

**THE THEME OF EXPECTATIONS AND ESTRANGEMENT IN ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES "AMUNDSEN" AND "HOW I MET MY HUSBAND"**

**Dr. B. Anitha**

Assistant Professor (SL)

Sree Vidyanikethan Engineering College

Tirupati

[anitthaw5@gmail.com](mailto:anitthaw5@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*The works of Alice Munro are exceptionally influential in understanding man-woman relationships. She presents a polychromatic description of man-woman relationship in her stories. However, the woman and the situations around her are centralized in the stories. Alice Munro expertly presents the lives of protagonists that a reader can really experience their joys, worries as well. On the other hand, when they are viewed from the perspective of Foucault's power relations they mirror the fact that how a woman's longing desires and dreams are callously suppressed and shattered for man's temporary desires and needs. "Amundsen" (DL) and "How I met my Husband" (SIM) are such stories in which the central characters, young women's dreams are scattered by men. In these stories, Munro skillfully records the voice of victimized ambitious young women to expose the priority given to men by the society. The present paper discusses the power relations between the man and the woman disguised in love expression. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher whose writings influence to a greater extent in interpreting man-woman relationships.*

**Key Words:** Michel Foucault, power, human relationship, ambitious

*"Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being"*

*-Simone De Beauvoir*

**Introduction**

It is evident that in the patriarchal culture, societal demands are given greater prominence than individual emotions. The emotions of a man and a woman as individuals are tailored to the demands of the society. The society indoctrinates man and woman as "man is mind and

represents culture: the rational, unified, thinking subject; woman is body and represents nature: irrational, emotional and driven by instinct and physical need” (King Angela 31). In this process, at times a man himself becomes a victim to indoctrinate another victim, a woman into the norms of patriarchal culture. Beauvoir pertinently asserts that “there was an absolute vertical that defined the oblique, there is an absolute human type that is masculine” (Beauvoir 25). The word “vertical” suggests that in pursuit of his desires, a man need not compromise with the situations whereas a woman who is referred as “oblique” is conditioned to incline to what a man desires.

It is also perceptible that “some patriarchal men are reliable and even benevolent caretakers and providers” (4) surprisingly, to this quality of a man, a woman becomes submissive yearning for love. As she loves she pleurably accepts all the commands given by her lover. The submissiveness of a woman enables a man to consider her as a puppet to be played with her emotions. She is never considered as an equal partner in the journey of life. On the contrary, a woman loves wholeheartedly and does not suspect betrayal in her relationship. Even if she is betrayed she silently longs for integration. Munro portrays these sensitive hidden corners of the woman’s heart in her heart touching stories “Amundsen” (*DL*) and “How I met my Husband” (*SIM*).

“Amundsen” is a story in which Munro brings in a young woman who is betrayed ruthlessly. Vivien Hyde, the narrator-protagonist of the story journeys from her native place Toronto to the north woods of Amundsen to take a job as a teacher at a children’s tuberculosis sanitarium. Eventually, Vivien Hyde recognizes that Amundsen has no room for a woman. In a comparison of Toronto and Amundsen, she relates,

The coffee shop didn’t have a ladies’ room, so you had to go next door to the hotel, then past the open door of the beer parlor, always dark and noisy and letting out a smell of beer and whisky, a blast of cigarette and cigar smoke fit to knock you down. Nevertheless I felt easy enough there. The loggers, the men from the sawmill, would never yelp at you the way the soldiers and the airmen in Toronto did. They were deep down in a world of men, bawling out their own stories, not here to look for women. (*DL*25)

Dr. Alister Fox, a local surgeon and the head of the sanitarium is the immediate boss for Vivien Hyde. After her first meet with Dr. Fox, she forms an impression that “he was evidently the sort of person who posed questions that were traps for you to fall into” (22). However, the other women in the sanitarium relate the callous behaviour of Dr. Fox to Vivien Hyde. She herself witnesses how brutally Dr. Fox rebukes the other teacher Mary saying “You’re on the way to getting as plump as a young pig” (31).

Alice Munro presents Dr. Fox as a representative of the patriarchal society. His indecent comments and sudden invitations clearly establish him as a domineering character. On the other hand, Vivien Hyde who is portrayed initially as an independent woman slowly

turns subservient. Vivien Hyde's sudden transformation is due to the 'power' disguised in love relationship imposed on her.

