

A Study of Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came over the Mountain'.

Dr. Anuradha Nongmaithem
Assistant Professor of English
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Institute of Technology Agartala
Jirania, West Tripura (India) – 799046

Abstract

The present paper is the study of Alice Munro's *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*. The paper focuses the importance of marriage and commitment in one's life and the paper also validate how cheating in marriage can impact both the partners involved in the relationship. The story revolves around the life of Fiona's, their marriage by any parameter is a mostly happy, although Grant's numerous affairs have deeply debilitated his wife. It traces the journey of Fiona's marriage till her struggles with Alzheimer disease. How the disease has consumed the lovely relationship that was the verse of closing stages since there was less of the bonding between Fiona and Grant. Irony of the sickness is that it was due to the disease that Fiona found her new bonding with a man whom she knew long time back and the most important aspect is that Grant became a better person with more compassionate towards his wife.

Keywords - Marriage, commitment, relationship, Love Alzheimer

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Munro (1931-) is a Canadian writer who needs no introduction in the literary circle. She basically writes only short stories. She has received numerous literary awards including the most prestigious awards the Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 2013 and the Man Booker Prize in 2009 to name a few. Munro's stories are set in locale where the author has lived most of her lives. Her stories are basically of common people's struggles of an ordinary day to day life. The stories are ordinary and presented in a simple manner for common readers, but it carries deeper meaning for those who can read between the lines. Munro's specific unrelenting observations unmask her characters in a way that is simultaneously painful and encouraging making the reader aware of the vulnerability and nuances of the so called 'Life' that we have on this Earth . It is ordinary people that go through the course and problems of relationships and moral values. Thus, it can easily relate the situation of the

character's issues with their own life. *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* is once such story. According from the information collected from the internet it is said that the story was originally published in the December 27, 1999, edition of *The New Yorker*, and also has a movie adaptation "Away from Her" directed by Sarah Polley in 2006.

I have just recently read the book *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001). In the collection of the short stories I like 'Queenie' and 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' a lot and it left a deep impact on me about relationship and marriage. And there is something about the last story of the book 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' that strikes me a lot putting myself in Fiona position. it haunted me for days together after reading the story. I must confess I have heard quite a lot about Alice Munro but never happened to read any of her works before in my life. And I really regretted it now for not reading it earlier. After reading it, I started researching about the story as well as about the author from my fellow colleagues as well as Mr. Google, my source of information. I went through the literature reviews and works written on it. The materials I got enhance the quality of the story. The paper is the outcome of my curiosity and appreciation of the literary piece which Munro has perfected it through her writings. I thought the only way to make a tribute to the paper is through an article paper. I took me three to four months to assimilate and write the paper on it.

II. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

The story is of an old couple Grant, a retired university professor, and his wife, Fiona, who have been together for decades happy married at the initial of their marriage. Their marriage by any stricture is a mostly happy, although Grant's numerous casual affairs have deeply wounded his wife, though Fiona never acknowledges that she knew about the affairs. Later in their marriage live Fiona develops Alzheimer's disease, forcing Grant to leave her to a nursing home so that she could be looked after properly. This is the turning point in their relationship. After a thirty-day waiting period,

when Grant finally visits Fiona, he discovers that she has forgotten him and initiated a relationship with another patient, Aubrey. Grant felt disenchanted and wonders whether this affair might be revenge for his former affairs. But later *on Grant* accepts it as inevitable. Eventually, when Aubrey's wife Marian withdraws Aubrey from the home, Fiona's condition quickly deteriorates. Grant confronts Marian, pleading with her to let Aubrey see Fiona. He was upset to see his wife desperate to be with her new friend and he has vowed to help his wife at any cause. Marian at first refuses to send her husband back to home since she is having difficulty handling Aubrey and her own limited financial resources; Grant also felt that Marian feels alone without her husband. Disappointed, Grant returns home, but when he finds Marian invited him to a singles' dance, he was happy at the prospect of the possibility to convince Marian. He realizes that a relationship with Marian will enable him to reunite Aubrey and Fiona, and he accepts that as a duty of a good husband. Grant soon visits Fiona to inform her that Aubrey will see her again. Fiona, however, has briefly recovered her memory and recognizes her husband. The happiness is short lived and she forgot him again. But Grant was happy that Fiona had found her new happiness with her new friend.

III. THE STUDY

“Do you think it would be fun---“Fiona shouted. “Do you think it would be fun if we got married?”

