

The Plight and Choice of Grace: Women's Subjectivity in Alice Munro's "Passion"

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Abstract—Alice Munro creates many "runaway women" in her highly acclaimed book *Runaway*, but the strong-willed heroine in the fifth story "Passion" is the character who should be given special attention to. Based on the feminist theory, the author tries to explore the heroine's identity crisis and her choice of running away. From the construction process of women's subjectivity in this story, the messages concerning true selves of women are conveyed.

Index Terms—Alice Munro, "Passion", feminism, subjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro, known as "Canadian Chekhov", is a world-renowned short story writer. She is a three-time winner of Canada's Governor General's Award for Fiction and the first Canadian writer winning the Nobel Prize in Literature. Munro won the reputation of "master of the contemporary short story" for "her finely-tuned storytelling, which was characterized by clarity and psychological realism" [1]. Although Munro is not claimed as a feminist writer, she always writes from female perspectives. She once said, "I keep an eye on feminism and Canada and try to figure out my duty to both." [2] Munro focuses on the ordinary life experience of Canadian women, explores their complex psychological and emotional world and shows her ultimate concerns for the fate of women.

The incomparable Alice Munro's bestselling *Runaway* is a book of eight extraordinary short stories about love and its betrayals and surprises. Most of the discussion was on "Runaway", the first short story of the book, which tells about the experience of a woman named Carla who is trapped in a bad marriage and tries to run away from his husband, but the attempt turns out to be a failure as she chooses to return back in the end. The fifth short story "Passion" is on the opposite of it, and it tells a story of a lonely small-town girl named Grace who flees from a passionless relationship. Unlike Carla, Grace chooses her path and never returns, as the construction process of Grace subjectivity is much more successful. In "Passion", the story opens with an older Grace who returns to visit the home of Travers family and recalls the "change in her life" [3]. Over forty years ago, she was a young girl who had a lover named Maury. The two was going to get married but she was actually confused about her feelings for him. She admired Maury's mother Mrs. Travers, who let her read at their home and discussed the books with her. When having a lunch with

Maury's family, Grace accidentally cut her foot and Maury's half-brother Neil drove her to the hospital. On their way, the two experienced intense attraction towards one another. In the morning, however, Grace surprisingly found out that Neil had died in a car accident that seemed like a suicide. She then broke up with Maury and started a new life with a thousand dollars given by Travers family. In "Passion", feminist manifestations are most clearly shown in the construction process of the heroine's subjectivity. Munro is succeeded in breaking the female stereotypes of traditional housewives by creating the intelligent and rebellious Grace who gradually constructs her subjectivity.

II. FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S SUBJECTIVITY

In the 1960s and 70s, the women's movement gave women opportunities to examine the underlying structure of their lives. From feminists' aspects, the whole social order is patriarchal, with men having power over women in every social, cultural, religious, personal, sexual area of life while women are relegated to a secondary position and treated differently and oppressively from men. Feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism. [4] In Simone de Beauvoir's masterpiece *The Second Sex*, she points out an important concept of "Otherness", which best summarizes the subjectivity problem of women. According to her, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not be with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other." [5] Men are seen as part of the subject of history, but women are the Other, the non-subjects, secondary, even aberrations. The key concepts of Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" are further explained and developed in the works of later theorists. For example, the similar meanings of "Otherness" and "Objectification" are expressed in *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet, who thinks the image of women is the one created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. [6] The models of middle-class women as happy housewives are criticized by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* [7], and the stereotypes of female characters in literature as either angels or devils are also deeply discussed in *The Madwoman in the Attic* [8]. Thus, what women need to do is to ask the question of "what am I?", and to what extent is the "I" that I am, the "subject" who makes choices rather than has choices imposed on him or her? Subjectivity means to take the perspective of the individual self, rather than the perspective taken from the

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outside of the self's experience. It looks at how a woman herself (the "Subject") lives and sees her role in life, which takes the experience of women as individuals and looks at how their activities and roles contribute to their identities. [9] In a word, emotions and personal experiences are important elements for women to construct their subjectivity, which requires taking seriously "women's consciousness".

