



The Oppression and Subversion of Annie: A Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of *A Wilderness Station*

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ABSTRACT

“A Wilderness Station” is Alice Munro’s short story revolving around the mystery of the insanity of the female protagonist Annie Herron. Based on postcolonial feminist theory, this paper demonstrates that the oppression and subversion of Annie are closely related with her insane behavior in “A Wilderness Station”. It finds that Annie suffers double oppression, namely, the colonial religious hegemony and the patriarchal domination, showcasing the female predicaments in Canada in the nineteenth century. It also explores that Annie subverts the colonial and patriarchal oppression through her insanity and feminine writing, thereby providing possible exploration for the female endeavors to transform from being the silent “Other” to the subjective “Other”.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism; A Wilderness Station; Oppression; Subversion

1. Introduction

Alice Munro, the winner of the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature and the master of the contemporary short story, depicts miscellaneous women in her literary works. “A Wilderness Station” is her short story revolving around the female protagonist Annie. It is an epistolary gothic story composed of eleven letters and one memoir throughout a time span of 107 years, describing two mysteries—the death of the early Scottish pioneer in Canada Simon Herron and the insanity of his wife Annie Herron after his death. The secrets are gradually unfolded through several male’s writing and Annie’s personal narrative.

Among these disparate and contradictory narration, Annie’s version gains the most trust, so Annie’s suffering becomes the most heated research topic. A majority of previous studies focus on her oppression in the patriarchal society from a feminist perspective. Héliane Ventura (2018) has discussed mythic feminine figures— especially “a Canadian female pioneer of Scottish descent” in the story (Abstract). In China, Wang Lan and Huang Chuan (2014) have adopted the perspective of female gothicism and demonstrated female body and experience to showcase the growth of the female protagonist Annie from silence to awakening and to revolt. Some scholars analyze Annie’s predicaments in combination with the unique epistolary narrative characteristics of this story. Rebekka Schuh (2016) has manifested the function of letters in this story from Munro’s “writing back” lens linked to a feminist dimension. In China, Yuan Xia (2016) has explored the nation-building narrative in the story. However, few acknowledges that Annie’s hardship is caused by manifold factors.

This paper explores further from the postcolonial feminist approach that Annie’s oppression is resulted from two aspects, namely, the colonial religious hegemony and the patriarchal domination, thus enriching our understanding of Canadian women’s living conditions as double “Other” in the nineteenth century. It also finds Annie’s personal way of subverting the colonial and patriarchal oppression through her insanity and feminine writing, thereby providing possible exploration for the female endeavors to transform from being the silent “Other” to the subjective “Other”.

2. Postcolonial Feminist Theory and the Scottish Colonization of Canada

Postcolonial feminist theory is developed out of postcolonial and feminist concerns about the marginalized identity of the “other” in the binary oppositions “suzerain/subordinate” and “male/female”. The theory compensates for the absence of a gender perspective in postcolonial criticism by focusing on the oppression and voices of women, especially the subaltern women in the Third World.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri C. Spivak (1983) manifests the concept of the “subaltern”. “Subaltern” refers to groups of people who do not have discourse power or are unable to express themselves. The concept especially refers to the group of women who suffer from multiple oppressions of gender, race, and class, thus losing their own subjectivity. They are also trapped in patriarchal imperial culture and patriarchal traditional culture and suffer from the domination of the discourse power of Eurocentrism and malecentrism, thereby becoming the silent “other”. Canada is a white settler country attracting British and Scottish settlers. According to some theorists, although Canada is different from invader colonies established among nonwhite peoples through the force of British arms such as India, Africa, South America, it should be included under the rubric postcolonial because white colonial subjects experience the same double consciousness experienced by nonwhite colonial subjects (Tyson, 2006, pp. 424-425). Therefore, the Canadian woman Annie, though coming from the Second World, suffering both the colonial religious hegemony and the patriarchal domination can be categorized as the subaltern group and one of the typical research subjects of postcolonial feminist analysis.

