

IMAGES OF MIGRANTS IN ALICE MUNRO'S SHORT STORIES: DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES



Kristina Vorontsova

ORCID: 0000-0001-9230-1043

Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities
Faculty of Humanities

Abstract

This paper focuses on the issues of the mediating role of English language and specific accents in the process of communication between Canadians and migrants from Europe. The author uses methods of close reading to reveal a variety of specific social patterns illustrating different levels of interpersonal attitudes in dialogues with migrants on the material of short stories from the collection “Runaway” (2004) by Alice Munro. While depicting Aliens, the writer utilises speech characterization as one of the most important artistic tools. Furthermore, in the short stories by Alice Munro, an attitude to people who speak differently becomes a “litmus paper” to portray the decaying intellectual life of the New World.

Key words

Alice Munro; geopoetics; migrants; accents; imagology; hate speech

Introduction

Alice Munro (1931–) is a crucial figure of contemporary English Canadian literature. She is well-known for her psychological short stories, vivid regional pictures of Canada, and critiques of conservative gender and social hierarchies. Her works have provoked great interest abroad, especially after 2013, when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In fact, it was the very first Nobel Prize in the whole history of Canadian literature.

The Nobel Committee’s motivation was rather laconic and specific: “master of the contemporary short story” (The Nobel Prize 2013). It was fair enough because Alice Munro is a rare example of a writer focused on this genre exclusively, so that she has been called “our Chekhov” (Merkin 2004) by colleagues and critics as a sign of recognition. Munro gave up writing in 2012 because of her age; her published body of works consists of 14 original short-story collections. In a telephone interview following the announcement of the winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature,

Alice Munro declared that this award was very meaningful “not just for me but for the short story in general. Because it’s often sort of brushed off, you know, as something that people do before they write their first novel. And I would like it to come to the fore, without any strings attached, so that there doesn’t have to be a novel” (Interview with Alice Munro 2019).

Munro’s characters, who are generally residents of small provincial towns in her native Huron County, usually represent rather universal problems, such as: women vs. men, discrimination, domestic violence, economic inequality, emotions and rationality, the inability to change anything in their life (the so-called existential “paralysis” in Joyce’s understanding of this phenomenon), etc. Thus, the author always protests when she is defined as a regional writer in the style of William Faulkner: “And I use the region where I grew up a lot. But I don’t have any idea of writing to show the kind of things that happen in a certain place. These things happen and the place is part of it. But in a way it’s incidental” (Munro in Hancock 1987, 200).

Despite being a Canadian writer, Alice Munro never mentions either French-speaking Canadians or political problems connected to the natural division of the country and its diverse culture. Writing about the 60s and the 70s of the 20th century, she avoids any mention of the separatist moods and conflicts inside Canadian society (especially those taking place in Quebec), whereas migrants from the Old World seem to be a compelling source of images, cultural intertexts, and the main reason to question the decaying intellectual life of the New World.

In her speeches and interviews, Alice Munro highlighted many times that she had never been a political person but rather a cultural one (Asberg 2014, 330). Taking that and her strong intention to be a universal writer into the account, it is possible to speculate why the author focuses on those who embody different cultures outside Canada, aliens and strangers, and not on her French-speaking compatriots. Moreover, Culture broadly understood, is a key element of the postmodern epoch. Munro is interested in cultures, but really remote and diverse ones only: Russia, Greece, Montenegro, Scandinavia. So that even the US is not a frequent part of her geopoetics: it seems to be too close and too similar.

In contrast, Europe as a part of the Old World with its sophisticated art, ancient traditions in philosophy and literature, as well as its peculiar cuisine, in Munro’s short stories becomes a “litmus paper” (Vorontsova 2019) in order to test commonplace Canadians: who is able to perceive the treasures of world’s geoculture, and who is not because of intellectual limitations?