III. IDENTITY CRISIS

There are four female characters in this short story: Grace, Mrs. Travers, Mavis (the daughter-in-law of Mrs. Travers), and Gretchen (the daughter of Mrs. Travers). The similarity of them is, despite of their varied ages, all of them lack passion in their intimate relationships. Obviously, Mavis and Gretchen represent traditional women, the good housewives who pay much their attention on taking care of their families, the contributors who devote the whole selves to their husbands and children. Mavis is a slim, handsome, suntanned woman, "but with little pouches of boredom or disapproval hiding the corners of her mouth." [3] Clearly, Mavis is not satisfied with her boring family life. When they have a family gathering, Mavis is eager to go home as she is very anxious about their children who are looked after by their grandparents. For readers, "her life is trying" [3], with two little kids she shoulders the responsibilities and the husband she lacks passion for. As for Gretchen, there are just a few words about her, which all relates to her identities as a wife and a mother. From Mrs. Travers's words—"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?" [3]—we can guess that Gretchen is a good female model who meets the expectation of the society. The maternal bodies are seen as instruments to the family, and the stereotypes are set only by male experience.

One of the most telling aspects of this story is the relationship between Grace and Mrs. Travers. In fact, the title indicates not only the passion between Grace and Neil, but also the passion between Grace and Mrs. Travers. The close relationship between the two women is a kind of sisterhood, a key concept of second wave feminism, which provides a collective sense of unity and purpose and demonstrates the solidarity of the feminist movement. "Sisterhood is powerful", and the inclusivity among women is emphasized by Robin Morgan [10]. Grace admires Mrs. Travers, a spiritually independent woman who loves reading and understands Grace more than her son. "Nor had the rough red, almost a rash, on her (Mrs. Travers) cheeks, which was probably a result of going out in any weather without thinking about her complexion, and which, like her figure, like her muumuus, showed her independence." [3] Warm, intelligent, humorous and tolerant, Mrs. Travers is the backbone of her family. What attracts Grace particularly is that Mrs. Travers once worked as a single mother to make a living independently. Her second husband Mr. Travers thinks that period of life was so hard for her, regarding his appearance as a lifeboat that allows her to escape from the sea of suffering. Ironically, Mrs. Travers does not feel in that way, still recalling many interesting people and things of that period of time. From here, the deep-rooted ideas of

male superiority in Mr. Travers' mind are clearly shown. Male superiority regards men as saviors for women, seeing the latter is inferior to the former in every way. Women are suggested to be "protected" at home for their lack of ability to earn a living on their own. Gradually, the subjectivity of women has been undermined. All in all, people who have this kind of idea don't recognize the equality between men and women. Just as what Beauvoir said in her *The Second Sex*: "He is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to accept his companion as an equal in any concrete way" [5]. Therefore, it is quite normal that the identity crisis happens to Mrs. Travers as she is surrounded with and influenced by the notions of male superiority. In the story, Mrs. Travers begins to go into trouble with her nerves because of domestic housework, indicating her confusion about her roles as an independent working woman and a housewife. Inch by inch, her passion runs out by taking care of the family and worrying about the children. The following *Anna Karenina* part shows the real situation of domestic women, which touches the issues of women's identity and subjectivity:

I don't know how many times I've read it, but I know that first I identified with Kitty, and then it was Anna—oh, it was awful with Anna—and now, you know, the last time, I found myself sympathizing with Dolly. When she goes to the country, you know, with all those children, and she has to figure out how to do the washing, there's the problem about the washtubs—I suppose that's just how your sympathies change as you get older. Passion gets pushed behind the washtubs. [3]

