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Retrieving History from Alice Munro's *The View from the Castle Rock*

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Abstract: Fiction is a great art of revealing the writer's society and culture. Thus, reading a literary work will enable the readers to be aware of the writer's period. It is one of the concepts of New Historicism. This paper tries to utilise this concept of New Historicism to read Alice Munro's autobiographical work *The View from the Castle Rock* to get glimpses of Munro's and her ancestors' societal history and culture.

Keywords: Literature, History, New Historicism, New World, society.

Reading a fiction most of the time enables one to accept the societal background and the cultural practices as factual. Sometimes works of writers from different periods give a glimpse of their time to the reader. Rabinowitz (1981) strengthens the above mentioned idea by stating that writing novel is a public act for which the writer needs the views of the community and its practices (408). Consequently it leads to the fact that literary texts consciously or unconsciously give historical information to the readers.

Based on the above mentioned concept a new movement named New Historicism has emerged in 1980. It is an approach to texts which pays particular attention to their historical situation, not merely as a decorative backdrop to the work, but as an integral part of it. One of the recurring themes of New Historicism is that one cannot divide the world by texts in the foreground and history in the background, because they are always mixed up with one another. It formulates a notion that history is inseparable from literary works. Regarding this Stephen Greenblatt, founder of this movement, comments thus: “Indeed, it becomes difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is represented and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event” (15).

While New Historicism has a number of different approaches to history and culture, the above said one is an important concept, that is, how fiction enables one to understand the historical information and also how it integrates history. The present paper intends to trace historical information from the select stories of Alice Munro.

Receiving the Nobel Prize exhibits the recognition for the finest creativity of Alice Munro. Though she is categorised as a short story writer, her stories are heavier than to be a short story. Munro states that the inspirations for her stories are from her life. Owing to her personal elements, the prime characteristic nature of her work is filled with her childhood experiences, life during the war time in Ontario, its culture and her family. Not only the theme but even the style of narration takes the readers to travel with her characters and visualise the incidents.

Alice Munro for the first time talks regarding her usage of life incidents in her book. In the foreword to *The View from the Castle Rock*, she expresses of her interest/curiosity to know the history of her ancestors. She puts in words about her voyage to Scotland to collect the history of her ancestors who left the place for the betterment of life, where she collects information from documents, letters and magazines. By giving life to those facts with her imagination, she frames the stories in the first part of this book and the second part portrays the writer's life. Munro considers this book is definitely different from the rest of her works and in the foreword she comments thus:

These stories were not included in the books of fiction I put together, at regular intervals. Why not? I felt they didn’t belong. They were not memories but they were closer to my own life than the other stories I had written, even in the first person. In other first-person stories I had drawn on personal material, but then I did anything I wanted to with this material. Because the chief thing I was doing was making a story. In the stories I hadn’t collected I was not doing exactly that. I was doing something closer to what a memoir does—exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way. I put myself in the center and wrote about the self, as searchingly as I could (x).

As a whole, the book gives the history of the Scottish immigrants in Canada, through their survival trauma and settlement approximately from the 17th century to the 20th century. By doing this, Munro looks at the glimpses of the history (private and public), which the writer portrays consciously or unconsciously in her writing. By tracing down her family history, Munro provides the public history of a certain part of Scotland during a particular period and about a particular class people. In order to pacify her curiosity of seeing her ancestor’s hometown, she visits the Ettrick valley, her ancestral hometown. Looking at the gravestones of her direct ancestors makes her to feel struck – “past and present lumped together here made a reality that was commonplace and yet disturbing beyond anything I had imagined” (7).

The first story in part I titled, “No Advantages” begins with a historical note regarding the fertility of the land in the Ettrick parish. The statistical account of Scotland in the year 1799 mentioned that the place had no advantages, which grew only barley, oats and potatoes due to the moist air and was fit for nothing. Due to it, many preferred to move away from that land.

Munro mentions about the religious revival of 1800 A.D which she calls as Age of Reasons since it enabled the lower class people to read. “Scotland was the country, remember, where John Knox had decided that every child should learn to read and write, in somesort of village

school, so that everybody could read the Bible” (ix). This practice has helped her family members in every generation to produce something about themselves and also about their society in the form of writing.