Furthermore, quite often Europeans express real emotions and true love, while Canadians are guided by reason and pragmatism. Only outsiders, people who do not belong entirely to the traditional “normal” society, understand European culture and are possessed with it. Interestingly, the majority of them are educated women whose intelligence is treated as “a limp or an extra thumb” (Munro 2004, 53) and who do not

fit the pattern of social expectations: Munro's favourite heroines are primarily unmarried and have an independent feministic point of view. So, it is they who are on the same level as the migrants from Europe despised by the middle-class majority, and who are able to overcome the big cultural gap between Europeans and Canadians. Munro regularly creates images of strangers from the Old World and pays special attention to such an important artistic device as a speech characterization.

The main goal of this investigation is to analyze different examples of images of Europeans from the short-story collection "Runaway" (2004) in order to point out the mediating role of language in the process of communication with a special emphasis on accents in the intercultural dialogue.

1. Cultural and Social Background of "Runaway"

According to the 2016 census conducted by Statistics Canada, every fifth Canadian was born abroad (Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity 2017). Moreover, relevant sociological studies claim that Canada now is believed to be one of the most "receptive to immigration among western nations" (Markus 2014, 10). Such is the long-term impact of five waves of immigration that took place from the 18th century till now and the current economic needs of the country caused by an aging demographic.

"Runaway's" short stories are set mostly in Ontario during the 50s and 60s, so it is possible to link events in Munro's fiction to the so-called fourth wave of immigration which was a result of the Second World War and the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

Most migrants came to Canada from Eastern and Southern Europe, but it must be emphasized that oriental exclusion (especially anti-Chinese sentiment) and the strong support given to white immigration were key elements of official policy during the entire 20th century. Consequently, in Munro's short stories the white male European migrant seems typical and credible (in "Runaway" only one of them is female but she too has vivid masculine features). On the one hand, there is no place for racism in such conditions, but, on the other hand, discrimination here takes a cultural form. Everything that cannot be understood is tagged as bizarre, stupid, eccentric, and deviant: from Chagall's modernistic paintings to strong European coffee.

2. Negative Perception of Accents and Images of the Alien in "Trespases"

In "Runaway", the author highlights that commonplace provincial Canadians, even educated and sophisticated in their own point of view, have a number of stereotypes and preconceptions towards people belonging to different cultures.

Their pejorative designations make intercultural dialogues almost impossible. It is no longer a process of communication on the same level. For example, Mr. Palagian

from a short story “Trespasses”, who is the hotel and bar owner and who might be an Armenian judging by his surname, “had a thick—and, it seemed, disdainful accent” (Munro 2004, 198). Of course, this characteristic—“disdainful”—belongs not to the author but to the characters Harry and Eileen, a married couple, representatives of the white middle-class English-speaking majority, who are supposed to be modern people but demonstrate obsolete stereotypes and negative attitudes to those who are not similar to them. They evaluate the behavior and terseness of Mr. Palagian sarcastically—behind his back, of course (once again, there is no room for an intercultural dialogue, literally and figuratively):

“Friendly”, Eileen said.

“European”, said Harry. “It’s cultural. They don’t feel obliged to smile all the time”. He pointed out things in the dining room that were just the same—the high ceiling, the slowly rotating fan, even a murky oil painting showing a hunting dog with a rusty-feathered bird in its mouth (Munro 2004, 198).

Harry would like to seem an expert in the topic of different ethos and a more than insightful psychologist, but his generalization about Europeans demonstrates his inability and even reluctance to distinguish nations of the Old World and learn their culture. Not only does language in “Trespasses” not play the role of a mediator, it is also a specific and powerful tool of belittling.

Although the narrative is in the third person, the reader understands that Mr. Palagian is depicted through Eileen and Harry’s pejorative perception:

He wore a shirt and tie, a cardigan, and trousers that looked as if they had grown together—all soft, rumped, fuzzy, like an outer skin that was flaky and graying as his real skin must be underneath (Munro 2004, 199).

According to Harry and Eileen, everything around Mr. Palagian is miserable, bleak and gloomy, including his clothes and furniture. The narrator states that he really never smiles and says only necessary words, avoiding the small talk, which is a part of western culture, but he really fits the behavioral pattern of Caucasian nations and their conceptions of masculinity: less words, more actions.

