

**Mirroring the Complexities of the Human Psyche and the Depiction of Female  
Powerlessness in Alice Munro's "Runaway"**

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**Abstract**

Human behaviour is constructed by unconscious drives and impulses. To Freud, thoughts are supposed to be guided by desires and these desires are the fundamental basis of humankind, life, and psyche. Not being expressed directly, they take other shapes in order to be expressible in personal and social situations. They are repressed because they could not be fitted into social norms and laws. Freud believes that many of our actions are motivated by psychological forces unknown to others which he calls 'the unconscious'. The objective of the present paper is to read Munro's *Runaway* in the mirror of Sigmund Freud to detect the psychological aspects of the characters.

**Keywords:** unconscious, dream, subjugation, survival

Short Story as a genre started to flourish in Canadian Literature during the late 1960s to the beginning of 1970s. Female writers gained huge attention and Alice Munro is one of the most remarkable writers. She is known for her practice of Chekhovian realism, attentiveness of day to day life and keen insight. Her stories mostly embark on real-life happenings and she is far better at describing women's extreme anxiety and perplexity. This reflects in her portrayal of women's sensitive and challenging spiritual life. 'Survival over victory' is stressed as the decision in her works. Munro states every stage of women and their inner quest from patriarchal supremacy. Thus the connection between self and society is a very prominent aspect of her writings.

Munro deconstructs the unfair and interiorizing structures of power and that is the reason why the theme of survival becomes significant in her short stories, where protagonists have to go through various trials to survive. Her stories portray the quest of the self assertion of her women protagonists, who meet threats from the patriarchal supremacy. She equates the powerless status of women to that of Canada. Lorna Irvine and Coral Ann Howells have also pointed out the theme of powerlessness, victimization, alienation as well as uncertainty that makes women tolerant accepting, yet also at times angry and resentful.

*Runaway* is one of her collection of short stories which won the Giller Prize. Munro chooses various narrative techniques like non-linear narrative time, such as flashback, retroversion; unstable narrative rhythm enhances the narrative artistry as well as the depth of the theme. It is quite clear that she prefers the subtle events in daily life and she explores how women find a suitable stand-in their family as well as their marriage under all the complex and different living situation. George Woodcock state that Alice Munro, "has always written best when her stories or the episodes in her novels were close to her own experience in a world she knew" (235).

"Runaway" as the name specifies, is literally related to running away. This is a story of a couple named Clark and Carla and their connection to their neighbour Sylvia Jamieson. This story describes that both their life is survival, swinging between memories and expectations. On her husband's aggressive behaviour, Clara wanted to attain a new identity and new horizons for herself without Clark. Brad Hooper says that "Runaway" is the most successful psychological story of Munro. It is narrated in third person view, set in a rural area of Canada and the story shows the conflicts between Carla and Clark and the conflict of Clark killing the goat.

Carla is worried because Flora went missing. Flora, the Goat has a symbolic significance in the story as Munro introduces two dream sequences. Munro represents that Carla had dreamt of Flora previous night and the night before. The narrator recounts,

She had dreamt of flora last night and night before. In the first dream Flora had walked right up to the bed with a red apple in her mouth, but in the second dream last night she had run away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to hurt, but she ran away. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong to some battlefield and then she – Flora- slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just shattered through like a white eel and disappeared (The New Yorker 2003).

There is a similarity between the goat's behaviour and Carla's relationship with Clark. Flora in dream is the Carla in reality. 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" (The New Yorker 2003). Clark says, "Flora might have just gone off to find herself a billy" (The New Yorker 2003). In reality Flora has been on a similar path as Carla, who had chosen to marry Clark few years back. The narrator recounts how Flora is inclined to Clark early on in her arrival and then tends towards Carla. The closeness and distance of Flora to Clark is the same mental progression Carla undergoes through her relationship with her husband.

