

Interpreting the “Other” in Alice Munro’s “Runaway” from Ecofeminism

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Abstract. *Runaway* turns on brief openings that close. Carla prepares to leave, returns, and learns how quickly care can become a means of keeping her in place. Read with ecofeminist concerns in mind, the story’s pairing of Carla and the goat, Flora, shows how management of bodies and habitats distributes voice and risk. The analysis follows scenes around departure and recall to show where choice is made visible and how it contracts through shelter, naming, and help offered on specific terms. In this account, “othering” is a practice embedded in routine relations rather than an abstract principle. The reading stays with the text and stops short of universal claims; it identifies the pressures that shape action in these moments and the unresolved ethics of living with non-human dependents under familiar patriarchal arrangements.

Keywords: ecofeminism, *Runaway*, Alice Munro, patriarchy, othering, care, dependency

1. Introduction

This article reads Alice Munro’s *Runaway* with ecofeminist concerns in view and keeps the analysis local to the text. Carla leaves, returns, and discovers how quickly care and protection can become means of keeping her in place. Paired with the goat, Flora, she is situated in a network that manages bodies and habitats—who may move, who is recalled, who is sheltered, and on what terms [1]. The discussion follows scenes around departure and return to show where agency briefly opens and how it contracts through routines of dwelling, naming, and help offered conditionally. Rather than a general statement about “oppression,” the reading tracks the practical forms by which constraint takes hold and the ethical friction that follows for both human and non-human lives.

From this vantage, objectification and othering appear not as doctrine but as practices embedded in ordinary arrangements. The partner who controls access to shelter, resources, and speech also sets the conditions under which movement counts as disobedience and care becomes a tool of management. In these moments, the story aligns Carla with Flora: both are protected and handled, yet both are made vulnerable by the very terms of that protection. The tension arises when the basic need for self-definition meets a requirement to remain secondary; it is here that the narrative locates the narrowing of choice and the lived cost of “being the other.” [2]

Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that examines ecological issues from the gender dimension, revealing the truth that patriarchal rule and man’s domination of nature are rooted in the logic of patriarchy. It also criticizes hierarchical thinking, dichotomous thinking, and the rationality of domination arguments.

The concept of the “Other” was initially used to analyze the Orient from an Orientalist perspective, and was later employed to study nature, women, and other subjects, often in dichotomy with the subject [3]. The concept of “Other” in Plato’s philosophy can be regarded as the origin of the notion of “Other” with subordination in subsequent Western thought. Jacques Derrida, a proponent of Western deconstructionism, has noted that in the dichotomous mode of thinking, the subordinate is frequently perceived as the “Other”, as evidenced by the treatment of women in gender relations [4]. The male activity of enslaving nature and women can be understood as an “othering” of nature and women. The establishment of the subject is accompanied by the “othering” of nature and women. Women are regarded as the absolute “other”, subservient to male authority, with no choice of destiny [5]. As Beauvoir writes in her book *The Second Sex*, “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other”. The patriarchy establishes a subordinate position for women, and from the inception of patriarchal society, the existence of the ‘other’ is perceived as a threat. The duality of the “other”, the female, is reflected in subsequent history, where women’s submission to the will of men continues to the present day [2].

At present, the research on *Runaway* mainly focuses on the dimensions of narrative technique, feminism, ethics and morality, but there are fewer studies on the ‘othering’ of the work from the perspective of ecofeminism. The purpose of this paper is twofold: firstly, to analyze the ‘othering’ identity of Carla, the heroine of *Runaway*, with the help of eco-feminist theories; secondly, to explore the causes of Carla’s “othering” and delve into women’s inner worlds and dilemmas. The author’s work is a reflection of the female’s inner world and existential dilemma, and it aims to provide references and inspiration for the improvement of women’s living conditions.

2. Literature review

From as early as the 1980s, Alice Munro’s short stories attracted considerable attention from English literary critics. As one of her early works, *Runaway* was extensively disseminated and subjected to rigorous scrutiny upon its publication, incorporating themes such as women’s self-perception, familial relationships, love, and marriage. The title *Runaway* is a double-entendre, referring both to Carla’s runaways from her oppressive marriage and the goat Flora’s runaway from Carla. In ecofeminist discourse, Clark establishes a parallel between the feminine and the animal, thereby subjugating her wife and nature by reducing her to a subjugated animal. The parallels drawn between Flora and Carla, and their “runaways”, serve as an analogy between animals and women, where the overt cruelty inflicted upon the former is seen as a metaphor for the implicit cruelty endured by the latter [6].

