



## **ALICE MUNRO'S *CHILDREN STAY*: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN APPROACH AND CHARACTER OF WOMEN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The study aims to analysis Alice Munro, the modern Canadian short story writer's viewpoint on the change that is on the way in approach and character of women. The paper attempts to explore the changing nature of women's behaviour in social and domestic walls of patriarchy. The study tries to explore the reasons of the changes in women's behaviour, its impact on society and family, the struggle put by women, and the price she has to pay for her freedom and rights. Alice Munro is literary legend of Canada and is respected in entire world as a master of the short story with the treasure of literature, that is, her fourteen volumes of stories. She is one of the few recognized figures in the realm of short story of Canadian literature and grab the apex of recognition in form of Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. Being a female author having deep understanding of feminine psyche, she simply writes about women, their place in society, their alienation, fractured and hollow relationships, family issues, marital issues in society, male dominance, and patriarchy. She created a range of characters, all of whom embodied the oppressed, male-dominated women in the system.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Munro is the champion of presenting women lives with all its goodness, fragilities, frailties, fortunes and misfortunes. She has created good number of characters that project the true picture of women's spirit. Her range and variety of characters truly represent womanliness and womanhood and reflect the real and unadulterated image of a woman in a society. As a woman writer, she is honest and straightforward in bring out the hidden self of womankind.

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She, as a writer, does not seek any masquerade or ideology or a movement or a theory to present her characters. She does not attempt either to glorify or demean 'women' through her characterization. Her whole hearted endeavor is just to present them as they are and as they appear to her. She presents them instead of interpreting them. She never makes efforts to treat them as some special or privileged being. She is at once compassionate and empathic and on the other hand ruthless in projecting the blatant reality.

Many stories and many writers have depicted a man protagonist who leaves his wife and children to fulfill his desire of love for another woman. The real-life experiences also contain numerous examples of men who discards their family running away with other women. Their discarding of their wives and children and then unfortunate sufferings of their lives are common aspects of day-to-day life. However, such an act on the part of women is rare and hence, it inspires awe and surprise. Men is shown of taking liberties and the male dominance raise no objection over such acts considering that all such things are their domain. But, it very difficult for patriarchal society to digest the running away of a girl or a woman to fulfill her unfulfilled desires within the periphery of domesticity. Munro is an unbiased observer of human life and has courage and strength to depict the other side of the truth which erstwhile suppressed under the ethical, cultural or civilized cover put by male-dominated society. However, in the story "The Children Stay," Munro signalizes the change coming in the society and shows that women also cherish the same feeling and desires of flesh which are erstwhile ascribed only to males. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, Del Jordan's mother, Ida Jordan, prophecies that change is near and impending and Munro shows it through her own stories.

So, the story "The Children Stay," from her collection *Love of Good Woman*, is all about Pauline Keating, a young mother of two daughters, who "shockingly and incomprehensibly gave everything up" and shows that now there is a significant shift in paradigm in the matter of the approach and character of women and she is ready to turn the apple cart of the society. Maria Loschnigg affirms the fact that,

*"Munro's protagonists to be mothers and to keep up their intellectual identity and personal autonomy, it requires the performance of a 'precarious stunt.'"*  
(Staines 67)

Munro has sketched the variety of characters from submissive to aggressive, passive to active, humble to arrogant, and from conventional to modern. Pauline has a revolutionary character that beckons the changes of the future society. She has initially suppressed her intense desire for freedom which is visible through her likings. She has a passionate preference for adventure, thrill and fantasy. She is of intellectual bent of mind and has modest liking for literature. The narrator observes, that, she "doesn't like the beach as well as she likes the road that runs behind the cottages for a mile or so north till it stops at the bank of the

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little river that runs into the sea.” (LGM 181) Beach stands for enclosed space as it is surrounded by water. She likes mystery – the road behind the cottage. She prefers vastness of the sea. However, her marriage with Brian captivates her in a conservative family where there is the reign of patriarchal rules. Her domestic life is like the beach. No matter from where you start your journey, you end up at the boundary. In her family, there is dominance of two males and they “are continually trying to decide which is what.” (LGM 182)

