

FANTASY AS SCREEN MEMORY: MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF DESIRE IN ALICE MUNRO'S RUNAWAY

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ABSTRACT: *Alice Munro's character-based short story "Runaway" (2004) mirrors the complexities of the unconscious psyche of the characters, especially the repressed psyche of the female characters as a result of suppression and asocial drives and desires. This paper will show how Alice Munro places fantasy as a setting for her characters where desires are screened through fantasies of the characters where they are planning and creating imaginary scene/s existing between the poles of reality and imagination. This paper will also explain how the whole story is actually the 'Mise-en-scène' of desires where the latent aspects of the characters are developed and evolved as a subject through fantasizing the self and other by transgressing the uncertainty and ambiguity of life.*

KEYWORDS: Alice Munro, Runaway, Fantasy, Mise-En-Scène, Desire.

INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro's writing grasps the complexities of human subjectivity, subtleties, ambiguities, internal conflicts, repressed unconscious desires and enigmas of feminine subjectivity. Munro's distinctive storytelling methods combine the familiar and the unfamiliar, slipping between realism and fantasy to make visible what is usually hidden within everyday life, silent female knowledge--of female bodies, love stories and romantic fantasies as well as female casualties where secrecy and silence become strategies of resistance. The rich and factitive worlds she creates are both touchable and mysterious. The story of "Runaway" revolves around the psychological space that demands physical space and the interactions between world and mind of the unconscious and conscious fabrication of free will, memory, anxiety and self-knowledge. Munro judiciously screens all these unconscious and conscious psyche of her characters through 'fantasy' in her narrative of the story.

Mise-en-scène:

Mise-en-scène is an expression used to describe the design aspect of a theatre or film production, which essentially means "visual theme" or "telling a story"—both in visually artful ways through storyboarding, cinematography and stage design, and in poetically artful ways through direction. In "Runaway", Alice Munro visualizes the inner thoughts and desires through a fantasy where "fantasy is not the object of desire, neither is it the desire for specific objects; it is the setting or the mise-en-scène of desire." (Homer 86) Literary critics conceive of short story to be a minor, marginal form of literature, but it is the accurate form of a writer like Munro to exhibit the life by creating a setting for the projection of fantasies of the marginal, the 'Other's unheard, unspoken desires to get room to fight, lose and win with the symbolic and the real self of the subject which is always in-process. "The space of fantasy, writes Zizék, 'functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires' (ibid 87) It was Freud's idea of fantasy as a kind of 'screen-memory, representing something of more

importance with which it was in some way connected.' [Fantasy (psychology), Wikipedia] According to Lacan 'the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinate in the function of repetition'. (ibid)

Fantasy as screen memory in 'Runaway':

The short story by Alice Munro entitled "Runaway" is from a volume she published in 2004 under the same title and which is her 11th collection of short stories. The analysis will address the issue of the resurgence of hidden or furtive signifiers through the correlation between fantasy and the real world. This paper will depict how Alice Munro's "Runaway" is wrapped with fantasies. It ends as it begins with a very confused state of mind thinking and predicting what is happening and will happen. The opening scene is very important for the whole narrative because of its careful introduction to its three characters together. Munro's characters will continuously fantasize about the situation and one another rather contact directly in real. "Carla heard the car coming... It's her, she thought... If it was somebody coming to see them, the car would be slowing down by now. But Carla hoped. Let it not be her." (Munro 1) Carla started to fantasize whether Clark, her husband noticed Mrs Jamison's car or not instead of telling him directly about Mrs Jamison. She assumes that Clark did not notice her and fantasizes how it can be possible for Clark to know that Mrs Jamison is back her house from holidays. These fantasies will dominate the whole narrative by the continuous emphasize on the possibilities of the situations. "Maybe Clark didn't know yet... If he was sitting at the computer...Mrs. Jamieson might have to make another trip—for groceries, perhaps. He might see her then...She might be so tired that she wouldn't bother with the lights; she might go to bed early. On the other hand, she might telephone. Anytime now." (Munro 1) Carla seems used to pursue a series of fantasies as a defence mechanism concerning the things she wishes she could do or wishes she had done, sometimes she controls her sovereign choices, daydreams. Her kernel, real core unconscious of the split self-runs away, again and again, to fight the conflicts her real life offers her. Munro situates not only Carla but also all three characters as determined by the phantasies to compromise with their very own desires of life.

