

Escape and Identity Construction -- A Comparison of "Escape" in *Women* and *Runaway*

Mengyuan Li

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou 730000, China

Abstract

Both Carla in Alice Munro's *Runaway* and the aunt in Yan Lianke's *Women* show the courage to pursue love and self-liberation, but their destinies are very different. Carla lacks independent thinking as well as the power to be self-reliance, and her disconnection from society results in the lack of a broad and effective social identity. In contrast, the aunt's escape experience is inextricably linked to society, and she builds a multidimensional social identity and emerges from the hardships of life under the influence of material affluence. This shows that women should not be limited to a single identity in their pursuit of individual development. Their self-realization must be based on self-independence, and on multidimensional identity in society.

Keywords

Escape, *Runaway*, *Women*, Identity.

1. Introduction

"Escape has always been the mother theme of literature", and this mother theme is "often implemented by women writers at the level of family life"[1]. In the nineteenth century, with the development of Western feminist thought, the theme of "escape" became more common in literature depicting women. Maggie in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Isabel in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, and Nala in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* are among the many women who have been described with great attention to show their pursuit of self-identity. They either escape from the family and social environment of their birth, or they act rebelliously because of the constraints of society.

"The first wave of Chinese women's 'escape' occurred during the 'May Fourth' period. Echoing the era of 'patricide', the rebellious daughters were portrayed first and foremost by escaping the patriarchal family." [2] In this period, Lu Xun's Zijun in *Regret for the Past* carries a monumental significance. Her escape epitomizes women's liberation in the May Fourth period: rebelling against their families, and pursuing love and autonomy in their chosen marriage. In addition to this, Sha Fei in Ding Ling's *Lady Sha Fei's Diary* and the many female figures in the novels of Lu Yin, Feng Yuanjun and Zhang Eiling greatly impact the traditional depiction of women and provide a new path for women in that era. In the face of the conflict between the old and the new, women dare to seize the opportunity to seek freedom and personal development by bravely escaping from their families, fleeing their hometowns, and running to love or to the big city. The portrayal of these women thus adds more connotation to the theme of "escape" in the context of new contemporary Chinese literature.

In 2013, Canadian author Alice Munro, known as the "Queen of Short Stories", won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her masterpiece, *Runaway*, is a reflection of her literary mastery. In the first short story, Carla embodies a feminist self-awakening and self-reflection. Yu Yanping offers a profound analysis of Carla's two escapes, calling them "the awakening and growth of female consciousness"[3]. Seven years later, in Chinese writer Yan Lianke's *Women*, there is also a female figure, the aunt (the youngest sister of Yan's father), who pursues love and goes far from

her family. She is not as resourceful and sensitive as Carla, nor does she have as many ideas of feminist awakening. Compared to Carla, the aunt's life is not only ordinary but also extremely dull, as if there is no vivid mark except for the earliest days of running away from home for love. Both stories seem to end in a similar way, with the heroine returning to her family with her husband, but with a difference—Carla makes a second attempt to run away from her husband, but fails and has to “resist the temptation” of escaping again. The aunt, on the other hand, remains in her new family and eventually becomes a part of it, never complaining about her fate in her entire life. While analyzing the similarities between the two, this article explores the main reasons for their different outcomes and further argues that in the process of self-awakening and self-realization, what is more fundamental for women is their connection to society, their ability to maintain a multidimensional social identity and their independence.

2. Escape of Carle and the Aunt

Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua refer to Chinese women writers of the May Fourth period as “the runaway Noras” and describe the women as follows: “The door that closed heavily behind them was not the door of the husband whose wife was a doll, but the door of the father, the home that nurtured them, imprisoned them, loved them, and was ready to turn them over.”[4]

The concept of the family of origin, or social environment of origin, also takes on a new metaphor in this context: the narrow cage. In some contexts, women, as a vulnerable group within the family, face a dilemma that is more pronounced than in the case of the “father/son” conflict, which is itself an experience of marginalization. In patriarchal societies and families, it is difficult for daughters to have the same power as men, and a daughter who defies her male parent faces more blame and hardship than a rebellious son. In the midst of this difficult entanglement and conflict, the enthusiasm and passion of the “daughters” to pursue the meaning of life seems to be an illusion and anachronistic, like some young people loaded with thousands of years of traditional thought screaming “self-development” in a book, while their own frailty makes this development extraordinarily tortuous and difficult.