Pauline feels isolated and alienated in Brian’s family. She takes the note of her mother-in-law’s position within the family. Her mother-in-law belongs completely to an old generation of women and she adjusts and brings changes in herself according to the needs of their family. She has become habitual not to give voice to her inner self. At the outset, Pauline appears to be submissive and docile like a traditional woman living her life within the outskirts of domesticity. As a matter of fact, she does not get any opportunity to reveal her real self. She gets opportunity to come out of the walls of household duties when she meets the young director of plays, Jeffrey, who plans to stage the play, Eurydice. Though she is not actress or even amateur actress, Jeffrey offers her the lead role of Eurydice. She hesitates to accept the offer and Brian insists her to accept the offer saying Jeffrey that,

*“She just needs a kick in the behind,” Brian said to Jeffrey. “she’s like a little mule, it’s hard to get her started. No, seriously, she’s too self-effacing. I tell her that all the time. She’s very smart. She is actually a lot smarter than I am.” (LGM 185)*

This evaluation of Pauline is testified later by her action and she proves really that she is smarter than Brian’s consideration. She is not shy but just waits for proper time to act. Brian fails to understand her each time. Jeffrey, as a matter of fact, uses women’s psychology to impress her. Women do not like her praise directly as well as they do not like their vices or weaknesses to be pointed out bluntly. Jeffrey while giving his reason of her selection as an actress for the role of Eurydice, explained both her weakness and beautiful aspects of her personality. He looks into her eyes “impertinently and searchingly.” He says that he is not looking beautiful girl – a girl with ethereal beauty. He praises her in a way that one may get confused that if he is praising or criticizing. The narrator comments, that,

*“So what did he mean about the way she looked? He said it was her hair, which was long and dark and rather bushy (not in style at that time), and her pale skin (“Stay out of the sun this summer”) and most of all eyebrows.” (LGM 186)*

Pauline is also impressed by the way he has looked into her eyes and there only their affair gets started. She meets him every Sunday after the rehearsals. She begins to enjoy her life



outside the threshold of her house and notes the difference between her past and present life. The narrator peeps into her inner recess of mind and the remarks,

*“That life seemed ragged and tedious compared to what went on in the rehearsal room—the hours of effort, the concentration, the sharp exchanges, the sweating and tension.” (LGM 189)*

Obviously, she records the taste of freedom and quality of happiness outside the boundary of the house. As a matter of fact, her domestic routine and the burden of household responsibilities has created a feeling of ennui and boredom which is strikingly absent in this world beyond her family. She begins to search her real self which is forgotten by the restrictions of her conventional family.

But then, her husband takes his family, his parents to Vancouver Island for two weeks as it is Brian’s habit to go on vacations in summer. This news for Jeffrey, is a severe shock, like a thunderbolt. This vacation brings out the complication in the relationship between Pauline and Brian. In Munro’s presentation of Pauline’s character, there are many elements of mystery that indicates the numerous aspects of feminine nature. Munro uses words like ‘steal,’ ‘slip,’ and ‘slide,’ to describe her actions while she is with Brian, her family and Jeffrey. She is shown enjoying the moments of seclusion. She rises early and when, during their vacations, she rises noiselessly as it is described – “Pauline slides out of the bed as soon as she’s awake every morning, slides out of reach of Brian’s long, sleepily arms and legs” and “Pauline steals time to be by herself,” and when she is in the motel room later with Jeffrey, again it is described, “she slides out under Jeffrey’s hand and from under the top sheet.” (LGM 183,210) All such expressions reflect her mental state. She wants to enjoy her life but, every time, she is bound by something, may be unknown fears and complexes of her mind or the burden of household responsibilities or the pressure of conforming to societal rules.

