

Translation of “Dimensions” by Alice Munro

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Submitted to

Dr.Fakrul Alam

Professor

Department of English

East West University

Submitted by

Tapader Fatema Begum

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Introduction

Canadian author Alice Munro is known as the “master of contemporary the short story” (Wikipedia). She is the creator of contemporary short stories and has changed the definition of short story. Known as “Canadian Chekhov” Munro won many literary awards including the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. She won Canada’s Governor General’s award thrice in her life and received Man Booker Prize in 2009. Despite all these literary accolades her stories are not widely read, at least in Bangladesh. Therefore, I felt an urge to translate one of her stories in Bengali for Bangladeshi readers while I was reading the stories of Alice Munro.

I have translated “Dimensions” to represent one of her stories to Bengali readers. “Dimensions” was first published in *The New Yorker* on June 5, 2006. The story is about a young woman Doree, who was always dominated by her husband and was unable to explore her individual identity, but who moves towards emancipation in an epiphanic moment. I read quite a few Munro’s stories and after thinking of translating few other stories, finally decided to translate “Dimensions”. Since most of Munro’s stories are set in south-western Ontario where she was born, the setting is quite different from Bangladesh. Cultural, religious and geographical aspects of Munro’s stories may sometimes make them quite incomprehensible to Bengali readers. So I was looking for something which, if not culturally relevant, is at least thematically familiar or universal. By “universal” I did not mean common, but something which has the power to move people. I think “Dimensions”, in any language, has the power to move readers. In the following pages, I will briefly discuss the life of Alice Munro and the nature of her stories, in addition with a commentary of my own translating experience of this story through examples.

I

Alice Ann Munro was born Alice Laidlaw on 10 July 1931 in Wingham which is located in the Canadian province of Ontario. Most of Munro's stories are set in Huron Country in southwestern Ontario. Strong regional focus is one of the key features of her fiction. When Munro was asked why she tended to describe small-town Canadian life in her fiction, she said:

I don't think I would've been nearly so bold as a writer if I had lived in a [bigger] town and if I had gone to school with other people who were interested in the same things I was ... what you might call a "higher cultural level." I didn't have to cope with that — I was the only person I knew who wrote stories. . . . I was, as far as I knew, the only person who could do this in the world! (Popova).

Southwestern Ontario, surrounded on three sides by Lake Huron, is mainly an agricultural land. In the 19th century many large and small towns started to flourish there because of accessible boat transport and water- power driven mills (Atwood). The Donnelly's Massacre¹ in Ontario had great impact on the people of this region. Violence, crime, subdued emotions – all these were part of south-west Ontario's people's lives and Munro's stories were greatly influenced by these real life experiences. Popular Canadian author Margaret Atwood writes:

“Lush nature, repressed emotions, respectable fronts, hidden sexual excesses, outbreaks of violence, lurid crimes, long-held grudges, strange rumors - these are never far away in Munro's Sowesto, partly because all have been provided by the real life of the region” (Atwood).

¹ Donnelly's Massacre- The Donnelly family migrated to Canada from Ireland in 1845 or 1846. A feud between the Donnelly's and their neighbor turned into in a massacre in which five Donnelly family members were killed.

Alice Munro has been writing fiction since she was in seven or eight grade. Her initial inspiration was the “dreadfully sad” ending of Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Little Mermaid”(Popova).So, when she finished reading that story, she decided to write another story with a happy ending. Because Munro thought that the little mermaid deserved something other than the death. As Margaret Atwood has noted, becoming a writer from a small town like southwestern Ontario, was really an unusual idea in 1930s and 1940s.After all, even in the 1950s or 60s, there were only few text book publishers in Canada. Nevertheless, Munro never felt unsure of herself as a writer. As she notes, she was always an extremely devoted artist who knew her goal perfectly.

“In writing, I’ve always had a lot of confidence, mixed with a dread that this confidence is entirely misplaced. I think in a way that my confidence came just from being dumb. Because I lived so out of any mainstream, I didn’t realize that women didn’t become writers as readily as men, and that neither did people from a lower class. If you know you can write fairly well in a town where you’ve hardly met anyone else who reads, you obviously think this is a rare gift indeed” (Munro).