Munro begins her ancestral history with William Laidlaw, later famously known as Will O’Phaup, born in 1695, a fast runner and the one who saw fairies. Her narration gives a vivid picture of the Scottish society which was pious in nature. “[E]very Presbyterian home in Scotland was meant to be a pious home. Constant investigation of private life and tortured reshaping of the faith went on to take care of that. There was no balm of ritual, no elegance of ceremony. Prayer was not only formal but personal, agonised” (14). Thomas Boston, her ancestor, was a minister who is still remembered for his religious book entitled *Human Nature in its Four-fold State*, which was available in every house in Scotland. The next famous ancestor of Munro is James Hogg who is the author of *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Through his writing he tries to record his society and people. Munro mentions that Margaret Laidlaw, mother of James, recited plenty of verses to Walter Scott, a well renowned writer, when he was collecting old songs and ballads. This information in the first story illustrates her ancestor’s interest/talent in the art of writing.

The depression, which followed the Napoleonic wars, has forced her great-great-great grandfather James Laidlaw to move with his children to the New World. From the Edinburgh castle, James with his son Andrew views a misty land, which James calls as America. He looks at it with hope, “America. It is only a little bit of it, though, only the shore. There is where every man is sitting in the midst of his own properties, and even the beggars is riding around in carriages” (30) which indicates people’s notion of America during the period of depression. On 4th of June 1818, James Laidlaw with two of his sons Andrew and Walter, daughter Mary and daughter-in-law Agnes and grandson James, starts the voyage to the New World. When old James along with his family entered into the ship, he is shocked to see the crowd who were ready to leave Scotland for the betterment of life in the New World. This part of the story reveals the poor economical condition which compels people to leave Scotland with a hope upon the new land. Women folks too were eager to leave for the New World as

they looked at it as a prosperous place where they would be treated elegantly by men. Walter, James’ son says, “‘To be born in the Ettrick is to be born in a backward place’, he would say. ‘Where the people is all believing in old stories and seeing ghosts and I tell you it is a curse to be born in the Ettrick’” (62). Walter records this journey in a book in order to send it to his people in Scotland.

James Laidlaw with his family members reaches Quebec, Canada by calling it as America, because the term America meant Canada to them. Slowly old James begins to feel lonely in the new place. Nostalgic feeling of his homeland disturbs him and says with detachment, “It cannot be my home. It can be nothing to me but the land where I will die” (80). He worries that the ties of his country will be lost and no one will carry the Scottish identity and its cultural heritage to the forthcoming generation. His expectation for this is shown when he scolds young James, his grandson,

He will go on and on and not remember a thing of Scotland where he was born or the ship he travelled on, he will get to talking another language the way they do when they go to England, only it will be worse than theirs. He looks at me with the kind of a look that says he knows that me and my times is all over with’ (80).

Gradually old James recovers himself from nostalgia and writes letter to his elder son, which was later published in a magazine by James Hogg and a letter to an editor of a newspaper in Scotland. He mentions about their stay in Toronto, where they have a comfortable life as,

...the people here speak very good English there is many of our Scots words they cannot understand what we are saying and they live far more independent then King George... Some will have as good as 12 Cows and four or five horses for they pay no taxes just a perfect trifell and ride in their Gigs or chire like Lords... there is no Presbetarian minister in this town as yet but there is a large English Chapel and Methodist Chapel. (82)

This historical information enables the readers to understand the differences between the Canadian and the Scottish society and culture. Moreover, here, Munro distinguishes between fact and fiction by mentioning that Walter's journal regarding their trip, and the letters of old James are true and the other incidents are her invention. Munro emphasises upon the changes in the religious practices of the Scottish immigrants in the new land through several incidents. Old James, in a letter drafts the religious fear of the Scottish people in the new place as "...few of them thinks about what will Come of thear Soul when Deaththere Days doth End for they have found a thing they call Whiskey and a great mony of them dabbles and drinks at it till they make themselves worse than a ox or an ass" (83-4). Later by portraying her grandmother's religious practices Munro distinguishes strict rules of Presbyterians and liberal Anglicans. Munro narrates thus:

