

# A Thematic Study of Alice Munro's Runaway

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## Abstract

Human relationships are impossible without a strong bond. This strong bond is built by mutual understanding. In mutual understanding lies a sense of respecting the differences. Including these love and closeness are the essentials of human relationships, how long are they sustain and last solely depend on how true love and intimacy are. In light of these Alice Munro's renowned short story *Runaway* has been studied. And, an attempt is made to show in what way the story *Runaway* goes surpassing all theoretical perspectives of feminism and gender related issues and remains as a glittering star to uphold the true spirit of human spirit and passion to make miserable life beautiful. This paper has aimed at issues like separation, belongingness, and freedom to discuss in detail.

**Keywords:** Body, Feminism, Gender, Human-relationships, Love, Hypocrisy.

## Introduction

Alice Munro is world's renowned short story writer. She needs no introduction. This fame she has not had from readers, instead, her story deserve it. After Chekov, as many critics have observed, she has taken the genre short story to greater heights. Her very concern and preoccupation in short story are of human nature. She fathoms the complexity of human nature going to its deep. No story of her deals with outside human passions and nature. Unlike conventional story tellers she constructs the process of presentation. Each story she has written has shown her ingenuity and nuances of disclosing the human nature. These can be seen either in her much acclaimed story *The Beggar's Maid* or the critically appreciated and modern classic *Runaway*.

It is generally believed that ideologies shape creative literature and vice versa. Here it can be quoted Octavio Paz's opinion on creative writing and criticism. Paz has made these observations in his famous essay collection entitled *Alternating Current*. Criticism and creation live in permanent symbiosis. Criticism feeds on poems and novels, but at the same time it is the water, bread, and air of creation. Her stories are completely away from being influenced by any isms and theories; instead, they give a wonderful stuff for many ideologies and thoughts. So, modern critical schools like feminism and gender studies can rely much upon her stories for substance and material for theorizing their concepts and perceptions. Particularly the story *Runaway* is well received and admired for its high-powered depiction of human nature. It has shown the way in which human beings act and react in the process of enlarging and establishing relationships. She never is interested in telling merely story, instead, she, in this story, has made an attempt to exhibit the different shades of human relationships through the characters like Carla and Clark. Reviewing the novel *The Times* magazine has rightly put saying that millions of words have been spilt in attempts to tell us exactly what it means to be human. In *Runaway* Munro performs that very miracle.

## A Sense of Belongingness, Separateness, and Freedom

It is mentioned already that she shows no interest in simply saying story, but tries to know through human beings how, in circumstances, they behave disclosing their true personalities. As life has no beginning and ending, her stories also have the same tendency, they emerge out of life's unexpected contexts and stop instead of end abruptly without giving a clue. The Story *Runaway* is such one. It mainly revolves around three characters- Carla, Clark and their neighbor Mrs.Jamieson.

When she was eighteen Carla was attracted by Clark, fell in love, and got married him against her parents' wish. Right from the beginning she has been kind of a person who wants to live as per her wishes, which she believes make her life beautiful. And importantly there has been a wavelength of tastes and interests between Carla and Clark. The like-mindedness has been one of the causes which urges her to decide her to go with him and live life independently. Before she left her parents she did discuss and defend her decision of marrying Clark:

*Her mother said, "He'll break your heart, that's a sure thing." Her stepfather, who was an engineer, did not even grant Clark that much power. "A loser," he called him. "One of those drifters." As if Clark was bug he could just whisk off his clothes.*

*So Carla said, "Does a drifter save up enough money to buy a farm? Which by the way, he has done?"* She finds a sort of confidence in him and speculates that she will be happy in her own world being free. She gives up her education just for the sake of her wish of building her own life. She was fond of animals, she in interested in horse riding and horse riding teaching, What she was thinking was being realized by Clark. This impressed her that if she could live in this world that could be with him only. The narrator depicts thus:

*Her parents wanted her to go to college, and she had agreed as long as she could choose to be a veterinarian. All she really wanted, and had wanted all her life, was to work with animals and live in the country. She had been one of those dorky girls in high school, one of those girls they made rotten jokes about, but she didn't care./ Clark was the best riding teacher hey had. Scads of women were after him, they would take up riding just to get him as their teacher. ... he wanted to have riding school, a horse stable, someplace out in the country. One day she came into the stable and saw him hanging up his saddle and realized she had fallen in love with him.*

This small description made the by the narrator of the story gives the reader to think that Carla is not a lame duck, instead, she is a kind of woman wishing to live with lots of love, affection, commitment, dream and so on. The very beautiful, which, she assumingly has been living, gets shattered and breached. She expresses it while talking to her neighbor Mrs.Jamieson. Of course she is very disturbed after she comes to know their goat Flora goes missing, but apart from that something is pricking her life which she can't anymore. Gradually when she begins her life she feels sensing her life's rhythm is getting upside down. When asked if he [Clark] hurts, the narrator speaks for her saying: *No. He hadn't hurt her physically. But he hated her. He despised her. He could not stand it when she cried and she could not help crying because he was so mad.* But she seems to be helpless because she knows that it is her decision, no one has compelled her to have him as her husband, and importantly she is warned by her parents also. The fact is a cordial cord between is becoming weaker. She feels going away. But she does not know where to go and has no money. Her dilemma of living the present life or getting new life has been expressed in a subtle way. Her suffocation is known by her only; nobody knows her true sentiments and passions. She has no outlet to let her suffocation and frustration goes evaporated sharing with some body. Her husband, whom she has believed to be a moral supporter to make her dreams come true. So she reveals her life's secret to Mrs.Jamieson. At certain point she gives her a piece of advice that is to go and

start a new life in Toronto. First she accepts and later she senses that it is not what she is supposed to do. She gets off the bus and asks her husband to come and pick her up. The irony is that in her personal life she feels she is neglected and separated. When accepting for the new life she feels much suffered and suffocated than actually she is experiencing in her present life. Sitting on the bus on her way to Toronto she realizes that the new place, space, life, people, apartment, job are strange. The people whom she is going to meet in search of job or anything else are not, she thinks, her husband Clark. It is one of rare and wonderful scenes portrayed in the story. It is a realization, enlightenment and a revelation she has in her life. Without expressing through her words the short story writer Alice Munro has succeeded in presenting the truth that one must accept the present life and bear unbearable condition withstanding all miseries and difficulties. If she goes off this present life there is no certainty that she will have a suffering free life. After she leaves home she under goes transformational changes which she obtains by her own experience. For her it is an inward growth and maturity. Inwardly she grows to be a strong woman leaving her life to take its direction. After she has started feeling something inexpressible things happen in her marital life, she becomes more and more attached towards an animal-the female goat [Flora]. The happiness she does not get from her husband is obtained to her by being so close to the animal. But the sad thing is that the very source of happiness and retreat is lost. The goat Flora goes missing. It is a great loss for her. This animal haunts her in her dreams. This animal not only a physical companion, but a psychological companion also. Human beings are believed to be understanding others feelings and emotions, especially in the case of marital life, both the partners lead life sharing equally all the experiences come in life. At the time of her marriage she had high expectations and fascinating dreams. But in the course of her life she come to know the reality that her husband is not the one whom she was thinking of before marriage. Very soon she feels disappointed and disillusioned which lead her separate from her husband. But towards the end of the story she seems to have clarity in her life. So she decides to come to her husband. It cannot be termed as U-turn, but her sense of belongingness. At a certain point she expresses this saying that a new world she is going to does not belong to her. The narrator puts thus: *'She'd not really belong be there.'*

After she returns, her husband pays a visit to Mrs. Jamieson and warns her that she should not interfere with their life. Before he returns from her home both that lady and he see the goat Flora. It literally returns. But he does not tell her that he has seen the goat. After its reappearance nowhere again it is seen. Probably he does 'something' to it. While reading Mrs. Jamieson's letter she comes to know that her husband has seen the goat. But she does not ask him about it. The narrator has poignantly expressed her mind:

*'It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there.'*

Unlike Nora of A Doll's House of Ibsen, Carla never verbally protests against the hypocrisy of her husband. For her, her husband is like one of many in the society, one has to, she feels, live amidst all this. The society is full of hypocrisy and cruelty. But she does not show her back to life, instead she goes on living understanding all these odds. If things like feminism and gender equality succeed in theories, Carla succeeds in practical life.