Despite the differences in country and social backgrounds, both Carla and the aunt, as “daughters of the family”, are in the process of “escaping” from their families of origin and breaking free from the constraints of tradition.

Carla's family is complex—her mother, her stepfather who is an engineer, her stepbrother who is nine years older and has no affection for her, and a sister-in-law who dislikes her even more. It can be surmised that the father was the main source of income for the family and provided a relatively affluent life for both Carla and her mother: a large house with a backyard, opportunities for leisurely holidays, and a closet “big enough for a man to walk into”. The stepfather even provided Carla with the opportunity to go to college. But in contrast to the material life, the stepfather, who is the most dominant in the family, does not understand the rebellious and undesirable stepdaughter in any way. Carla is a marginalized presence in the reconstituted family—in the group, but also outside of it. So, Carla makes her own choice: “She left a note on the table and slipped out of the house at five o'clock in the morning”. In Clark's rusty truck, a mixture of petrol, metal, tools and stables, Carla leaves her old family without a second thought and enters the mobile home with a broken roof. The trailer life, which she had never known before, was the rest of her life, and she couldn't wait to learn how to decorate, furnish it and choose curtains and paint trims.

The Clark she was running to “hadn't even finished high school before he was eager to get out and do something He worked as a caretaker in a mental hospital, as a pop record caretaker at a station in Lethbridge, Alberta, and as a highway maintenance worker near Port Thunder. He also learned to work as a barber and as a clerk in a military supply shop. These are just some of the jobs he was willing to tell her about.” [5]

In Munro's delicate descriptions, Carla is like the young girl in the lyrics: last night she slept in a feather bed with a silk quilt over her body, tonight she lies on a hard, frozen floor—nestled against her gypsy lover.

Compared to the material disparity from Carla's escape, the "escape" of the aunt in *Women* is more of a physical distance. Yan Lianke's first sentence in the chapter "Youngest Aunt" is as follows.

"My little aunt married far away." [6]

In the 1950s, when horse-drawn and bullock carts were still important means of transport, the aunt fell in love with an accountant in the town, without any reluctance. "Amidst the opposition and crusade of my grandparents and the whole family, she and her clothes and parcels were missing one morning."

No one knew what village or family the youngest aunt was in. "It was as far away as the sky, and I almost broke my neck walking", "waiting for an hour for the bus, standing crammed in the bus for two and a half hours, then getting off and walking in a hurry for half a day, going out at sunrise and arriving at sunset", and if one did not take the bus, it was If you don't take the bus, it's a "day's walk" and you can only arrive at midnight. Those turbulent years of the 1960s were filled with revolution everywhere, and the ensuing famine affected many people. Even under these circumstances, "because the aunt's house was deep in the mountains, the sound of revolutionary gongs and drums was not so loud, and people still had time and energy to grow food." [6] 127

There is no doubt that love is the most direct reason for the two young girls to flee. The power of love is like a beacon of light. It is suitable to say that Carla's escape is full of subjective individualism because she is dissatisfied with her stepfather's dominant life and alienated by the family. She sees Clark as the salvation of her life. While the pressures faced by the aunt are more contemporary. In a time when transport was not available, it undoubtedly took a great deal of courage to escape over long distances. Both women not only say 'no' to their patriarchal families but also dare to challenge the traditional notions of conformity imposed on women. In the other stories in *Women*, the oppression of women is more evident: "though women are human beings, the land has planned for them to be just 'women'" and "fate is for women both an open field and a prison cell from which they cannot escape" [6]. I-II. Their escape is both a courageous act of love and an awakening of themselves.