She was very strict about all Presbyterian rules and observances, and this strictness had a peculiar history. She had not been brought up as a Presbyterian at all, but had led a carefree childhood and girlhood as a member of the Anglican Church, also known as the Church of England.... Their religion often seemed to outsiders to be all a matter of bows and responses, with short sermons, easy interpretations, worldly ministers, much pomp and frivolity... But when my grandmother married she had wrapped herself up in her husband's Presbyterianism, becoming fiercer than many who were brought up in it. (133-34)

Survival history of her ancestors is also focused by Munro in this book. Old James' son William Laidlaw reaches America before his father leaves Scotland. He settles in Illinois with his wife and children where he dies of cholera by leaving his family. Later they move to Canada with Andrew and as they are new to that place they do not possess any land. When the children of William Laidlaw grew up they move in search of fortunes. In that generation, Big Rob, Andrew's son, write his memories where he mentions about his voyage to Morris Township with his cousins in 1851. The descriptions of their travel and their hardship indicate the survival problem in the wilderness of Morris.

Later the transformation of Morris due to the advancement of time is expressed by him as, “I have been here (1907) for sixty years and have had some hardships and have seen many changes both in the inhabitants and the country. For the first few months we carried our provisions seven miles—now there is a railroad less than a quarter of a mile from us” (116).

As discussed earlier, Munro, in the first part of the book uses upon the documents, diaries and letters of/about Laidlaw's to make up her stories. Along with the portrayal of the lives of her ancestors and the Scottish immigrants' history Munro presents the societal treatment of women and the Indians. With the help of the post-colonial theories, one can look at the binary position occupied by the Indians and the white people during the colonial period. This book contains many incidents where Indians were treated as marginalised. Indians were associated with wilderness, who knew how to mingle with wild animals and could walk deep into the forests. They were treated as inferior beings and always observed with suspicion. In the 18th century, Walter, when he travels in a ship to Canada, thinks that he will fight with the Indians which shows that even before landing in Canada, he had seen Indians as his enemies. Andrew Laidlaw considers Becky, half Indian, who was a neighbour of Mary, William Laidlaw's wife, as her servant. Even after knowing Becky as neighbour he comments, “But we don't have them coming in and sit down in the house like that” (89). Later when Mary's baby disappears everyone suspects Becky as she happened to be an Indian. In the 20th century, still with the same kind of perceptions Indians are looked at. “They say the Indians thump their women everyone in a while and it makes them love 'em better” (295). Later in the story “Home” Dr. Parakulam, a ‘Hin-doo doctor’ is ill-treated by the nurse. Munro gives choices of reason to it as “Her tone with him is less discreet, less correct and differential, than the tone I would expect a nurse to take with a doctor. Maybe he is not a doctor who wins respect or maybe it is just that country and small town women, who are generally so conservative in opinion, can often be bossy and unintimidated in manner” (302). Munro mentions that this book is a blunder of fact and fiction. While reading these incidents a question arises within us whether she too is prejudiced to portray Indians as subalterns or is it a portrayal of her societal view.

Next in the case of societal view upon women, their condition did not face many changes irrespective of place and time. In the case of Agnes, she was first married to James, old James' son but when he left his family for Nova Scotia, Agnes married Andrew, her husband's brother. The readers are not given any information regarding her wish to marry him. When they cross Nova Scotia, Agnes thought that, "she has to hope he will show up sometimes and see her married to his brother, so that he will wonder. Also he will understand that in the end he did not get the better of her" (67). Agnes, due to her societal restrictions she could only think in such terms as if to evoke jealousy in her husband instead of fighting with him.

In the early 1900s Susan, Big Rob's daughter is portrayed as a decision maker of the family. Susan "was the one who always buy something. And she was the boss of the brothers when they were in the house" (121). The treatment of women as weaker sex continued till 21st century and readers can consider that Susan happens to be an exception to enjoy her freedom. Munro presents that in 1949, women riding bicycle was seen as "eccentric" (154) and, "All girls who wanted to establish their femininity had to quit riding them" (198). Due to it, girls who lived in faraway places prefer to quit their studies rather than riding a cycle. In the last story of the book, "What do you want to know for?" which probably might have been written in 1990s, talks about a woman preacher. When she was preaching in a funeral a man from Faith Lutheran in Desboro leaves that place as "We could not stand the idea of a woman preaching" (333). These incidents indicate that in Munro's society women in most of the places are still seen as inferior. In an interview Munro records her views regarding the condition of women in her family thus,

