

Capturing the cusp of change - Before the Change by Alice Munro

Dr.T.Anantha Vijayah, Assistant Professor of English, School of English and Foreign Languages, Gandhigram Rural Institute - Deemed University

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Abstract:

Canadian Literature is classified by The Encyclopedia Britannica into three segments: From Settlement to 1900; Modern period from 1900 to 1960; and 1960 and beyond considering significant shifts in the Canadian Society and literature. Not many authors traversed these significant shifts. Alice Munro is one writer who was able to write across the shifts and that is perceptible in her writings. Her stories were reflecting the changes in a more subtle manner. This particular research paper would discuss Alice Munro's "Before the Change" the significant shifts in the Canadian Society and literature.

Keywords: Before the change, Alice Munro, Canadian Literature

Beginning her writing career in her teens in the 1940s Munro traversed the shifts but she ceased to write from 2013. Spanning a writing career of nearly seventy plus years, she had straddled a seismic shift in the literary sphere of

Canada. Having been born in the early 30s, she was also privy to stories of the earlier period. As Taine would posit, literary work is not 'a mere play of imagination,' but 'a transcript of contemporary manners and customs' which will enable readers to understand the period through 'literary monuments.' Munro true to the spirit of her changing times had her stories reflect the turbulence and rapid changes in the society. Henry James tacitly approves that a "...novelist must write from his experience, that his 'characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life.'"

Munro claims that her novels reflect her neighborhood. The locale that Munro had crafted for her stories are unequivocally the rural Ontario. In an interview with Metcalf when enquired about the element of autobiography in her writings, Munro responds thus: "I have a standard answer to this ... in incident— no ... in emotion— completely." (81)

Munro's story Before the Change is one such story that is placed on the cusp of a significant shift in society and literature. Published in the New Yorker in August 1998, the story traces events of 1960s. The crux of the story could be identified if one ponders over the title Before the Change.

The story was later published in the anthology *The Love of a Good Woman*. Narrated by a young woman, the story engages the readers through her letters to her fiancé Robin. She straddles the minds of her other male characters like her father, her fiancé and invites them in the discourse on abortion, sex before marriage and things that were controversial at that point of time for the society despite the law that was promulgated around that time permitting abortion. The conflicts at the social, cultural, spiritual and legal levels were glided into the discourse deftly by Munro.

However, the question for an innocent later reader in the 1990s when Munro actually wrote the story would be what change was considered. Munro fixes the time of the story with the introduction of a historical event in the Television history - the live debate of Kennedy and Nixon. This provides a clue as to the time period that the story is positioned. Probing further, Munro has artfully captured the essence of the introduction of contraceptives and the notion about abortion in the then society. True to her words, she had encapsulated the emotions of people at the time of transition when abortion and contraceptives were on the threshold of becoming popular and shifting the attitudes of the Canadian society to a great extent. At cross currents are the religious, emotional, professional moral and health issues that were delicate to be spoken openly but had to be addressed. Munro was fair enough to represent them and allow the readers to decide for themselves never taking a stand but

provides a focused in-depth vision on the emotions of the characters involved.

The widespread use of contraceptives became prevalent in the 1960s (Quarini) It is pertinent to note that oral contraceptive pills were marketed in 1957 (Potts) thus giving freedom for women, however, the church was considering the introduction of contraceptives and abortion as problematic vis-a-vis the faith. The role of Church in contraception, abortion etc was conflicting with the development of advancement in science and technology in this sphere of its application in human progeny and moral stands. The Vatican Council in 1962 deliberated on the so-called artificial contraception in Catholic theology.

Social norms on abortion, popular lack of contraceptives at that point of time increased the need for abortion of unwanted children. While the conflict is within the church, there is a tacit approval of the society in keeping their mouths shut over the abortion executed. Munro, observing the period, removed in space and time, was able to reflect on the tensions as a woman who had gone through the crosscurrents. Through this story in 1990s, Munro was able to provide an objective reading of the situation from both ends of the argument crystallising the period in the story.

In Canada, laws were promulgated to decriminalise abortion, however, it is not just the laws of the government but what significantly affects are the mores of the society. Munro attempts to bring out

the conflict between the laws and the reality.

