

# **Family Bond and Traumatic Pathology in Alice Munro's**

## **"The Bear Came Over the Mountain"**

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### **Abstract**

Alice Munro (1931–), Canadian author and winner of the Man Booker International Prize in 2009, has written a number of short stories. "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is a story of love, romantic affairs, family relationship, enigma of romance and psychological disorientation. The story reveals family bond through mental depression and physical inability, which, to a large extent, are traumatic. Munro's presentation of human relationship and family bond gets a new dimension from psychopathological point of view. The story reveals a bizarre relationship between two unacquainted families, members of which suffer from two different types of trauma: psychic hysteria and physical immobility. Munro shows the effect of such frenzy on individuals as well as on societal connection. This paper attempts to illustrate, from psychoanalytic point of view, the nature of traumatic pathology and its testimony in the lives of individuals and how its outcome can be a major device in understanding human relationship.

"The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is a story of love and psychological disorientation. Alice Munro portrays two families in a suburban area in Ontario in Canada. The family around which the story develops comprises the husband Grant, a retired university professor, and his wife Fiona, a former hospital employee. This couple is childless. The other family has a paralyzed husband Aubrey, his wife Marian, housewife, and a son, who, along with his wife and children, lives far away from the parents. These two families are not related with each other, nor are they located in the same area. As the story proceeds, some secrets and past life of the characters are brought to light. These happenings leave their marks on the lives of these individuals with a strong sense of helplessness yet responsibility. Munro attributes universality on the characters as the surnames of the families are not mentioned. Her intention is obvious: these are real-life characters who can be met anywhere. Fiona, circling whom the story evolves, used to live in her parents'

house even after her marriage, unlike other married women. She is regarded as a woman who enjoys life and finds delight in all her activities. It is she who first proposed to Grant. And Grant's acceptance of that proposal shows that he feels the same zeal. A married life thus begun may be regarded as a great source of happiness. Setting the story with such a background, the author consequently raises the issue of relationship: what might happen to a family when one partner unintentionally fails to recognize the other, who has every opportunity to depart or to remain empathetic.

Munro presents Fiona as a paradoxical character in her story. This lady, who is seventy by the end of the story, has a large farm house by means of inheritance 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 biological reason she is unlikely to become a mother. This biological imbalance causes a psychological problem in Fiona and takes away the entire spark from her life, although it remains quiescent in her behaviour. Her whole life bears the mark of emptiness, unlike her mother's life, and this sense of emptiness lets her adopt Boris and Natasha, two wolfhounds, as a favour to a friend. Devoting her life to them, which she does passionately, may compensate her emptiness to some extent, yet the core remains as vacant as it had been at the beginning. Incidentally, she suffers from a type of memory loss, which Grant notices as he finds tiny notes on yellow papers all over the house. Munro sets this abnormality in her in the wake of the demise of the two dogs and the death of her mother, leaving her psychologically alone all the more. Her husband remains always careful, yet she starts showing unnatural signs of memory loss or dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Munro does not provide with any direct explanation for this. However, Fiona's lifestyle suggests a sense of incompleteness in her. At the age of seventy, she wears her hair down the way her mother used to wear, showing her subconscious attachment to her mother's way of life. In other words, Fiona, even at this age, feels and misses the sense of belonging to her mother without proclamation but through concealed acknowledgement. Thus begins the trauma in her life. Lenore Terr, a

psychiatrist, mentions that psychic trauma begins when “a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (8). Fiona is caught in two losses: one, external – loss of the substitute for her dormant motherhood, the other, psychic – the end of familial care and responsibilities. Her unconscious yet uncontrolled behaviour and attitude worries both Grant and Fiona. After consulting the doctor, they both agree that she be taken to a sanctuary for such patients at Meadowlake.