Ironically, Harry “was hoping that one day Mr. Palagian would thaw out and tell the story of his life” (Munro 2004, 201), but the main purpose was not a sense of community or canadianization of the migrant. Harry’s interest was strictly self-interested: “Someone like Mr. Palagian—or even that fat tough-talking waitress, he said—could be harboring a contemporary tragedy or adventure which would make

a best seller” (Munro 2004, 201). The formula “someone like Mr. Palagian” is evidence of great disrespect and it can be characterized as an example of “hate speech”. Harry, despite his creative ambitions, is not able to hide his disgust and repulsion. It is also worth mentioning that in his hierarchy non-attractive women are even worse than immigrants. Thus, Munro follows Edgar Allan Poe and Ernest Hemingway’s thoughts that in a piece of writing every word must contribute. In her short stories, literally every word is meaningful and illustrates the inner world of the characters and their hidden (sometimes hidden from themselves) intentions.

3. Accents as Triggers for Intercultural Dialogues in “Tricks”

In Alice Munro’s artistic world, only losers who are not able to gain success in their social life (e.g. smart unmarried women) are on the same page as migrants. It is they who perceive accents and foreign languages as a sign of different possibilities and exotic countries, so-called “parageographical images” (Zamyatin 2003, 48). According to Dmitry Zamyatin, any cultural, historiographic, economic, or political notion has a strong space genic component and drives geographical concepts and associations connected with one or another territory. In the case of Munro’s heroines, who feel alienation at home, in Canada, for many of them accents become a cultural code to recognize outsiders alienated for different reasons but with the same result.

A vivid example of such an outsider is Robin from the short story “Tricks”: a twenty-six-year-old young woman and a nurse, she is the only one from her whole neighborhood who is able to understand and, moreover, really likes Shakespeare, and because of it she is treated as an eccentric and almost crazy person by her own family. In their philistine opinion, she is different and abnormal going to the theatre alone. After the annual performance of Shakespeare in Stratford Robin loses her purse and by chance becomes acquainted with a total stranger, Danilo Adzic from Bjelojevici, Montenegro (former a part of Yugoslavia). As if in evidence of her reputation as an adventuress, Robin accepts his invitation to the dinner.

A young woman and Danilo have a lot of things in common that nobody else could understand, for instance, both love Shakespeare and going anywhere by train. In contrast to Harry and Eileen from “Trespases”, it is precisely Danilo’s accent that makes him reliable and credible for Robin:

She was not worried. Afterwards she wondered about that. Without a moment’s hesitation she had accepted his offer of help, allowed him to rescue her, found it entirely natural that he should not carry money with him on his walks but could get it from the till in his shop.

A reason for this might have been his accent. Some of the nurses mocked the accents of the Dutch farmers and their wives—behind their backs, of course. So, Robin had got

into the habit of treating such people with special consideration, as if they had speech impediments, or even some mental slowness, though she knew that this was nonsense. An accent, therefore, roused in her a certain benevolence and politeness (Munro 2004, 243).

Pathographic comparisons make Robin as an intelligent woman, who according to Canadian society has “an extra thumb”, feel herself related to this foreigner: they are both Aliens, Others not in a cultural but ontological sense. As a nurse she “diagnoses” herself and the immigrant.

Unlike Harry, Robin is actually interested in who Danilo is and which culture he belongs to. She even tries to figure it out from her experience with accents. The narrator shows that her character does not do it because she is falling in love with a stranger: she always was curious and attentive towards migrants:

What was it? It was not French or Dutch—the two accents that she thought she could recognize, French from school and Dutch from the immigrants who were sometimes patients in the hospital (Munro 2004, 243).

While being a sensitive person obsessed with the theatre, Robin pays much attention also to the manner of speaking: “Foreigners talked differently, leaving a bit of space around the words, the way actors do” (Munro 2004, 245). Theatrical symbolism prevails and is evaluated positively. For Robin being an actor means to be different, to be sophisticated, not to be artificial or unnatural.