The memories of Carla continually attempted to integrate her past into the negotiation of her newly married life, but her inability to do so trapped her in a deadlock of desire both in terms of her desired life and her love life. She has gazed at the luxurious images of everything she desires around but comes face to face with the fact that she cannot attain them. "A fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally 'teaches us how to desire.' (Žižek 7)

"The pleasure we derive from fantasy does not result from the achievement of its aim, its object, but rather from the staging of desire in the first place" (Homer 87) Carla is seen stages her desires and wishes by fantasizing about Clark. Carla always wanted to see herself as an independent girl who will work with animals in somewhere out in the country. Besides her smooth life with her parents, she always felt an emptiness inside her that worked as 'screen for the projection of desires'. Against that empty surface, she places Clark, in search of 'a more authentic kind of life' (Munro 16). She associates her search for own identity with the strange, young, rough and very competent riding teacher Clark who has worked in different fields of job sectors and who has a different concept about family and life. The distance between unpredictable, moody Clark and Carla springs fantasy in Carla's life. In the postmodern identities of identity, fantasy is "an element in the discursive construction of identities...an infinitely more mobile, more subject to choice..." (Feminist Theory 91) Carla's choice and preference for her life start fantasizing about the life of Clark who named himself as Gypsy

Rover. Her fantasy becomes stronger when her parents wanted to keep her in the chain of the society in the name of order and disciplined life. She starts running after her fantasy world with her fantasy boy Clark by running away from her parents and her known surroundings. She was spellbound and caught by the thrill of the journey with Clark where she structures her fantasy as “it is the support of desire” (Homer 86) She has started to screen her desires by looking at fantastic Clark.

“She recalled now how the sun had come up behind them, how she had looked at Clark’s hands on the wheel, at the dark hairs on his competent forearms, and breathed in the smell of the truck, a smell of oil and metal tools and horse barns. Clark’s preoccupation with the traffic, his curt answers, his narrowed eyes, everything about him that ignored her, even his slight irritation at her giddy delight—all of that had thrilled her. She saw him as the sturdy architect of the life ahead of them, herself as a captive, her submission both proper and exquisite.” (Munro 15)

With full of energy and spirit, both of them fantasize life as carefree where with Clark’s savings they settled down with their business and then they used to visit several towns in search of cheap patrol station; they keep travelling just like tourists, revealing new hotels, different foods and singing merrily. “But after a while, all outings came to be seen as a waste of time and money. They were what people did before they understood the realities of their lives.” (Munro 16) Gradually life becomes complicated and so material that Carla notices how Clark in the rainy season becomes busy for promoting business and searching for a secondhand roof for a horse barn. There was always a distance between Clark and Carla’s relationship. Now it seems more visible when Clark denies his fights with people; when the setting of people’s mobile houses upsets Carla; when Clark does not reciprocate Carla’s emotions. But she does not stop fantasizing “she hoped that if they could get out of there, get a takeout at the cappuccino place, they might be able to talk in a different way, some release might be possible. (Munro 3) These failures torment her memory and desire. In Lacanian terms, she is tormented by the desire for the unattainable ‘Other’ – the object *petit a*, or “the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier”. (Homer 87)) Carla’s memory of the fulfilled self she experienced in her parents’ house is the *object petit a* that she continually tries to locate in the ‘Other’. The memory of the fulfilment of love she experienced with her parents is what Carla aspires to in her relationship with Clark, but Carla fails to reciprocate her love and shares this loneliness in horse’s barn. The persistent frustration of Carla’s desires places her in an unsustainable position, a position in which she is both aware of what she wants and that she cannot attain it, or what Lacan’s protégé Slavoj Žižek calls “the deadlock of desire.” (Žižek 32)

