



**(HI)STORY RECONSTRUCTED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ALICE MUNRO'S
"MENESETEUNG" AND AMBAI'S "VAKANAM"**

MALATHY.R

Associate Professor

Research Center in English

V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women

Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Comparative Literature is a critical study of literatures across the world and promotes the concept that literature is one, just like art and humanity are one. The paper aims at a comparative study of Alice Munro's "Meneseteung" and Ambai's "Vakanam" (Vehicle), wherein the Canadian author and the Indian author reconstruct the story of their protagonists with historical accuracy and objectivity but with a difference. The similarities and the dissimilarities in their way of constructing history is the focus of this paper.

Keywords

Narration, past, story, experience, incident, history, historical, objective, subjective, vehicle, incident, facts, people.

INTRODUCTION

The relation between history and fiction has been an area of contention for critics and novelists for long. A novel may be written with a background of a historical incident or it can be purely made up. However, historians like Collingwood perceives the work of a historian and a novelist to be similar: "Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a

description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters" (qtd. Walder 439). Alice Munro, the Canadian short story writer and Ambai, the Tamil short story writer have attempted to reconstruct the past events of fictitious characters just like a historian does, that is on the basis of evidences like photographs, newspaper clippings (reports and / or advertisements) and stories heard. The aim of the paper is to compare the discourse of Alice Munro's "Meneseteung" and

Ambai's "Vakanam" which uncovers the past of the family / individual entrapped in the flow of time and emphasizes the element of historicity.

Alice Munro (1931-), the Canada's best living short story writer, has gained readership far beyond the boundaries of her native Canada. She has been recognised as "one of the foremost contemporary practitioners of the short story" in the world (Kakutani 22). Her hundred and odd short stories, set mostly in Ontario and British Columbia in Canada, deal with the lives of girls and women, their conflicts, dilemmas and irony with domestic details. Hailed as the best story teller, Munro adopts conflicting narrative techniques to explore the life – altering moments of the inhabitants of the rural Ontario. She is interested in writing about the way people narrate events. Ambai (1944 -) her original name being C.S. Lakshmi, stands unique in the annals of modern Tamil Literature. As a leading short story writer, her stories voice freedom for women and female autonomy with fervour and force. She has so far published three collections of short stories: **Cirakukal Muriyum (Wings Get Broken**

1976), **Vittin Mulaiyil Oru Camaiyalarai (A Kitchen in the Corner of a House,** 1988) and **Kattil Oru Man (A Deer in the Forest,** 2000) and all of them relate the experiences of women of different ages, positions and regions and their quest for self-realization, liberation and equality in affirmed and assertive voice. A staunch feminist, Ambai exposes the multiplicity and diversity of feminine experiences by transcending rigid conventions of fiction writing. "Her fiction presents experimentation in form... innovative, pluralistic narrative patterns, and an abundance of cultural allusions"(Mangalam 129). Her writings reflect her consciousness of her place in society and of her history.

GENERAL DETAILS

"Menesteung" a story in Munro's collection titled *Friend of My Youth* is divided into six parts. The first part of the story opens with a poetic epigraph, introduces the poetess by name Almeda Joynt Roth of the nineteenth century. The first paragraph gives all details about her book '*Offerings*' – the title of the book, description of the covers, name of the

author, date of publication and photograph of the author and the fact that the local paper the 'Vidette' referred to her as 'our poetess' (Munro 50). The piling of historical facts related to the publication of a book is a deliberate act on the part of the author to introduce the character whose biography she is going to reconstruct in her narrative. It renders an objective account of the poetess mentioned; at the same time, the phrase 'our poetess' signals a subjective tone. There seems to be a mixture of respect and contempt for her calling and for her sex. The paragraph that immediately follows details on the physical appearance of the poetess, as if somebody is interpreting the personality of the poetess by looking at the photograph. The paragraph is not totally objective as the earlier one, as the details in the paragraph seem to be evaluative and speculative. The phrases 'the hat which might be made of velvet', 'that makes me see artistic intentions and perhaps it was the fashion' denote that somebody is assessing the aspects of the persona of the poetess. Next follows a brief account of the life of the poetess and her interest in verse writing as given in the preface of her

book in past tense. This paragraph loaded with autobiographical details supposed to be read by some one – the narrator – is quickly succeeded by a thematic summary of the poems written by the poetess and an analysis of the poems with an intrusive sentence "Are these terms familiar anymore?"(53). The first part, seemingly replete with facts, autobiographical, historical and literary, has within it hidden fictional matrices – a narrator weaving the fabrications of a story.