Fiona’s relocation gives the story a new dimension and brings out some key aspects of traumatic pathology. Earlier, it was only sort of amnesia in Fiona. Her forgetfulness was coerced by her own self. Grant even recalls incidents when she could call him over phone but forgot the way of returning home. Her unvoiced sufferings worsened as she forgot her way home from a supermarket and then asked a policeman to find the two dead wolfhounds, which, she believed were alive. Incidents like these recur in the story only to serve Munro’s purpose of revealing the periphery of traumatic pathology and its consequence in the life of an individual. Trauma is “an injury to mind or body that requires *structural repair* . . .” (qtd. in Horvitz 5). Trauma’s role in literature is “from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ both to the victim and to the community” (qtd. in Horvitz 19). In this story, the community is formed by Grant, Fiona, Marian and Aubrey, who, years ago, became a victim of physical immobility owing to the attack of a certain bug on a holiday. Grant’s support scarcely helps Fiona recover. So, she has to go to the nursing home at Meadowlake, where she incidentally meets Aubrey, who is left there for a few weeks by Marian, who is exhausted taking care of her husband and now needs a break.

The relationship between Fiona and Aubrey is not new. Fiona discloses to Grant that they “were always kidding around and he could not get up the nerve to ask me out. Till the very last weekend and he took me to a ball game” (Munro 290). Now meeting a long-lost friend brings all the memory back to them. This unity has an adverse interpretation for Grant in the sense that he finds it difficult to accept the newly found relationship between the two victims of trauma. For him, Fiona has been admitted at Meadowlake for recovery; but her conditions seem to run in the

opposite direction, as he asks Kristy, a nurse, about Fiona whether she knows who he really is. Grant imagines that she is passing through another phase of trauma. Her adolescent experience has been renovated in the old age in the form of a break, a relief in her life. As a conscious and caring husband, Grant finds it difficult to swallow. Fiona's past life, which has revived now, takes away all the memory of Grant, who becomes a respectful burden for her in that sanctuary. She finds pleasure in the presence of Aubrey, her admirer once, and tries to ignore Grant on the ground to assist Aubrey who is playing cards. As Cathy Caruth writes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (5). Fiona is now obsessed with that early memory of Aubrey. But its impact is a renewed experience not only for her but also for Aubrey, because both of them feel that bygone passion now. He becomes baffled as she goes away from him even for a moment and cannot continue the game of cards any longer. His dependence on Fiona and her sense of attachment to him can be interpreted as an outburst of an imploration to belong to each other, ignoring the fact of who and where they are at this moment. Fiona's married life has never shown any sign of early affairs; but now she transcends herself beyond her conscious mood and dives in the past, having been present in the past. Both the present and the past are perplexing for them. A belated attachment marks the characteristics of their trauma, as Caruth says, "the impact of traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (*Trauma* 9). The earlier detachment from and the present attachment to Aubrey show that Fiona suffers from psychic as well as psychosexual trauma.

Fiona, on the one hand, treats Grant as a visitor about whom she has a feeling of liability - because she cannot recognize him; on the other hand, deals with Aubrey as a source of reliability. Her present situational behaviour is not intentional. A psychoanalytic study might help understand her hysteric condition. Freud says:

The mind of the hysterical patient is full of active yet unconscious ideas; all her symptoms proceed from such ideas. . . . If she is executing the jerks and movements constituting her 'fit', she does not even consciously represent to

herself the intended actions, and she may perceive those actions with the detached feelings of an onlooker. (*The Essentials* 137)

Meadowlake is a frustrating place for Grant, for he finds Fiona's condition ever deteriorating. Or, to put it in another way, Fiona treats her husband as an external, alien force and pays all her attention to that whim Aubrey – unconsciously. Even when Grant talks about her hair-cut, she remains nonchalant, "Why – I never missed it" (Munro 299). Her pleasure in the sanctuary is tormented with the traumatic situation of Aubrey, who is about to go home with his wife Marian and cannot tolerate the separation. Fiona tries to console him by calling him "honey" and promises a reciprocal meeting at each other's place. Her assurance confirms that the adolescent fear and anxiety have not gone away from her after all, and it now threatens her pleasure. She then falls into hysteria. Freud further analyzes the situation, "there exists in the mind a strong *tendency* towards the pleasure principle, but that that tendency is opposed by certain other forces or circumstances, so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure" (*The Essentials* 220). Fiona becomes a dual character who lives in "in-between spaces or on the margins" (qtd. in Sanders 142). She witnesses a sense of total withdrawal from her surroundings as well as numbness, which is "the very paradoxical structure of *indirectness* in psychical trauma" (Caruth, "Violence and Time" 24). At the time of departure, both Fiona and Aubrey shed tears, yet this incident reveals that they are becoming conscious of their early memories and present situation. Their separation from Meadowlake, unintentional though it is, ensures not only their traumatic reality but also their return to their former social context, which "affirms and protects the victim and . . . joins victim and witness in a common alliance" (Herman 9). Their fate is inevitable, like their pubescent experience. Both of them are hysterics, and "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (qtd. in Waugh 499).