In the case of Carla, her fantasy is an attempt to escape the implications of the actions she has taken to break the deadlock of desire that is too unbearable for her to face. Another significant aspect of Carla’s fantasy world is taken by Flora, a barn goat. A back story about a barn goat Flora takes shapes through the fantasies of Carla because she is never with a direct contact to the goat in the entire narrative. Flora is seen only in Carla’s memory and dream. Even when Flora appears in the story, Carla was absent there. From the very beginning, Flora’s absence establishes its presence throughout the pivotal scenes and ending of “Runaway” to parallel that Carla is not the only runaway here. The little white goat makes Carla concerned for two days and “Carla was afraid that wild dogs or coyotes had got her, or even a bear.”(Munro 2)

Munro introduces us to Flora when Carla’s relationship to Clark had gone through a litany of miseries. For repairing the fractured self of Carla, Munro gives us two dream sequences that

strongly associate Carla's expression of the flow of psychic energy of the complex ideas revolving around the absence story of Flora. "She had dreamed of Flora last night and the night before. In the first dream, Flora had walked right up to the bed with a red apple in her mouth." (Munro 3) But in the second dream, "she had run away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be hurt, but she ran anyway. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and then she—Flora—slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared." (Munro 3) The literal image of the goat as a "sacrificial lamb," connects Carla's close relationship with Flora. Especially, in the second dream, the foreshadowing of the runaway is associated with the goat as runaway which is wounded and the reason for running away is unknown. Her dream foreshadows whatever the goat represents is forbidden to Carla (ran away, barricade, barbed wire). In a neat trick of writing, Alice Munro intentionally gives the pronoun reference confusing with the goat and Carla: "...and then she — Flora — slipped through it." (Munro 3) This structural decentering strategy is only possible to be shown in the fantasy that can make space for the destabilization of ideological imperatives through structural disjunction. According to Jan Shaw, "Undercutting the expectations of narrative logic is a way of upsetting the order of things." (Feminism and Fantasy Tradition 466). The good, bountiful life that Flora represents, is illusive and "disappears" early on for Carla, that it is, perhaps, even forbidden. Freud's idea is that the prime mover of psychic life is the unconscious wish, not phantasy. Phantasies are conceived as imagined fulfilments of frustrated wishes. "Fantasy can allow the terms of existence to be explored, dominant ideological paradigms to be disrupted, and the forbidden and repressed to be explicated" "Fantasy provides a space where the unspeakable can be spoken. (ibid) These two dreams of Carla signal an ascent into the psychological realms of her unconscious desires.

The dreariness and the dissatisfaction of life are remade into a fully developed narrative where Munro's subjects flee into fantasy precisely because it seems to cure the dissatisfaction they cannot otherwise escape. Both Carla and Clark cling into an abject story of Carla's neighbour, an ageing poet, suggestively called Leon Jamieson, who is about to die and who is misrepresented by her as a randy lecher bent on seducing her as a setting of their own desires. Munro creates a *mise-en-scène* here like they are whispering, even there was nobody to hear "A bedtime story, in which the details were important and had to be added to each time, with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles. (Dirty, dirty.) And it was not only he who was eager and grateful. She was, too. Eager to please and excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time that it still worked." (Munro 6) As Clark fantasizes how to make money by the capital of this story does not make him jealous as Carla expected. Rather Clark asked Carla to demand money from Ms Jamison by claiming "You were injured. You were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It's a question of respect. "Over and over again he talked to her in this way. She tried to deflect him, but he insisted." (Munro 6) The deformation of reality that Carla has engineered triggers off Clark's greed and his desire for revenge and reparation.

On the other hand, Carla was like Flora to Ms Jamison, as comfort, life and energy personified in a sick-bed house. Carla presence means a lot to her. Mrs Jamison fantasizes an indescribable bond as she had no children. She named it as "Displaced maternal love." (Munro 9) Mrs Jamison also fantasizes the life for Carla to attain her fractured desires with Clark. She instigates Carla to runaway to attain the self she deserves. But in her second run away, leaving Clark behind, inspired by Sylvia seemed 'strange and terrible' to her. She recognizes that this is not the fantasy she is running after rather this is the fantasy of Ms Jamison about Carla's life ahead. "What am I in the Other's desire? Fantasy is a response to that question" (Homer 86)

Carla turns back to her own fantasy world which is according to Burgin “Fantasy is a complex articulation of both the subject and its unconscious desire in a shifting field of wishes and defences” (Feminist Theory 91).

