

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN A PATRIARCHAL  
CULTURE: A RADICAL FEMINISTIC ANALYSIS OF ALICE MUNRO'S  
"RUNAWAY"

Fareeha Jabeen<sup>1</sup>

Lecturer in English, Department of English, Govt. Associate College for Women Chak Jhumra,  
Faisalabad. Email: [fjabeen005@gmail.com](mailto:fjabeen005@gmail.com)

Muhammad Yousuf<sup>2</sup>

PST, Government Higher Secondary School Samina Sadat DGK

Muneeba Mughal<sup>3</sup>

M. Phil Scholar, Institute of English Language and Literature - IELL, University of Sindh,  
Jamshoro, Pakistan ([mughalmuniba5@gmail.com](mailto:mughalmuniba5@gmail.com))

### Abstract

*The current study aims to investigate female's life and conditions through the experiences, writings, and narratives of Alice Munro (1931), she is bestselling author of short stories and Nobel Laureate (2013). In her collection of manufactured short stories, Runaway (2004), she explores female existence, conditions, and experiences and gives an exclusive narrative of female-centric characters. This study utilizes qualitative approach based on two main objectives. First, it explores the core causes of women's oppression in the setting of Canadian society in Munro's first short tale "Runaway" from her book Runaway, despite the fact that the female protagonist Carla revealed all of her life's hurdles. Second, it explores the patriarchal norms and dominant culture in Runaway that limit women's freedom and choices, as demonstrated by Carla's husband Clark in the story. To offer a thorough examination, the concept of radical feminism proposed by Simone De Beauvoir (1908-86) serves as a theoretical foundation for this study. Radical feminism is a feminist perspective that entitles the concept of patriarchal grounds, gender system, dominating culture, and also a hierarchy; as a result of these fundamental concerns, women suffered oppression throughout their lives. However, due to its assumption-based nature that women are not inherently confined and resist, society produces the opposing fractions (sexes) male and female. Therefore, this theory is also classified as conflict theory. Finally, this paper shows Munro's pinned down the reality of life and relationships that are built on male dominance over women; the patriarchal harshness of males oppresses women's freedom and choices.*

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, Radical Feminism, Women Oppression, Patriarchal Practices, Dominant Culture, Runaway

### 1. Introduction

Alice Munro has gained profound popularity in the field of women's writings. She is one of the most influential Canadian short story writers and won Nobel Prize in 2013. Her writings are world-widely recognized especially from the feministic perspective. She fearlessly engages her narrative styles and techniques to a novelty of truth and reality. However, her story is the sole bread of the upcoming generations to engage their female writing up to grade. Because there is a dire need to change the patriarchal mindset and brutal dominance of males over females from the inception of humanity. Moreover, Munro's spread the awareness of female life and conditions from her own life experiences and also reflects the feminist quest to develop the female characters in her stories. Runaway is an interesting story of oppressed married women living in the countryside. The female protagonist named Carla is an innocent petrified lady who lived with her brutal and proud husband. She was living, working, and dancing for her husband but still was ignored by her husband for whom she ran away from her family. All she had done was to love her Goat, Flora and Carla were in a sound friendship with her neighbor, Sylvia Jamieson, She often lived in her fantasy world where all she can do is to dream of living far away from her land, only to find her lost existence and to escape from her now existence. Someday, she is helped by Sylvia to away from her oppressive life for the very second time. However, she was

unable to find a new identity wherein and return to her husband once again, again preparing herself to face the same oppression.

Most importantly, the story depicts two different sides of marriage life, firstly marriage was an escape for Carla, and second marriage does not an escape. Munro's plot is compressively constructed, in first look the female character live her life fullest from runaway form her family and live a life she dreams of, but when her expectation breaks down she falls into an oppressive and brutal environment but again she has the hope to live her life once again and rise with her hope and desires. In Runaway, Munro explicitly talks about the cognitive shift of the main characters through the narrative of mysteries and the oppressive existence of Carla.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

Every society is the victim of Women oppression, since, the inception of humanity, men's brutality and oppression of women can be seen to a large extent. Thus, it is an wild issue to resolve through cutting the edge of patriarchal practices that challenges women existences. Therefore, the present study investigates the root causes of women's oppression in Canadian society from Munro's *Runaway*(2004). The researchers further scrutinize the global issues of patriarchal practices and dominant culture from the perspective of Radical Feminism by Simone de Beauvoir.

