Chapter Seven

Summation

Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises.

(Butler 87)

The short story has become immensely popular with readers both in Canada and in India. It is no longer an inferior "cousin" of the novel. In her introduction to The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English, Margaret Atwood asserts that "the form has been practised by many writers; Canadian poets have frequently taken a crack at it, and many novelists--though not all--have also done so" (xiii). In his introduction to The Collected Short Stories of Khushwant Singh, the author confirms the splendid survival of short fiction, "In India it has only recently had its rebirth, and literary pundits who make horoscopes have forecast a long and prosperous life for it." He adds that there is no doubt "that in all of India's major fourteen languages the standard of short-story writing is uniformly high and their popularity unrivalled" (ix).

This genre has been used widely in Canada and India as a medium not only for expounding human motives or explaining meaning in life but also for self-exploration or introspection. It looks as though the rapid growth of short fiction would continue
increasingly to reflect life and give shape to the literary voices of the twenty-first century in both the countries.

With the new century looming on the horizon and the present century having less than a quarter of a decade to run its course, it is quite clear that Canadian writing in this genre has come of age and offers the world literary stuff with a unique international and multicultural flavour. India has demonstrated a remarkable talent for regeneration and for recounting new stories or telling old tales in new ways. India's cultural diversity could be discerned in the literary creations of the writers, for literature is the essential record of a community or country. Canada, like India, has throughout spoken of her cultural mosaic. Secessionist cynics, however, argue that a multilingual polity is radically at variance with the socio-political realities and imperatives of contemporary Canada or India.

It is really writers who help one to realize that people everywhere experience the same emotions and go through similar situations. Countries differ, cultures vary and creeds diverge but human thoughts and feelings, actions and reactions converge. The things they write about are similar but their tools of art may be different. One of the striking features of the literary scenario in a post-colonial nation like India
and Canada has been the gradual decolonization of the female self from oppressive conditions. The women in Canada and their counterparts in urban India could not stomach the idea of men alone enjoying the fruits of freedom. Their recognition of the need for independence and their resistance to male hegemony have become more noticeable in the writings of women.

Fantasies and reminiscences are usually the weapons used by them for release from their colonized conditions in their houses and communities. From the current critical parlance, one can identify and isolate the denominators that characterize women's writings or female ideologies. They overtly or covertly deal with masculine domination or tyranny and female subjugation and marginalization. Woman's need to be liberated is underscored and the myth of male superiority is exploded through satire, sarcasm or outright rejection of male assumptions. What distinguish women's writings are their highly individuated perceptions and disparate experiences which have been fictionally recorded. In spite of common female attitudes towards life and society, their experiences differ which the writings of these women reflect. The culture of the society in which a woman lives and the language of tradition that she appropriates have their bearing on what she writes. The oppressed woman revolts against the language of tradition which, in her opinion, is male-centred. As
the culture conditions the writer, the impulse to rebel against the culture surfaces in the mind of the writer, for she thinks that the very same culture has marginalized her.

While one maps the frontiers of the fictional world of Ambai and Alice Munro, one has to acknowledge the universals that designate them as women, and denote the divergences that distinguish them as different writers. The similarities and dissimilarities in terms of their themes and techniques have been ascertained from their stories which are in a way products of their languages and cultures. The present investigation has been an attempt to read the universal woman's mind, hear her voice and recognize the unique artist in the two authors chosen for study. Ambai and Alice Munro make stories out of their reminiscences, present experiences and fantasized fulfilments of frustrated desires.

"Fact and Fantasy," the second chapter, shows how the stories of the two authors are fictional transmissions of their own experiences in life. They are found to skirt the non-essential facts of their lives and transmit the essential ones into their art. The typical Ambaian or Munrovian protagonists, like Rukma in "Caṅcāri" and Del in Lives, discover the real world's hostility towards female expressions of love and beauty that have not been sanctioned by tradition.
The fantasies of the female subjects presented by the two authors voice the forbidden or frustrated longings of women everywhere. Fiction for the two writers has been a release from social bounds and familial barriers. Yearnings which fail to materialize find fulfilment in daydreams. Munro has acknowledged that many of her heroines are projections of her own self. Some of Munro's characters are modelled on specific people like her parents, stepmother, aunts or father's assistants. Ambai, however, has not been so candid in her confessions of the autobiographical elements in her fiction. But this researcher's interviews with her have provided sufficient evidence to substantiate the argument that she writes mostly about her own experiences. It has been borne out by the answers obtained from some of her fellow writers and critics also who have read her stories and known her for years. It is interesting to note how the socio-cultural differences of the two writers limit the revelations of their intimate experiences and their explicit treatments. Ambai's protagonists, for all their progressive views, are in the ultimate analysis women who live in fear of what "Mrs. Grundy" will say.