Munro then creates a brilliant *mise-en-scène* at Flora’s surreal re-appearance after Carla has returned from her “escape” from Clark. Clark confronts Sylvia with the clothes she lent Carla for her escape attempt. They argue some. Sylvia is uncomfortable and even a little afraid of Clark. And then they see something “What’s that?” “What’s what?” he said as if she were trying out a trick on him and it would not work. Munro sets it as a dreamlike, a near-death experience. Out of fog and out of magnifying light, the ‘apparition’ is “unearthly,” it is “hell-bent,” it is “something like a giant unicorn” i.e., mythical. Clark evokes no less than Jesus Christ twice. ‘Then the vision exploded.’ ‘Out of this appeared a white goat. It’s Flora’. (Munro 19) Both characters are changed significantly, brought together by a good old-fashioned epiphany and super-realistic experience. Flora’s apparition is not a mirage. It is a fanciful delusion which is represented as a projection of repressed, non-narratable fears and tensions of all the three characters of the story. This visual delusion that undergoes through visible deformation according to Lacan “for psychoanalysts generally a fantasy is not simply a mental image but a total context in which desire is staged” (Feminist Theory 90). Significantly, however, Clark doesn’t share this surrealistic experience with Carla. He makes no mention of it when he returns home to her, even though he has sufficient opportunity to.

Mrs Jamison’s letter to Carla seemed to break the fantasy of Carla where she reveals the reappearance of Flora as a miracle of that night of Carla’s return from escape. But this truth cannot disrupt the imagined satisfying life she has with Clark rather she didn’t take time to destroy the letter, she just burnt it and washed it away in the sink as if she is washing away the uncompromising reality to her fantasy world. “In order to be operative, fantasy has to remain ‘implicit’. It has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression”. (Žižek, 22)

She fantasizes a number of conjectures, involving her husband Clark’s responsibility in her disappearance: “He could have chased Flora away. Or tied her in the back of the truck and driven some distance and set her loose. Taken her back to the place they’d got her from. Not to have her around, remind them. She might be free.” (Munro 24) She starts feeling a murderous needle pain when she takes a deep breath. Now Carla’s fantasy shifts from Clark to the ambiguous illusion of the absence of Flora. Does she start fantasizing what may happen to Flora? Seeing the buzzards flying around the bare trees of at the edge of the woods, Carla thinks that she may find bones and skull skin reaching there. But finally, she didn’t go into the woods to inquire the truth. She does not want to leave the fantasies that are grounded within.

CONCLUSION

Munro ends the story with the ambiguity she hints at the beginning. A leaking secret creates a huge space for fantasizing Carla from Flora to Clark and Clark to Flora. It seems that Carla compromises with her desires. But according to Lawrence M. Friedman “choice is often an illusion. People are firm believers in free will. But they choose their politics, their dress, their manners, and their very identity, from a menu they had no hand in writing. They are constrained by forces they do not understand and are not even conscious of.” (quoted in Hall 2) W. R. Martin used the phrase about Munro’s narrative that “barely felt gravitational pulls and ironic

repulsions' to describe the tension and cross-currents generated by Munro's story arrangements" (Howells 138). Munro's powerful narrative tact splits the story by Carla's first third narration and second third by Sylvia, then Carla/Sylvia/Carla in equal parts through the last third of the story. Clark is only observable through these women's eye. Munro chooses to create *mise-en-scène* to project the desires of each character about one another through fantasies constructed from internal and external reality. The pleasure these characters derive from fantasy does not result from the achievement of its aim, its object, but rather from the staging of desire. Fantasy should never be fulfilled or confused with reality, "it is a critique of what has been, or is, or might be in the future; but its resolution is not possible, now, in the real world" (Jan Shaw 465) Beyond the familiar realm of belief, a world of contrast and opposites seems to break away from the entrapment of realism here. By creating fantasy as the *mise-en-scène* of desire, Munro empowers Carla to invigorate her fantasies which concludes Carla as a successful run away from the entrapment of reality.

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