

**PSYCHO – MARITAL CONFLICTS AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS IN ALICE  
MUNRO'S RUNAWAY AND FICTION**

**R. Bhuvaneswari**

Ph. D Research Scholar (Full-Time),  
PG & Research Department of English,  
Government Arts College (Autonomous),  
Salem – 636 007, India.  
bhuvanavinod5@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*Alice Munro is an outstanding writer in Canadian literature. She is admired for her writing approach of symbolism, her dedicated observation and attention to everyday life. Alice Munro delicately portrays the spectacular moments of her characters' lives in her short stories. Munro always concerns about the life of women and their situations. Alice Munro's extremely brief and lucid language illustrates every characteristic of women, particularly with concerns of their love, family and personal world. In her short stories Runaway and Fiction, Munro not just presents a lucid portrayal of the life of general women, but also focuses on the common life of usual women with the full personification of their inner emotion and personal world. The short story Runaway is about a young woman, Carla, who struggles to form her individuality and position in the world and takes a terrible way to figure it out. In the short story Fiction, Alice Munro deals with the marital conflicts in the life of an innocent woman Joyce.*

**Keywords:** Symbolism – Inner emotions – Individuality – Fear – Resemblance – Suppressed-  
Psycho- marital conflicts – gender difference – Regret – Gothic appearance

**Introduction:**

Alice Munro is highly praised as the most important Canadian Short Fiction writer. Her stories are the periodic reminiscences that record the emotional progress of girls and women.



**Alice Munro**

**\*2013 Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature\***

*Runaway* (2004) is a short story collection by Alice Munro. It was awarded by Giller Prize and Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. There are eight short stories in this collection. The first short story in this collection is 'Runaway,' the story about a young woman is trapped in a dire married life. The next three of the stories 'Chance,' 'Soon,' and 'Silence' are about a life of Juliet Henderson. In 'Chance,' Juliet takes a train journey which shows the way to a love affair. And then in 'Soon,' she visits her father and mother with her daughter Penelope. The third story of her life 'Silence' depicts the expectation for information from her mature separated daughter Penelope. The fifth short story 'Passion' is about a lonesome small town girl flees a passionless connection with a stranger. 'Trespasses' describe the story of a young girl who meets an older woman and her experience of life. In the next story 'Tricks,' Robin; a lonely girl lives life single-handedly due to bad fortune and delusion. The final short story 'Power' is divided into five parts and it is one of those concluding stories that send readers speeding up back to the beginning.

*Too Much Happiness* (2009) is a short story collection with ten short stories deals with the happiness and desires of women in life. The first short story 'Dimensions' can definitely be interpreted as a triple murder, fantasy, violence, normative rules and conventions of the patriarchal society. 'Fiction' deals with the allusions of gothic incidents and the broken marriages. 'Wenlock Edge' reveals the oppressive behaviour of the characters in the story. The next short story from this collection, 'Deep-Holes' is basically about hatred and rejection and the non communicative members of the family. The title 'Free Radicals' indicates the chemical term, which is easily bound but can disturb their function. The protagonist of this story Nita is a follower of literature and uses it to influence her own life and others too. In 'Face,' Alice Munro lets her adult characters to think upon the incidents of the past with the theme of mutilation and rejection. 'Some Women' is also a looking back

story and about the gender construction. 'Child's Play' is one of the most haunted stories by Alice Munro with the story of cold-blooded murder. The next short story 'Wood' deals with the epiphanies. The historical story 'Too Much Happiness' is about the typical struggle of an academic woman to attain success and happiness.

Gender differentiation is developed from the influence of social rules in a patriarchal society. The terms 'gender' and 'sex' are often used exchangeable but these both are not the same. The term 'Sex' refers to the biological difference between female and male. And the term 'gender' refers to the characteristics associated by socially and psychologically being female or male. The role of gender influences men and women in every characteristic of their relationships. Men have stereotypically been described as dominant, objective, independent, competitive, and superior. Women have been traditionally viewed as expressive, obedient to others, caring, affectionate, supportive, emotional, and good at domestic responsibilities and child-rearing.