Before a detailed interpretation of “A Wilderness Station”, the historical background of Scottish colonization of this story needs to be taken into consideration. “A Wilderness Station” happens under the circumstance of Scottish emigration to Canada, including the Scottish pioneer experience in Canadian wilderness. Though considered British, the Scots have always regarded themselves as a separate people. Scotland has an over-200-year history of emigration to Canada with steady and substantial numbers, with the connection between Scotland and Canada stretching farther—in 1621, the establishment of the earliest Scottish colony in Canada. The Scots are among the first Europeans to establish themselves in Canada. Between 1815 and 1870, the right time setting of “A Wilderness Station”, some 170,000 Scots crossed the Atlantic to Canada, roughly 14 percent of the total British migration of this period, accounting for a large population in Canada. These Scots and their descendants have shaped the economic, political, cultural and religious life of Canada as explorers. Most of them are farmers and artisans, but large numbers of professional people are also included, especially teachers and clergymen (Bumsted, 2013, para. 1). These clergymen model many of their new nation’s churches. However, the nineteenth-century Glasgow Mission from Scotland imposes oppressive religious colonization on the white settler colony Canada and especially on the women. Extremist Presbyterian theology plays a major role in the settling or ordering of the New World wilderness, expecting to establish the theocratic conformity. Thus, this is a kind of Scottish cultural colonization on Canada.

3. The Colonial Religious Hegemony and the Patriarchal Domination of Annie

In “A Wilderness Station”, Annie’s hardship is caused by double factors, namely, the colonial religious hegemony and the patriarchal domination.

3.1 The Colonial Religious Hegemony of Annie

As for the colonial hegemony, Annie suffers the religious colonization brought by the Scottish emigrants, specifically, the oppression of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland in two aspects—the unreasonable standard of being a wife and the rigid spiritual constraints of the religion. The Presbyterianism is the national Church of Scotland, arriving in Canada with extremist theology represented by the minister, the Reverend William McBain. McBain, the embodiment of the repressive Scots-Calvinism coming from the West of Scotland to the Huron county, expects to “eradicate disorder or wilderness from the social landscape by inscribing the Glasgow Mission’s authority on the souls of his Huron county parish” (Gittings, 1997, p. 31). However, he imposes the tenets of the Christian order of the Scottish Free Church in a very rigid way.

In the first place, Annie is oppressed by the criteria for choosing her as a wife. In the first letter of the story, the matron of a children’s home writes back to Simon Herron’s expectation of selecting an ideal wife. Annie is the very recommended girl for her “moral and spiritual uniformity” (Gittings, 1997, p. 32). Spiritually, for her religion, she is born legitimately of Christian parents and comes to the orphanage because of the deaths of her parents but not some immoral reasons. Meanwhile, she has pure blood. Her parents are from Fife, Scotland, thus she is the descendent of Scottish emigrants with “no indication of mixed blood” (Munro, 1997, p. 645). From a moral perspective, she is far away from the evil quality like drunkenness or immorality. In addition, she, “with a more durable constitution”, is suitable for Simon’s requirements of the hard work of pioneering and reclaiming in the bush (Munro, 1997, p. 644). Therefore, the criteria for spouse selection indicate the rigid religious restriction on a Canadian woman for her moral and spiritual correctness.

Secondly, Annie is plagued by McBain’s religious domination manifested in his superior colonialist discourse and his spiritual surveillance. After Simon’s death, Annie shows some weird behavior. McBain blames her for three aspects. First of all, she does not appear at services. Then, she stops shouldering her obligations and responsibilities like planting vegetables and chopping down the wild vines. Last but not least, she turns untidy with filthy clothing and uncombed hair. Although McBain has the duty to preach in his parish, he criticizes Annie in harsh words, that is, “the deterioration of her property showed the state of her mind and spirit” and “there was no order imposed on her days” (Munro, 1997, p. 651). According to McBain, the disorder must be eliminated in the settling or ordering of the New World wilderness. “The deterioration of her property” demonstrates McBain’s superior colonialist discourse and the inferior status of Annie in his eyes. Additionally, McBain’s blame for Annie exposes his gaze on her, which is a kind of supervision and monitor. He is a firm advocate of the totalizing concept of settlement, refusing to accommodate Annie’s fluid vision of self and the world. All the behavior against the order and settlement should be eliminated and eradicated. The morals and values of his Presbyterian Church are superior and the tenets of his religion are used to legitimize the Scottish colonization. Thus, McBain’s care for

Annie after her husband's death is actually a kind of colonial religious control, appealing for her submission and obedience.

