

An escapist attitude portrayed in Alice Munro's The Albanian Virgin

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Abstract

Alice Munro, a prominent Canadian literary figure, was born in Ontario, in the country's southwest, on July 10, 1931. Her skill in crafting short stories earned her recognition as "the master of the contemporary short-story." Alice Munro's story "The Albanian Virgin" is one of her most fascinating works to present. Munro focuses on the situation of women in Albania, where she comes upon an issue that demands attention: the cultural creation of the Virgin, who can only escape her fate by denying her sexuality and living like a man. "The Albanian Virgin" is based on individuals who live in the mountains and gather tobacco crops to make goods. In addition, the data indicates that men and women only interact during the supper. The people living in the tribal village are not thieves. The People are ready to die for their honor. Also, it is claimed that their culture and customs are unique. "The Albanian Virgin" mentions about women's rights, responsibilities and Culture. In her short story, Munro does not portray the Albanian women as victims. She also doesn't criticize Albanian society's patriarchal structure. Rather, she draws attention to the women's beauty and power. Albanian women, according to Munro, possess a stoicism that allows no one to interfere with their joy despite their living under inequality. Munro delves deeply and powerfully into female themes, but her perspective is not limited to just women: through the perspectives of her fictional characters, she scrutinizes the

customs and principles of her realm, all the while developing intricate, vivid, and lyrical interpretations of the environment she has deeply adopted.

Keywords: Tribal Culture, Virginity, Patriarchal Society, Identity, Gender Roles

Alice Munro, a prominent Canadian literary figure, was born in Ontario, in the country's southwest, on July 10, 1931. Her skill in crafting short stories earned her recognition as "the master of the contemporary short-story." She became the first Canadian to attain such a magnificent feat when she was commended for her literary Noble Prize for Literature in the year 2013. In addition to the Noble Prize, she received additional notable literary honors and acknowledgment for her outstanding creative work on a national and worldwide scale.

In 1968, her first collection of short stories gained recognition in the literary world. Her other well-known works, including "Lives of Girls and Women," "Too Much Happiness," "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage," "Dear Life," "Open Secrets," and so on, came after. Her writings were frequently published in well-read periodicals such as *Parish Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *New Yorker*. Munro's creative ability allowed her to combine the narrative of the Albanian vowed virgin into a story titled *The Albanian Virgin*, which was included in her collection of short stories titled *Open Secrets*, released in 1994.

Tribal literature is defined as the folklores, oral stories and poems of the tribal community. A tribe is a group of people who live and work together in a shared common geographical area. A tribe has a common culture, dialect, and religion. They are also quite connected as a group. Typically, a chief leads the tribe.

Alice Munro's eighth collection of short stories, *Open Secrets*, was released in 1994. Despite being enigmatic and ambiguous, the book's back blurb effectively conveys the one theme that unites all of the stories in this one: unusual women and freedom. The stories in this book include women of all ages and backgrounds, in different living circumstances, and with different perspectives on both important and trivial problems. *The Albanian Virgin* tells the story of a woman who is taken in by a local tribe and absorbed into their way of life.

The Albanian Virgin is based on a true story of Miss Rudd, a Clinton librarian, who got lost from her traveling group in Albania. The story is supposedly about a young Canadian lady traveller who is abducted by Albanian bandits in the 1920s. After hearing the story from her husband, Munro was able to confirm some elements with accounts from the local newspaper from that era. "I could not put these two elements together: Clinton librarian, Albania," Munro recalls. "So I started reading everything I could about Albania. It got to the point that people didn't want me around—I'd keep bringing every topic round to Albania somehow".

Obviously, as Munro sarcastically describes it, the story is not actually about a "high romance in Albania." The significance that sex played in a woman's position inside the tribal culture of that era definitely caught Munro's attention. A woman might live on equal terms with males if she gave up intimate relationships to become a "virgin"; she could possess wealth, bear arms, and eat food made by women. **"It just fascinated me that her whole status was dependent on not having sex with men—and not on the equipment she was born with," says Munro.** She didn't pretend to be physically or intellectually inferior. She was condemned to a form of inferiority once she had sex. That is just one aspect of the expertly crafted story: In a way that is both subtle and amazing, Munro connects the overseas trip to a young Victoria woman nearly fifty years later. This helps to reveal the story's objective.

