

## **The Untrafficable Woman and Twisted Sisterhood in “Free Radicals”, a Story by Alice Munro**

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### **Abstract**

One of Alice Munro's great short stories is "Free Radicals". It has not been paid sufficient attention to and I believe the women presented in the story are quite remarkable. In the story, there is a subplot about how the murderer has killed his parents and his crippled sister. This paper aims to study the role of the sister since she is not seen as a woman. She does not have an exchange value base on Gayle Rubin's idea and she does not function as a woman based on Luce Irigaray's view as she is handicap and overweight. Moreover, this research intends to demonstrate the invisible sisterhood which exists between the protagonist of the story and her husband's first wife. Although she has betrayed his wife, through an imaginary story, she creates a bond with her that leads to saving her from getting killed.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, "Free Radicals", Luce Irigaray, Gayle Rubin, Exchange Value, Gift, Sisterhood, Exchange of Women.

### **Introduction**

Alice Munro, a prolific contemporary Canadian author, has written many great short stories such as *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), and *Runaway* (2004). All the stories cited have won one or two awards. But there is a story by her which has not been paid much attention to; and that is: "Free Radicals". This story is written in 2008 and is about a woman in her

sixties, who has lost her husband by an accident. It begins by narrating the way she is coping with his death and remembering their memories, through which we understand that Nita, the protagonist, is Rich's, the lost husband, second wife. Rich had fallen in love with Nita, cheated on Bett, his first wife, and got married to Nita. As the story goes on and we get more and more engaged in Nita's past, there comes another character. Suddenly the bell rings and a man comes in, pretending to be an electrician and wanting to check her fuse box. But in fact, we come to the understanding that he is a murderer. He has murdered his family, father, mother, and his sister, Madelaine. He explains that Madelaine is five years older than him, disabled, and very annoying to him. It was because of her that he didn't want to stay around the house, that he was always out and minded his own business. The family paid more attention to Madelaine instead of him, considering her a gift from God. Despite all this, his father and mother have promised him that their house would be his. But one day, his father calls him and says he will have the house only if he signs a contract, which is about taking care of Madelaine until her death after the parents are gone. Hearing this, he gets angry. As deciding to kill them all, he picks a gun, sets a date to visit them, and "bin-bang-barn" (Munro), he murders them all. After telling Nita his story, she becomes very scared and tries to find a way to get rid of the murderer who is getting more and more drunk as he is gulping wine. She starts a story by telling him that she too has killed someone. She pretends to be Bett, who finds out about his husband's affair with Nita and kills her by poisoning. Gathering her story, the man gets a bit scared and runs away with the same car Rich has had an accident with.

The next day, Nita finds out that he, too, dies in an accident with the car.

One of the most interesting characters in this story is Madelaine. She is not a woman whom a patriarchal society would approve of. She is disabled, "She was born funny. Nothing no doctor or anybody could do for her" and pretty much fat, "in spite of all that bulge of flesh, an expression of some satisfaction and cunning .... And ate like a pig." (Munro). Therefore, not being accepted by the patriarchal society, she got murdered.

In *The Traffic in Women* (1975) by Gayle Rubin, she has mentioned "exchange of women" (Rubin 779); meaning that in primitive tribes, women were used to be exchanged among men as goods. It was basically for two main reasons: to use women to do labor, such as agriculture (781), and also to produce children (774). I am well aware that this story is written in 2008 and has nothing to do with primitive tribes. But I believe there are close relations with the primitive man and the murderer in the story, and also Madelaine and a primitive woman, who is exchanged or is refused to get exchanged. Subsequently, by using *The Traffic in Women* and also *Women on the Market* (1997) by Luce Irigaray, it is going to be portrayed how Madelaine in this story is the opposite of how a woman should be to function as a Woman, meaning to get exchanged; yet she does not fit the definitions and gets killed.

### Women as Gifts

Rubin in her essay, explains how the process of gift-giving makes the relationship of the kins stronger "in a typical gift transaction, neither party gains anything .... the significance of gift giving is that it expresses, affirms, or creates a social link between the partners of an exchange. Gift giving confers upon its participants a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid. One can solicit a friendly relationship in the offer of a gift; acceptance implies a willingness to return a gift and a confirmation of the relationship" (777-778). Later on, she indicates that "the idea that marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts" (778). Therefore, incest taboo comes to play, "the incest taboo

should best be understood as a mechanism to insure that such exchanges take place between families and between groups" (778). Thus, women are merely the means through which the society makes the male connection stronger. They are gifts. What are the values of women? Irigaray in her article explains that women have "use value" and "exchange value" (801). By use value she means "reproductive use value (reproductive of children and of the labor force)" (801) and by exchange value, she means how much they cost being exchanged: "It is thus not as 'women' that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature — their current price in gold, or phalluses - and of which they would represent a plus or minus quantity" (801). Thus, not only the woman should be capable of reproducing children and also doing labor, but also they have to be fetishized so that their exchange value can become more. By fetishizing

a commodity — a woman - is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. No doubt these values also express "nature," that is, the expenditure of physical force. But this latter - essentially masculine, moreover - serves for the fabrication, the transformation, the technicization of natural productions (804).