He took her up on it, he shouted yes. He wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life. (276)

The about passage depicts the spontaneous nature of Fiona, full of life. She takes as life got to offer her. She is full of live and believes the values of holy matrimony. Life is a long journey indeed incomplete without a good partner. I believed a good marriage can be quite satisfactory and fulfilling. The word ‘fun’ hinted the fun loving nature Fiona, full of life and zeal to do new things. She also looks at marriage as a joyous journey and wants to give a name to their relationship, instead of just having an affair. This strongly reveals the character of Fiona who is upright and believes in the tradition of marriage, where in today’s generation many take relationship lightly and for granted.

She was tall, narrow- shouldered woman, seventy years old but still upright and trim, with long legs and long feet, delicate wrists and ankles and tiny, almost comical- looking ears. Her hair, which was light as milkweed fluff, comical- looking pale blond to white somehow without Grant’s noticing exactly

when, and she still wore it down to her shoulders, as her mother had done. (276)

They were married for quite a long time over forty years. Somehow to the researcher one could feel that it was not a happily married life for both. Fiona maintained herself quite well all these years. There is something sad about the above lines, “... comical-looking pale blond to white somehow without Grant’s noticing exactly when...” one could sense that Grant did not even notice that his wife was aging. He seems to start noticing Fiona only when she started suffering from the disease and how feebleness and vulnerability, his wife is at that point of time. Thus, it can be assume that Fiona must be having a lonely life without the attention of her husband, and more so since the couple has no children. They have two domesticated pet dogs named “Boris and Natasha” (287), even they died and left Fiona very lonely after that. After Grant retirement they went back to the country side to their farm house where his wife has inherited from her parents.

Grant was in various short affairs with his students before and some after marriage too, “He chose the woman named Jacqui Adams. She was the opposite of Fiona – short, cushiony, dark- eyed, effusive... The affair lasted for a year, until her husband was transferred.” (302). Grant never had the intension to hurt Fiona personally, but having various affairs shows that something was lacking in their marriage. He has deceived and cheated her and broke the trust of the marriage but never for once he thought of leaving and staying separately from her. Grant “... had never stopped making love to Fiona in spite of disturbing demands elsewhere. He had not stayed away from her for a single night.” (286), though this also reveal that he was very much committed to the marriage. He made sure that the affair never affected his married life. Nothing much in reveal about the problems they had in the marriage in the story. The wonderful twist in the story is when Fiona started showing symptoms of Alzheimer. Grant started feeling sympathy for Fiona. He felt compassionate and genuinely wanted to help Fiona fight with the sickness. The irony is that when Fiona wanted love and attention he was busy having affair and when he started noticing his wife, the sickness has Fiona far away from him into another world.

One important aspect of the story is the theme of marriage, which lasted for decades in the story. The character sketch of Fiona is presented only through Grant’s perspective. There is no actual narration from Fiona’s side. Her feelings and opinions are acknowledged only, and through Grant’s memory. Fiona is an ironic character from anybody’s perspective. She is seventy has a large farm house inherited from her parents, and has sufficient economic support from her parents as well as from her husband,

who, in spite of his sexual attraction for other women, never stays away from his wife even for a single night, and takes good care of family life. Fiona has nothing to worry or complain about except for the fact that for some reason she is unlikely to become a mother. This uneven balance in the marriage could also be one good reason which causes a psychological problem in Fiona and takes away the entire glimmer from her life, although it remains dormant in her behavior. Her whole life bears the mark of barrenness except for Boris and Natasha which she does love them passionately and compensates her emptiness to some extent. Fiona starts working as a 'hospital coordinator of volunteer services (in that everyday world, as she said, where people actually had troubles that were not related to drugs or sex or intellectual squabbles)' (287), to past her time. Life for them became monotonous and boring after they started living in the farm house, they 'were not sociable, but gradually made some friends' (287). Their marriage after 'nearly fifty years' (293) now is an empty shell supported merely by commitment of marriage. Fiona feels more exhausted than ever and longs for "a new life" (287). However, passion is not enough for long term preservation of love and marriage. Real marriage is not about fun and passion. It's a lifelong promise to stay beside each other and having a healthy relationship. Passionate love between them diminishes as the positive force of the relationship is taken over by opposite forces. In Grant and Fiona's cases, the most violent force striking their relationship is the enticement of other women. Grant comes in touch with waves of other women, looking for that passionate love once again outside the marriage.