Vivien Hyde overlooks Dr. Fox's faults for the irresistible allure towards him and goes to his house for supper as soon as he invites. She considers the invitation as a casual act of Dr. Fox "on the spur of the moment" (27) but during supper, she experiences Dr. Fox's warmth of love when he says "I'm your janitor and your cook and your server" (27). In a brief time period, Vivien Hyde gets intimate with him. She slowly transforms from a self-reliant woman into a submissive woman and gives complete authority on her to Dr. Fox. Even while Dr. Fox abruptly proclaims "I do intend to marry you" (32) without asking for the opinion of her, she remains silent. She neither accepts nor rejects "in the course of events, she transformed from an educated and independent young woman to an other-directed object of gossip and of Alister Fox" (Söldenwagner 15). She rather feels contented for the respectable looks of the other women in the sanitarium. She relates what the other women say,

"Enjoy your supper the other night?" Their tone was friendly, they seemed to approve. It looked as if my particular oddity had joined up with the doctor's familiar and respected oddity, and that was all to the good. My stock had risen. Now, whatever else I was, I at least might turn out to be a woman with a man. (DL30)

Since ages a man is respected individually whereas a woman is regarded only if she is associated with a high profile man "a woman does not exist without a master. Without a master, she is a scattered bouquet." (Beauvoir 773). This sort of preoccupied perceptions of the society "stresses polarization between the sexes" (Bell Hooks 2) and both become the victims of patriarchy.

Dr. Fox reaches to the peak of brutality when he takes Vivien Hyde to "Huntsville. Going to Huntsville... code for getting married" (DL33). On their way to Huntsville, Vivien Hyde as a normal bride wanders in dreams sensitizing her feelings of being a woman. She misses her grandparents who are not invited to her wedding. She even dreams about future events as, "once we get to Huntsville I expect that we will find a minister and stand side by side in a living room which will have some of the modest gentility of my grandparents' apartment, of the living rooms I have known all my life" (34). All her dreams get shattered when Dr. Fox all of a sudden changes his mind and says "I can't do it" (35).

Vivien Hyde realizes that Dr. Fox does not marry her, but still she does not dare to question him, "sometimes for life she will make herself a voluntary victim (Beauvoir 617). Even when Dr. Fox drops her in the station to leave for Toronto, Vivien Hyde does not express her anguish. She sacrifices her esteem for Dr. Fox's love, later she realizes that her sacrifices carry little value in his world. She becomes mere puppet in the hands of him whenever he wished he played with her giving fake promises. When he felt there is no need

for a long commitment he refused to marry and decides to send her to Toronto. Dr. Fox intentionally betrays Vivien Hyde.

It is right to accept that “women are not simply men” (1). They are inconsistent and change their aims frequently. The inconsistent mindset of women sometimes, allows men to easily overpower women. Initially, Vivien Hyde travels to Amundsen to join sanitarium to serve the children who are suffering from tuberculosis. Later her aim shifted to marry Dr. Fox. Dr. Fox never had the idea of marrying Vivien Hyde. His stand is only to maintain a temporary relationship and he successfully achieved it. On the contrary, Vivien Hyde does not want to realize that he betrayed her instead she craves for his love saying,

even now fantasies are running through my mind. I board the train as if there are chains on my ankles. I press my face to the window to look along the platform as the whistle blows for our departure. Even now it might not be too late for me to jump from the train. Jump free and run through the station to the street where he would just have parked the car and is running up the steps thinking not too late, pray not too late. (DL36)

Dr. Fox’s relationship with Vivien Hyde mirrors power relation between them. The sequential acts since their meeting such as inviting Vivien Hyde to the dinner, declaring to marry without the consent of her are the power weapons used in disguise only to trigger the natural emotions of a woman in order to make a temporary relationship. Foucault rightly points out that “the State, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations” (28). Dr. Fox acts according to the mind theory suggested by Sigmund Freud, Id, Ego, and Superego. Dr. Fox initially behaves with his instinctual desire of getting into relationship with Vivien Hyde and declares to marry her. Later he decides to withdraw from marrying her for several reasons, to quote, he is much older than her hence; it cannot be accepted socially or morally.

Beauvoir aptly says, “the word “love” has not at all the same meaning for both sexes, and this is a source of the grave misunderstandings that separate them. He also refers to Byron’s words “love is merely an occupation in the life of the man, while it is life itself for the woman” (723). Munro distinguishes very clearly the indifference in love of a man and a woman through the characters of Dr. Fox and Vivien Hyde in the story. Charles in his blog “Reading the Short Story” relates that “Amundsen” “is about the mysterious nature of the dichotomy of the physical and the spiritual, the male and the female, the romantic and the realistic. The attraction between male and female, what brings people together and keeps them apart, is always a mystery. Love stories never change; they always end in separation and thus perennially exist in the world of the imagination”.