Lottar, a foreign traveller, discovers "Maltsia e madhe," a location in northern Albania. Her only confidant in the community, a Franciscan friar, forces her to give up her identity as a woman and adopt a male persona—that is, an Albanian vowed virgin—in an attempt to save her from being pushed into marriage. The priest reveals that the tribe members were protecting their family honor because the guide had killed one of their member, they are not robbers as Lottar had suspected. **"Oh, they are not robbers! said the Franciscan, shocked. They are honest men. They shot him because they were in blood with him. With his house. It is their law."**(p.256)

According to their Albanian Culture, the people are ready to die for their honor. **"But it is for their honor, the honor of their family. They are always ready to die for their honor"** (p.257). Lottar's journey, which barely makes up a single story cycle in *The Albanian Virgin*, takes place at the start of the 20th century. The second primary character, Claire, frequently pays Charlotte, a Canadian married to an Albanian, a hospital visit. During Claire's visits, Charlotte

invents Lottar's tale. Claire is conflicted about her husband and her neighbor, two different men. Ultimately, she **"made a desperate change and was proud of that despite the regrets [she] suffered every day."** The primary tension in *The Albanian Virgin* is between two women who live in entirely different situations but who have a single parallel created by their relationships with men and who are both working towards achieving autonomy.

But she also demonstrates numerous times over how this patriarchal society restricts women, letting them be in their element only when they are around other women. The woman Lottar turns to when she first encounters a vowed virgin **"shook her head, not willing to speak where the men might hear them."**

Gender roles have long been assumed by women in upland Albanian communities. In order to appear before twelve tribe elders, they only needed to promise never to have sex again. A lady who was a "Sworn Virgin" was allowed to own land, engage in blood feuds, carry a gun, imbibe, and smoke cigarettes. The crucial aspect has been omitted from that list, though: she was free to rebel against her father, brother, spouse, other women, or society. She was also free to bear the burden of being beaten because she was strong enough to carry a gun. **"He said it was a woman, but a woman who had become like a man. She did not want to marry, and she took an oath in front of witnesses that she never would, and then she put on men's clothes and had her own gun, and her horse if she could afford one, and she lived as she liked."** (p.262)

According to Albanian custom, Lottar assumes the gender role of a man to escape being forced into a Muslim marriage. This is a fascinating and entertaining adventure. Lottar is relieved of the hard task that is allotted to the women and is allowed to enjoy a carefree life, smoke, and joke around since she has pledged virginity. She might still be forced into a slave marriage, but betrayal still seems inevitable. One day, a Franciscan priest makes the decision to travel to a bishop's house in Shkodra in order to flee the patriarchal culture with Lottar. Their relationship has remained a mystery throughout these occurrences, maybe as a result of her male social identity. **"She had never seen the Bishop at all. And she had not seen the Franciscan since he had followed the Bishop's man into the house. She called out for him now, as she was leaving. She had no name to call, so she called, "Xoti! Xoti! Xoti!" which means "lord" or "master" in the language of the Ghegs. But no answer came, and**

the Consul's servant swung his lantern impatiently, showing her the way to go. Its light fell by accident on the Franciscan who was standing half concealed by a tree. It was a little orange tree he stood behind. His face, pale as the oranges were in that light, looked out of the branches, all its swarthy complexion drained away. It was a wan face, hanging in the tree, its melancholy expression quite impersonal and undemanding, like the expression you might see on the face of a devout but proud apostle in a church window. Then it was gone, taking the breath out of her body, as she knew too late. She called him and called him, and when the boat came into the harbor at Trieste he was waiting on the dock.”(p.294)

With the exception of dinner and a few hours at night, tribal men and women are always kept apart in Albanian tradition. **“Women were with women and men were with men, except at times in the night.”** (p.261) Lottar is placed to work alongside the other women after her illness has gone away, without being given any extra care. She is taught how to harvest tobacco, prepare fern beds for the tribe to sleep in at night, and cook in the same manner as if she were a tribal member.

Concluding the study we find that Alice Munro in her stories splendidly sketched out the everyday experiences of the living habits of the indigenous people are raised as the purpose of women's rights etc. In this short story, the status of a chaste woman is pointed out in the form of Albanian culture.

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