I don't think there were many changes in my family until my generation. Until then, the women of an agricultural class lived very much the same lives in 1900 as they had been living in 1800, and on a different continent. The only thing was that they were a little bit more comfortable in Canada, because even though no one had done particularly well, they had done well enough that people were not living at that bare level they had lived in

in the Ettrick Valley. So the changes were mostly in terms in 1900 died in childbirth, just the way they always had. The big changes everywhere I think, of a bit of physical comfort. But the expectations and lives were very much the same. Women have happened since the Second World War in women’s lives. But they were happening slowly all through the twentieth century (Awano 2006).

Changes in the economical condition and the changes in the lifestyle and occupation are elaborated by Munro. Especially the second part of the book contains Munro’s personal experiences and stories like “Working for a Living”, “Fathers”, “Lying Under the Apple Tree”, “Hired Girl”, and “Ticket” present the economic condition of her society. These stories mirror the poor economic situation and turmoil which they faced during the Second World War. Regarding it she mentions,

I must emphasize that this was not great poverty; it was the poverty of the area where I live. I didn’t grow up as an outcast at all. I grew up in the same situation as most other people I knew, but then, when it’s almost inevitable perhaps that you will jump into the middle class as you would at that time in our country’s history if you got an education (Amber 2).

Poverty was not the condition which the whole Canada faced. Munro presents the two extreme cases: poverty and rich in the story titled “A Hired Girl”. In it she talks about her experiences as a hired girl at the age of 17 in a rich person’s house. This story contradicts her world as different from Mrs. Montjoy’s, at whose house Munro worked.

Here was a difference, already, from the world I was used to. In that world, fear was commonplace, at least for females. You could be afraid of snakes, thunderstorms, deep water, heights, the dark, the bull, and the lonely road through the swamp, and nobody thought any the worse of you. In Mrs. Montjoy’s world,

however, fear was shameful and always something to be conquered. (229)

This story portrays the tension caused by differences in wealth. Here personal experiences from the poor economic background provoke her at the carelessness of a wealthy family. Regarding this story Munro mentions in an interview as,

...I can remember it being a rage I tell at the time and it’s quite unreasonable because all those people wanted was a servant, a good servant, and that’s what her job was, but she wants to be a person in their lives and of course that isn’t possible. It’s not to be expected. And this seemed to be a really interesting thing to write about. It’s a very autobiographical story. (Amber 3)

The short story titled “Working for a Living”, talks about the differences in the mentality of the olden days farmers with the present one. Here she narrates the life of her grandparents and parents; her father’s interest in animals and his tricks to trap animals especially foxes for skin. Selling fox’s fur becomes a business, upon which the whole family thrive. Slowdown in business due to world war and its effects upon lives of the people are elaborated the change in the lifestyle of the middle class people. “Things did not pick up much with the beginning of the war – in fact, the prices in 1940 were among the worst ever. During the Depression bad prices were not so hard to take—he could look around and see that nearly everybody was in the same boat...” (145-46). By involving her family history into stories, Munro has successfully presented the history of her society. Coral Ann Howells comments that in these stories, there is a, “playful mixture of fact and fiction, an imaginative revisioning of history” (Howells 107).

Past constructs the present; which indicates the importance of history. Through this book Munro tries to retrieve the history of her ancestors which on the other hand reveals the history of the Scottish and the Canadian society. Through this work, Munro enables the readers to view history of the Scottish immigrants in Canada from the 17th century to the present history: pious Scottish people, their poor economic condition, people’s hope upon the New World, hope for immigration,

immigrants feeling of loss, nostalgia, survival problems, creation of identity in the New World, economical depression due to the world wars, vast economical differences in the Canadian society, subaltern position occupied by the Indians and women in the Canadian society and much more. As Nietzsche mentions, “We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life” (59), we need our past to be re-presented and figured out for our present and future. With this notion the paper concludes that by presenting her ancestors’ past, Munro has succeeded to retrieve the history of her family and her society.

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