The dilemma that Grant faces during all these events is what to do with Fiona's psychological condition – whether to send her for further cure or simply let her meet Aubrey sporadically. On his part, he is not as honest as Fiona thought of him. Earlier, he developed one relationship after another, illicit ones, with wives of colleagues or housewives-cum-students of his university, yet not getting much

involved in any. He cares much for Fiona, yet is subjugated by his passion for other women. This duality makes him a victim of psychosexual distortion. He is caught in it to such an extent that he even experiences a nightmare with a threat of suicide of a woman in case he walks out on her. Nothing happens; he sighs and later continues his errands. But in the social context of Canada, it is not unbecoming of Grant, since "Sexual desire – in fact, all sexuality – is influenced by the cultural, personal, and situational" (qtd. in Cherlin 150). The oddities that Fiona shows are not to be blamed; nor are those of Grant or Aubrey. All of them are sufferers of multifarious trauma, and are entangled in a hysterical situation. This can be defined as traumatic catastrophe. All of them ultimately go to their respective places. At least, they return to the present. They share one another's trauma and try to feel it. That is why, Grant does not complain to Marian about Aubrey's behaviour. He is primarily concerned with the psychic condition of Fiona. He also feels his limitations as an honest husband. For him, "the traumas of one are the traumas of the other. The hysteria of women and the combat neurosis of men are one" (Herman 32). Both Grant and Fiona are subjects to private and public worlds, which are interconnected and inseparable. Grant manages to control both; Fiona cannot.

One of Munro's aims in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is the question of love: what might happen to a love relationship if one becomes so ill as not to remember the other. In dealing with this subject, she adopts a theoretical aspect: trauma. Interpreting it from her point of view brings the issues of conscious and unconscious, psychic and physical. When Grant desperately tries to convince Marian to let Aubrey pay a visit to Fiona, Marian steadfastly rejects the idea, but proposes him over telephone to join her at a social gathering. Though at the first meeting they dislike each other, later they come close to each other with their own intention. Marian's longing for a sexual attachment invokes the same feeling in Grant also, though both of them are aware that they have some familial liabilities at the same time. It is the same passion that entices Fiona and Aubrey to each other in their unconscious minds. As Freud explains:

The Unconscious is the greater sphere that includes the smaller sphere of the Conscious; everything conscious has a prior stage that is unconscious, whereas the Unconscious can remain at this stage and still claim to have the full value of

a psychical function. The Unconscious is the true reality of the psyche . . . (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 405)

In this way, Munro brings out some other psychic issues of middle age and women in society. Patriarchal atmosphere reigns in Grant's house. The other house, though apparently dominated by Marian, is constrained with economic condition, which is supported sometimes by her son. Thus, it can be said that both the families are in patriarchal atmosphere. "In patriarchal logic," writes Graham Allen, "man is always what woman is not. Thus . . . if man is associated with mind and with rationality, woman is associated with body and with madness" (152). The vice-versa is also true. Marian's rationality is countered by her intention of a free evening with Grant; Grant's rationality is controlled by his intention of the same, proposed evening. Furthermore, Grant tries to convince Marian to let Aubrey visit Fiona. This effort gives him an opportunity to establish a communion with her and thus to have her as his "sexual objectification" (Storey 114).

Yet, the other two elderly persons are not above this feeling, though they are not as able-minded as Grant and Marian. Fiona and Aubrey try to have that satisfaction, which they do not seem to find properly from their real life-partners. This reciprocity has two interpretations, "the pleasure of the gaze has been separated into two distinct positions: men look and women exhibit 'to-be-looked-at-ness' - both playing to, and signifying, male desire" (qtd. in Storey 115). Psychic trauma thus goes beyond the circumference of sexual trauma and becomes situational trauma. In the angst of these types of hysteria Grant possesses the supreme command over the situation and acts accordingly by managing Marian and clinging to Fiona. He need not be sublimated by his duality; he can rise above it. It is his ability, his power, which "lies in the capacity to find or *create* individual, personal meaning from a traumatized and tortured past. If traumatic events are not repressed, they can be *used*: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on" (qtd. in Horvitz 134). In this way, trauma helps a person both to bring out some feelings of sexual belongings and to create a sense in the individual to cooperate with that trauma.