The third chapter, "Disenchantment and Disengagement," confirms Simone de Beauvoir's comment on the female plight, in the case of the typically Tamil woman, that
She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future, not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master. (The Second Sex 69)

Here, the contrast between the attitudinal positions of the two authors is better seen in their portrayal of man-woman interactions inside the orbit of marriage. In the stories of both the authors, marriage is seen to be a bounding experience or captivity in a cage. It results in a crisis of relationships. There is a specific pattern in their treatment of male-female relationships. The heroines of both the writers get terribly disenchanted. Disengagement generally takes place only at the emotional level in the case of most of the Ambaian women while Munrovian protagonists walk out on their partners when they break up. The distinctive difference between the hesitations of the Ambaian women to complete their emotional disengagement with physical separation and the readiness of the Munrovian women to ditch or divorce their men with ease is quite understandable in the context of the cultural differences that have conditioned the psyches of the two writers. Most Indian women continue to be unconsciously governed by the code of conduct in the great Indian epic, Ramayana, which celebrates Rama's
adherence to the values of monogamy and glorifies Sita's chastity. Even the apparently liberated heroine of Ambai's "Piracurikkappāṭā" could not openly carry on with her lover even after separation from her husband. Marriage in India continues to be considered too sacred to be marred, and divorce has a lot of stigma attached to it. The Ambaian women mentally protest against male chauvinism but put up with their callous or cruel husbands and rarely seek separation as Bharathi does in "Pilāciṭik." She could afford to secure her separation as she lives in the permissive west. Discussing Ambaian fiction, Venkataraman writes that the central concerns in it are

How the traditional woman is made, reasons for the suppression of women, the structure of society, ideas for improvement, women resisting hurdles, tyranny, exploitation, oppression; woman fighting all these. . . .

(53)

The similarities and differences between the attitudes of the two fictionists towards conjugality, or sexuality in general, could be seen clearly in chapter four, "Illicit Territory and Terrain of Sex." The Munrovian women smash marital institutions and form sexual friendships, or practise promiscuity, which could be seen as a kind of protest against patriarchal ideas or assumptions. Ambaian women yearn to stray
into "illicit territory," as Munro terms it in "White." This desire is discerned in them when their men fail to measure up to their expectations and become something of a thorn in their flesh. Most of these Tamil women rarely experience physical fulfilment of their illicit fancies as their Munrovian counterparts do without fear of family or society. Munro's treatment of sex is quite explicit while Ambai's scenes of sexuality are rather implicit. But both the authors are, however, found to be graphic painters of the human body with all its striking features. Munro's fiction quite often becomes an expression of feminine libidinal energy. She is not ashamed of female sexuality; she even scorns those of her women who spurn sex and remain spinsters. Munro openly concedes, "sex is the big thing" in adult life (qtd. in Ross, Double Life 79). Their passions are painted without inhibitions of any sort. Puritanical or prudish part of the reading public would find that her stories offend against all canons of morality. In the case of Ambai, sexual passions are generally put behind psychic screens or released through dreams, reveries or metaphors. Even Ambai's latest story, "Oruvar Maṭṭoruvar" ("The one and the other"), demonstrates how sexuality finds expression covertly through beautiful images: the genitalia of Veeru in its resting position is likened to a reclining tender bud while the slightly red male organ of the
older man, Matthew Nathan, is pictured as "a faded, dry fruit" (25). Nudity in some of Ambai's works is portrayed with narcissistic passion while it is done with exhibitionistic pride by Munro. In Munro's treatment of sex, one finds what Barthes would term "jouissance" while in Ambai's portrayal of it one would find cultural criticism or commentary on Indian male mentality. Gynecological subjects, which have remained the topics of conversation in female society behind closed doors, are brought out into the open and displayed by Munro as the realities of female experiences and fantasies. Ambai, on the other hand, lets the reader have a peep into the inner secrets of the female world but does not drag them out to be dramatized or discussed as Munro does.

A notable trait in the fiction of the two authors is the undercurrent of pathos, which has been dealt with in the fifth chapter entitled "Patches of Pathos." Disenchantment, disengagement and divorce result in social or psychological isolation for women. The gloom that envelops their lives could be discerned in most of the stories. Their anger and anguish issue from their lack of companionship or man's failure to fulfill female expectations. The Ambaian and Munrovian women seek love and liberty, but what they experience is only rejection and regimentation. They tragically traverse between the realms of realities and reveries but they
do not give up on love or sex. In his write-up, "Ampaliyin Kataikalum Peñ Viṭutalaiyum" ("Ambai's stories and woman's liberation"), Suresh comments:

The gap between expectation and fulfilment is a feature of modern middle-class life. It is women who become the victims here. Ambai introduces middle-class women, and their problems form the main thematic strain.