Most of the story focuses on the illness of Fiona's and her stay in Meadowlake. The relationship between Grant and Fiona took a different turn in the wake of the demise of the two dogs and the death of Fiona's mother, leaving her psychologically alone all the more. Incidentally, she suffers from a type of memory loss, which Grant notices,

... so many little yellow notes stuck up all over the house. That was not entirely new. She'd always written things down—the title of a book she'd heard mentioned on the radio or the jobs she wanted to make sure she did that day. Even her morning schedule was written down – he found it mystifying and touching in its precision. (277)

Grant remains always careful, yet she starts showing unnatural signs of memory loss or Alzheimer's disease. However, Fiona's lifestyle suggests a sense of incompleteness and not belonging in her. Grant notices that, '... She would stand in doorways trying to figure out where she was going. She forgot to turn on the burner under the vegetables or put water in the

coffeemaker. She asked Grant when they'd moved to this house' (278). The rest of the story focuses on the nursing home, with occasional flashbacks to Grant's infidelities or to Fiona's earliest signs of memory loss. She keeps doing things that remind him she is losing her memory. Grant tried his level best to make sense with Fiona and avoid putting her in Meadowlake and took care of her as much as possible.

Life took a different turn for Fiona in Meadowlake. During her first 30 days there -- during which Grant is not permitted to visit -- Fiona seems to forget her marriage to Grant and develops a strong attachment to a resident named Aubrey. She found a new friend named Aubrey. Actually ones come to know that Aubrey and Fiona knew each other before they met again in the nursing home. Fiona discloses to Grant that they, 'He worked in the store. The hardware store where my grandpa used to shop. He and I always kidding around and he could not get up the nerve to ask me out' (290). Grant notices that Fiona is happy to found her long-lost friend and brings all the memory back to them. He finds it difficult to accept the newly found relationship between the two victims of trauma and he was desperate to know from Fiona whether she still remembers him or not. Grant came to know that Fiona is fondly attracted to Aubrey and wants to stay with him always in the nursing home. He wanted to try all possible way to find out about Aurey and came to know that he is only in temporarily residence, while his wife takes a much-needed holiday. Whenever Aubrey's wife takes Aubrey from the nursing home, Fiona is distressed. Grant could see Fiona grieving and becoming more fragile.

One can find the change in Grant perspective towards their relationship. He is more of giving nature and shows concerned over his wife and did his best to make up for those time that he couldn't give all those years. It is evident that Grant misses Fiona intensely. Grant is enveloped by solitude without Fiona by his side, for Fiona has wholly integrated into his life over the years. Everything he does, each object in the house is a reminder of Fiona.

He is ready to going into another affair to make sure that Fiona's wish to stay with Aubrey comes true. The irony is that, "It would be a challenge. A challenge and a creditable feat. Also a joke that could never be confided to anybody- to think that by his bad behavior he'd be doing good for Fiona" (320). As the story comes to an end one could sense that Grant is more devoted and took maximum care of his wife. He just did not discard his wife, and stood by her in the course of her sickness. The word "Mountain" in title of the story, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" can be

synonymous with marriage. The marriage between Grant and Fiona stood like the mountain with ups and down, but the like the mountain standing upright their marriage stood the test of time.

IV. CONCLUSION

The story of Grant and Fiona is interwoven with love, aging, affair, isolation and disease. The story juxtaposes the past and the present and portrays destruction of aging vividly, and the challenges that one need to overcome, and the constant care and devotion. Love knows no age or death, and it has no ending. The story is a standing example that depicts love judiciously as it is, complicated and ever-changing, evolving, never arriving at a certain end. With their unbreakable love, Grant and Fiona keep coming back to each other despite all forces tearing them apart. One can forgive Grant for betraying Fiona at the beginning of their married life, because he stood strong and took up a big responsibility of looking after his wife at the later part of their life, which many men would have given up by

leaving their wife to suffer alone.

REFERENCES

- [1] Munro, Alice. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship Marriage*. Vintage: London, 2001. Print.
- [2] "Alice Munro". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Munro
- [3] <https://study.com/academy/lesson/alice-munros-away-from-her-summary.html>
- [4] <https://www.thoughtco.com/analysis-bear-came-over-the-mountain-2990517>
- [5] <https://prezi.com/klijsgebjw2w/the-bear-came-over-the-mountain/>
- [6] Balestra, Gianfranco. "Aging, Memory And Identity: Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over The Mountain" And "In Sight Of The Lake". <https://riviste.forumeditrice.it/oltreoceano/article/view/740>
- [7] Wei, P., & Tang, Y. (2015). A Study of Aging and Love in "The Bear Came over the Mountain". *Advances in Literary Study*, 3, 36-40 <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/als.2015.32006>