro's women must take repeated flight from the harshness of their realities bad spinsterhood, worse marriages into their imaginations, where wrongs are alternately redressed or allowed to fester into self doubt and guilt. Louisa, the protagonist of "Carried Away," is a small Canadian town's lonely librarian who receives an unexpected letter from the equally desolate Jack, a WW I soldier whom she has never met but who remembers her from the library and woos her through the mail. After the war, he never introduces himself in person, and she reads in the newspaper of his betrayal and marriage to another woman. Jack continues to be the obsession of her thoughts and actions when his head is severed from his body in a horrific accident at the piano factory where he works and Louisa plunges into a "normal" life and marries the factory's owner. Years later, when an elderly Louisa thinks she is having a conversation with an elderly Jack in town, we realize that Jack's death or even Jack himself may be a figment of her imagination. Similarly, we aren't quite sure if an old bag lady in Victoria, B.C., was kidnapped in her youth by Albanian tribesmen ("An Albanian Virgin"), if a woman in the 1850s Canadian wilderness actually murdered her husband, who may or may not have been abusing her ("A Wilderness Station"), or if a teenager who disappeared from a hike was murdered, kidnapped, or simply ran off with a guy she had the hots for ("Open Secrets"). In Munro's hands, fact is a stepsister to fiction and reality may have nothing in common with life's truths. Munro's stories of miscellaneous experience in the female world of fictions and facts are of applicable with native hue of humanism.

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