Munro artistically establishes a momentum with the help of symbols in the story. Perhaps the most prominent symbol in the story is the title itself. The story where the protagonist reaches is north woods of “Amundsen” from Toronto. Among the four directions, the north symbolizes alienation and hostility. It is even considered as the abode of death. As

the direction suggests protagonist is alienated first by her self esteem and later by her lover which leads to the scattered dreams of marriage and permanent death of their love relationship. Even after ten years when they meet in a crowded street, even casual smiles were not exchanged. The journey symbolizes exploration and new experiences. In the story, journey of Vivien Hyde from Toronto to Amundsen brings in the image of exploration of unfamiliar mindsets in the new world and at the end Amundsen to Toronto establishes the regaining. Though Vivien Hyde encounters bitter experience in a relationship she again leads on to a much confident place Toronto to regain whatever she lost with a cautious mind which a bitter experience taught her.

Munro depicts Vivien Hyde as a weak, docile and easily bent character who acts according to Dr. Fox's will. A woman who is obliterated by a male-oriented society puts her in the category of an object to be manipulated and exploited. Munro creates awareness on the non-status of women in an exploitative society that places her in the category of a commodity, if desired she is bought with fake promises and after fulfilling the desire, she is sent away mercilessly. At this juncture, a woman is leftover with two roads to lead on her life; one is to lament and the other is to choose the alternative way to forget the betrayal.

A woman who chooses the second road can be witnessed in Munro's other story "How I met my Husband". In this story, Munro portrays the narrator-protagonist, Edie as a young, naïve girl who considers making others happy is happy in itself. Though Edie is betrayed she does not lament on the betrayal instead chooses the second road to settle her life comfortably.

Edie starts working with an upper class family, the Peebles. Like any other girl she is very curious, her curiosity takes the best of her when she decides to spy around Ms. Peeble's closet and tries on her "light bluish-green in color" (SIM32) dress and makeup. A young handsome pilot Chris Watters who is a guest of the Peebles sees her in Mrs. Peeble's dress and says "I was surprised when I looked in the door and saw you. Just because you looked so nice and beautiful" (33). Edie has no reaction to his comment at first but later, the realization that Chris Watters had seen her as a woman, she inclines towards him, "sometimes the love shown them is enough to arouse their love" (Beauvoir 611).

When Mrs. Peeble is not at home, Edie meets Chris in his tent. Chris takes the advantage of privacy and kisses Edie. She believes that the meaning for getting into the relationship with a man, is kissing. However, Eddie is perplexed when she learns that Chris is leaving the place in order to escape from his fiancée. Eddie's emotions battle between positive and negative outcomes such as if Chris has a fiancée he cannot marry her and he is leaving the place only to escape from his fiancée which implies that he does not marry his fiancée. A little later Chris leaves the place but before he leaves he promises Edie as "I'm going to write you a letter. I'll tell you where I am and maybe you can come and see me" (SIM38). Eddie infers that writing letter meant loving. Thus, she strongly believes that Chris marries her. She had her own opinion on what the thought of being intimate with someone



meant. She thought it was kissing “I was thinking of us lying on the cot and kissing, wasn’t that intimate?” (40).

The episode of Edie’s longing begins for Chris’s letter. It is evident that “the woman in love, much more grievously than the wife, is one who waits (Beauvoir 625). Love relationship follows after admiration between a man and a woman, and many a time, the relationship continues as an invisible string. “Waiting can be a joy; to the woman who watches for her beloved in the knowledge that he is hastening towards her.... But with the fading of the confident exaltation that can change absence itself into presence, tormenting uneasiness begins to accompany the absence: he may never come back” (626). Edie realizes that she should stop waiting as no letter is forthcoming “when one really wants to break off, one doesn’t write” (624).

The story takes the turn justifying the title “How I met my Husband” when Edie lingers around the mail box for a long time for Chris’s letter. Every day waiting at the mail box is wrongly understood by the mailman. The mailman takes it as Edie loves him and waits for him. However, Edie perceives the truth that “If there were women all through life waiting, and women busy and not waiting, I knew which I had to be” (*SIM* 51) and decides not to wait for Chris’s letter.

Munro appealingly depicts the character of Edie to the reader through the colour of the dress which Edie chooses. The bluish green colour symbolizes inexperience and immaturity and the combination of green with blue represents heat and cold (Marshall 1). Edie is immature in perceiving the relationships, men as well. She considers kissing a symbol of intimacy and a promise of letter, wedding. She never anticipates that waiting at the mailbox everyday might evoke new aspirations for the others. These acts establish Edie as inexperienced and immature. Eventually, the reader observes the psychological development of Edie when she decides to marry the mailman.