There remains the question of harmony between Marian and Grant. Not that they are only sexually attracted to each other. There is a larger ground that unites them. It is the testimony of every traumatic development in the two families that they both come across. When Grant goes to Marian, they share many things. This gives her an opportunity of developing a relationship with someone who, apart from being a sexual objectification, can also be a good sharer in many aspects. Grant also likes to avail himself of the opportunity, though he knows that he has to be cautious about all the sexual enticements offered unconsciously by Marian, “the practical sensuality of her cat’s tongue. Her gemstone eyes” (Munro 322). The dance party brings forth the meeting, where they can find a way of their own satisfaction. Fiona’s psychic trauma has its own victim and witness: Grant. Aubrey’s physical trauma has its own victim and witness: Marian. These two witnesses further observe that for Fiona and for Aubrey, the two trauma survivors, the past is not dead; for them, the past is a metaphorical present leading to a queer future, and so they are trapped in the time cycle. They cannot possibly break this helplessness, nor can Grant and Marian. They try to console each other on social ground, leading them above private life. Marian’s bringing Aubrey back home and Grant’s visit to Fiona run the parallel traumatic testimony of Grant and Marian:

Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other* – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking *to somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time. (qtd. in Felman 70-71)

There is another witness, and she is the nurse Kristy, who says that people admitted in the sanctuary have usually a short memory. In her opinion, “Grant and Fiona and Aubrey . . . must seem lucky. They had got through life without too much going wrong. What they had to suffer now that they were old hardly counted” (Munro 306). When Grant pays a visit to Fiona and tells her about a surprise regarding Aubrey, her answer that names elude her becomes quite puzzling yet relieving for Grant. The story ends with a note of recalescence between Fiona and Grant. The question of love has been resolved. Her passionate gratitude



to her husband for not forsaking her brings Grant close to her. His romantic and confident answer to Fiona's fear of being forsaken, "Not a chance" (Munro 323), is an assurance of the continuity of their family life. The absence of Aubrey brings back to Fiona the reality about Grant and as a result of it she realizes her helplessness, her individual trauma. She also unconsciously hints at what was Grant's worst fear: revelation of his inclination towards other women. Yet, the confidence Grant shows portrays him as an honest, loving and caring husband. He may have a covert intention of remaining attached to Marian, the way he did in the past. But as he did earlier, now he remains as much loyal to his wife as possible. His social bindings and familial commitment, his "life-assertion, paradoxically enough, constitutes yet another . . . inexorable . . . transvaluation, the implications of which . . . [they] have yet to understand" (qtd. in Felman 74).

Munro's third person narrative of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is non-chronological. The whole story has been imparted from Grant's point of view. Though he does not directly say anything, occurrences in the story are focused as he faces them. The title of the story has been derived from a nursery rhyme that begins in this way:

The bear went over the mountain,  
To see what he could see.  
And all that he could see,  
Was the other side of the mountain. ("The Bear Went Over the Mountain")

The story reveals the secrets of Grant, and past life of Fiona. By the end of it, both are reunited in the sense that Fiona, more vulnerable than her husband, finds him as her only refuge. He, too, returns to her, ignoring all the enticements around him. His love for Fiona, and commitment to her and to his family bond create the fence between his passion and his sense of responsibility. In his subconscious mind, he looks into the matters of human relationship. Grant, on the one hand, maintains his family life, and, on the other hand, focuses on the social attachment with Marian. As he possesses a dual character, he subconsciously makes a comparison between these two parallel realities - his family and his passion, and remains loyal to his primary concern: Fiona. The experience he gains, out of this familial and societal

inconsistency, helps him realize his *self*. Thus, he has been able to come to a conclusion. Realization of the *self* is the key to maintaining any relationship. This is how the story serves the purpose of Munro extensively and becomes a means of understanding human relationship as well as family bond.

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