At the beginning of 1998, the number of studies on Munro in China was relatively small, with most of the research focusing on his preliminary works. However, since 2006, scholars in China have convened to explore women’s themes and narrative art techniques. The research on *Runaway*, for instance, focuses on the survival status, inner struggles, and self-searching of female characters, with researchers generally exploring the dilemma and way out for women in marriage, family and society. The notion of “runaway” is a perpetual pursuit for the women depicted in the book, representing a cry of nature that resonates in the face of oppression. In their pursuit of autonomy, women embark on a journey of self-discovery and awakening their consciousness, a process accompanied by adversity. The long-term impact of patriarchy has resulted in women’s subjugation, and the act of escaping represents a resistance against this subjugation [7]. The symbolic representation of nature’s resistance to human exploitation is exemplified by the runaway of the goat Flora.

In the following discussion, researchers’ varying insights into Carla’s runaway and return will be considered. From the perspective of spatial criticism, Carla’s actions can be interpreted as a pursuit and reconstruction of her self-space to achieve a deeper understanding of her true self. Her runaway, therefore, can be regarded not as a sign of failure, but rather as a symbol of awakening, rooted in a

profound reflection on the dialectical relationship between reality and ideal. This reveals a new interpretation of Munro's "runaway": the notion that a blind runaway does not lead people to the desired Garden of Eden. Instead, the call to women in the new era is to return to reality, perseverance and courage [8]. This paper analyses the reasons for Carla's runaway and return, finding that it is the closed symbolic world she wants to run away from. However, after the experience of escaping, she realizes the importance of Clark to her and the meaninglessness of escaping [9], and the return is a choice she makes after weighing the pros and cons of life [10].

Ecofeminist readings of *Runaway* are fewer than studies on its narrative craft or feminist themes, though several early attempts point the way. In this account, Flora—the goat who draws Carla's attention and sympathy—functions less as an emblem than as a presence that steadies her and clarifies what is at stake in leaving. The text hints at Flora's disappearance and the threat of harm; Clark's handling of the animal sharpens Carla's sense that care can turn coercive and helps catalyze her brief defiance. Set beside one another, Carla and Flora mark how a familiar order manages movement, shelter, and voice, positioning women and non-human creatures as the more vulnerable side of an unequal arrangement [11]. The novel stages frictions between "civilization" and nature and between masculine and feminine roles; rather than issuing a manifesto, it shows how the exploitation of women accompanies a wider indifference to damaged environments and gestures toward more reciprocal ways of living [12]. At the same time, by filtering key scenes through Clark's actions and influence, the story records the pressure placed on Carla's choices and, implicitly, a desire for fairer gender relations and more careful human–nature ties [13].

Prior scholarship on Munro and "Runaway" is broad—covering narrative technique, thematic inquiry, feminism, and regional culture—and the international literature began earlier and is more extensive, with domestic work expanding in scope and depth. What remains scarce are studies that track "the other" at the junction of ecofeminism and textual practice. This article addresses that gap through close reading, tracing how Carla's status as "other" is produced in scenes of departure and recall and in routines of dwelling, naming, and care, and specifying the local causes that narrow her choice.

3. Ecofeminism

In the 1970s, as global ecological problems became increasingly severe, human beings initiated a re-examination of their relationship with nature, leading to the emergence of the trend of ecologicalism. Concurrently, the feminist movement experienced a period of global flourishing, with women increasingly advocating for equal rights and interests across various domains. A central tenet of ecofeminism, a seminal school of thought, is the exploration of the intrinsic connection between nature and women. This theory was first proposed by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. After this, Vandana Shiva, drawing upon influences from Indian culture, advanced a distinctive perspective on "ecofeminism." Shiva's work focused on highlighting the detrimental impact of the capitalist economy and the Western-style development model on the natural environment and female groups in Third World countries. She revealed that in the process of transformation of the roles of nature and women, they have changed from being the original creators and sustainers of life to the object of desire for the male subject. This transformation has resulted in nature and women being treated one-sidedly as so-called 'resources' in a development model that disregards the value of life and is characterized by the suppression of the feminine principle [14]. Carolyn Merchant examines the macro dimensions of how society in her analysis, symbolizing masculinity, oppresses nature, symbolizing femininity, and critiques the dichotomous thinking of traditional concepts. In her book *The Death of Nature - Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, she provides an in-depth analysis of the symbiotic and coexisting relationship between women and nature throughout history, emphasizing the close relationship between women and nature [15]. Susan Griffin, in her book