Munro's father Robert Eric Laidlaw was a fox and mink farmer and her mother, Anne Clarke Laidlaw was a school teacher. She studied English and Journalism under a two years scholarship at the University of Western Ontario. Munro considers this period as "a little vacation", because this was the single time in her life while she was free from household work (Munro). In 1951, right after her two- years scholarship ended, she married James Munro and moved to Vancouver, where she had her first baby. Then in 1963, they moved to Victoria to open a book store. They opened "Munro's Books" which is still there. Her marriage ended in 1972 and in 1973 Munro left Victoria and taught creative writing at York University. But she quit teaching because she hated the job. She got married to Gerald Fremlin, whom she had known from her university days, and in 1976 they moved to Clinton, Ontario.

"Royal Beatings", Munro's first story, was published in 1977, although Munro had sent her early stories to *The New Yorker* in 1950s. Then she stopped sending stories to *The New Yorker* and sent stories only to Canadian magazines. Her first published story "The Dimensions of a Shadow" was published when she was nineteen years old. Her first collection of stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* was published in 1968 and won the Canada's Governor General's Award. But the book sold very badly. In 1971, *Lives of Girls and Women* was published. This is a collection of interlinked stories. In 1977, another collection of interlinked stories *Who Do You Think You Are* was published and for this volume Munro won the Governor General's Award for a second time. Since the 1980s Munro has continued to publish collections of stories. Her most recent collection was published in 2012.

Munro constantly revises and edits her stories. She had even published different versions of her stories. For example, “Save the Reaper” and “Passion” were published in two different versions within the year of the publication of the first versions. “Home” and “Wood”, are stories that were published thirty years after the publication of the first versions. Munro tirelessly rewrites her stories. She revises perspectives, themes, syllables, even punctuations. Sometimes she changes characters and creates new ending.

Munro said that her stories are meant to move people regard less of age, sex and generation; still it is difficult not to focus on the feminist aspects of her fiction especially when the reader is a woman. Truly, I became interested in Alice Munro because I enjoy reading women writers. Munro mentions that big novels about “mainstream real life” are men’s terrain. Like her, I believe that, women writers write well about the “marginal” and “the disconnected realities of life” (Munro). Munro’s stories focus on the triviality of life, talks about the distinct complexities of the lives of those seemingly uncomplicated people whom we barely notice in the course of our lives.

As I suggested above, the source of Munro’s stories is the life itself; life out of fancy and fantasy, devoid of superfluity and absolutely unpredictable. Her stories move back and forth in time, continuously astonishing readers and leaving no room for prediction. In a critical appreciation of Alice Munro’s fiction, Margaret Atwood noted:

“In Munro's work, grace abounds, but it is strangely disguised: nothing can be predicted. Emotions erupt. Preconception crumble. Surprises proliferate. Astonishments leap out. Malicious acts can have positive consequences” (Atwood).

It is difficult to mention one particular feature of Munro's stories. Munro notices the tiniest detail of life and reveals the complex psychological state of her characters perfectly. Her stories are vividly described and skillfully observed, and mostly based on a sudden epiphanic moment, a sudden revelation. The summation is always larger than the sections in her stories. Munro's stories do not always have happy endings, but can make readers feel completely different persons at the end of the stories (Popova).

II

Translating “Dimensions” was a thrilling experience for me, although not an easy task at all. Since a translator has to always expect that “sameness cannot exist between two languages” (Bassnett 36). Even though I tried to be faithful to the original as much as possible, something of the original was somewhat lost in my translation. As I mentioned above, Munro’s stories mostly represent her native culture, so it was quite impossible to ignore the culture, custom and religion while translating any of her stories. Lack of similar cultural conventions in Bengali language made my task difficult and untranslatable at times. Certainly, it was not possible to achieve full equivalence in my translation. Nevertheless, I tried to be as close as possible to the original and did my best to make it quite readable for Bengali readers while keeping the flavor of the original alive.

“Dimensions” opens with the protagonist Doree who takes three buses to visit her “Criminally insane” husband in an unnamed place. As soon as the story opens up, the readers come across the name “Kincardine”- which is a municipality in Canada. As the name of this city might not sound familiar to Bengali readers, I have provided a footnote for the readers. I mentioned more than once that the setting of this story is distinctly different from ours and Munro seems deliberately mentioning the names of the shops or spots or even the products of Southwestern Ontario frequently. For instance “Raspberry- chamomile” is not comparable to any fruit available in Bangladesh and “Kleenex” or “Tim Hortons”, too, are not replaceable by any well- known brand names. Since I have not adapted any situation in this story to make it seem like a familiar one for Bengali readers, I decided to omit names of some of the products and places without changing the meaning of the text and destroying the essence of story.