At the same time, if it comes to the male character of this short story, his main intention is to adapt to the new for him cultural space of Canada: he speaks perfect English, listens to jazz, reads classical plays, and even changes his name to a more Canadian variant. He introduces himself to Robin: “Danilo. But Daniel here” (Munro 2004, 249). According to mythology and magical thinking, the name defines the inner nature, so that in some archaic cultures it is hidden and may be shared only with very close relatives. The same conception lies in the basis of the fantasy world from the cult novel “A Wizard of Earthsea” (1968) by Ursula K. Le Guin: magic there is possible because wizards know the true names of things or people and for this reason have some power over them. It is remarkable that Alice Munro’s Danilo shares his Serbian “true name” with Robin, who is also a total stranger, only after telling her the whole story of his life; something which could be interpreted as an act of trust.

Besides that, Robin finds out that he might have moved to Canada because of the political situation in Yugoslavia. So, the male character in this context could be defined in terms of exile. According to the theorist of postcolonialism Edward Said, “in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivation

felt at not being with others in the communal habitation [...] Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (Said 2000, 140). Feeling as an alienated, “displaced person”, despite his attempts to adapt to Canada, Danilo tries to recreate his motherland partly inside his clock shop in Stratford. Edward Said claims: “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (Said 2000, 148). Interestingly, language plays an extremely important role in this process of overlapping realities and crossing borders. Robin at Danilo’s place sees the magazines printed “in a language she could neither read nor identify” (Munro 2004, 246) and it is they that pique her attention the most. The Serb explains that his mother tongue is Serbian, or Serbo-Croatian, and the alphabet is “like Greek” (Munro 2004, 246). It is remarkable that in the imaginative structure of “Runaway” Greece is always associated with true love, blind passion and irrationality. Moreover, the Cyrillic alphabet implicitly appears in the collection again and again with mentions of “Anna Karenina” by Leo Tolstoy, the classical Russian novel read and discussed by different heroines and which is supposed to be one more symbol of animal passion and feelings prevailing over reason.

Robin perceives cultural combinations through the language: “A small piece of a foreign world on Downie Street in Stratford. Montenegro. Cyrillic alphabet” (Munro 2004, 246). It is she who lives in an almost homogenic neighbourhood and encounters a different culture not with disdain, like Harry and Eileen or her own sister Joanne, but with admiration and sincere concern. She falls in love with Danilo and his native culture and language at the same time. For her the one means the other. Later, when Danilo has left Canada in order to assist his sick brother, Robin explores everything she is able to find at the library about Montenegro, paying special attention to the geographical “names”, toponyms: “She hardly retained a word of what she read. Except the name, the real name of Montenegro, which she did not know how to pronounce. Crna Gora” (Munro 2004, 254).

As with the “true name” of a man, Robin can be seen as a person who is worthy enough to investigate the soul of the whole nation. Danilo embodies Montenegrins as evidenced in another of Said’s statements: “We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy” (Said 2000, 147). So, it seems logical that Robin attempts to get to know her beloved through geographical maps, Montenegrin history and the difficult Serbian language. Montenegro is *terra incognita* for a Canadian nurse at the very beginning, like Danilo himself, and she investigates territories like his soul through “true names”:

She looked at maps, where it was hard enough to find the country itself, but possible finally, with a magnifying glass, to become familiar with the names of various towns

(none of them Belojevici) and with the rivers Moraca and Tara, and the shaded mountain ranges, which seemed to be everywhere but in the Zeta Valley (Munro 2004, 254).

Thus, explorations of the map and toponyms become an analogy to some very intimate physiological acts between the separated characters:

What she must have been trying to do—and what she at least half succeeded in doing—was to settle Danilo into some real place and a real past, to think that these names she was learning must have been known to him, this history must have been what he learned in school, some of this places must have been visited by him as a child or as a young man. And were being visited, perhaps, by him now. When she touched a printed name with her finger, she might have touched the very place he was in. (Munro 2004, 254).

Geography here is conveyed through poetry of true names and toponyms. And for Robin it is a challenging task to understand her beloved man while he is absent. In this context the cultural dialogue is blurred and distracted.

