

# An Analysis of the Wilderness Thought in the Albanian Virgin

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**Abstract:** Wilderness is a common image in Alice Munro's novels, which is closely related to Canadian national identity. This paper focuses on the thought of wilderness in *The Albanian Virgin* which is selected from the short story collection—*Open Secrets* of Alice Munro published in 1994. It discusses gender inequity, the family feud between people and the coexistence and conflicts between wilderness and modern civilization. It is of great practical significance to explore the relationship between man and nature, between man and man, and between nature and modern civilization.

**Keywords:** Wilderness; Human; Nature; Modern civilization

## 1. Introduction

Alice Munro is a famous Canadian female writer and short story novelist. She has won the highest Canadian literary award—the Governor General's Award three times. She was awarded "The Man Booker International Prize" in 2009 and became the thirteenth female winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 2013. The reasons why Alice Munro is able to become an "evergreen tree" in Canada are that her stories are noted for plain language, emotional intensity and abundant themes, especially the theme of wilderness. Just as Munro said, "The world is like a wilderness. We can change our position in it, but it's just from one wilderness station to another". Wilderness is a very important element in her works.

*The Albanian Virgin* describes wilderness scene and all kinds of human living in the wilderness. It tells three seemingly parallel stories through three lines: the story of virgin Lottar in typical narration, the story of Claire with flashbacks and the story of Charlotte scattered in the first two parts. These stories are about love, marriage, discontent, betrayal, impulsive passion, second thoughts, deaths, even murder, which provide us with plenty of reflection as well as meditation.

## 2. Walk into the Wilderness: Conflict and Integration in the Albanian Virgin

In Canadian literature, wilderness narrative has a long history. It can be seen in *Backwoods of Canada* and *Roughing It in the Bush* by Catherine Parr trail and *Susanna Moo die*. They describe the journey inward of early immigrants in the process of pioneering life in the jungle. Later critics believe that wilderness narrative shows Canadians' ambivalence of love and fear towards nature. To some extent, the natural environment plays an important role in the formation of Canadians' character [1].

Northrop Frye points out in his "conclusion" of the *Literature History of Canada* that Canadians, like the loners surrounded by the "indifferent" wilderness and jungle, are in deep fear of nature [2]. The wilderness thought in *The Albanian Virgin* has great value to explore. The novel describes the serious oppression on women, the exploration of human nature and the coexistence and conflicts between nature and modern civilization under the background of pioneering, promoting people to rethink the relationship between themselves and society.

### 2.1. Man and nature

The thought of "wilderness" is not only the core of ecological thought of American ecologist, but also a field that ecological criticism should focus on. The concept of wilderness first refers to nature, then to lots of spiritual qualities and universal values, such as awe, humility, respect, tolerance, non-violence, freedom, kindness and love. The "wilderness" is a key to unravel the study of ecological literature. What's more, it could also open a door to explore the human mind. The relationship between human and nature is very close in *The Albanian Virgin* [3]. Natural environment provides human with the basic condition for survival and development. People's clothing, food and shelter all depend on nature. They will not survive without natural materials. Human in Albania—the savage land, rely more on nature. Their small huts are made of stone; their beds are made of heaped-up ferns; they milk the ewes to drink; women wash their husbands' white head scarves in the river. They use all the materials in nature to live. Meanwhile, wilderness has a variety of symbolic meanings in *The Albanian Virgin*. Firstly, wilderness is a symbol of freedom and personal pursuit. People live in harmony with nature in Kula, especially the women. On the one hand, the little girls who always come to a mountain far away from Kula to get milk are

quiet wild with joy. They are relaxed and enjoy themselves in nature so much. On the other hand, in order to leave Canada to see the bell tower where the heads of Turks used to hang, Lottar falls out with her brother and never surrenders, even if someone tells her that it's very unwise to go there. This process which she comes to Albania is a process of pursuing inner freedom and self selection. When Lottar becomes a virgin, she wouldn't be lonely even though she is far away from the crowds and lead a hard life every day. She lives comfortably here and enjoys herself very much. Secondly, wilderness is a paradox between "evil" and "shelter". Under the cover of the jungles, the people in Kula can revenge from time to time. Lottar's guider finally has been killed. During this attack, Lottar's leg has been injured and she has been taken prisoner by the tribe. To go into the wilderness means to be in danger. At the same time, wildness is the preservation of the world [4]. In *The Albanian Virgin*, wilderness also plays a role of protection. The minister can take Lottar out smoothly and help her avoid the fate that she may be sold again just because of the wilderness as an excellent blind age, So, to a certain extent, wilderness can coordinate barbarism and violence [5].