Ambai's "Vakanam" (Vehicle) in her third collection of short stories *Kattil Oru Man* divided into nine parts (unnumbered) resembles more or less the pattern of Munro in reconstructing the past events. The first part in third person narration serves as an introduction to the story of events to be narrated in the following parts. The subject of the story being vehicle, the beginning section is a melange of details about owners of vehicles in Hindu mythology, history, fairytales and epics; Packiam born in a Hindu family invariably has a knowledge of and therefore has a right to claim a vehicle of her own (Ambai 60). "Still, she

does not have the luck to possess one” is the sentence that infuses artistic purpose into the story in the sense that it leads the story forward into the sections that follow. Though the story seems to be in third person narrative, the point of view is certainly that of Packiam. The factual details, as in Munro's, do render objectivity to the narration but that is undermined by an implicit rhetoric of personal involvement and evaluative interpretation of facts. The details obviously bear a tone of grudge over the possession of vehicles by different Gods on hierarchical basis: “Siva has Nandhi, Muruga has peacock; Vishnu Karuda; Saneeswara crow and Yama bull” (Ambai 60). Unlike Munro's passage in the first part of her story, Ambai's sentences are tinged with irony, mingled with humour exposing the flow of thought in the mind of Packiam. “Even the huge bodied Pillaiyar who does not travel much and who has to sit all the time under the pipal tree is not bereft of a vehicle as he has mouse” (Ambai 60). The narration also has feminist leanings as Packiam dwells at length on the vehicles owned by Goddesses, queens and princesses. The

passage no doubt challenges the mythological beings and argues in favour of a female, providing a contrast to Munro's reference to the ‘mixture of contempt and respect’ for the poetess.

BACKGROUND DETAILS

The second part of the story “Meneseteung” in present tense with its vivid description of the house of Almeda Roth signals the fact the Almeda's life is being reconstructed. It begins with the historical details of date and names of streets:

In 1879, Almeda Roth was still living in the house at the corner of Pearl and Dufferin streets, the house her father had built for the family. The house is there today; the manager of the liquor store lives in it. It's covered with aluminium siding; a closed-in porch has replaced the veranda. The woodshed, the fence, the gates, the privy, the barn - all these are gone (Munro 53).

The details in the quoted passage indicate the dual focus of the story – the appearance of the house in the past contrasted with the appearance of the

house in the present once again underline the fact that there is a narrator assessing the situation. The evidence for the narrator is a photograph taken in the past.

A photograph taken in the eighteen-eighties shows them all in place. The house and fence look a little shabby, in need of paint, but perhaps that is just because of the bleached-out look of the brownish photograph (Munro 53)

The description of the house naturally leads to the details about the life in the town in which the house is situated – the problems created by the younger population of the town and difficulties encountered in summer. The sentences “I read about that life in the Vidette”(Munro 54) and “All these things are possible any day of the week. Be on your guard, the ‘Vidette’ tells people” (Munro 550) indicate the ‘Vidette’ to be the source for the objective details about the town life. The casual reference to the old woman, a drunk nicknamed Queen Aggie who was driven by the group of boys into a wheelbarrow and then trundled all over the town only to dump her into a ditch – an example cited to prove the dangerous

behaviour of the youth in the town – has been interwoven later into the life history of Almeda Roth elaborated in Part IV and thereby reinforcing the historical truth of the incident. The second part ends with the description of Almeda Roth living in the house and her habitual actions.