But it also could be treated as a hint for what Alice Munro's characters are going to experience in a year. Ironically, Robin, who struggles with the Serbian language and cannot read "Crna Gora" properly will not be happily in love with Danilo because of misunderstandings: she does not know that a man, who closes the door in front of her face and who does not want to communicate, is not her lover but his sick twin-brother. Language here in general is a great metaphor of a soul, of a nation and a love story.

Conclusion

To sum up, in "Runaway" intercultural dialogues are reconstructed as a part of commonplace Canadian life and language as a mediator is able to play different roles in these interactions between migrants and ordinary Canadians. Accents seem to be a distinguishing sign tagging *the Other, the Alien* in the ontological or cultural sense. Migrants, who are perceived *a priori* as losers and even marginals, have a lot of things in common with women who dare to stand out of the crowd in a patriarchal society and who would not like to fit in. It is no wonder they could find a common language, and accents here are key elements of future communication. Thus, it could be said that migration issues in these stories are related to gender issues closely.

Generally speaking, in short stories by Alice Munro, they play two main roles. On the one hand, sometimes they could be a recognizable cultural code in communication between the Canadian outsiders and strangers from Europe while,

on the other hand, accents may also be a trigger for the emergence of ethnic and social stereotypes and even “hate speech”.

In this paper, two short stories (“Tricks” and “Trespasses”) from the collection “Runaway” were analyzed in the context of social and Geocultural processes in Canada of the 50s and 60s. Migration is still considered as a crucial part of Canadian international policy as well as inner separatist moods among French-speaking and Native-American population. It is said that cultural gaps between Quebec and the rest of regions are relevant even nowadays, but migrants are perceived with tolerance as a normal part of everyday life in the global world. However, in the middle of the 20th century, Canada was an almost homogenic country with a white English-speaking majority of Irish descent, which caused a lot of problems and prejudices towards foreigners. Consequently, the short stories by Alice Munro, an author who witnessed all these social changes herself, can be read as a testimony.

Certainly, this topic demands further investigation with other short story collections by the author in order to reveal global tendencies and build up the typology of images of migrants as different invariants representing cultural dialogues.

References

- “Alice Munro: In Her Own Words”. 2014. Interview by Stefan Asberg. In *The Nobel Prizes*, 323–337. Sagamore Beach: Watson Publishing International LLC.
- Hancock, Geoff. 1987. “Alice Munro”. In *Canadian Writers at Work: Interviews with Geoff Hancock*, 187–224. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- “Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census”. 2017. *Statistics Canada. Government of Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.pdf?st=RyvXwMf->
- “Interview with Alice Munro”. 2019. Interview by Adam Smith. *NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019*. (19 July). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/munro/25382-interview-with-alice-munro/>.
- Markus, Andrew. 2014. “Attitudes to Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Australia”. *Journal of Sociology* 50, no. 1, 10–22.
- Merkin, Daphne. 2004. “Northern Exposure.” *The New York Times* (24 October). <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/24/magazine/northern-exposures.html>.
- Munro, Alice. 2004. *Runaway*. New York: Vintage International.
- Said, Edward. 2000. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2013”. 2019. *NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019*. (19 July). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/summary/>.

Vorontsova, Kristina. 2019. "Staryj svet glazami Novogo sveta: kompleks lokal'nyh tekstov v sbornike rasskazov Elis Manro 'Beglyanka'". [Old World through the Eyes of the New World: a complex of local texts in Alice Munro's "Runaway" in literature and folklore]. In *Vostok–Zapad: prostranstvo lokal'nogo teksta v literature i fol'klоре* [East–West: Local Text Space in Literature and Folklore], edited by Nadezhda Tropkina, 398–404. Volgograd: Peremena.

Zamyatin, Dmitry. 2003. *Gumanitarnaya geografiya: prostranstvo i yazyk geograficheskikh obrazov* [Humanitarian Geography: Space and Language of Geographical Images]. Sankt-Peterburg: Alejteja.
