

The Plights of Females in *Passion* by Alice Munro

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Abstract. By the study of a collection of novel runaways, the paper can discover the Alice Munro depicts the growth process where some traditional women never give up seeking for the ideal life style in the patriarchal system. Thus, this thesis aims to discuss women's growth process in *Runaway* to explore self-pursuit of women's ideal life style and self-realization process from the perspective of feminism criticism involving a series of topics, such as voice right, self-consciousness, and gender issues. It not only provides new perspective of the study about Munro's works, but also it is beneficial for readers to capture the profound connotation and to enjoy the artistic charm.

Keywords: Alice Munro; *Runaway*; Feminism.

1. Introduction

As one of the most renowned short story writer, Alice Munro has been called as "Our Contemporary Chekhov" [2]. She is the only three-times winner of Canadian Governor General's Award for Fiction and the first Canadian writer who was honored with the Nobel Prize of Literature in 2013 [7]. Although Munro has never claimed herself as a feminist author, most of her stories are told from the female perspectives. In fact, her technically use of realism and narration interspersed with flashbacks, her unique insights to the hidden tragedies in female's ordinary life and her sympathetic and humanistic care result in the strong response from the readers and the literary field. For example, in Zhao Huizhen's (2002) *On Canadian Female writer Alice Munro and her Female Images*, she studied the *Dance of Happy Shadews*, *The Lives of Girls and Women*, and *Who Do You Think You Are?* In the female image characteristi [7]. Ma Aihua (2022) makes an in-depth analysis of Dale, the protagonist in *The Lives of Girls and Women*, from the perspective of Jungian psychology [4]. Liu Yiqing (2011) made a critical study of Munro's *Fleitz Road* from the perspective of female narrative strategies [3]. Zhang Lei studied the feminist themes, feminist narrative strategies and methods of Munro's 15 short stories [5]. From the perspective of ecological women, Feng Jiawen makes a comparative study of Alice Munro's *runaway* and Shen Congwen's *The Border Town*. Although the two novels were published in different countries and times, they express their sympathy and concern for women, indicating that in the patriarchal culture, women are reduced to appendages and ornaments in the rational framework of the society ruled by men. At the same time, nature is also placed in the subordinate position of the subject of human enslavement and the prey, making women and nature hover on the edge of the mainstream culture centered on male power, becoming passive, unspiritual and mechanized things. It can be seen that the domestic and foreign studies on Munro are mostly carried out from multiple perspectives such as the narrative technique of her works, feminism and the regional background of her novels.

2. Plot Summary of the Novel

Among all the works of Alice Munro, *Runaway* is definitely an unquestionable milestone in her creative career from both sides of sales and artistic attainments. This collection published in 2004 contains 8 stories all focusing on women's plights, choices and their different destinies. Furthermore, *Runaway* is not simply the name of the first story and the title for the entire book, but also the theme which goes throughout the life of all the heroines. *Passion* is the 5th story in this collection which is told from the perspective of elder Grace. Taking *passion* as an example, this paper analyzes the female image in Alice Munro's works, the dilemma faced by women, the origin and evolution of female consciousness, and the reasons for producing female consciousness.



The revisit to the Travers' house reminds her of a passionless relationship she finally fled when she was young. Over forty years ago, Grace was a waitress working in an inn who had to give up her academic career to college due to her poverty. Maury was her lover at that time. From a world point of view, he was definitely the right choice for a fiancé in terms of both social status and personality. However, Grace was confused by this relationship since it was hard for her to tell the passion existing between them. Comparing with staying alone with Maury, she preferred to spend time together with Maury's mother Mrs. Travers, the one who let Grace read all of her books freely and exchange their opinions on them. At the Thanksgiving potluck, Grace cut her foot accidentally and taken away by Neil, who was born to Mrs. Travers and her ex-husband who suicided, to the hospital. During their drive, they both showed the understanding and intense attraction towards each other. Grace also mastered driving which was impossible to her for the first time under the guidance and encouragement from Neil. However, on the next morning, Grace got the news that Neil also chose to end his life by pretending the suicide as an accident. Eventually, Grace broke up with Maury as what she realized while she was driving with Neil that she could not marry to him since it would be the betrayal to herself. In *Passion*, Alice Munro points out the plights of females and created rebellious, thoughtful and independent Grace as a character who breaks the conventional stereotype of women's only identity as a housewife. Besides, the emotional connections, similarities and variances between Grace and Mrs. Travers are also the crucial elements.