Woman and Nature: Her Inner Call, profoundly reveals the intrinsic connection between women and nature and criticizes the hierarchical value theory and subject-object dichotomy under the patriarchal civilization, especially the dichotomy between men and women, human beings and nature [16]. Dualistic thinking is identified as a root cause of the oppression of women and nature. According to Griffin, both women and nature are subjects of oppression by the patriarchal worldview, and ecofeminism links women and nature because they both suffer similar forms of oppression and exploitation. The overarching objective of ecofeminist theory is twofold: firstly, to expose the pervasive devaluation of women and nature in human thought and social structures; and secondly, to challenge the dual oppression of women and nature by patriarchy through a dichotomous way of thinking. The theory is committed to the realization of gender equality and ecological justice.

In conclusion, ecofeminist theories have profound insight and wide influence, revealing the common dilemmas and close ties between women and nature in patriarchal societies, and providing new perspectives and methods for examining and solving global environmental problems and social inequalities, such as developing new economic models, establishing a more just social system, and stimulating women's awareness of environmental protection and their power to take action, and so on.

4. An othering analysis of runaway in the light of ecofeminist thought

4.1. Interdependence between women and nature

Set against the backdrop of life in rural Canada, the novel devotes a great deal of ink to depicting the interdependent relationship between women and nature. As a teenager, Carla longs to run away from the hustle and bustle of the city and live in the countryside with the animals. Carla's longing for country life is essentially an affinity and dependence she has on nature. "She liked the rhythm of her regular chores, the high space under the barn roof, the smells." [1] For Carla, the countryside is not only a physical abode but also a place for the soul. Nature provides her with a space away from the pressures of family and society where she can find a moment of peace and self. In a patriarchal society, women are oppressed and have a lower status than men, while nature suffers from human destruction and plunder. The empathy and mutual solace experienced by women concerning nature serve as a source of strength, enabling them to resist oppression and collectively seek liberation. In her flight, Carla immerses herself in nature, deriving strength from its essence and seeking solace in its metaphorical Garden of Eden. In moments of isolation and perceived helplessness, Carla finds solace and support in Flora, the goat. The goat's presence is a source of comfort and support for Carla, reflecting the profound connection between women and nature. This phenomenon finds resonance in the context of Canadian Aboriginal culture. The "natural" attributes of the culture of Aboriginal groups in Canada, and their irreplaceability in the Aboriginal state of being, are evident in Canadian Aboriginal literature [17]. Aboriginal languages are believed to have been derived from the land that nourishes them, a concept that also reflects the sacred beliefs of Canadian culture in honoring nature.

4.2. Patriarchal "othering" of nature

Maria Mies, the famous German sociologist and feminist, analyzes the object relations of women and men with nature in her masterpiece *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* [18]. In it, she specifies that in the case of women, their interaction with nature, with their own as well as external nature, is a reciprocal process. Although they possess nature, this does not constitute a dominant or property relationship. In the case of men, on the other hand, men's instrumental object relationship with nature suggests that the object relationship has taken on the character of domination [17]. In *Runaway*, Flora is not only an important companion in Carla's life, but also her emotional and spiritual support. However, Clark does not give Flora enough attention and affection. "He had heard

about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it.” [1] exemplifies that in Clark’s eyes, the goat Flora is nothing more than a tool he uses to soothe the horses, not a being. Clark’s attitude towards Flora is largely characterized by neglect and indifference, as well as indifference after she is lost. This behavior reflects Clark’s view of Flora as a secondary, unimportant being, the “other”. In addition, through the bones in the grass in the article, Clark is likely to kill Flora after Carla’s return, which not only implies that Carla’s budding immature feminist ideology has been stifled in the cradle, but also reflects the indifference of the Canadian patriarchal system to nature.