Even when the change had been promulgated by the government, as a Minister of the church and a public personality, Robin, the unseen intended recipient of the letters written by the narrator was insisting that her fiance - the narrator has to undergo abortion as it might affect his public image that he had sex before marriage and his ecclesiastical profession might be tarnished.

Robin, the narrator's fiance was no better. He was also caving in to the social mores and opinions forcing her to undergo abortion. For Robin, the society's criticism becomes predominant that he insists on the narrator to undergo abortion. Robin was clear in his instructions, "we had to find a doctor. A doctor who would give me an abortion." (281) further he was clear that anyone would find out that she was pregnant even before marriage. Munro portrays the tacit approval of the society for abortion, but does not intend to acknowledge the same in a transparent manner. Munro has clearly portrayed that it was not a stray case of one abortion, but about abortions that the narrator's father executes. Also, the procedure for the abortion is described in detail. Abortion is euphemistically referred to as a 'Special' thus the magnitude of the crisis both physical and mental are glided over.

However, there is a fear of repercussions on what would happen if people come to know about abortion. At the moral level, Munro portrays the Minister and at the social level Munro

employs the medical professional on the fear yapping in the public about abortions executed by him. There is a hint that the medical professional had spent all his earning to silence his nurse who is privy to the abortions.

Even when the law was changed, what was considered unethical remained unethical, though the doctor had the liberty to perform abortion, he had to pay to keep people who are privy to his doing from becoming public. It becomes obvious that either the doctor had not charged for the abortions when his daughter was not able to find any hidden treasure in the house, or there is another thought that runs in the mind of the narrator: did her father spent all his money to silence the nurse who might yap about the abortion or about the people who had undergone the procedure. Aspersion were raised by the narrator whether her doctor father would have bought the silence of the maid Mrs. Barrie by giving her all the money he earned for the 'special' operations. Her basic question was whether he was 'caving in to blackmail'

Apart from the religious minister, a medical doctor, Munro also depicts abortion from the point of a woman who undergoes and anxiety and desperation of a mother who wants her daughter to undergo the 'special.' Immediately after the funeral of her father, the narrator receives a call from a woman, a desperate mother asking for a 'special' for her daughter who is in a bad condition. The desperation is obvious "You must know what this is about. It's very crucial. There are very

special circumstances ___" Even getting to know a doctor who performs the special is not very transparent. The caller confesses that "If you knew what i went through to get this number you would try to help me." (287)

When the whole town seems to be on his side, the narrator's father who performs the 'Specials' despite knowing that the law permits and that the rules were amended to legalise abortion, he was not ready to acknowledge publicly that he performs abortion. The social mores become very powerful.

The narrator had confessed to her father that she had delivered a baby on the seventeenth of July in Ottawa, and that she did not know whether it was a boy or a girl and one this was sure that the baby was adopted right away. The narrator was ready to give her baby in adoption than to abort or to marry while she was pregnant.

Munro even provides a sample 'special' to her readers through the eyes of the narrator by keeping aside Mrs.B from the scene. The patient being Madeleine, it appears as though Madeleine knows Mrs.B and the narrator's father addressing her provides an impression that they are in familiar terms and that this was not her first visit to the doctor. Madeleine compares how the narrator and Mrs.B differ in they say they hold her knees implying that it was not her first time to abort.

When Mrs B was away, the narrator's father invited her to 'give him a hand in the office.' It was for her to keep

her steady. He directed her to keep her "Where's that old woman?" she said.

She's rough," she said.

Her voice was matter-of-fact ... not so nervous ... (274)

Munro calls it through the narrator that abortion is a 'problematic act of mercy' (285) Munro was talking about change in the mindset of the people, not the laws. Munro deliberates the issue of abortion from the point of view of women, a Minister and a medical professional, and how that privacy to the information are exploitative. The crosscurrents on the issue are deliberately interwoven to enable the readers to take their own positions on the issue. When one woman the narrator wanted to beget the child yet be away from it emotionally, there is another woman who wants the pregnancy to be aborted and there is yet another woman - the maid, who was exploitative. On the other hand, we have two male characters, one insists on abortion and the other executes the operation without any compunction. Munro thus through her deft portrayal was effective in capturing the cross currents for posterity.

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