

Looking for the Mystery Woman in *The Albanian Virgin*

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Abstract: The passion to write absent feminine lives drives Munro to let go of the old ways of fictional expressivity and as a consequence leaves room for her readers to seize on fragmentary and splintered representations, finding their own meanings there. The parts, partisan voices overwhelm the whole. The intense urge to move into the spiralling experiences of characters in shifting ontological states gives Munro's narratives the semblance of the sliding cinematographic images.

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Alice Munro's eighth work of fiction *Open Secrets* (1994) delineates the preoccupations and paradoxes of human life. The line separating fiction from reality is very thin- figment of imagination or bygone experiences taking forms of stories or perceptions clouded with traumatic personal grievances, short-stories in this collection weave stories within stories in a colloquial style. Like a consummate minimal artist Munro braids the events of many decades in few pages. Based on the life of small Canadian towns -Carstairs, Ontario, sometimes venturing across the continents - there is an Albanian tale entitled "The Albanian Virgin" which is set in part in British Columbia. The kaleidoscopic images evoking past selves, defamiliarizing the familiar and known, often challenging the limits of realism her fiction offers a unique reading experience akin to visualizing a motion picture. Open-ended, with visible gaps and silences invite the readers to make even a contingent meaning out of them with "shifts of emphasis that throw the storyline open to question."¹ It is only by making connections that meaning comes into being. Howells notes:

What [Munro] stories do is "make connections" between separate events and different perceptions of reality, enclosing disparity and contradictions within the same fictional space, while always recognizing that there is an "outside" which resists the accommodation her fictions offer....Paradoxically, it is an awareness of the incompleteness if not outright falsity of any fictional structure that animates the efforts of her narrators to tell their own and other people's stories, with their constant tendency to revise and supplement.²

Writers come by their plots in many different ways. They gather them from conversations, from newspapers and from their own experiences. Alice Munro suggested that the plot of her story "The Albanian Virgin" came from an unverified story recounted to her by her husband about a small-town librarian who during a trip to Europe was captured by some tribal robbers in Albania sometime before World War I. Munro takes up

this real or semi-real narrative to infuse a new meaning in it as E.D. Blodgett suggests about the art of Munro:

For the story in its essence is neither its polish nor the writer's wisdom. It is more elusive, "happening somewhere, not just in [the writer's head, and in its own way, not [the writer's]]. And the story that is finally written "is still only an attempt, an approach, to the story." It keeps, then, some part of itself, its soul that must escape the grasp of the writer, and toward which, in the end, the critic can but gesture. What is called "soul" may only be perceived in the story's discourse that continually summons into the text a surface that reflects a hidden depth."³

Munro narrates a woman's travel narrative giving specific details of her life in London, her arrival to a small town of Canada and her friendship with a mysterious woman called Charlotte. The narrator Claire continues to live a happy married life until she develops an illicit love affair with her tenant Nelson married to Sylvia. Exposition of their extramarital affair results in bickering and separation— Donald leaves Claire and Sylvia leaves Nelson. After some time Claire moves to Victoria, a small town in Canada where she sets up a small bookshop. And here, the narrator befriends a couple, Charlotte and Gjurdhi whose story she narrates. The intricately structured plot of "The Albanian Virgin" concerns two parallel narrative lines-- a Canadian tourist who is kidnapped by the people of Gheg tribes and of Claire. The story begins in the mountains of Malsia-e-madhe situated somewhere in Albania where a woman who 'had a wound in her leg, from a fall on sharp rocks when her guide was shot'⁴ is rescued by some men of Gheg tribes. The woman is named "Lottar" in parenthesis and her real identity is never revealed. Ghegs call her so because they could not pronounce her name properly. This woman came to travel down the Dalmatian Coast with her friends and was on a morning tour with her guide when he was killed — her guide was shot dead in revenge retaliation for having killed a man of the Gheg tribe — leaving her wounded and later with this tribe. In the middle of the story it is conveyed that this story of the Albanian Virgin is merely a fictitious imagination. Charlotte admitted in the hospital makes worthy use of time by crafting a story which she desires to be made into a movie and narrates it to Claire when she visits her:

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. My friendship then seemed both intimate and uncertain. I never knew why people told me things, or what they meant me to believe" (85).