4.3. Patriarchal “othering” of women

In a patriarchal culture, women are often portrayed as subordinate to men. As a working woman from the lower class without a high level of education, Carla is often neglected and marginalized in society. Under the yoke of traditional gender roles, Carla has no income and is economically dependent on her husband, Clark. Her lack of financial independence makes it difficult for her to run away from Clark’s control, and she is thus regarded as an accessory to the family. When Carla is upset by Clark’s bad attitude in forcing her to call Sylvia, Clark says, “Don’t tell me what I am. You’re choking me. Start supper” [1]. Not only does he not have the slightest relief for Carla, but he impatiently accuses her and tells her to go and make dinner in a commanding and taken-for-granted tone. Such episodes not only reflect his indifference and lack of patience towards Carla, but also side-step the fact that society’s expectations of women are often confined to the traditional roles of housewives and good wives and mothers. In addition, when Clark forces Carla to blackmail Mrs. Jamieson, he says, “You were injured. You were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife. It’s a question of respect.” [1] and Clark warns Sylvia not to interfere in their private affairs by rhetorically asking Sylvia “My Goodness, is that so? My wife is a human being? Really? Thank you for the information. But don’t try getting smart with me. Sylvia.” [1] This episode exemplifies that in Clark’s mind, his wife Carla is just an appendage to him and not a person with an independent personality. He expects Carla to settle for her subordinate position instead of pursuing personal independence and development. The family is a microcosm of society, and the subordinate position of women in the family reflects the suppression of women in a patriarchal society. Clark’s violence and indifference to Carla is not only a personal problem but also reflects the fact that society at that time recognized male authority and acquiesced to women’s disadvantaged status. The deep-rooted social expectations and stereotyped roles restrict women’s self-development and space for choice, making it difficult for them to get rid of the identity label of “the other”.

In male-dominated societies like Canada, women are imprisoned by an opaque future as the “other”. When men commit themselves to a cause, they are motivated by profit and move steadily in the dark, while women have to struggle in the darkness of the night [2]. This social context may explain Carla’s second failed runaway. She is scared and confused about everything when she runs away, how she takes the subway or the trolley, takes care of unfamiliar horses, talks to people she does not know well, and lives every day amid a crowd that is not Clark’s. On Carla’s runaway, she was fearful of the future. “But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place?” [1] Carla’s journey exemplifies her lack of inner independence, she doesn’t know how to fill the emotional void within herself after leaving Clark, and she struggles with her emotional dependence on her old life and her confusion and insecurity about the unknown. In the process of escaping, she realizes that she is not fully prepared to meet the new state of life, and eventually breaks down and chooses to return. Compromise is not only the helpless acceptance of reality but also an important manifestation of the spiritual oppression of women in the patriarchal society, which reflects the spiritual poison of the patriarchal society to women in the position of the “other”. This is also closely related to Munro’s own experience. Munro writes in the vein of second-

wave feminism, a movement that not only focuses on basic gender equality but also raises subconscious concerns about patriarchal dominant culture. In Munro's work, female characters often suffer from the limitations imposed by men, so Carla's runaway is ultimately not free from the limitations of her time.

5. Conclusion

Read through an ecofeminist lens, *Runaway* locates Carla's "other" status not in abstract doctrine but in scenes where care, shelter, and help are offered on terms that constrict her movement. Her departures and returns make the pattern legible: brief openings of agency close as protection becomes a mode of management. Set alongside Flora, the goat, Carla's experience shows how the same routines that safeguard bodies and habitats can also sort them into degrees of vulnerability, binding human and non-human lives to the conditions set by a familiar order.

This account remains local to the text. It traces how "othering" is produced in ordinary arrangements—access to a home, control over naming and speech, the power to recall someone who has left—rather than in proclamations about gender or nature. The story's pressure points clarify where choice appears and why it narrows, without resolving the tension into harmony or offering a universal remedy. From this vantage, *Runaway* invites further work that tests how these practices operate in other episodes and how small changes in the terms of care might alter what counts as leaving, returning, or staying.

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