Marriage, women understand, is not as passionate as they had delightful. It becomes a life of responsibility and fulfilling different expectations. In order to runaway such rigid lifestyles, they alternatively to having relationships with other men. At times, they are married but at other times they are not married and have a connection with married men in order to have pleasure and comfort without being committed. Many of Munro's stories deal with the marital conflicts of women. The theme of cheating, broken marriage and taking up a relationship is witnessed in the short story 'Fiction.'

### **Psycho- marital conflicts in Alice Munro's Short stories Runaway and Fiction:**

The short story 'Runaway' from the collection *Runaway* enlightens the story of a young woman named Carla, who declines an opportunity to escape a dreadful wedding. She is originally run away from her parents to marry a horse trainer named Clark. He is an abusive husband, later provokes Carla to run away from that painful life with Clark. Sylvia is her neighbour who supports Carla's attempt to run away. Sylvia's is a widow and she depends on Carla for help around her house. Sylvia was the sturdy self-determining woman, who tried to help Carla escape for her personal good when Carla had an opportunity. Sylvia widens compulsive anxiety for her abused friend Carla. Sylvia's friends explain her fondness for Carla as a crush. Runaway is the main theme of this story.



**Flora**

Flora is a goat, Carla's pet, which mysteriously disappears and returns in supernatural style when Clark threatens Sylvia physically. The goat's unexpected return saves Sylvia, and then the goat again vanishes. Likewise, Carla tries to escape from Clark with the help of Sylvia and she could not go through with it, so returned to him again. After Carla returns to Clark, she finds Flora's bones in the forest. She hypothesizes about the reason of Flora's death and then forgives Clark of any blame that something she is going to continue her life with him. In result, she runs away from the reality; Flora's destiny could turn out to be hers.

Munro initiates the readers to Flora after she has gone through a repetition of struggles for Carla and her relationship with Clark. Munro gives us two dream series that powerfully connects Carla's story with Flora. Carla had dreamt about Flora twice. The first dream was flora had a red apple in her mouth and walked up to the bed. In the second dream, she ran away by seeing Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be injured but she ran anyhow. In several ways, Carla was like Flora as calm, powerful and personified in a sick-bed house. Munro illustrates the goat's behaviour with the way of Carla's relationship with Clark. She writes:

At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention. She was as quick and graceful and provocative as a kitten, and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla. (Runaway 9)

The worse thing as far as in her life Carla was worried was the absence of Flora, the little white goat that kept the horses' company in the shed and in the fields. There had not been any symptom of Flora for two days. Carla was frightened that a wolf-like wild dog or even a bear had got her.

In the next short story, the main characters Joyce and Jon in the short story 'Fiction' from the collection *Too Much Happiness* were met at high school. Their parents have imagined about their son/daughter future of their intelligence and the high potential. But they

eloped together in their first year at college and got temporary jobs in many places. The parents called them hippies. Joyce, as a middle-aged woman, describes her happy life story of thirty years ago when she was married to Jon and after the gothic ambiance penetrates their life. Later, Jon learned carpentry and Joyce started to teach music in schools to overcome from their insecurity feeling. They bought an old and fragile house in Rough River and renovated it. Joyce decided to appoint an apprentice to help her husband in his business of woodworking in the carpentry as his business was growing more successful. Though her husband not willing to hire an apprentice, Joyce wants to develop her husband's business with this little help states as,

That was what he had been most afraid of when the business of hiring as apprentice had come up. A Government program had been started – he was to be paid a certain amount for teaching the person, and however it was would be paid enough to live on while learning. At first he hadn't been willing, but Joyce had talked him into it" (35)