Munro wants to show that a woman can feel fear or burden or grief to at limited extent. Once she finds out herself, no one has that kind of potential to curb her instincts or her unfulfilled desires. Pauline does not like Brian, his nature and temperament of taking every aspect of life very lightly, his boisterous sense of humour and his lack of sense of responsibility. The discussions between Brian and Pauline clearly points out the ideologies or bent of mind they possess. They discuss on the play “Eurydice” which is the modern version of original Greek drama. In that discussion, whenever Brian makes the reference of Jeffrey’s name, a sparkling shine of happiness is sprung in her eyes and heart. There Pauline defends the love of Eurydice and Brian blames her of having sexual relationship with many other men. She accuses Orphee that he is crazy after perfection in everything and wants love “outside of ordinary life.” She defends Eurydice saying, that, “Just because she’s slept with those men doesn’t mean she’s corrupt. She wasn’t in love then.” (LGM 199) Isn’t she speaking her



mind? Such discussions are regular part of their life and after discussion, they reconcile with each other. The strange aspect of their relationship is that there is not a single references or implied statement in the story which indicates that they quarrel with each other.

Munro often shows as in “The Progress of Love,” that under the calm surface of a marriage, there flows undercurrent of grudges and all the kinds of darker emotions. During their vacations in Vancouver Island, Pauline is called by Jeffery that he cannot live without her and he forces him to come to his motel. He said her with ‘determined practicality’ that, “I just wanted you,” Jeffery said. “I just wanted you in my bed.” (LGM 199) Those words depict the youthful passion of his heart, but not his love. Pauline tries to decode the meaning out of those words. She understands the meaning but unfortunately fails to understand the reality of his love. ‘My bed’ just denotes physical love only. If she also needs just bodily pleasures? The reason is she refused to come at that moment when he has called her because her children are with her and there is no one in the cottage to look after and she muses that she cannot take children with her on ‘such a guilty expedition.’

Then she decides to call Brian to collect children and goes away in their car making some excuse to Jeffrey’s motel never to return. Jeffery asks her to call her husband to tell him about her decision. The readers are not told what she has said to Brian and just the reaction of Brian is narrated – “Oh. Oh. Okay.” The astonishing reaction is recorded by the narrator that the decision is accepted by Brian in a very normal way just like any other news which does not relate to him. He readily believed her decision as the narrator remarks, “As if he had known all along, all along, what could happen with her.” (LGM 205)

Pauline very abruptly leaves her husband without any proper planning or intention to leave him. It creates a kind of conflict in her mind that what she has done and why she has done. Munro, with the help of Pauline’s conflict, remarkably provides an insight into the boundless and uncontrolled desire of humanity in having extramarital affairs and run-away tendency. She dives deep into the human psyche and tries to find out the condition that compels men or women to come out of the marriage institution and to fall prey to outer attractions. In doing so she has pen down remarkable analysis of the human behaviour and has exposed the complexity of women’s predicament. Pauline argues with herself regarding reasons engaging oneself in an extramarital affair. She mediates that people surely must have experienced some different kinds of emotions and pleasure in such affairs. Otherwise, people should not have involved themselves in such numbers. There comes an insightful remark that,

*“Different in kind. That was what Pauline must believe now—that there was this major difference in the lives or in marriages or unions between people. That some of them had a necessity, a fatefulness, about them that others did not have.” (LGM 208)*





She considers her case of leaving her husband and what kind of label the people will attach to her act – that they will be call run-away. When she meets Jeffrey in the motel even then she has not decided that she is going to leave her husband and thinking of devising some solid reason to tell her husband when she will reach her house. Jeffrey expresses her desire to live with her and she is unable to conclude her say.