Gone with the passion is the women's subjectivity, the true self is taken place by the role of somebody's wife or mother. Quite similar to Mrs. Travers, the identity crisis also happens to Grace. On the one hand, Grace is confused about her "feminine" identity. The nubile Grace go to the cinema with Maury, wearing "a dark-blue ballerina skirt, a white blouse, through whose eyelet frills you could see the tops of her breasts, a wide rose-colored elasticized belt" [3]. She is happy to be regarded as "attractive" and "special" from men's judgment. While she makes herself prey to seduce men, however, she at the same time hates the stereotyped female characters—the "beautiful, treasured, spoiled, selfish, pea-brained" women [3]. According to Beauvoir, "This difference of attitude is manifest on the sexual plane as on the spiritual plane" [5]. A discrepancy exists between the way a woman presents herself and the way she wants to be judged. On the other hand, Grace undergoes a psychological struggle. Contrasting against the title of the story, the relationship between Grace and Maury is not passionate at all. For a poor girl, Maury is a good choice who is helping her to get across the huge socioeconomic gap and to escape from the hopeless and boring life. The inequality between men and women is evident, just as Munro once said, "Odd choices were simply easier for men, most of whom would find women glad to marry them." [11] When he talks about their marriage, instead of questioning or contradicting him, Grace listens curiously as if she is the outsider. "None of

this seemed at all real to her" [3], the marriage is only a vague dream. What really attracts Grace is not Maury's courtship, but the promise that Maury's family—particular Mrs. Travers—seems to accept and ratify in her. It's a life full of possibility and pleasure, "a taste of life" that she always tries to get. Obviously, the passionless engagement is contradictory to what Grace always insists in her mind: to be an independent woman who pursues true love. When she prepares to marry a man she does not love, she betrays the true self for pragmatism. At that time, the heroine is trapped in a splitting identity and her subjectivity has not been fully aroused.

IV. THE BREAKTHROUGH OF STEREOYPES

It is once widely acknowledged that a woman's first duty in life is to cultivate her feminine talents in the emotional realm so as to maximize their usefulness within the domestic orbit. Any woman who has a personal ambition or a selfish desire for intellectual independence or economic independence is regarded as unnecessary. For example, John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman's intellect, if she did have, was only for "sweet orderings of domesticity." [4] Hannah More said the similar words: "To women moral excellence is the grand object of education; and of moral excellence, domestic life is to a woman the appropriate sphere." [4] Even at an early age, girls have been expected to be accommodating and emotional, while the boys have been taught to be self-confident and aggressive. Beauvoir contrasts a girl's upbringing with a boy's: at the age of 3 or 4, a boy is told that he is a "little man", and the "feminine" destiny has already imposed on the girl by society [5].

Munro's stories often show how patriarchy restricts women's development in society. Her female characters, however, seek sexual liberation, economic liberation and cultural liberation, in order to gain women's subjectivity and individuality. Two details in "Passion" reflect Grace's subconscious subjectivity: The first detail is her insistence on study. "Numerous Munro characters, most often women", perhaps in common with Munro herself, "are alienated outsiders in their communities as a direct result of their intellectual curiosity". [12] Grace is one of the heroines who loves reading and often feels alienated from the environment she lives in. Growing up in a small town, Grace is brought up by her stand-in parents who make caning chairs. After finishing her high school, the twenty-year-old Grace is supposed to continue her uncle's career. In the very small town where she lives—there is nevertheless a high school that offers five grades and it is never necessary to study all the subjects offered. However, Grace tries to learn as much as she could, taking all kinds of courses and receiving "unnecessarily" high marks. In the eyes of the small-town folks, Grace's learning is a useless thing, which should be laughed at. Naturally, in a patriarchal society, the oppressed women have little opportunities to pursue their dreams, so the dreamer Grace is marginalized by the society on her path of self-improvement and self-fulfillment. It also explains why Grace likes Mrs. Travers—Maury's mother seems like the only person who understand the importance of reading in life other than earning a living. When Grace has the chance to go to the study of Mrs. Travers, she read a lot.