### **1.2. Research objectives**

This study serves the twofold objectives, firstly, to determine the primary cause of women's oppression in Canadian Society. Second, this research addresses the global issues of patriarchal practices and dominant culture in Munro's *Runaway*. To analyze the aforementioned objectives in a comprehensible and systematic way Simone de Beauvoir's concept of Radical Feminism is applied on Munro's *Runaway*.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

1. What are the root causes of women's oppression exposed in Runaway?
2. How the global issues of patriarchal practices and dominant culture are addressed in *Runaway* aligned Beauvoir's Radical Feministic perspective?

### **1.4. The significance and delimitation of the study**

The present study contributes a new aspect of Radical feminism to Munro's *Runaway* under the umbrella of feminism. Previously, many researchers and critics have profoundly done their work on *Runaway*, as it is considered the most influential work of Munro, but none of them has used Radical feminism on *Runaway* from the same perspective as this present study is explored. Therefore, this present study is delimited to only one selected short story as *Runaway*, and merely Beauvoir's concept of Radical feminism is utilized in this research.

## **2. Literature Review**

The purpose of the literature review is to build a comprehensive account of previous researches done on the relevant topic and field; hence, the current literature review highlights a famous Canadian Nobel laureate (2013) winner and considered a best living short story writer named Alice Munro (1931). Alice Munro depicts in her short stories entitle with the themes of a female's life, conditions, experiences, sufferings, and so many other aspects that are widely discussed in this brief yet comprehensive literature review.

Patni, Nath, and Sharma (2019) present the narrative exuberance and powerlessness of female characters and the sense of accuracy that distinguished men and women in Alice Munro's profound short story "Runaway". They expose the truth about Munro's narrative techniques that how she creates fantastic fiction through her collection of short stories, and how she appreciates individuality through her female characters, even though they are normally considered as

weakest of all. Munro also depicts fictive marriages, and uncertain relationships bound between individuals. Another aspect highlighted by the researchers is the traits of nostalgia in the female protagonist, Carla.

In 2019, Keskh describe Munro's story that shows how and why she portrays a female image in her stories, and introduces the idea of a female's enforced silence by using different narrative techniques to make her readers understand the brutal role of the male dominant society, Canadian. Moreover, she fearlessly discusses the resilience, little freedom, and oppressive males in her short story Runaway (2004) that further elaborate by Keskh. (2019).

According to Akhtar and Islam (2018) the story by Munro depicts the female complexities and female unconscious psyche that involves her fantasizing about herself as a human being. Further, they distinguish how and why the female character is enriched in creating reality to imagination and picturized their desires in a self-made fantasy world by using the idea of 'Mise-en-scène'. Females are naturally sentimental thus Munro's depiction of sensitivity and dependence of the female character in Runaway.

The most important aspect of marriage in the Runaway is discussed by Gao (2017), Munro's objective and subjective approach to marriage in her stories are extensively highlighted the selflessness and responsibilities of married life, respect, and self-esteem between married couples, the sense of tolerance and forgiveness, gender discrimination, quest for equity between male and female, etc.

Another related research on female characters is comparatively studied by Hadaeghand Daraee in 2015, their stance highlighted how the female quest for identity and struggle in Russian author Chekhov and Canadian author Munro's stories are depicted. Hence, both the short story writers have expressed the women's self-recognitions, self-identity, contemporary roles, and struggle of day to day life, for a true reason, it is super challenging for females to gain development, despite the male dominant and colonized society.

According to Bahador and Zohdi (2015) research on the subjective development of character in fiction and how the development in the abjection. The focus of their research is based on uncertainty and ambiguity felt by the character because Munro's stories are solely character-based. Hence, Kristeva's perception of Abjection will provide the lens to determine the character's struggles and how they formed the abject. A Kristevian reading of Munro's short fiction supposes the abject part of characters essential for the development and self-analysis of their subjectivity. Despite the Hostile integrity of the subjectivity, the researchers explain the character's attempt to overcome the double effect of seduction and disgusting in abject and restore the secure territory of the symbol.