In her thesis “Alice Munro: Development of narrative from the traditional to metafictional”, Prabha in her thesis discusses the psychological development of the protagonist and asserts that “from a state of ignorance, through experience, she lights upon a phase of realization, a sort of anagnorisis that she was “never made to go on like that”. She grew practical, married the postman who offered to marry her, led a normal life and mused on her past as a leisure time joke” (162).

The secret that Edie waited at the mailbox for the pilot’s letter is not revealed to the mailman. Brian Sutton, in his essay aptly says “How I Met My Husband,” explores the theme of secret-keeping” (53). Munro diligently reasons that why Edie disguises the fact of waiting for Chris’s letter with waiting for the mailman. Edie feels that if any secret makes others happy, it has to be concealed forever. She relates about the mailman as “he always tells the children the story of how I went after him by sitting by the mailbox every day, and naturally I laugh and let him, because I like for people to think what pleases them and makes them happy” (52).

The protagonist Edie realizes that being happy and making happy is a journey between a man and a woman where man is a decision maker and a woman compromise seeker. At times, man proves to be selfish in this journey, leaving the woman behind. She is left to choose only sacrifices. Edie chooses to sacrifice her longing for Chris and decides to make happy the mailman by marrying him. The woman's realization of truth is that she has to sacrifice her desires for others. Since ages a woman is trained to care for others. Coral Ann Howells rightly points out that,

Women are deeply implicated in the existing structures of the social world as mothers, daughters, lovers and wives so that it is a paradox of most women's position that any search for new ways of restructuring their lives and their stories has to acknowledge their genuine need for affective relations and responsibilities at the same time as they register resistance to such constructs. (28)

While getting into relationship both men and women are equal; in a due course, torn away from the commitments, men abruptly become superior allowing women inferior. Beauvoir aptly asserts that "to see clearly, one needs to get out of these ruts; these vague notions of superiority, inferiority, and equality that have distorted all discussions must be discarded in order to start anew" (35) which enables one to value human emotions and the relationships. In order to make possible of this progressive move "dismantling and changing patriarchal culture is work that men and women must do together" (bell hooks 2). An underlying theme that when a woman's expectations disappoints her what are the set of choices left with her and which choice would she prefer to choose in order to begin a new life; runs in Munro stories and the above discussed stories are no exception to it. She vividly depicts the emotional encounters of ordinary women in the male world who trust men in their relationship, experience betrayal still withstand in life choosing the positive path.

#### **Works Cited:**

1. Munro, Alice. *Dear Life*. Toronto. McGraw - Hill Ryerson Ltd, 2013.
2. Munro, Alice. *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. 1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin 1990.
3. Beauvoir, De Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
4. Brian Sutton (2005) Munro's How i Met my Husband, *The Explicator*, 63:2, 107-110, DOI: 10.1080/00144940509596909
5. Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant, A. (1996). *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Penguin.
6. Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. London: Harvester Press, 1980. Print.
7. Hancock, E. (1972). *Techniques for Understanding Literature*, Belmont, CA.

8. Hooks, B., 2004. Understanding Patriarchy [online]. Available from: [Http://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/Understanding Patriarchy.pdf](http://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/Understanding_Patriarchy.pdf) [Accessed 30 May 2019].
9. Howells, Coral Ann. *Alice Munro*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Print. <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss2/4>
10. King, Angela (2004). The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(2), 29-39. Available from:
11. Marshall, D. Peter 2008. Colors and their meanings [online]. Available from: <https://filmdirectingtips.com/archives/157>
12. McLeod, S. A. (2016, Feb 05). *Id, ego and superego*. Available from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>
13. P.K Prabha "Alice Munro: Development Of Narrative From The Traditional To Metafictional" 2006. University of Calicut.Ph.D Thesis. Available from: [https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/32724/9/09\\_chapter%203.pdf](https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/32724/9/09_chapter%203.pdf)
14. Ronja, Söldenwagner. "Love, Gender and Social Pressure in "Amundsen"." *FOR (DEAR) LIFE Close Readings of Alice Munro's Ultimate Fiction*. Ed. Eva-Sabine Zehelein. Zürich : Lit Verlag. 2014. Print.
15. <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/psychoanalysis/>
16. <http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.com/2012/08/alice-munros-amundsen-and-stories-in.html>