But the fictiveness of the story always remains open to question. The readers share the unreliability of the narrator, not knowing, 'what they meant me to believe' (85). In spite of Charlotte's emphasis that the story is purely a fiction, the readers are puzzled regarding its authenticity asking themselves whether Charlotte is actually Lottar or not. It is human nature to imagine adventures stories to escape the boredom and ennui of sickness. But is all the story a fiction or autobiographical one can only make conjectures about. One gets a hunch that Charlotte is narrating her love story. Like the elderly man named Duke in a nursing

home in the romance film *The Notebook* (2004) reading out a love story from his notebook to his wife, a female fellow patient suffering from dementia—the story of Noah and Allie that eventually turns out to be the story of their past life. The connection of the story-characters Lottar and Charlotte being the same person can be made once the reader knows Charlotte's name and when she begins telling the bookstore owner the story: 'In the mountains, in Maltsia-e-madhe, she must have tried to tell them her name, and 'Lottar' was what they made out of it' (81). The language barrier between the Albanian people and Charlotte must have been the reason. Munro offers, through the lives of the female protagonists and their peregrinations, a puzzling view of “alternate reality” vacillating between reality and imagination.

Told in both first-person and third-person narrative — Lottar's story narrated to the narrator by Charlotte is told in third person through the narrator's eyes while the narrator reveals her own story in the first person narration. The unconventional method of narration thus sustains the mystery and evokes a dream like reality. The story has abrupt ruptures in narrative perspective and temporal shifts — the story oscillates among the lives of Lottar, Charlotte and Claire and also goes back and forth in time, now in Victoria and then in Albania. In the process of telling the story, Munro creates sudden and significant gaps in point of view and time asking the readers to make connections between these unexpected shifts in the narrative. At the same time working against the obvious abruptness of these perspective and temporal shifts, Munro constructs a subtle narrative in which the two worlds and the two stories interpenetrate. While the first two sections of the story recount Lottar's tale — how she got herself kidnapped in Albania by the men of Gheg tribes — the third section breaks up the narration by shifting the focus on the real narrator of the story, Claire. In the fourth and fifth section the narrator is listening to Lottar's story of being converted into a virgin to escape being sold to a Muslim and her final escape with the help of the Franciscan. To indicate the shift in the story, Munro creates gaps between the sections which fracture the involvement of the reader with the story and also the linearity of the narration. Final sections of the story are more experimental when Charlotte abruptly ends the story of Lottar declaring “That part is not of interest” (124). Such pronouncements compel the readers to pay more attention and read between the lines to resolve the 'aporia' or in decidability of the meaning. Constant awareness that there are hidden layers coaxes the readers to re-read the story again and again to discover them. Truly Munro is a writer of peripheral vision as Constance Rooke aptly suggests:

Her eye is on the margin, the point at which something repressed or not seen suddenly materializes in consciousness. Again, she is what I would call a writer of peripheral vision; and when insights do arise from that zone, they remain somehow in suspension or in motion. Although they suggest a pattern, they do not immediately make everything else clear and coherent.⁵

The identity of Lottar is infused with an aura of mystery. Is she just an imagination of Charlotte or is it her own story? When Claire asked

Charlotte where from she got the idea of the story, she replies:

“From life,” said Charlotte indistinctly. “Wait a moment.”
She turned her head away, on the pillow, as if she had to
arrange something in private. Then she recovered, and she
told a little more (125).

Charlotte's turning her head away as if to compose her emotions which she did not want Claire to see baffles the readers making them conscious of the fact that she is hiding something. Also at times the similarity between Franciscan and Gjurdhi intrigues the reader to make connections between the two. The Franciscan is described by Charlotte as a “fierce-looking man” (82) and Gjurdhi is described by Claire to possess the faint remains of “a quenched ferocity”. Moreover, reference to the wooden crucifix that both characters wore around their necks forces one to make an association. Finally, Charlotte and Gjurdhi vanish all of a sudden from the hospital like Lottar who disappears into nowhere from the Albanian tribe. Claire just before her reunion with her lover Nelson reflecting on the sudden disappearance of the two says:

It was about vanishing. I knew that Charlotte and Gjurdhi had not actually vanished — they were somewhere, living or dead. But for me they have vanished...I was tipped into dismay more menacing... I had lost my bearings...My connection was in danger — that was all. (127)

The readers' 'connection' with the story also seems to be in 'danger,' 'frayed' and 'arbitrary'. Alternative realities keep puzzling the reader's mind and the abrupt break of Charlotte/Lottar story leaves them with 'flimsy choices' (127). Even the final section, in which the narrator is reunited to Nelson and the readers are also hinted about the possibility of Lottar's union with Franciscan, does not satisfy the readers' anticipation. The story ends in a Munroesque fashion with a message for the readers in the form of narrator's final end to her own story:

We have been happy. / I have often felt completely alone.
There is always in this life something to discover.
The days and the years have gone by in some short of blur.
On the whole, I am satisfied (128).

Munro at times is the wicked stepmother who locks the door trapping us within without any key and at times like Hansel drops crumbs of bread eaten by the birds of reason and connection with the story's pathway is lost, only resorting to one's imagination could provide any resolution to personal doubts and uncertainties.

References :

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