3. The Different Escape Experience

Without a free and strong heart, without a complete awakening and development, without the ability to stand on one's own, there is always the danger that the gains made in the process of rebellion against patriarchy will be lost. The dilemma faced by daughters who run away from their fathers is likely to be repeated again.

Although Carla and the aunt share similar experiences of awakening in their pursuit for love and their escape from their original families, they take different paths and go on to deviant endings. The former realizes that Clark is cranky, brutal, irritable and pretentious, and the two have to start coping with the difficulties of their situation, with Clark owing people money and the farm they run not being very prosperous. What is hardest for Carla is that the warmth that once existed is slowly fading. Clark has no way of caring for her inner needs. Carla looks forward to going to town, to the laundromat and to bringing a couple of coffees out to the cappuccino shop, but Clark is oblivious to this and does nothing in the face of her crying. While Carla tearfully hugged him from behind, he sat motionless at his computer and said, "I can't even breathe. Go make dinner." [5]10

The tedium of married life and the differences in their concepts of values made it increasingly difficult for Carla to bear being with Clark. Finally, at the home of her neighbor Sylvia, she cried

out in pain. "He snapped at her at all times. It was like he hated her inside. Whatever she did was wrong, whatever she said was wrong. It really drove her crazy to spend time with him. Sometimes she thinks she's gone crazy. Sometimes she thought he was crazy" [5].22 In the midst of this depression and pain, Carla sought Sylvia's help and had a plan to go to Toronto, find a motel or some such place to stay, and attend a riding school to get a job.

Kind Sylvia not only provided her with nice clothes and money for her trip, but also suggested that she could stay at her friend's house in Toronto. But a worried Sylvia ended up waiting for a knock on Clark's door - Carla got off the bus in a panic, rapping on the door, and the first thing she did when she got off was call Clark to come and pick her up. And Clark had come to Sylvia's house only to return her beautiful dress and say smugly, "My wife Carla is sleeping in her bed at home. She's sleeping soundly. It's her own home." [5]37

If Carla's first escape was a determined self-awakening, in the family she reorganized, Clark does not in any way assume the same responsibility for the woman's struggle for independence. On the contrary, Clark becomes the main motive for maintaining and supporting a new oppression that is still patriarchal, refusing to pay attention to Carla's heart and emotions and even contributing negatively to the stability and financial accumulation of the family as a whole. He refuses to change his attitude and character and tries to get through each day in a bad way. He controls the power of discourse in the family, controlling Carla's work and life in obvious or implicit ways.

Unlike Carla, who is repressed at every turn, the aunt never complains - at least not explicitly - about her chosen married life. "'Why regret it - it's fine! No worries about food or clothes.' This was my little aunt's almost fixed answer and explanation of her fate. No matter who asked her, she said it to people with a smile." [6]128

Unlike the poorly educated, macho Clark, the aunt's husband was an educated man of his time, able to read and count, and this intellectual characteristic was inherent in him. In Yan Lianke's few descriptions of his aunt's life after marriage, her husband welcomes her child relatives (i.e. the author) to stay for the summer and lets him return at the end of the holiday with a package of white flour. Her husband walked all day with her to deliver food when the people in her family were suffering from famine, and also allowed her to bring flour and other food back to her original family on many occasions. This is a very important factor - the husband takes on the responsibilities of the family with an attitude of equality and tolerance, and respects her maintaining the relationship with her original family, a kind of reciprocity of rights and moral fairness stands in the new family and becomes an important factor in its stability.

If the relationship between husband and wife is a subjective factor, then the the biggest objective factor is the self-sufficient food. Everyone was worried about food shortages and had to stockpile food early, while this situation made the life of the aunt and her husband extraordinarily rich, which became a testimony to their happiness in the special times, and the days seemed to be filled with love and poetry in this peace of mind. "It was not the holy love of her and her husband that could prove her choice of marital love right, but the commonplace and earnestness of the 'grain that always enough.'" [6]132

The Aunt's freedom is objectified by something as extremely materialistic as grain to justify the nobility and rightness of spiritual love, in contrast to Carla's return after her second failed escape feels like a desperately disguised calm. Carla and Clark's life has eased and they have more space for intimacy, but Carla "feels like a deadly needle has been stuck in her lungs somewhere, and she breathes shallowly without feeling pain. But every time she needed to take a deep breath, she could tell the needle was still there" [5].