Another significant research thesis by Wessman (2014) on Munro's writings express the Gender construction, and the pattern, awareness, and formation of gender in society. Despite the fact of economic and civic crisis the characters in her stories are still fighting and troublesome for their very existence as human beings. Wessman is of her view that the characters are trying to show their individuality rather than the traditional gender roles. Another aspect of her writing exposes the relationships of husband and wife, mother and daughter, animals and humans, between neighbors, etc. Another important view of Jun-min (2014) research highlights Munro's women's dilemma that is supposed to lead to the inescapable hopelessness in female protagonist Carls and her Goat Flora in Runaway, the significance of the title Runaway is pretty interesting in itself. In the story Runaway, its meaning is just a simple escape from relationships like marriage and family, virtue, religion, betrayal, otherness, oppression, and anxiety, and more essentially from the choices they had made for themselves.

Above all reviews expose the Munro's writing and narrative techniques, her themes, her way of picturized female life, struggle, and experiences, thus, many researchers have done their work on *Runaway* from different perspectives, and however, this present research aims at exposing feminism theory from the perspective of Radical feminism presented by Beauvoir on Munro's *Runway*.

### 2.1.Theoretical Construct

Since the inception of humanity, men's brutality and oppression of women can be seen to a large extent. Radical Feminism is used to address this global key issue of patriarchal culture and practices. Radical feminism is a significant perspective of feminism theory. Essentially, it is by and for women and this theory discusses some important concepts of sexual oppression as the primary oppression of women. Here is the most influential and prominent feminist theorist, Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986). She elaborates the Women's conditions in her most profound work, *The Second Sex* (1949). She exposes the fact that how a man supposes himself superior to that woman and how he rules his brutality and manhood over a woman by considering her as an object, and also women's existence is nothing more than that of sexual relief. She uses existentialism as a framework for her *The second sex*. The key concept of Simone de Beauvoir is biology, sex/gender role, patriarchal practices, power holder, dominant culture, and hierarchal system. She describes in her book "One is not born, rather becomes, a Woman" (Newyorks: Vintage books, 1973, 301).

According to Welch (2015), radical feminism exposes structures of domination that are wider than any individual structure, likewise, patriarchal practices dominate women by supposing them as an object of men's brutal world, besides liberal feminism is quite a different framework as it explores the idea of potential freedom. This present study is limited to Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical framework of radical feminism on Alice Munro's selected Short Story *Runaway* which argues that femininity and domesticity are not naturally constructed rather it is socially constructed. Hence, there is no limitation on women's freedom and womanhood.

### 3. Research Methodology

The qualitative research method is utilized to analyze the objectives of the study. The study employs content analysis of *Runaway* first story from Munro's book *Runaway* (2004) from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's Radical feminism. To understand Munro's narratives Beauvoir's theoretical framework helps to address the research problem of this study.

### 4. Data Analysis

#### 4.1.An Overview of Radical feministic perspective in *Runaway*

The primary focus of Radical feminism is the system of gender as a social and cultural construction, the backdrop of French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) raised the rhetorical question of the Women's existence, patriarchal influences, where the women are conserved as inferior to man and the concept of otherness. The analysis is based on *The Beauvoir's Second Sex*, according to Radical feminism, *Runaway's* characters are more likely living in a dystopian society where a male like Clark is subject, brutal, and dominant whereas the female Carla is an object, sensitive and dependent. The title of the story signifies the magnificent idea of the female inner world, *Runaway* means to escape from all the cruelty to a fantastic world. Munro's writing broadly sheds the female life and experiences of the character of Carla in the story, married women once escape from her family to marry her husband Clark and later on she escapes from her husband's brutality and dominance. Munro explains the innocence and selfishness of the female world through Carla. In the context of *Runaway*, Beauvoir is quoted as "one is not born, but rather becomes, women" (283) thus this

idea of her can be fixed in every existence of Carla. Women are first a human than women, so the resistance in Carla