Chapter six, "Thematic Demands and Textual Devices," elucidates with textual examples how the Ambaian and Munrovian subjects recreate their past experiences in snatches and patches and how the texts become as a result quite frequently non-linear. As their heroines move from fact to fantasy, there is at times a mix-up of dream and reality. The hallucinatory state of the central character's mind affords her the comforts of a parallel existence. The woman longs to actualize the experiences of the world that exist outside male values. These are appropriated and transcreated by the protagonists of the two authors. Their attempts to create a world of female reality results in the emergence of what the French theorists already referred to call "the feminine way of writing." Both the writers have used body language to depict intimate scenes. They both sexualize their images with inimitable skill.
Ambai and Alice Munro have had both recourse to the use of parallelism and irony. Parallelism has been employed to create an ideal female realm of reality in such a way as to make it parallel the male-orientated world. Irony has been used to interrogate and subvert traditional male ideals and institutions that deny women their identity or individuality. In the process of protest the realistic frameworks of their texts get fractured and turned into psychic-realistic expressions. The isolation and unhappiness of the two authors and their subjects oblige them to journey into a world of memories, meditations or move into a mood of confessions.

The researcher has found the structure of the Canadian writer's fiction to be more elegant as it achieves a larger sophistication by virtue of the plurality of perceptions. Her stories have been structured as a collage of reveries and fantasies interspersed with confessional expositions. The Ambaian stories also read like memoirs, meditations and confessions, but they seem to lack the kind of Munrovan complexity with its multiple points of view and narratorial voices. Ambai's style also is complicated where an average reader is concerned on account of her use of difficult terminology and frequent allusions to literary as well as mythological
characters and situations. Her language is more poetic with its striking symbols and suitable similes.

To state briefly, Ambai and Alice Munro contribute to male understanding of the female psyche. What stands out is their persuasive advocacy of the imperative necessity for the presence and preservation of the human element in man-woman relationships. They are both born story-tellers who have the rare skill to transmute into their art the anecdotal or the apparently banal parts of human experience. Writing for them both is an experience in which they let their families, friends and neighbours participate. They have all their counterparts in their fictional world. Theirs is the kind of female fiction where repression finds expression in subdued or strident tones. A Tamil woman reared in a traditional ambience gets her due share of space only in her realm of fantasy. The traditional ties bind her consciously or unconsciously and prevent her from the practice of promiscuity.

Both the authors cast in bad light conventionally heroic or dominant patriarchs. Munro makes them out to be funny and foolish while Ambai amplifies male monstrosities and malevolent monopolies. There is found to be less hatred of erring males in the Munrovian treatment while one finds in the Ambaian presentation of patriarchs not only furious flak but literal flaying as well. Although their heroines are
dissatisfied with their spouses or lovers, they prefer heterosexual relationships and do not subscribe to the gay way of life, as a rule. The caged woman is angry or anguished, but the woman outside the cage of marriage generally feels lonely and lost. Both the writers are disdainful of obsolete social customs and ways of thinking even though they do not call for total jettisoning of tradition. Their scornful outlook on repressive religious mores also could be seen in some of their stories. They both believe in full female flowering. They hold that a woman or a man is not a complete individual if they are denied fulfilment of their natural urges. They implicitly and explicitly point out through their writings that to relinquish sexuality is to renounce femininity itself. Ambai in "Ciğa ku ka" wants film-makers presenting women as renouncers of sex to be proceeded against and punished. The Munro-like protagonist in "Friend" despises Flora who devalues sex and, unlike her mother, admires Nurse Atkinson for her lascivious disposition.

They both aim to unveil before the reader segments of contemporary life with their commentaries on them. Their narrative strategies do not fail to invite their readers' empathic participation in what they write. Suffering in life for women is so expressed as to make their female readers fellow-sufferers. Harsh realities of life are presented with humour and pathos tinged
with irony. One has to dream in life so as to make life lose its poignancy, as the song sung by the spinsters in "Chaddeleys" of Munro's fifth collection seems to suggest. Their fantasized versions of life critique real life. The protagonists of both the writers mourn the death of their desires and dreams but they do not experience for long the kind of angst and anomy which some of the postmodern antiheroes do.

Ambai and Alice Munro could be named feminists who, however, refuse to be caught and held in any of the monolithic ideologies of the western feminist schools. They have tried in their individual female ways to weigh the issues that concern women cutting across ideological stances.

Their stories cumulatively reveal the artists in them. Their stories fulfil Matthew Arnold's requirement of "a criticism of life" (Essays 3). Ambai and Alice Munro carry a heavy load of lovely memories which are "safely preserved in anecdote, as in a kind of mental cellophane," as Alice Munro has put it (Dance 193).

Alice Munro implicitly points out the lack of communication between the sexes. Women fail to articulate their deeply felt responses in the realm of male-ordained reality. Their moments of articulation are seen in the world of fantasy that they create. Ambai makes no bones about the halting and hostile
relationships that occur between her male and female subjects. The recurrent flashback techniques show how they escape the oppressive present and recreate their lives or slip into the past that no longer hurts. The Munrovian and Ambaian readers tend to recall and reflect on the parallel lives or the "double" existence that their female subjects lead like their creators.

The present investigator's sojourn in the realms of Ambai and Alice Munro has enabled him to conclude that woman's experience in the present-day world is essentially the same in spite of attitudinal variances and cultural differences. While the distinctive differences issue from cultural and traditional factors or artistic and technical moulds, the gender perspective that unites the contemporary women writers dominates. The nucleus in which all women writers converge remains the male-negating and female-affirming attitude.