Joyce does not know that she will regret her activity later in life. The peculiar lady named Edie appointed an apprentice. She was an alcoholic and mother of a nine-year-old girl. She is rather quiet but sometimes vigorous in talking. Edie, a short and young woman does not seem to be a threat to Joyce, but she is one who will destroy Joyce's happy married life. Jon and Joyce's life was described in a quite realist style, as the classic life of a middle-class couple. The mysterious and evil-minded woman Edie seduces Jon with her unexpected presence in this short story. She has changed the whole life of Jon and Joyce and broke down what they build these years. Jon seems to be bewitched when he abruptly gives up his marriage for this repellent girl. When Joyce advised him that Edie will drive him foolish if he continues to take her sincerely, Jon answers she already has his mind. Edie is considered a monster by Joyce and she thinks her not as a normal human being. She tried to take her husband to form her mysterious addiction but failed.

The second section of the story 'Fiction' deals with a middle-aged woman Joyce who got separated from her husband Jon and married to Matt. Joyce meets a young girl named Christie O'Dell in her second husband's sixty-fifth birthday party. Joyce has a weird feeling about that girl that she had known that face before. Christie is a young writer, Joyce bought her first published book, how are we to live, which is a collection of short stories. When Joyce finds that book contains a song cycle by Gustav Mahler, 'Kindertotenlieder,' she immediately attracted towards the collection as being a music teacher. On the other hand, while reading the stories, it begins to dawn on her that the stories are based on her own past life. Then she realised that Christine is none other than Edie's daughter. As Joyce is attracted towards this girl Christie, she forgets about the past rages. To the contrast, Joyce appears to be more interested to know the present life of Edie and her former husband. Joyce chose the girl to play the foremost part at the annual concert of her music class, which allowed her to spend more time with Christie and to ask her personal questions about the home. Joyce interest towards the girl does not seem to be sincere but it is shown something she wants to

recollect of her first marriage. Christie understands that gradually and thinks Joyce as poor lady who remains to be in the memories of past. Joyce feels anxious about reading the collection of short stories written by Christie. However, the story ends with the child observing the last conversation between Joyce and Jon, at which point Joyce drives away without Christie. At first, the girl feels dissatisfied about Joyce's behaviour but later to Joyce's shock, Christie's feelings transformed. She recalls the happiness of that period, the music she devastatingly learned to play, the interested and pleasant names of the forest flowers. Joyce finally feels the relationship she had with the girl Christie, something she did not want to give in to because it was Edie's daughter. Sadly, she is not capable to get in contact again, because when she returns to the bookstore where Christie is signing her book, the girl does not show any kindness or signs of respect, much against Joyce's hope.

### **Conclusion:**

The classification with Flora recognized subtly and with minimal objection throughout the story, becomes unbelievable important at the story's climax. Also, the similarities between Clara and Flora add a strong prominence to the core theme of the short story. When Carla first left home, she acts much in the starry-eyed behaviour of the goat. If Clark has killed the goat, it is symbolic of his commitment to killing off any of Carla's desires to think or act autonomously, to be anything but the straightforward girl in love who married him.



The readers are left with the ending that Clark killed Flora so that Carla would never run away from him again; never feel the drag of the life strength without Clark, the haul of her own actions and accomplishments. Alice Munro speaks for female understandings and sensationalizes the personal lives of individuals through her characters in the short stories

‘Runaway’ and ‘Fiction.’ The story ‘Fiction’ points to the fact that a short story can help people to come to new insights and to learn something about them.

**Work Cited:**

Munro, Alice: *Runaway*. Vintage Books, 2006, Print.

Munro, Alice: *Too Much Happiness*. Vintage Books, 2010, Print.

Munro, Alice, *Runaway*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 2004.

Munro, Alice. *Runaway: Stories*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 2004.

Sustana, Catherine. "A Closer Look at Alice Munro's 'Runaway'." Thought Co, Jun. 27, 2018, [thoughtco.com/closer-look-at-alice-munros-runaway-2990450](http://thoughtco.com/closer-look-at-alice-munros-runaway-2990450).