

An Analysis of Munro's Works from the Post-colonial Perspective

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Abstract: Alice Munro is an outstanding Canadian short story writer, Nobel Prize winner in Literature for *Runaway* in 2013. Most of Munro's works are set in the remote towns of southern Ontario, highlighting unique indigenous nature of Canada. It is noteworthy that Canada is a post-colonial country, and Munro's works are deeply influenced by the post-colonial characteristics of Canada. So far, domestic and foreign scholars tend to study Munro's stories from two main aspects of narrative strategy and feminism, but they often neglect the post-colonial nature of Munro's writing. Therefore, starting from the post-colonial perspective, this paper attempts to deeply explore the construction of post-colonial features reflected in Munro's writing for the purpose of having a deeper understanding of her works.

Keywords: Alice Munro; Post-colonial Perspective; Indigeneity; Otherness

1. An Introduction to Munro and Her Works

As one of the most important spokesmen of contemporary Canadian literature, Alice Munro is especially famous for her short stories. In 1968, Munro published her first collection of stories *Dance of the Happy Shades*, which won the Canadian Governor General's Literary Award. From then on, she began to establish her position in the Canadian literary world, and gradually became prestigious worldwide. Her representative works include *The Moons of Jupiter*, *Friend of My Youth*, *Open Secrets* and many others. In 2013, Munro won the Nobel Prize in Literature for her outstanding work *Runaway*.

Most of Munro's stories are set in the remote towns of Ontario, highlighting unique indigenous feature of Canada. Many critics have analyzed Munro's works from different angles. For example, Christopher E. Gittings argued that Munro tried to construct a Scots-Canadian ground in her works by connecting Scottish history with Canadian locality in her stories^[1]. Rowland Smith analyzes two heroines' images of Munro's stories from feminist perspective. Anne and Almeida both suffered from the oppression of the patriarchal society at that time; finally they regained spiritual salvation and liberation by walking into the wilderness^[2]. Fiona Tolan combined the female subject with narrative mode, but she avoided one-sided view of women's escape and return as a failure and compromise to the society, but realized that women may encounter many difficulties in the process of self-fulfillment^[3].

2. What is Post-colonial Perspective?

When it comes to post-colonial topics, many people tend to think of Edward Said as the most representative post-colonial theorist. In the field of post-colonial studies, Said's position is irreplaceable. However, the way of argumentation Said uses in his works is the traditional binary opposition, and his Orientalist views depend on a culturally constructed distinction between the Occident and the Orient. On the contrary, this paper adopts an innovative post-colonial perspective to study the problems raised in the settler colonies like "the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new one; the relationship between the indigenous populations in settled areas and the invading settlers; the relationship between the imported language and the new place"^[4]¹³³. All these relationships are closely linked with the post-colonial characteristics reflected in Munro's works.

In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft puts forward that the true meaning of post-colonial "covers all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression"^[4]². Hence, the literatures of Canada, Australia, India, Africa countries and so on all belong to the post-colonial literatures. What these literatures have in common beyond their distinctive regional characteristics, is that they emerged in their present form out of colonial experience and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of imperial center. It is this that makes them distinctively post-colonial.

This is also pointed out in *The Empire Writes Back*: "It is therefore arguable that, even before the development of a conscious de-colonizing stance, the experience of a new place, identifiably different in its physical characteristics, constrains, for instance, the new settlers to demand a language which will allow them to express their sense of otherness"^[4]¹¹. That is to say, people in the settler colonies have to construct a native culture which is different from that of Europe. Because this is not only an attempt to understand or describe the different reality, but also a struggle to create an indigenous culture in opposition to that imposed on them. They want to free themselves from the restriction of European colonization and establish their own national character. In Munro's works, she tries

to construct the indigeneity and otherness of Canada through depicting the daily life of Canadian small town residents.

3. The Construction of Post-colonial Features in Munro's Works

As is known to all, Canada is a post-colonial country. Due to its remoteness of geographical environment and subordination of cultural economy, Canada has always been in a marginal position. It is this marginal position that determines the difficult survival of Canadian literature in the cracks between the long-established European literature and the prosperous American literature. Hence, Constructing Canada's national character in a harsh environment has always been an urgent and persistent pursuit of Canadian writers. As one among these writers, Alice Munro graphically presents the national character of Canada by means of constructing the post-colonial characteristics in her writing. Through close reading of the text, we find that post-colonial features embodied in Munro's works are mainly manifested in two major aspects: indigeneity and otherness. On the one hand, Canada's indigenous nature is vividly reflected by celebrating its natural beauty and constructing people's sense of identity in daily life. On the other hand, through giving the typical example of Canadian residents' deviation from Scottish traditions, the feature of otherness is also completely expressed in Munro's works.

Munro uses her own way to construct Canadian indigeneity in her stories. Compared to other Canadian writers, she finds an unusual way to eulogize the natural beauty of Canada by vividly depicting the Canadian wilderness. In her writing, sunrise, swamp, wild plants and even mist in the wilderness are all so charming and fascinating. Thus, Munro's portrayal of the Canadian wilderness overturns traditional perception. Besides, many protagonists in Munro's works are Scottish descendants who immigrated to Canada, struggling to construct their national identity with this new land. The process of searching for identity is tough and arduous, but her protagonists courageously overcome all kinds of hardships, ultimately build their identities in daily life and thus constructing the indigenous nature of Canada.

In "Meneseutung", a story from Munro's work *Friend of My Youth*, the poetess Almeda immigrated to Canada when she was only 14 years old^[5]. In 1854, her father took her family to the wilderness of Canada. Although her father was a harness maker, he could recite the content of Bible and Shakespeare's works. More importantly, the poetess's father eventually took root in this new land and built a comfortable house in which the poetess lived for a long time. Although this uneventful narrative in the novel is the most ordinary detail of life, we can see the Scottish immigrants' spiritual identification with their new homeland. As a young immigrant writer, Almeda faces the mission of celebrating national traditions and eulogizing the native land. "Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseutung" is one of her representative poems. This poem "celebrates the popular, untrue belief that the explorer sailed down the eastern shore of Lake Huron and landed at the mouth of the major river".^{[5] 124}

"Dance of the Happy Shades" is another short story of Munro^[6]. This signified Canadian people's escape from their motherland in the post-colonial context. They are eager to get rid of European colonization and construct their otherness. Canadian people want to build their own culture and identity, rather than changelessly inheriting the culture of motherland. Only in this way can Canada get rid of its embarrassing marginalization in the international community and gain its own independent status.

4. Conclusion

As a post-colonial country, Canada was once alienated by the British and French cultures internally and threatened by the imperialist culture led by the United States externally, so it was geographically and psychologically marginal for a long time. As Margaret Atwood put it, the victim position of Canada is the root reason why its literature highlights the theme of survival^[7]. Canadian writers have been working hard to establish their native identity through praising Canada's unique history and culture in their works. In Munro's works, she vividly portrays how marginalized Canadian people construct their national identity in the post-colonial context. From being passively defined by the imperial center of Europe as the edge, to actively settle on the edge and squeeze the European center, Canada will eventually transcend the post-colonial attitude of center and periphery to represent its own ingenious feature and gain worldwide recognition.

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