## The Narrative Strategy

The language she uses in this story is very superb conveying effectively the inner most emotions and human nature. Alice Munro has adopted here the third person narrative technique so as to maintain the balance in disclosing the personalities of the characters. The story goes in a topsy-turvy way. Flash back technique is appropriately used for presenting the time and circumstances. The story opens with the depiction of Mrs. Jamieson's return home from Greece through the two important characters of the story- Carla and Clark. Next story goes back to tell incidents happen between the neighbor Mrs. Jamieson and this couple. When the female protagonist Carla leaves home and sits on the bus the narration shifts to tell their love story and things happened before their marriage. While Carla is at Mrs Jamieson's home the narrative focuses on telling briefly about the careers of both Mr. Jamieson and his wife Sylvia (Mrs. Jamieson). Mr. Jamieson was a poet but now he is no more; and, Sylvia was Botany teacher. She is leading a secluded life. Quiet often she calls for Carla for assisting domestic chores. As life has no beginnings and endings, this story's narration also floats like a river taking its course. No description is deliberately added, everything depicted here has been expresses very naturally. Clark and Carla's goat named Flora takes a very significant role. First she was loved and cared by Clark, later he neglects as he does to his wife Carla. After it is neglected by Clark, Carla has grown an intimate attachment with her. Except for the last scene it is not seen physically, readers are just told about it by the characters. Its presence, absence, missing, appearance, re-disappearance have conveyed some symbolic and metaphorical connotations. Firstly, when it has gone missing, Carla feels as if she has lost some one who is very dear to her heart. After its disappearance she has thought of running away. May be if it has not been disappeared, I could be possibility that she could not think of running way. It is just a speculation, but there are many things which have been reasons for decision of running away. Especially when she comes to know that it appeared and was seen by both her husband and Mrs. Jamieson she feels upset. But she never expresses her inner emotions outwardly, she bears all this alone inwardly.

## Conclusion

By Nationality the writer belongs to Canada, but her stories deal with issues related to women irrespective of nations. At the end of the story female protagonist Carla appears to be a strong willed woman having a tremendous sense of reality. Despite having had an average school education she does not expect any sympathy, her subtleness and perceptiveness are highly remarkable, because, after she come home back she gets to know the true nature of her husband, but she never loses her confidence. She turns out to be strong willed woman to live her life. She is committed to her life, has realization that escapism or running away from life has no meaning at all. She is not an innocent, but is capable of understanding the truth and reality of life. The quite interesting thing to notice in this story is that the same wishes, dreams, mindset attract both Carla and Clark, but later she senses a kind of invisible gap in their relationship. This gap or breach will be slowly covered by her. So, her return is not a defeat, but a chance or an opportunity obtained by her only. Life cannot be measured in terms of either a victory or a defeat; instead, it should be lived. That is what she does. Thus she is a ray of hope for those who have failed in life. She re-invents herself. May be her husband will have lots of lessons to be taught by her. Of course there is no as such indication; instead, he is as he was with full of strategies, plans, smartness, and selfishness.

Margaret Walters in her book **Feminism** gives some remarkable concluding comments – *If feminism is to be something living and evolving, it will have to begin by re-inventing the wheel- which in this case means finding not just new issues, but a new language. In spite of everything, I still have faith that feminism will take us by surprise again, that it will re-invent itself, perhaps in unforeseen ways, and in areas we have thought little about. It will almost certainly come from outside the academy, and will probably- hopefully- challenge us in ways that, as yet, we cannot even glimpse.* She asserts that feminism will be inspired and influenced by outside the academy. In that outside the academy remains a woman like Carla.

### Works Cited

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