Theories of Sigmund Freud marked revolutionary effect upon the modern psychological characteristics of any literary works. Freud considered dreams "the royal road to the unconscious" (Rabstejnek, 1). In *Rereading Freud: Psychoanalysis through Philosophy* Jon Mills writes, "Freud considered his work on dreams to be his most original contribution to understanding the human mind" (xi). Dreams had been interpreted in many ways throughout history but Freud gives psychological reliability to it. Freud viewed dreams as the expression of repressed desires which resides in the unconscious. The psychological theory of Freud emphasizes that it is in dream that a person's desires are revealed. In *Dream Psychology*, Freud asserts that dreams "completely satisfy wishes... and are simply and disguisedly realizations of wishes" (16). In view of that, dreams are the mirror and reflection of unconscious desires and Freud called them "wish- fulfilment because it is an unfulfilled and unrepressed wish from the waking state" (76).

J. Rivkin and M. Ryan in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* writes, "according to Freud, the drives of the unconscious though repressed, can never be quelled entirely. They emerge in dreams" (391). The emergence of desires in dreams is indirect and it may stand symbolically or otherwise the real representation of what had been denied. Accordingly, dream expresses the realization of the desire indirectly.

According to Rivkin and Ryan, "Freud realized that the unconscious often expresses itself in the form of dreams" (409). Carla is not satisfied with her husband and the narrator explains this problem in the text. Early in the story, the reader's get to know Clark's personality "Clark often had fights, and not just with the people he owed money to. His friendliness, compelling at first, could suddenly turn sour" (The New Yorker 2003).

Clark provides a hostile situation for Carla and it is reflected in Carla's words "I can't stand it anymore" (The New Yorker 2003). Carla began her life with Clark with a different perspective: to have a more 'authentic kind' of life. She imagines a brilliant future with Clark who she sees as "sturdy architecture of the life" (The New Yorker 2003). Carla runs away with Clark to start a new life and desires to attain a new identity because she is annoyed and fed up with Clark. The dreams indicate Carla's oppressed desires and wishes. In *Dream Psychology* Freud classifies dreams. He emphasizes the second kind of dreams which he believes "constitute the larger number of our dreams and express in a weird form some repressed desire" (37). The dreams act as a temptation and lead Carla to escape for freedom.

In *The Fiction of Alice Munro* Hooper writes, "Clark's bad moods create an oppressive atmosphere... he is consumed with his computer. That situation creates an indelible picture of their relationship: Clark has his back turned to Carla" (145). The urge behind Carla's desire for a runaway is not only Clark's bad temper and his disability to make an 'authentic life' but also her repressed identity and desires of freedom. The revelation of her subdued identity is noticeable when she creates a world for herself where Clark, who was once her one and only, does not exist. "She did this at times when Clark's mood had weighted down all their indoor space. The best thing then was to invent or remember some job to do in the barn" (The New Yorker 2003).

To build a world of her own is the desire behind Carla's attempt to escape the subjugation and pressure dictated by her husband. She married Clark in search of a special life. Unable to build one, she acts against Clark. According to Lois Tyson, "we unconsciously behave in ways

that will allow us to ‘play out’, without admitting it to ourselves, our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress” (13).

Before getting familiar with Clark, Carla wished to get an academic education to be a “veterinarian” (The New Yorker 2003). She alters her plan in order to get married to Clark but she is not happy. Her marriage to Clark is the base stone that builds her unconscious desire towards the escape. She dreams her prosperity with Clark in spite of her parents' warning. Carla's intention is an ‘authentic life’ and when she reaches the delusion of Clark's promised life, she tries to journey the destination on her own. She constantly lives with temptation and in Sylvia's house the temptation which resided in her unconscious moves toward consciousness.

The twin dreams reinforce to change her condition. To run away is to dream a future life without Clark and it has been anticipated in her dreams. To have an independent economic condition and safe mental situation is what she searches in her getaway to Toronto. Implicating Toronto as her utopia, she manifests her unconscious desire in freedom and a new identity. Carla's first run away from her parents' home indicates that she has the courage to decide in complex circumstances but it is not the same in her second runaway. Clark's presence is very vital. Prior to his presence in Carla's life, she has the ability and confidence to decide what she favours but after marriage, she is affected by her husband domination gradually and unable to decide consequently. Formation of a repressed identity and desire is the process that Carla undergoes in her life with Clark.

The analysis of Alice Munro's “Runaway” makes clear the deep and complicated layers of characterization. Carla's twin dreams reveal the reflection of her unconscious. In her life with Clark, Carla could not fulfil her wishes regarding an authentic life and her dreams appear as wish-fulfilment in Freudian terms.

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