### The Untrafficable Madelaine

I believe that Madelaine in *Free Radicals* is herself a free radical. Her whole being is rebellious toward whatever that would make her "trafficable". She is a disabled girl in a wheelchair, and that makes her naturally a bad option to become a "gift" and to get exchanged among men. Moreover, she has neither the reproductive value nor exchange value. To have reproductive value, she must be able to produce children and also bear the labors she has to go through; for a primitive woman it is agriculture, for Madelaine, it is housekeeping and child-raising. There would be no exchange value for her as well. First of all, her family think of her as a gift from God and they are

consent enough not to want her to go away in one way or another. Secondly, her father and mother would want to make sure that even after their death she won't get into the game of getting exchanged, by making their son sign a contract that would make him take care of her until her death. Even if she could be exchanged, the surplus-value would be almost nothing. She couldn't be fetishized, because of both being disabled and fat. Her "natural body" and her "socially valued, exchangeable body" are definitely not the "mimetic expression of masculine values". And she is totally fine with the fact; "And, in spite of all that bulge of flesh, an expression of some satisfaction and cunning" (Munro), furthermore she sings freely, "God. They took her with them to church and she'd fuckin' howl like a fuckin' cat in the back yard and they'd say, 'Oh, she's tryin' to make music, oh, God fuckin' bless her.' Excuse me again" (Munro) fearing nothing. She throws stuff at her brother, torments him, knowing that she is safe from his deep-rooted will to let her go, to get her exchanged: "There was bad blood between her and me since ever I remember. She was five years older than me and she just set out to torment me. Throwing anything at me she could get her hands on and knocking me down and trying to run over me with her fuckin' wheelchair. Pardon my French." (Munro). Therefore, she is immune to get traded.

Her brother, on the other hand, hated the fact that she existed. Throughout the story, by the tone that he uses, we understand that he hates her body, "ate like a pig", and her being disabled, "She was born funny" (Munro). Moreover, she wouldn't leave him be until she dies. He cannot get her exchanged, he cannot gain anything from her. She is not as she is supposed to be and that is the real reason that tortures him. Therefore, he did what he had to do: to eradicate the one who is not functioning as she should have and also the ones who support her (the family).

### **The Invisible Sisterhood**

Another interesting character in the story is Nita. She is experiencing the loss of her husband and through this grief, she is also contemplating her life. And this contemplation actually starts when she pretends that she is

Bett and had poisoned Nita by some rhubarb. Recounting the unrealistic story of hers, Nita describes herself as a fragile being who was always sick, ergo her death did not arouse any surprise: "She was one of those girls who had rheumatic fever as a child and coasted along on it, couldn't play sports or do anything much, always having to sit down and have a rest" (Munro). Also after poisoning her, she admits that Nita had been a burden on her husband's shoulder and her death was much of a relief to him, "He came to see that she wouldn't have been good for him, anyway. She'd have got sick on him, almost certainly. She was just the type. She'd have been nothing but a burden to him. He saw that" (Munro). Afterward, believing her story, he gets up, finds the keys to her car, and rushes out of the house. After all the events, she wants to inform Bett that Rich is dead and she has saved her life, "Dear Bett, Rich is dead and I have saved my life by becoming you" (Munro). After their marriage, Nita had tried to become like Bett. She started cooking the way she cooked, based on the "A Celebration of Familiar Fruits and Vegetables." "Hearty and Elegant Dishes and Fresh Surprises" (Munro), a book collected by Bett. In it, she understood all about vegetables and fruits, and the way they affect the human body, "she had learned a few things that surprised her. Such as the poisonous aspects of certain familiar and generally benign plants" as well as rhubarb of course (Munro).

Not only she had learned a few things from her that basically saved her life, but also by replacing herself, by pretending to be Bett, she could escape death. Here, I see a sort of sisterhood. Although Bett's presence is missing, her existence, her experiences, and her book helped Nita. If we consider the murderer as a patriarchal force, then this sisterhood assisted Nita pretty well. It is not about the connection between black and white women. It is not even about two beings helping each other directly. It is the being and the previous efforts of Bett, her book; whether she is present or not.

### **Conclusion**

"Free Radicals" by Alice Munro has many interesting characters such as Madelaine and Nita. By using Rubin and Irigaray's articles, I

tried to show the cause of Madelaine's death. She is not in accordance with what society defines as a "gift" and therefore her existence is not useful and necessary. Also, I think that there is a kind of strange sisterhood between Nita and Bett, through which Nita could escape the deadly situation.

## References

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