#### **4.2. Gender Identity and Roles are the Root Cause of Women's Oppression**

Munro highly distinguished both male and female characters in *Runaway*, because its society that demands gender construction and identity. Therefore, the root cause of women's oppression gets birth from traditional gender roles. According to Beauvoir, Radical feminism is a surprising fact about the socially and culturally constructed gender roles and biologically confined sexes. Radical feminism is a hallmark of "*what are women? Where they are existing? Whether they should stand-alone or not?*" (5) In *runaway*, Munro explains the existence of women through Carla if she is a wife, a daughter, a sister, and doing her responsibilities, so what if she could justify her existence among all these things. Is it not normal if she is a simple human than a woman? What is her mistake is to identifying her gender as a woman? That's all. So, Munro's stance is quite clear with Beauvoir's ideas of radical feminism. Munro's title *Runaway* signifies that Carla and Flora, the two souls from different species but the fate of femininity is the same. Why a woman *Runaway*, being a woman should is plenty of painful experience shown in the *Runaway*.

Carla has fled from home some time recently, murmuring "*She's leaving home, bye-bye*" while "*putting the note on the table and slipping out of the house at five o'clock in the morning*" (*Runaway*, 2004, p. 3332).

Yet, leaving home is painful experience for a woman. Carla departs with a steady hand, except the "*man from the engine exchange*" (ibid, p. 33)

#### **4.3. The blind practices of patriarchy and the dominant culture of Canadian society**

"*Runaway*" is the story of a woman named Carla who, frustrated in her marriage, is helped by a neighbor, Sylvia Jamieson, to escape to Toronto. On the way, however, she discovers herself unable to start a new life and forge a new identity; therefore, she comes back to her husband, Clark, to resume a cooperative life with him. According to Beauvoir "*this world has always belonged to males*" (71) and women are treated as aliens and also women cannot imagine surviving without man. This world is inheritably fine enough with the patriarchal mindset because patriarchy is often derived from the rural mindset in the 1960s these same happenings happen. Although, the existence of this world is based on some facts that women are heavenly weak and sentiment creatures, whereas, the male is the power holder and intellectual (Adam and Eve). Similarly, in the Canadian society, Munro portrays the grave difference between married couples where the male is the only dominant creature, so here Clark describes when he says: "*You were injured, you were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It's a question of respect.*" (*Runaway*, 2004, p.8)

Beauvoir, states in the *Second Sex* that women are treated as "*Other*" (7). Similarly, Carla is treated by her husband as another creature; he has treated both his wife and Goat with the same otherness. Here, Munro also resembles a woman's life with an animal Goat. This evidence shows the blind practices of patriarchal culture that is remained superior and dominant in the rooted of Canadian culture and broadly in world's cultures.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Every civilization experiences widespread women's resistance and oppression, along with the patriarchal customs and dominant culture. However, in order to overcome these universal obstacles, women begin to use writing as a vehicle for their hope and determination for a new existence. The prominent short story writer and Nobel laureate Alice Munro faces the same intense challenges as other women have in the feminism movement. As a result, Munro's

perspective on the lives and conditions of women has been examined from the standpoint of Simone de Beauvoir's Radical Feminism. One important idea in feminism, known as radical feminism, seeks to address the underlying roots of patriarchal society and the oppression of women. Munro's collection of short tales is a call to action to improve the lives and conditions of women as a result. Munro's collection of short tales is a call to action to improve the lives and conditions of women by exposing her readers to these terrible truths. This patriarchal mentality confines both men and women to stereotypical gender roles. Through Carla's husband's harshness and rudeness towards her wife and her goat Flora, who was slaughtered at the end of the story, she reveals all the concrete facts of patriarchal society in Runaway. Carla's marriage to her husband is in doubt, but there is no denying her affection for Flora. Runaway reveals a very private aspect of Carla's life as she flees twice—once from her controlling spouse and once from her family so she can be married. Here, Munro illustrates that marriage is not a means of escaping reality. How about that, You must accept the fact that you are a woman. Without a question, Munro supports women and has spoken up on their behalf around the globe as well as in Canada.

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