## 2.2. Man and man

Human beings have formed two basic relationships in the practice of transforming nature: one is the relationship between man and nature, the other is the relationship between man and man. It is on the basis of the former that the latter can be expanded and the history of mankind can be written [6]. Munro is good at describing a variety of people and the relationships among them. And in this novel, a lot of space is devoted to describing working women in Kula. Gender inequity is a universal phenomenon here. Women in this tribe need to do farm work and housework, including washing clothes and serving their husband. No matter what men do outside, women cannot say anything. They are restricted to Kanun Laws, a set of laws and codes developed from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century in Albania. The law stipulates that families must be patriarchal (only males can continue the family bloodline as well as inheriting family honor and property and women must be attached to men.) and patrilocal (upon marriage, a woman moves into the household of her husband's family). Females are treated like the property of the family. Under the Kanun Laws, females are deprived of many rights. They cannot smoke, wear a watch, or vote in their local elections. They cannot buy land, and there are many jobs they are not permitted to hold. There are also establishments that they cannot enter. In order to avoid being enslaved, some women choose to become a virgin. They give up marriage, childbearing and sexual right, and dress themselves up as males, so that they can get males' rights and assume family responsibilities.

In addition, men are busy with road repairing and horse keeping, and the most important thing is revenge. Every man is equipped with a gun. These descriptions can easily lead to ethical confusion of readers. Those murderers are proud to kill people in the name of maintaining their families' honor, which is also influenced by the Kanun Law. It stipulates that people must revenge for generation, and a person often be despised if he does not revenge for his families: failure for vengeance is considered as a lack of courage. Apart from this, gun and killing are a constant topic of conversation in Kula. Everyone's life is priceless, but other people's lives in their eyes are as light as a feather. Munro spends a lot of ink to describe death in *The Albanian Virgin*. She attempts to explore the relationship between people and their attitude towards life.

## 2.3. Nature and modern civilization

What's more, Munro is adept in associating wilderness with modern civilization. And the relation between them is one of the origins of her novels. The world is backward meanwhile is contemporary in this novel. Her description of wilderness is not only an embodiment of the development of wildness culture itself, but also an expression of the anti-resistance and adaptation of the females against the world in which they live. The novel reflects the real plight of females, and invokes the profound rethinking on the issues of their lives. In *The Albanian Virgin*, wildness and civilization appear frequently in the same story. Munro advocates ecological balance between nature and civilization. She calls on all human beings to reconsider social values by presenting the harmony between nature and civilization. If readers study carefully, they will find that *The Albanian Virgin* is a story tells by the experienced person-Lottar (also known as Charlotte). Charlotte is deeply influenced by wild tribal life. She is very poor now, and has been living a vagrant life with her husband (the priest) over the years. Until now, they keep a lot of wild habits: sit on the floor, eat with hands, and eat cheese and pumpkin chips. Charlotte and her husband are the embodiment of the wilderness, but they can continue to live in a civilized world, which shows that the wilderness and civilization can coexist.

What we call wildness is a civilization other than our own. Most of the time, there are many conflicts between wilderness and human. *The Albanian Virgin* is a representative of the conflict between wildness and civilization among Munro's works. At the beginning of the novel, Lottar is totally alienated by Albanians. It is because of misunderstanding that Lottar is hijacked by savages. She even cannot find any way to communicate with local people for nobody there can speak English. Under such circumstances, she could not only learn many survival skills and adapt herself to the surrounding environment. Finally, Lottar is transformed into an unkempt person regardless of the individual image and personal hygiene.

She even become a member of the local people. Because of long-term isolation, Lottar has been used to the life there gradually, and she has been abandoned by modern society when she comes back from Albania. She cannot integrate into civilized society and has to learn to sleep on the mattress, to sit on the chair and to eat with a knife and folk. She even could not speak English any more! People around regard her as a freak monster. More unfortunately, she could never go back to the wilderness which she is familiar with. Wilderness and civilization face struggle and conflicts sometimes. It is crucial to seek the balance between wilderness and modern civilization.

### 3. Conclusion

“For me, if the story is not good, it is my fault, not the fault of the story. I hope my story can move others” [7]. As a female writer with sensitive and delicate narrative techniques, Alice Munro describes the conflicts and joy of ordinary people under the background of wilderness. Readers are impressed by rich meanings in her novels, which are mostly derived from her own experience [8]. It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. In *The Albanian Virgin*, nature is the wilderness; man is natural and wild. Human and wilderness are integrated. Although wilderness conflicts with modern civilization sometimes, it is the source of life to support the existence of civilization, the geographical space to carry civilization, and the internal requirement of the construction of ecological civilization. With environmental damage, the life value of the wilderness will

be more emphasized. Therefore, we must correctly understand and handle the relation between wilderness and civilization. Finally, the author of this study hopes this paper can be of some help and value to the people who do research on Alice Munro's *The Albanian Virgin*.

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