Grace is the heroine of the whole story and the conflicts on her are the most dramatic and obvious. During her period as being a maid, she was alienated from the school community and the environment she was in as a result of her intelligence, curiosity, eager to knowledge and inevitable poverty. Grace was brought up by her stand-in parents who made caning chairs for living. She learnt as much subjects as she could and gained the high marks which were unnecessary while she was in high school. Her request for taking more courses was rejected by her principle and was laughed by the folks on the town who got to know that she delayed her graduation due to the extra classes which seemed totally impractical to them.

It is natural in a patriarchal that the females are forbidden from "unrealistic dreams" which are actually the opportunities for them to pursuit their dreams. Except learning a technique supporting the basic living and getting married, all the other choices for life to females will be considered as odd and queer. Grace and many talented females at her time were all marginalized by their society as the result of not obeying the traditional and expected rules on their identity as being a female. This kind of identity crisis leads to the imbalance and breakdown of the relationship between Grace and Maury. Their first conflict is revealed by the film they watched together. She realizes the fact resentfully and bitterly that: "men—people, everybody—thought they should be like: beautiful, treasured, spoiled, selfish, pea-brained. That was what a girl had to be, to be fallen in love with. Then she'd become a mother and be all mushily devoted to her babies. Not selfish anymore, but just as pea-brained. Forever." [1] For Grace, she hates the conventional prejudice on woman while Maury just see the movie as a comedy for fun. When Grace explains her opinions on the wedding ceremony which seemed stupid to her in the movie, Maury regards it as her jealousy for such a grant wedding that she may never be able to afford even though he believes she holds such idea with respect and admiration to her. From another aspect, the inequality in their relationship is the place which is unbearable to Grace. Maury has always been acting as a protector to Grace. However, this role eventually turns to be restrictions to her both physically and psychologically. Maury is against to Grace when she wants more intimate contact with him. He feels like that his feelings are hurt as long as it is much to his surprise that this does not match her image in his mind and he accuses her for being not self-love. His reactions make her more confused and force her to reexamine whether she is truly too frivolous to sex or not. "It was a relief to Grace to be alone, to get into bed in the hotel dormitory and blot the last couple of hours out of her mind." [1] However, in many of Munro's characters, sex liberation for females is always the thing they are striving for as long as their normal desires and thoughts are misunderstood and mistaken. Then, they are likely to deny and doubt on their own voices and desires.

For the other female characters, Mrs. Travers is undoubtedly the most iconic. She represents in a large way the plight of married women as they face marriage and family life. Their identity as individuals is easily erased by their husbands and children. Only the titles of wife and mother are left behind. For Mrs. Travers, her married life is not as happy as it seems, which can be glimpsed from a few details. First of all, Mr. Travers is describing Mrs. Travers' life before she met him as compared to an ascetic practice. Though the optimistic Mrs. Travers does not think so and is often enthusiastic about the interesting landlords, French tenants, and various interesting and memorable books she met in her old life. Here, her husband continues to present himself as the great savior, while she remains passive. In addition, Mrs. Travers' constant intermittent psychosis is a hint to the state of her dissolute marriage. And, in this new family, her marginalization is shown through the fact that Neil is treated by the other family members with cold talk. Gretchen and Mavis' roles as Mrs. Travers' daughter and daughter-in-law also both endured their lackluster marriage to some extent. Their lives continue to revolve around babysitting and cooking. But when Mrs. Travers talks about her daughter Gretchen she says, "With Neil I worry a lot, with Maury only a tiny little bit. And Gretchen I don't worry about at all. Because women have always got something, haven't they, to keep them going?" [1]

