

Female Escape in Lu Xun's Regret for the Past and Munro's Runaway

Shuyan Ye

Shanghai International Studies University Shanghai 201620

Abstract: This article aims at doing a comparative study of two literary works of strong comparability -- Lu Xun's Regret for the Past and Alice Munro's Runaway. Both describe two escapes of the heroine and hint at the major causes of their failure to realize real escape. Meanwhile, there are also great differences between the two works due to the different social backgrounds of them. The comparative study of the two works offers an insight into female dilemma and liberation.

Keywords: Female Escape; Dilemma; Liberation; Marriage

"Escape" is a recurring theme in both Chinese and foreign literature. It shows a common choice of human beings in the face of adversity — to break away from the existing dilemma and seek new horizons. Among the many stories, those about female escape are particularly compelling. Although written in different times and by different authors, Regret for the Past and Alice Munro's Runaway both focus on presenting the two escapes of the heroines.

1. Two Escapes of the Two Heroines

The first escape displayed the two heroines' firm and uncompromising attitude in pursuit of freedom of love. Zijun declared that "I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me."^[1] She then left everything behind and chose to live with Juansheng. So did Carla, who "put the note on the table and slipped out of the house at five o'clock in the morning," and met her beloved Clark "in the church parking lot down the street."^[2] The two heroines seemingly broke away from the external fetters and gained freedom. However, what awaited them was not a long-lasting sweet and free marriage life as they imagined, but one that put them into a state where they had to face the brutal reality on their own and suffer from both physical and mental tensions. They were stuck in a monotonous, repetitive, distressed and eventually unbearable marriage life. The freedom they previously gained became empty, and thus led to the second escape.

After Juansheng told Zijun the truth that he didn't love her anymore, Zijun was taken away by her father in agony and despair, instead of running away on her own. She returned to the original patriarchal family, lived under the male authority and suffered from the cold looks of bystanders until death. Zijun's second escape was passive and a tragic failure. By comparison, Carla made her second escape more out of her own initiative. She complained that "I can't stand it anymore" and said she would "give anything to get away."^[3] With the help of Mrs. Jamieson, Carla embarked on her second escape, but unfortunately, ended in failure. Carla could not resist calling Clark before the bus arrived in Toronto, begging him to take her home. Carla failed in her second escape and returned to her old life track.

2. Why Zijun and Kara failed to achieve real escape?

In Regret for the Past, Zijun and Juansheng struggled to make ends meet on the meager income of Juansheng. The simplest furniture cost a large part of the money Juansheng had raised. In the days of poverty and misery, Juansheng's true, passionate love for Zijun was exhausted. Financial problems also troubled Carla and Clark. At first, they reveled in "sampling the specialties in grimy hotel bars" and "singing all the way home like crazy hillbillies."^[4] However, when they started to think seriously about their future life, it was all just a waste of time and money. The financial burden became heavier when Clark's riding school, the primary source of their income, suffered from bad business. Without a solid financial foundation, happiness and freedom, which Carla and Zijun desired in marriage life, were empty and doomed to be short-lived.

In both Zijun's and Carla's marriage, the man is economically the head of the family. The two heroines had no steady jobs or source of income of their own. Zijun put her heart and soul into exhausting and never-ending housework, from lighting the stove, boiling rice and steamrolls, to feeding Asui and chicks. As for Carla, she acted like Clark's assistant for attending to some of the riding school business. When Clark made the decision for her to work at Mrs. Jamieson's house, she could do nothing but obey, even if she actually dreaded going to the Jamiesons. The two heroines were dependent on their male partners financially, which put them at a distinct disadvantage in marriage, contributing to the difficulty of their escape.

In addition to economic dilemma, another crucial factor is the two heroines' psychological or mental dependence on their male partners. Between the lines of Juansheng's notes, we can read that Zijun was psychologically dependent on Juansheng. Lu Xun used the word "childlike" six times to describe Zijun's look at Juansheng. She would nod her head with eyes filling with "a childlike look of wonder" when Juansheng talked about "Ibsen, Tagore and Shelley."^[5] She was not genuinely passionate about these things but only catered to Juansheng's interests, hoping to win his heart and response. When Juansheng declared that he didn't love her anymore, Zijun "gazed around like a hungry or thirsty child searching for its kindly mother."^[6] Zijun was as dependent on Juansheng as a kid is on his mother. Zijun also always put Juansheng's emotions ahead of her own. Although her mental state kept getting worse, she still tried hard to please Juansheng by making forced smiles and reminiscing about the sweetness of the past. However, all these efforts were of no avail. Carla's strong mental dependence on Clark was most vividly reflected in her second escape. Mrs. Jamieson made arrangements for her to escape from the life with Clark; however, as soon as Carla got on the bus to Toronto, she started to fear that she would be lost without Clark, who still kept his place in her life. Carla could not stop thinking about Clark and mentioned him more than five times on the bus and even looked forward to his appearance. When she realized that the bus would soon take her away from Clark, she stopped the driver and called Clark to take her home. To Clark, Carla was more like his accessory than an individual. "You were molested and humiliated and I was injured and humiliated because you are my wife." "You mean my wife Carla?" "I don't appreciate you interfering in my life with my wife."^[7] When Mrs. Jamieson pointed out that Carla was a human being besides Clark's wife, Clark replied sarcastically, "My wife is a human being? Really? Thank you for the information."^[8] Clark even threatened to tan Carla if she tried to run away from him again. Carla's submission and lack of mental independence, combined with Clark's male chauvinism led to Carla being annexed to Clark's universe, failing to be herself.