4. The Reconstitution of Identity

Identity is the position of a member in society, and its core components include specific rights, duties, responsibilities, objects of loyalty, recognition and rules of conduct, as well as the legitimate reasons for the existence of those rights, responsibilities and loyalties. [7]4 Members of society often look to their own 'identity' and seek a certain 'social identity'.

Carla chooses to escape her family of origin in order to reconstruct her identity, but her reconstruction of identity does not give her a self-identity. Her relationship with Clark is complex. In the beginning, she left her stepfather-dominated family and choose Clark. This initiative allows Carla to recognize her own expectations and acceptance with her self-identity, and is a reflection of her awakening sense of autonomy. Feeling no acceptance in her family, Carla would rather ride in a broken-down truck and live in a cramped, ramshackle house and still plan her future life with gusto. In her new life, she constructs her new identity - from the rebellious child of the family, to Clark's wife.

However, the active choice becomes fluid. The dreams are disillusioned and the trivialities of life are constantly undermining the identity system of "Clark's wife". On the one hand, Carla wants to be dependent on Clark, but is not given any attention. She is full of grievances and unresolved depression, a delicate mind that contrasts with Clark's irritable, brutal and unreasonable character, all of which Munro portrays through Carla's psychological state, as if she has become intolerant of her husband's behaviour. But on her second escape, after she suddenly realizes that the life she expects will inevitably be devoid of any trace of Clark, she gets out of the car in a panic and returns instead to the life she has been trying to escape.

It is worth noting that Carla does not choose to run away a second time solely because of financial pressures and life's dilemmas; the main factor that compels her to flee is the lack of a way to communicate harmoniously with Clark. Their conflict is therefore a clash between Carla's self-perception and the identity Clark has given her, a game of ego versus Clark. Her return is therefore not difficult to understand - she finds no way to live on her own by abandoning Clark, and has to return to Clark's home again.

Carla's identity is singular: after fleeing her family, her life is almost entirely Clark. "She pins her desire for a better life in the future on Clark, i.e. rescuing her individual freedom from the confines of her family yet leaving it unthinkingly in the hands of another man" [3] After her marriage, her parents move away to British Columbia, not wanting to know whether she is dead or alive; she has no friends, few customers, and even the regular ones are driven away by Clark's temper; her neighbour Sylvia takes good care of her, but it seems to Carla that she only goes to her neighbour's house for the money, otherwise she does not want to go there, and even thinks that "as if she(Sylvia) were delirious and sleepwalking" [5]. Her life revolves around horses and lambs. After her return from her failed escape, she is afraid to see Sylvia, in a way cutting off her last possibility to establish a link with society and to seek acceptance, and it is difficult for anyone else to help her as selflessly as Sylvia. At the end of the escape, Clark sees Flora, the lost lamb, return when he talks to Sylvia, but in the end of the story, all Carla goes to find are Flora's skeletal remains, perhaps killed by Clark --so what can happen to Carla, who is totally alone after her return?

In contrast, the identity of the aunt in *Women* is multidimensional and solid. Like Carla, her escape from her family of origin is a self-selection that requires courage. After the construction of a new identity, a new game of perception of identity unfolds. "The people in the town we lived in - including my family's closest relatives - used to make fun of my aunt for the free marriage" [6].¹¹⁴ The ridicule of the old social relationships and the inconvenience were both factors that eliminated and undermined the aunt's new identity. But then there was a more important factor in maintaining and sustaining this new identity: the abundance of food.

Han Mingming and Liu Chuan'e see Yan Lianke's *Women* as "a different kind of eco-feminist writing", that as a male author, he "confronts the situation of women living in the Chinese countryside in a reflective and critical manner, reflecting on the complex historical causes and cultural background behind the reality." [8] As Yan Lianke says, "The limited books on 'fermiology' and 'feminism' that I have read in an ad hoc manner failed to discuss my family and the women of that land. " [6] 222, The book is not simply a polemic about ideas and thoughts, it is a picture of a ponderous and muddled countryside that places women's development in a broader social context - especially in an economic one.