Christianity is perhaps the most obvious feature of Munro's stories. Since the society she writes about is Christian. In Margaret Atwood's word,

“Christianity is not often overt; it's merely the general background.....Christianity is "what people had" - and in Canada, church and state were never separated along the lines laid down in the US. Prayers and Bible readings were daily fare in publicly funded schools. This cultural Christianity has provided ample material for Munro, but it is also connected with one of the most distinctive patterns in her image-making and storytelling” (Atwood).

On the contrary, Christianity is not an overly familiar theme for Bengali readers. Some concepts of Christianity might seem obscure to them. For example, to describe Lloyd's altered philosophy Munro wrote in “Dimensions”, “His philosophy of life had changed as he got older—he believed now in marriage, constancy, and no birth control”(4). Again, when Lloyd decides to teach their children at home, “Lloyd thought that their children should be educated at home. This was not for religious reasons—going against dinosaurs and cavemen and monkeys and all that...” (9). If readers are not accustomed to Christianity, it is difficult for them to understand Lloyd's objection against birth control and the religious reason behind not sending children to schools. Therefore, I have provided footnotes to make the story more comprehensible to the readers in such instances.

Munro reveals human complications in an uncomplicated, straightforward prose style. She writes simply, avoids superfluous words, and uses everyday speech. In this translation I have tried to follow Munro's stylistic elements quite adequately and have tried to translate in a similarly uncomplicated Bengali prose style. Munro often uses carefully punctuated and grammatically correct sentences, but sometimes she uses really short sentences. In order to create

a fairly readable prose style of Bengali, sometimes I have tried to focus more on readability than structure. But a translator is always bound by the original; therefore I have tried to follow the English prose structure as closely as possible.

Munro uses lots of idiomatic expressions in her writing and exact translation of these idioms is not always possible. While translating I concentrated on what Susan Bassnett mentions in her book *Translatin Studies* about translating idiomatic expressions:

One idiom is substituted for another. That substitution is made not on the basis of linguistic elements in the phrase, nor on the basis of a corresponding or similar image contained in the phrase, but on the function of the idiom (31).

As I mentioned above, the same culturally equivalent expressions cannot exist between two languages, therefore, I have tried to replace an English phrase with a culturally equivalent Bengali phrase. For example, “Done to death,” “Thin edge of the wedge” etc. I have substituted these idioms by Bengali ones that serve the same functions in Bengali. Similarly, I have followed the same policy while translating slang such as, “Goddamen asshole”, “Bitch- out- of- hell”, “Suck- stick” etc.

I borrowed words from English that we use quite a lot in Bengali as well. Since I have borrowed many words I would not name them all. Sometimes, instead of using the Bengali term, I borrowed the word from English directly, for example, “Menopause”. I have used menopause instead of its Bengali term because I thought that we use the English word more often than its Bengali term in everyday conversation in our country.

In my translation, I tried to capture the tone or the perspective that Alice Munro has used in this story. Munro narrated this story quite objectively from a third- person's point of view. I carefully have tried to reproduce the narrator's tone in my translation as much as I could. In addition, I have provided footnotes to make the story more comprehensive for the readers where necessary. In spite of all these, unavailability of similar cultural expressions often makes the text culturally untranslatable for a translator. I also faced difficulties in translating such expressions. Expressions like "Holy shit" cannot be substituted, because this kind of expression does not exist in Bengali, and literal translation in such a case could have destroyed the readability of the text. Therefore, I decided to omit this phrase while keeping the meaning of the whole sentence intact.

Translating "Dimensions" was really a pleasing task for me, although I went through lots of trial and error sessions. It was also challenging because the story is big, culture bound, carefully constructed, and skillfully narrated. I tried not to translate the story in haste, cautiously followed Munro's style and revised my translation tirelessly in order to give readers the closest impression I could give of the original story. I do not know whether I have succeeded or not and whether my translation can still convey Munro's story to any extent or not, but I enjoyed the experience of translating very much.

Margaret Atwood said about Alice Munro that "no matter how well known she becomes - that she ought to be better known". Unlike other Nobel winning authors, Munro is not extensively read and widely taught in Bangladesh. Even for Bengali readers of world literature, Alice Munro is still not a familiar name, despite the Nobel Prize. Although some of her stories have been

translated into Bengali, these are few in numbers and really inadequate to represent Munro's literary works. This translation of "Dimensions" is my beginning attempt to acquaint Bangladeshi readers with one of Munro's stories in their own language. I have not come across any other translated version of "Dimensions" into Bengali yet. So I am incapable of comparing my translation with any other translated version of this story. All I can say that I put my earnest effort to make my translation good in every possible way and hope that readers will enjoy this story in my translation.