Then she introspects her mind to find out her reason of leaving her husband. She compares the sexual pleasure she has got from both men and the difference she has noted. She confuses herself saying that sex is little bit same with both and concludes that,

*“But nothing’s the same, really. With Brian—especially with Brian, to whom she has dedicated a selfish sort of goodwill, with she’s lived in married complicity—there can never be stripping away, the inevitable flight, the feeling she doesn’t have to strive for but only to give in to like breathing or dying. That she believes can only come when the skin is on Jeffrey.....the weight that bears down on her has Jeffrey’s heart in it, also his habits, thoughts, peculiarities, his ambition and loneliness.” (LGM 209-210)*

The Herculean challenge before Munro as a story writer is that she has to sketch her character in such a way that Pauline should not be blame by her readers of adultery or of looseness of morality. It is the great risk before her that her character might be misinterpreted. Maria Loschnigg states;

*“Like so many of Munro’s protagonists who break out unhappy marriages, ‘leaving husband and house and all the things acquired during marriage ....in hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy and shame.’ (Staines 66)*

Munro has presented her with such delicacy of feminine emotions that she is able to bring out the true heart feelings of a woman who is forced to run away to achieve her happiness. Pauline is not satisfied emotionally and physically with Brian and this is her reason for running away. However, she does not get this happiness without giving a prize.

At that night with Jeffrey, she enjoys bodily pleasures forgetting one inseparable aspect of her life. In the morning, she stealthily comes out of lusty bed and thinks to buy some necessities and sets out on a highway, then suddenly the bitter reality dawns upon her mind that she has forgotten all about her children. This realization proves to be a heavy blow. Munro finely brings out the volcanic outburst of motherly concern and conflicting trauma of her mind when the narrator remarks about her mental state describing, that,



“Something is coming now. A truck. But not just a truck—there’s a large bleak fact coming at her. And it has not arrived out of nowhere—it’s been waiting, cruelly nudging at her ever since she woke up, or even all night.

*Caitlin and Mara.” (LGM 211)*

*Maria Loschnigg aptly summarizes the feeling of millions when she says,*

*“There is one role she cannot give up, at least not emotionally, which is that of the mother.” (Staines 66)*

She now, after the film of sexual frenzy is removed from her senses, she recalls the verdict of Brian regarding their children. He has calmly received her decision of leaving him and raises no objections on her such shocking even insulting rejection. Then he asks her about her decision about children. Then he delivers her decision that – the children stay. She understands now the meaning of his revengeful action that he their children will stay with him and he is not ready to share their responsibility with her. His revenge is the revenge of a patriarch to make her realize what she has walked away.

Munro shows that a woman has to pay prize for choosing her happiness. Her path of happiness is full of thorns of untold miseries. Pauline pays the prize of her children for choosing her happiness and freedom. In the bargain like Lorna in the story “Post and Beam,” she gets pain which will be with her for her life-time. Munro aptly describes this pain when the narrator remarks that pain is like, “a round cold stone in her gullet, like a cannonball. And, that,

*“This is acute pain. It will become chronic. Chronic means that it will be permanent but perhaps not constant. It may also mean that you won’t die of it. You won’t get free of it, but you won’t die of it.” (LGM 212-213)*

Munro bares the sores of many pent-up souls and operates the woman’s heart bringing her intricacies not of heart but of her soul. Once again Pauline’s character brings home the point that relationships are simple but individuals are complicated and their behaviour makes their relationships complex.

Pauline is one of many women characters that beckon change in the societal assumptions and expectations of the society as Maria Loschnigg pinpoints the change;

*“....Munrovian girl characters, and which is based on the assumption of women being weaker sex, is turned upside-down in several stories which feature young adult women who actively decide to reject this power imbalance.” (Staines 66)*



### CONCLUSION

To conclude, Munro, through all her stories, tries to capture the different hidden aspects of women's character and temperament that show that she is also a human being like men. She also possesses same weakness and strength as men. She has desires and instincts natural to human beings. She is not different or other. She can commit common place mistakes. She has appetite of senses and in the world of temptation, she like a man prone to take wrong decisions, can select wrong partners, gets involved in sexual relationships and also gets cheated. As a man learns by his mistakes in relationships, she also learns a lesson. Munro's concern is she should not be treated as a culprit or a sinner. Munro shows them doing all kinds of things – civilized or uncivilized – which up to this time, in the literary world is done by male characters only.

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Note: LGM (used for in-text citation) is the abbreviation of Alice Munro's story collection, *The Love of Good Woman*.