Here, Grace bravely challenges the stereotypes of ignorant and foolish women who simply attempt to please men with their beauty. Instead, she represents a different kind of woman who obtains superior intellectual ability.

The second thing is Grace's rage on the movie girls. When she watches the movie—*Father of the Bride*—with Maury, she hates the film girls not because she is poor and jealous, but because she is rage against the stereotypes of women. She realizes the sad fact:

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. [3]

Grace feels the forced pressure of society, and she tries to say "no" to the social expectation of women. Her subjectivity begins to awaken and her sense of self-awareness becomes clear.

V. THE "RUNAWAY WOMAN"

Women have been given "protectors", and if they are invested with the rights of the old-time guardians, it is in woman's own interest. In exchange for liberty, as women have only received the heavy burden of her "femininity" from the family and the society. "The security that marriage and family seem to promise is", on the contrary, "challenged in Munro's writing, which studies the myriad ways in which unfulfilled desires, disillusionment, and discontent invade and undermine the stable framework of social convention." [13]

Maury admires Grace for her beauty and cleverness, but he tries to be her "protector", with physical and psychological restrictions. One of the biggest troubles is their different views on sex. As Grace is eager to get further intimate contact, Maury tries to "protect" her, accusing her of not being self-love and thinking that this does not match her image. Maury's attitude makes Grace always reexamine whether she is really too frivolous in terms of sex. "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." [3] "Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" [14]. The opposition between mind and body has also been correlated with an opposition between male and female, and the feminists attach great importance to women's bodies and their sexual desires. In a patriarchal society, the normal thoughts and desires of women are either seen as wrong or misunderstood, which leads them to doubt and deny their voices and to abandon their true desires. Munro's female characters, however, revolt against the subjugation of sexual feelings. We come across incidents where her heroines make sexual advances, experience sexual pleasure and confirms her sexual identity without any remorse.

In "Passion", Grace's desire for passion is fulfilled when Neil and her meet. Neil takes her on an odyssey, a kind of dreamlike experience, leaving duty and everything behind.

For the first time, she enters into "an incredible world inhabited by a mysteriously motivated fictional character." [15] Grace doesn't criticize Neil's excessive drinking, on the contrary, she understands his nihilism and gives him warm support. Based on mutual acknowledgement of emptiness and spiritual resonance, Neil allows himself to fall asleep in her presence, and an intimacy has been built. Neil then presses the palm of Grace's hand to his mouth and gives it a lick, sharing a deeper connection—a vision of life's promise undercut by its emptiness. At that time, Grace realizes that she must break up with Maury because marring Maury equals to a kind of treachery of herself. Neil's later death shocks Grace deeply, which makes her determine to protest against her destiny and change her life. What Grace always wants to escape is the female stereotypes provided by the family and the society, and Neil's struggle and death suddenly awakens her. On the way of her identity quest, Grace constructs her own subjectivity by the most extreme way—running away. Although it means giving up good opportunities and stable life, it is definitely a great victory that she finally follows her heart and escapes from her "set life".

The older women in Munro's works always reflect and review what happened once after many years. The event happened in some way, and the heroine made her own choices and decisions, no matter what the decision and choice would bring. In the years to come, the heroine is more concerned with the outcome of the decision and choice, deciding to pay more attention to let her live better. In "Passion", when the older Grace revisits the old place and reexamines the younger Grace after forty years, she is mixed with feelings of relief, confusions, and a sense of loss. She is still not sure about the outcome of her choice, but she tries to continue to look forward instead of living in repentance.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the short story "Passion", Alice Munro shows the process of arousing and constructing women's subjectivity through the plight and choice of Grace. From her identity crisis, to her brave breakthroughs of stereotypes, and finally to her choice of a "runaway woman", the subjectivity of Grace is gradually constructed, and the path for women to seek true meanings of life is indicated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chen Zhitong is the sole contributor of this paper, and she has approved the final version.

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