The second section of Ambai's story presents the photos in an album as the source through which the female protagonist Packiam ponders over the vehicles owned by her family through generations. The opening sentence of this section projects the childhood stage of the protagonist who, it has been said, could walk even when she was just ten months old without a toddler. Consequently, the narration depends upon the source of photos in an album to trace the history of the family and its association with the family. The photos reveal the truth that the maternal grandparents and uncles of Packiam did not own a vehicle but took snaps standing near and against different kinds of vehicles. The photos themselves stand as good records to prove the changing trends in vehicles from bicycles to cars within two generations. On the

paternal side, her father's brother was the first to bring a motor bike to the family as he was promoted as inspector. The narration, as in the first part of the story, incorporates within itself, feminist thoughts as it comments on the attitude of the photographers towards women and the rituals followed in the family to absolve the 'sin' committed by the wife of her father's brother by taking the pavilion ride in the motor bike of her husband (Ambai 61). The second section of the story can be thus said to be focussing on the mechanical vehicles of the previous generations of Packiam's family as opposed to the 'animal' vehicles supposed to have been manipulated by the celestial beings in mythology and human beings of purana age, thereby bringing the narration from its imaginative level to reality.

LIFE EXPERIENCES OF THE PROTAGONISTS

In Munro's story, the narrator in the present dwells on the life of the nineteenth century poetess. The protagonist Almeda Roth's lonely life after the death of her parents and blood relations as mentioned in the preface of the book referred to in the first chapter of the story

is the focus of narration in the following three chapters. The arrival of Jarvis Poulder, a widower to the town and his frugal living in the next house to Almeda's create a sensation as the local newspaper 'the Vidette' comments on the style of living of Poulder. Jarvis Poulder's story is further built on the gossips of the people by the narrator and hence the uncertainty of the accuracy of her account:

This is a decent citizen, prosperous: a tall – slightly paunchy? – man in a dark suit with polished boots. A beard? Black hair streaked with gray. A severe and self-possessed air, and a large pale wart among the bushy hairs of one eyebrow? (Munro 57)

The story of the married life of Poulder has been constructed by the narrator based on the talk of the town people; at the same time she is sceptical of the validity of the account given by the people - a quality necessary for a devoted scholar or a historian. Poulder has come to the west looking for oil; hence, historical information on the oil well is inserted in the narrative: "The first oil well in the world was sunk in Lambton Country,

south of here, in the eighteen – fifties” (Munro 58).

The story moves on to Almeda's relationship with her neighbour, Poulder which becomes the topic of discussion among the people and the 'Vidette' flashes such news in the name of 'interest'. The narrator confirms it saying "This kind of thing pops up in the 'Vidette' all the time"(Munro 58). The couple 'salty gentlemen' and 'literary lady' – walking back home from the church together on Sunday morning triggers up guesses and fuels the imagination of the common people. But the narrator who is on the job of reconstructing the past still doubts and hence the question marks in the passage that follows the newspaper clipping about Poulder and Almeda. Again, the sentence "Everyone takes it for granted that Almeda Roth is thinking of Jarvis Poulder as a husband and would say yes if he asked her"(Munro 59) opens the surmises of the people about Poulder and Almeda meeting at Church, amounting to the courtship between the two; but all of these surmises are totally nullified by statements of reality; "But he does not go to church at night. Nor does he call for her, and walk with her to Church on Sunday mornings. Nor does she invite him to come in – a

woman living alone could never do such a thing” (Munro 59).

The last part of the third chapter discusses elaborately the possibilities and impossibilities of Almeda taking up Poulder as her husband – a woman when alone with a man of almost her age is generally believed to be falling prey to her passions. The thoughts of Almeda about Poulder, her comments on the fussy opinions of married women about their husbands and her own opinion about men and the remote chances of Poulder taking her to church or countryside - all these are described in a speculative narrative form raising the doubt in the minds of the readers about the historicity of the account as it does not relate the facts. So this part of the story obviously more fictional and imaginative than factual must have been the construction of the author to continue the story of Almeda. The thoughts on women resemble in a certain way to those of Ambai; while Ambai questions the dictatorial ways of men, Munro critically views the women ascribing excessive importance to men.