3.2 The Patriarchal Domination of Annie

Annie endures the deep-rooted patriarchal dominance both physically and spiritually. Physically, she undergoes her husband Simon's domestic violence and her brother-in-law George's bad treatment.

First of all, Annie suffers from Simon's violence. From Simon's criteria for selecting a wife mentioned above, what he wants is an efficient helper adept in shouldering all domestic responsibilities but not a beloved wife. Therefore, as a devoted and submissive role in Simon's eyes, Annie is less likely to rejoice in a happy marriage. What's worse, Annie gets reproof from the bad-tempered Simon over the meal she prepared for him—the spoiling of some cakes by their proximity to fish. Simon always gets enraged due to these little things and beats Annie, leaving black and blue marks on her hands, her legs and her arms. However, at that time, Annie bears all the pain silently. Meanwhile, George treats Annie in an abominable way. In Annie's letter, it is known that Simon does not die from accident but is killed by his brother George. After knowing this, out of their common dissatisfaction and hatred towards Simon, Annie keeps the secret of Simon's death for George and is determined to protect him. She gives him both the physical care and the spiritual cure, preparing food for him, comforting him patiently and turning to Bible to find religious salvation for him. However, George treats Annie badly. According to Annie, “[t]hen he looked at me for the first time in a bad way. It was the same bad way his brother used to look” (Munro, 1997, p. 664). What George really cares is his safety. Therefore, he desires to drive Annie crazy so that no one knows his sin.

Spiritually, Annie's persecution mania is caused by the patriarchal hegemony of George. Meanwhile, she always suffers the male discrimination and prejudice. After George's bad look, Annie turns maniacal and lunatic. George becomes her nightmare, intending to chase and kill her in her dreams. He also keeps appearing in her dreams, covers the secret, lies to her and pretends to be a nice person. Thus, under such tremendous mental pressure, Annie does not stay in her house anymore and sleeps outside to avoid George regardless of the religious services, her duties and her untidy image.

Besides, Annie, together with other females, are burdened with the deep-rooted male prejudice and discrimination, that is, women's characteristics of obedience and inferiority. As for the obedience, McBain explains that the reason for Annie's insanity is that “her submission to her husband was not complete” so “she would feel a natural and harrowing remorse” (Munro, 1997, p. 655), indicating that women's submissive role in their marriage is natural and absolute. In terms of the inferiority, McBain holds that the female stubbornness is “of another kind than a man's” (Munro, 1997, p. 651). This stereotype is also revealed in the doctor's diagnosis for Annie's madness, “she is subject to a sort of delusion peculiar to females, for which the motive is a desire for self-importance, also a wish to escape the monotony of life or the drudgery they may have been born

to” (Munro, 1997, p. 656). “A sort of delusion peculiar to females” relates with Freud’s “hysteria”, defined as a “female disease” which did occur mainly among women. “This mental illness, like many other nervous disorders, was thought to be caused by the female reproductive system, as if to elaborate upon Aristotle’s notion that femaleness was in and of itself a deformity” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2004, p. 63) Thus, “the female stubbornness” “delusion peculiar to females” and “hysteria” all manifest women’s subordinate position in gender and the alienation of them from the patriarchal perspective.

4. Annie’s Subversion of the Colonial Religious Hegemony and the Patriarchal Domination

Annie is the silent “other” in previous letters written by the male, suffering the double oppression—the colonial religious hegemony and the patriarchal domination. However, fortunately, Annie finds her way of rebellion through her insanity and feminine writing.

4.1 Annie’s Subversion through Her Insanity

To begin with, her insanity is her strategy of revolt against McBain’s Presbyterian narrative of moral and spiritual uniformity, represented by her weird behavior and her integration with the wilderness.

In his *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, “Foucault insists that madness is not a natural, unchanging thing, but rather depends on the society in which it exists. Various cultural, intellectual and economic structures determine how madness is known and experienced within a given society. In this way, society constructs its experience of madness” (“Madness and Civilization”, n. d., para. 2). Annie’s insanity and madness are her strategies of subversion, serving anticolonial functions. According to McBain, Annie’s lunatic behavior is as follows: her disappearance in religious services, her nonfeasance as a member of the church and her untidiness. Meanwhile, Annie sleeps in the wilderness at night to avoid the menacing nightmares caused by George. She views wilderness as the place of safety:

I didn’t stay in the house where he could find me and when I gave up sleeping inside and slept outside I didn’t have the dream so often. It got warm quickly and the flies and mosquitoes came but they hardly bothered me. I would see their bites but not feel them, which was another sign that in the outside I was protected. I got down when I heard anybody coming. I ate berries both red and black and god protected me from any badness in them. (Munro, 1997, pp. 664-665)

Annie believes that the wilderness protects her from harm, so her preference for the bush does violence to the authoritative conception of the evil and disorderly wilderness in the writings of McBain. Thus, her lunatic behavior and her integration with the wilderness are her unique way of revolt against the totalizing concept of settlement and order espoused by McBain. “Annie, the daughter of Scottish immigrants, translates herself into a Canadian ground; she resists the totalizing system of the Free Church of Scotland to become hybridized, indigenized, Other” (Gittings, 1997, p. 34).

4.2 Annie's Subversion through Her Feminine Writing

Annie's writing is a way deconstructing the male authority. To be more specific, it demonstrates the truth of her innocence and the man George's violence in Simon's death and depicts her female experience and feelings vividly.

In the first place, "feminine writing", in French *écriture féminine*, is put forward by a French feminist Hélène Cixous in 1970s. Cixous argues that language reveals patriarchal binary thought, in other words, the polar opposites, with one superior to the other. Women need a new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences them. This kind of language, which Cixous believes best expresses itself in writing, is called feminine writing. It is fluidly organized and freely associative. It resists patriarchal modes of thinking and writing (Tyson, 2006, pp. 100-101). In most parts of "A Wilderness Station", the males are the narrators and articulate Annie's lunatic behavior after her husband's death in an extremely prejudiced way, making Annie the silent "other" in their narration. At the end of the story, Annie who sits on the periphery of other narratives before, eventually speaks and writes for herself through her letter to her intimate friend. Her letter is a way of guaranteeing her right of discourse power. According to Foucault, "[L]anguage plays a powerful role in reproducing and transforming power relations along many different dimensions. ... [D]iscourse is interwoven with power and knowledge to constitute the oppression of those "others" in our society, serving to marginalize, silence and oppress them" (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013, p. 24). Her letter uncovers the truth of George's murder of Simon and the real reasons for her insanity—George's evil thoughts towards her and her disguised manner of self-protection. Thus, her writing manifests a sharp contrast with the previous male writing and serves as the powerful weapon of speaking out, resisting the patriarchal stigmatization and oppression on her.

Meanwhile, Annie's writing fully expresses the female experience and feelings. Cixous also sees this kind of feminine writing as a way to "spontaneously connect (or reconnect) to the unfettered, joyous vitality of the female body, which she emphasizes as the source of life. Thus, for her, writing can be an enactment of liberation" (Tyson, 2006, p. 101). In Annie's writing, paying close attention to her body, she describes the black and blue marks on her arms, her legs as well as the back of her hand left by her husband, the bites of the flies and mosquitoes on her body caused by sleeping in the wilderness and the warmth and comfort in the Walley Goal. These expressions fully demonstrate Cixous' advice of "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" and relate Annie's true feelings with the readers.

Although trapped in the double oppression of colonial religious hegemony and patriarchal dominance, Annie chooses to subvert and deconstruct the hardship through her subjectivity, namely her disguised insanity and her feminine writing. At the end of the story, in the reunion between Annie and George decades of years later, Munro makes George suffer a stroke with the loss of his discourse power. By contrast, Annie speaks freely, gaining a victorious and superior ending.

5 Conclusion

Based on the postcolonial feminist theory, this paper focuses on the female protagonist Annie's predicaments and her personal way of rebellion and revolt. Annie's oppression is caused by both the colonial religious domination and the patriarchal superiority, specifically, the rigid tenets of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland and the physical and spiritual violence and torture from the male. However, Annie gathers her courage and finds her ways of fighting against the double hardship through her insane behavior and female writing. In these ways, she revolts against the order, the male authority and depicts her female experience and feelings, thus managing to survive and gradually gaining her subjectivity. Through Annie's experience, Alice Munro explores the hardship of the Canadian women in the nineteenth century and exposes the colonial and patriarchal oppression at that time. More importantly, she empowers the female with characteristics like resilience and tenacity and their personal ways of revolt, thus providing possible exploration for the female endeavors to transform from being the silent "Other" to the subjective "Other" and eventually the subjective "Self".

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