Marriage must combine two autonomous existences. It should be an equal partnership. However, in both stories, the heroines have almost wholly lost themselves, naturally admitting their subordinate status and constructing their life with men as the center, both economically and mentally. "She saw him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission both proper and exquisite."^[9] Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*:

For the wife, dependence is interiorized; she is a slave even when she conducts herself with apparent freedom, while the husband is essentially autonomous... the wife feeds on him like a parasite; but a parasite is not a triumphant master.^[10]

Zijun and Carla made the first escape in the hope of seeking freedom, but their escape consciousness was superficial and immature. They were on their way to escape("逃"), but were not fully prepared to thoroughly break away from their old life("离"). The two escapes did not pull the two heroines out of their existing predicament, but left them still trapped in it, or dead in its shadow.

3. Pets As the Vehicle of Metaphor

Apart from direct descriptions, Lu Xun and Munro both revealed heroines' fate in a metaphorical way, taking their pets as the vehicle of metaphor. Asui was a spotted peke of Zijun. One morning after Zijun was taken away by her father, Juansheng saw "a tiny creature perambulating the floor. It was thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive."^[11] After running away from Zijun, Asui lost protection and eventually came back in such a pathetic state. Asui's fate implied that Zijun eventually returned to her original life in poor condition and had a tragic ending. Flora was a little white goat kept by Carla. After Carla failed in the second escape and returned to her old life with Clark, Flora appeared like an apparition. Flora then escaped again, until its bones were later found in the grass. Without the protection and care provided by Carla, Flora might have suffered from hunger and attacks from wild animals, then lost its life. In Flora's tragic ending, Carla seemed to see her fate if she escaped again; therefore, she held out against the temptation. Both Asui and Flora implied the result of their owners' escape, which was to return.

4. Contrast Between the Two Novels

Since *Regret for the Past* and *Runaway* were written in different societies at different times, there are many differences between them except for similarities. In 1918, New Youth published *A Doll's House*, a classic drama written by Norwegian dramatist Henrik

Ibsen in 1879. The female character Nora, who chose to break through the constraints of male authority and left her family, became a symbol of women's liberation. The work exerted a powerful influence on Chinese society, inspiring women to break away from feudal thought and pursue freedom and equality. However, China was still a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society in the 1920s. The May Fourth Movement did not change this fundamental nature. Lu Xun profoundly realized that women could not achieve real liberation without the liberation of the whole society. He revealed this cruel reality in *Regret for the Past*. The bourgeois ideas of "liberty, equality and love" indoctrinated by Juansheng could not free Zijun from the spiritual shackles of feudalism. The backward social environment made Zijun more passive than Carla in her escape and had a more tragic fate.

Born in 1931, Canadian writer Munro began her writing career in the 1960s. During that period, feminists advocated the establishment of women's own groups to challenge the male-dominated society, and feminist literary criticism became popular in Europe and the United States. In addition, Monroe herself has a rebellious personality. She once ran away from home with a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario. As a girl growing up in a poor family in a small rural town in southwestern Ontario, she is constantly searching for what kind of person she really wants to be. She has also publicly admitted that she is a feminist. Therefore, the two escapes in *Runaway* had a more solid foundation in reality and reflected more about the heroine's own initiative and self-consciousness. Mrs. Jamieson, another female character in *Runaway*, who may have failed to escape from her marriage life when she was young, did not hesitate to help Carla in the second escape. This plot also indicated the general awakening of female consciousness at that time. Although Carla finally chose to compromise and returned to her old life, it does not mean that she has lost her courage and desire to pursue freedom and equality. By offering such an ending, Munro tried to convey that men and women are not binary opposites, which is an idea in postmodern feminism. Under its influence, Munro is trying to explore other more gentle and rational ways for women to achieve their liberation instead of escaping from men.

With the rise of the women's liberation movement in modern times, we see more and more literary works with heroines trying to free themselves from external constraints, especially male authority. Lu Xun's *Regret for the Past* and Munro's *Runaway* are two typical examples. Because of the authors' time and space differences, the two heroines in their stories display different degrees of self-consciousness and have different fates. At the same time, the two works share striking similarities, from writing techniques to the plot of the heroines' two escapes, and the theme of female dilemma and liberation. Through the comparative study of the two works, we may have a deeper insight into how to promote female liberation.

References:

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About the author:

Shuyan Ye, October 2001, Female, Han, Zhejiang, Student, Undergraduate