The third section of Ambai's story details on the life experiences of Packiam as a working woman, while she travels in a bus or an electric train. As in the previous sections, gender discrimination is focussed in the account of the different ways in which man and woman encounter the difficulties in catching a bus during rainy seasons; the routine scenes in bus stations and the railway stations and the usual hustle – bustle activities surrounding them are explained vividly. The fourth section of the story takes the readers back to the remote past when Packiam's grandfather lived and bicycles were the vehicles used by the people. The newly-bought vehicle was first the sole property of Packiam's uncles in her grandfather's house; soon, her aunt Kamala and her younger sister Anandhi learnt the art of cycle-riding. The skilful way in which Kamala rode the cycle is vividly described endorsing the fact that women of yesteryears were as efficient as men in cycle riding; later when a car was bought and was allotted exclusively for the use of men, those men could not drive those cars as skilfully and adventurously as Kamala. All these happened only when the grandfather

shifted his residence to Coimbatore. The advertisements bearing the pictures of women riding on bicycles and women participated in the cycle races organised by one Maharishi Karve during the days of Packiam's mother are the sources to say that women riding bicycles was common during the days of Packiam's mother (Ambai 62).

The fifth section of Ambai's story, a continuation of the third section, records the experience of bus and train journey during which Packiam can watch the movement of vehicles of different sizes, colours, shapes and producing different sounds. The pleasant experience is accompanied by the unpleasant experience of witnessing accidents. The site of accident, the victims, the collision of a bus and a scooter and the worried conversation of the people about the accident are all described in a general manner.

The sixth section of Ambai's story narrates Packiam's efforts to own a vehicle and ride it. The subject of the story being vehicle and journey, it is to be noted that Packiam thinks of and tries different vehicles as her family moves to different

cities. Packiam is forbidden to ride a motorbike and she learns cycle riding from her younger brother amidst much warning from the elders in the family. As she falls down in the course of learning, she is advised severely against acquiring that skill as she is a woman and if she becomes handicapped, she will never get married. (Ambai 64). Her desire to learn horse riding when they live near Guindy has been much criticised and it sparks a lot of debate in the family and she is forbidden from learning it. At Delhi, when she goes for higher education, she has a bad experience of riding on a scooter with her classmate; but her desire to own a scooter remains unfulfilled. This part of the story, resembling a memoir, centres on the various incidents in the life of Packiam.

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY THE PROTAGONISTS

The fourth chapter of Munro's story continues the life story of Almeda who grows sick and feels restless. The chapter focusses specifically on the incidents happened at night – some people chasing a drunk woman in the

neighbourhood of Almeda, the woman being brutally attacked and fallen into the fence of Almeda's house. This external incident, referred to in the second chapter of the story, affects the sick Almeda much and she seeks the assistance of Poulder; Poulder helps her out of the trouble, chases the drunk woman away and promises to walk with her to the church the next day. The chapter ends with the news report of this incident recorded in the newspaper.

The fifth chapter of the story is an account of the last days of Almeda, who refuses to see Poulder the next day, takes medicine to calm herself and rests. Her desire to write poems grows, as she has been immensely disturbed by the enterprising, money - minded people like Poulter, the stormy winter nights of the town and the benighted violent deeds on the street at nights. Besides, she wishes to write a great poem encompassing the poems she has written so far.

Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn't that the idea – one very great poem that will contain everything and, oh, that will make all the other poems, the poems she –has written,

inconsequential, mere trial and error, mere rags? (Munro 71)

She decides to write a poem on the river "The Meneseteung", by looking deep into the "river of her mind" and writes about her experiences in the town. The chapter ends with a sense of ambiguity – if Almeda is sane or insane. The story of Almeda ends with the abrupt note on her mental health of Almeda; its first person narrator totally gets disappeared in this chapter, leaving no traces of interpretation nor any sources to support her discovery of historical facts about the life of Almeda.