When it comes to Grace and Mrs. Travers it is important to mention the sympathetic feelings and relationship between the two of them. First and foremost, they both love to read and share their opinions with each other. And they faced similar dilemmas in a sense. For Grace, she is happy that Mrs. Travers does not say that Grace is absolutely crazy when she learns about her unusual high school life, even though she states that she never went to college and went to a more practical business school. Also, both Mr. Travers and Maury try to be the all-purpose savior in both women's lives even when they don't need to be. In some ways, Mrs. Travers represents the aging Grace who is married to Maury whereas Grace represents the young Mrs. Travers. Also, it is the words of Mrs. Travers that make Grace reflect on what she saw when she met Mrs. Travers just out of the sanitarium, and Grace's eventual departure is inextricably linked to the many details that she saw in Mrs. Travers.

3. Conclusion

In face of love, Grace could not have enough courage and great confidence to welcome it. Firstly, Grace works at the hotel at Bailey's autumn in Canada where she and her boyfriend Maury encounters at that moment. From then on, she begins to work on weekends and enjoys time with her friend on vacation. Compared with the social status of Maury, she has been indulged in the complicated and negative mind. Neil is smart and thoughtful, which makes her aware that Neil is the real man she actually wants. she made important decision to escaping from her fiancé. Experiencing fled all the afternoon, she seems to love Neil and steers her hope and heart into another one. She prefers the long and exciting journey to the dull life because the life road stimulates her desires. Hence, obligations and rules are abandoned in her mind. This kind of passion brings her heart to the unprecedented world.

Grace's experience shows that women live in a world built according to male ideas, and their standards of life are built according to male wishes. Grace hates the image of girls in everyone's mind, and believes that everyone should live a different style according to their own hearts, without changing to cater to the public. Grace's views on education, women, and marriage show that she is independent and has free will; Even if at the beginning is very confused, but in the end still can stick to the self, frank expression, brave pursuit.

Looking at the female images in Alice Munro's *runaway*, readers can see the struggle and resistance of women: the wife's resistance to her husband's ruling family, the struggle against the cold violence in the patriarchal family, the resistance of different characters to the imbalance of husband and wife and parent-child relationship, the resistance and compromise of traditional vision and religious rites. It can be said that women strive to find themselves in the perspective of male-dominant discourse. The process of women seeking for themselves is also the process of female consciousness awakening, that is, self-cognition: women's dissatisfaction with real life, awareness of the equality of men and women, and questioning of traditional morality and secular vision are the embryonic stage of female

consciousness. Secondly, self-pursuit is the escape and resistance of different female characters in the novel, hoping to realize their value, which is the embodiment of women's self-pursuit consciousness. Finally, there is the self-actualization stage.

In Alice Munro's works, the heroine will feel frustration in life. This emotion comes from the binary opposition, that is, the contradiction between the beautiful ideal and the cruel reality. Therefore, the process of female consciousness awakening is painful. The reason is that under the influence of the patriarchal society for a long time, men have relatively absolute speech rights in social life, and they can shape and restrict women according to their ideas, so that women lose their right to speak, forming women's attitude to cater to and attach to men. It can be seen from the novel that some women readily accept the terms of life attached to women by men, and this kind of living condition dependent on men has gradually become the natural nature of women. This is due to the factors of women themselves, the social environment, and people's cognitive concepts.

Through narrating the painful family of origin and marriage and family life, Alice Munro shows the survival status of women in the patriarchal society, even if they realize that they need to survive independently, only a few of them can find a way out. Those women who have a strong sense of femininity and have enough courage to fight to the end can win, while those who cannot get rid of the inherent life, and ideological patterns will face another life blow. In today's society, because men have both physical and psychological advantages and public opinion is also driven by the patriarchal society, women are also more likely to be questioned and speculated by the public than men and become the vulnerable party. Although in the process of striving for equal rights with men, women have greatly improved their social status. However, gender-derived inequalities will not be easily eliminated. Therefore, to get rid of the bondage of the patriarchal society, women not only rely on social intervention and changes in the living environment, but also need a self-repair ability to obtain self-identity.

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