The identity maintained because of food abundance is both an accident and a necessity. In the mountains, where there are crabs in the river and bird's nests in the trees, in the surplus of white flour and rice, and in the yellow, crispy and soft doughnuts and noodles in garlic sauce, the aunt is able not only to exclaim to herself, "I was right to marry there," but also to make her father finally say, "You are better off than your elder, second and third sisters." Yan Lianke pushes life to its limits to see the stubborn, unyielding will to survive that life reveals in its sadness and absurdity." This friction between yearning for free love and thick survival reflects Chinese literature's own intrinsic nature, "with its own mission, tasks and goals, and thus its unique way of writing about society, history and reality." [9]

The aunt's identity comes not only from the abundance of food, but also from a multidimensional social identity. Even though her husband's family is distant, and even though she insists on fleeing against the family's advice, her brothers and nephews have all visited her, and she and her husband often return to her original home. Unlike Carla, who was left as 'Clark's wife' after she fled, she remained the little sister, the youngest daughter, the breadwinner in times of trouble, and later the mother of six children. The text does not describe her perception in her husband's family, but twenty years after her father's death and after her children had moved away, she was still willing to stay in the village and courtyard of the mountain cliffs, despite repeated invitations from her relatives, and to remain there to guard her status as a 'foreign wife'. This perception and sense of belonging is clearly missing from Carla, who wants to make a second escape.

5. Conclusion

"Escape" is not a complete cut-off or a complete reversal, nor is a woman's awakening and independence necessarily predicated on a complete revolution. Even though the aunt has fled her family of origin for love, she still has a long and intimate relationship with it. Within a system of equal power and fair moral evaluation, women can achieve a healthy and long-term harmonious interrelationship with anyone else, which can be an important way for women, as human beings in society, to seek their own development.

The analysis of Carla's and the aunt's experiences of escape shows that, on the one hand, identity and socially constructed ties determine the success or failure of women's self-development, and on the other hand, they are influenced by the realities of society: they are created, stimulated and maintained, or they are worn down, damaged and destroyed. Carla's second escape fails because she has not constructed a sufficient multidimensional identity or an effective connection to society, and she is unable to gain complete inner independence on her own, nor does she have the courage to cope with life again. The aunt has never planned to escape twice, and her multidimensional identity and material prosperity have given her the strength to cope with life. Her life was never confined to the single role of "wife", but was like a flourishing tree with strong roots firmly planted in the earth. She is not only complete as a woman, but also as a person with a stable identity, showing independence and freedom.

References

- [1] Ai Wei. Escape or nowhere to go - a textual analysis of Alice Munro's Runaway: Yangzijiang Literature Review, (2020)No.02, p.5-9.
- [2] Yuan Ying. Stagnation, Daily life and Escape: Three Keywords of "New Women's Writing": Contemporary Literature, (2022)No. 02, p.199-204.
- [3] Yu Yanping. Behind "Escape": The Awakening and Growth of Female Consciousness. Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), Vol.44(2011)No.03, p.109-112.
- [4] Meng Yue, Dai Jinhua: Surfacing the Historical Ground: A Study of Modern Women's Literature, (Henan: Henan People's Publishing House, 1989).
- [5] Alice Munro: Runaway. (Beijing: Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2009.)
- [6] Yan Lianke: Women (Zhengzhou: Henan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2020).
- [7] Zhang Jing: "Identity: The Social Configuration of Citizenship and Identity", edited by Zhang Jing: Studies on Identity. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006.
- [8] Han Mingming, Liu Chuan'e. Ecological Feminist Writing of Otherness: On Yan Lianke's Women. Contemporary Writers Review, (2021)No.03.
- [9] Chen Xiaoming. Is there a narrative about civilization? --A Modern Perspective on the Creation of Chinese Literature in the Past Century. Literary and Artistic Controversy, (2021)No.08, p.6-18.