The sixth and the last chapter of the story opens with two newspaper reports published in the 'Vidette' juxtaposed without any intervening comments of the narrator. The first italicized passage is the report on the death of Almeda and the second is the report on the death of Poulter, followed by the comment:

So the Vidette runs on, copious and assured. Hardly a death goes undescribed, or a life unevaluated (Munro 72).

The tale of the poetess has thus been reconstructed both on the reports of the newspaper and speculation. The fact and fiction get mingled in the discourse in an interesting way.

The seventh section of Ambai's story presents facts as observed by Packiam while she travels in an electric train or a bus. The journey she finds to be irksome as it speeds on the highway, emitting a lot of smoke, making hazardous sounds and disorderly noise. These vehicles are attractive and colourful to look at but dangerous when they function. Packiam's fears overcome her desire to travel in such vehicles.

The eighth section of the story takes place in Kalpakkam, after many years. Packiam visits her brother's house there; she and the children of her brother travel in the Kattamaran despite sea sickness. Her desire to ride a bicycle is still unabated and she again falls down in her attempt to ride one, when accompanied by her brother's son. After a few unsuccessful attempts, she could ride on it like a queen (Ambai 67). With this, as in Munro, the story of Packiam riding a vehicle ends.

RECONSTRUCTING THE LIFE HISTORY OF THE PROTAGONISTS

The last chapter in Munro's story marks the return of the first person narrator who has been effacing throughout and ascertains the fact that it is the story of Almeda is as much as it is the story of the narrator. It is the narrator who has been engaged in the activity of the reconstruction and Almeda's story has been subjectively constructed, though the story seems to contain objective descriptions. That deceptive objectivity emphasises the subjective nature of historical inquiry.

The narrator looks for Almeda Roth in the graveyard and finds out the stone of Almeda with the name 'Meda' engraved on it. She confirms the fact that she was called 'Meda' in the family. "Or perhaps she chose her name from the poem, to be written on her stone" (Munro 73). This uncertainty clouds her joy of discovering the stone. She still feels that curious people strive to find the truth but truth evades them.

And they may get it wrong, after all I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever made grape jelly (Munro 73).

These last sentences about the medicine taken by Almeda for her sickness and the account of her grape jelly preparation in the preceding chapters, a kind of confession from the narrator, question the truth of the events presented. This uncertainty of truth makes sure again the fact that any history is subjective.

The last section of Ambai's story compromises the discrepancy between Packiam's hither-to, unfulfilled desire to possess a vehicle and the opposition she has received so far from the society. Packiam is now the owner of a computer, an electronic vehicle that never pollutes the atmosphere and never collides with any vehicle and causes bloodshed. She can now do anything and everything, travel anywhere and everywhere and flies across the worlds like her ancestral Gods and Goddesses (Ambai 67). The story ends with the hint that she could use the vehicle

to destroy the wicked and to meet the good.

CONCLUSION

If Munro's story creates the life of Almeda, a nineteenth century poetess out of the available sources and the imagination of the narrator, Ambai's story too makes the story of vehicle from her own experience, knowledge of mythology and her family records. Munro's story resembling auto/biography centres on the life history of a single person put together by a young scholar – narrator; Ambai's story is a personal experience of Packiam reconstructed by herself, covering the lives of three generations of her family and their experiences with the vehicles of their time; it is like creating cultural auto/biography. Munro's story consists of two parallel narratives of artistic creation – one of the narrator and another of Almeda; Ambai's work has a single strand of Packiam's narrative. There is no uncertainty and unreliability in the narration of Ambai; likewise, the feminist thought is not so much in Munro. But the conflict between the society and the protagonist is evident in both the stories; while Almeda is a

lonely poetess shuddering and shying away from the crowd, Packiam faces the problems, challenges them and achieves her aim. However, both the stories are, fictional creations, encoded with traces of history as part of their thematic framework.

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