

## WRITING SILENCE: THE INCOMMUNICABLE IN ALICE MUNRO'S *SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU AND MATERIAL*

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**Abstract:**

*This research article adapts Henri Lefebvre's space theory to the act of writing. Writing is a spatial act that combines words and that which is left unwritten. Writing is a perpetual conflict between what gets written and what does not get written. This conflict is revealed in Alice Munro's writings. She has mastered the art of communicating the incommunicable. This paper demonstrates how Munro effectively uses words to communicate silence. The paper takes two of Munro's stories, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* and *Material* to demonstrate this. Word and Silence are two spaces that need to go hand in hand in order to communicate the reality of human lives.*

**Keywords:** *Incommunicable, silence, space, word, writing.*

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre says, "Space is a product" (26). He divides social space into three categories: spatial practice (perceived spaces), representations of space (conceived spaces) and representational spaces (lived spaces). Spatial practice is the physical space. Representations of space embody the space of ideas and knowledge. Representational spaces embody the lived reality. When these concepts are applied to the analysis of the act of writing, writing becomes a spatial practice that combines the representations of space and the representational spaces.

The space between words remain largely unexplored in writing. Word- both written and spoken- carry the illusion of clarity. Word-centred writing do not reveal the possibilities of non-verbal language. The ideology of the Word creates an illusion that reality is easily decipherable, first through speech and then through writing. There is a fetishist obsession for Word in the Western philosophical systems. Traditionally, writing was an act that facilitates the grasping of an idea or a thing by the writing and the reading subject. It is assumed that Word drives away any kind of obscurity without the disappearance of the reality that is communicated. Thus the obscurity or the non-communicated can be brought into the realm of the communicated through Word. But what about the incommunicable? It has no existence but as a residue (29). But this residue is that what adds meanings to a text.

Is mimesis truly possible in writing? Munro's writing has always been categorised under the realistic fiction. But reality in Munro's writing is not confined to the words on page. Reality in Munro lies also in what is *not* written. But the reality at the level of feelings and emotions that lay detached from the surface reality belongs to a different realm altogether. Ajay Heble remarks that the most peculiar feature of Munro's writing is "the tension between her interest in delineating a surface reality- a world 'out there' which we are invited to recognize as real and true and her fascination with the very limits of representation, especially in language" (Heble 4). Word creates a world that is apparently transparent.

This 'unresolvable gap' between reality and words is spatial in its nature. This gap is a representational space. A space, as Lefebvre says, that tends towards 'systems of non-verbal' (39) images. A space of artists 'who describe and aspire to do no more than describe' (39) a space free of politics, knowledge and ideology. It is space that cannot be captured by the Word. Word or verbal language reveals itself as a system of limited signs in Munro's writing. She explores the Other in writing. Lefebvre defines representational space as the dominated space. In the art of writing, which is dominated by the Word, the subjugated is the Silence. Silence forms the non-verbal (the unspoken) part of Munro's writing.

Silence assumes a spatial significance in Munro's writing that it forms a discourse of its own within the verbal discourse of her writing. Munro's writing exhibits the tension between Word and Silence. Word has always occupied itself with the task of re-presenting the reality for us. It is endowed with the duty of defining the outside reality. Silence is symbolic of all those realities that evade a fixation by words. The incommunicable reality is elusive.

Alice Munro's stories, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* and *Material* are studied to explore the incommunicable spaces that we can find in her writing. Here I would like to quote Deleuze who famously remarked that "writing entertains a relationship with silence which is altogether more threatening than its supposed relationship with death" (*Space in Theory* 16) It is interesting to study how the Word/Silence and the spoken/unspoken binaries play out in the above stories.

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, published as the first story in the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) plays with the idea of tension between Word and Silence in its title itself. It immediately calls up the image of something left unspoken. The Word/Silence tension plays in two ways within the story. Firstly, within the story (in the lives of the characters), and secondly, in Munro's writing (which leaves things unsaid, but still communicates). In the story Char emerges as a symbol of Silence, and words are not quite enough to convey what her inmost feelings are. Char also exhibits the 'unresolvable gap' between Word and Silence. Munro presents Char's life through Et, her younger sister. Though written as an omniscient narrative, Char's love, life and death is *described* as Et sees it. Char nurses the hurt of a lost love. Munro never writes in words the intensity of Char's pain. But through few instances where she is mute, in which there is an absence of any word or dialogue, the readers are able to experience the nature of Char's pain. When Blaikie Noble, her old lover, comes back to the village, everything *seems* normal between Char and Blaikie. Char is now married to Arthur, a school teacher and a part-time dramatist, and Blaikie is twice married and twice divorced. He is as flirtatious as he ever was. Blaikie seems to have completely moved on and is a regular visitor to Char's house. Char visibly appears to be not affected by Blaikie's presence. When Et declares at the beginning of the story, "Anyways he knows how to fascinate the women" (1), Char responds as if she is unaffected by it. Char remarks, "I wouldn't worry" (1). But a few pages into the story, and Munro ingeniously reveals that Char displays an apparent contradiction between what is *spoken* and what is *lived*. She is unable to word her silent pain. In the following instance, Char's lived emotions are revealed to be different from the spoken reality:

"My strength is as the strength of ten," said Blaikie Noble, "Because my heart is pure. I didn't know I remembered that."

"You should have been King Arthur," Et said. "King Arthur is your namesake."

"I should have. King Arthur was married to the most beautiful woman in the world."

'Ha,' said Et. "We all know the end of that story."

Char went into the living room and played the piano in the dark. (4)

Munro's writing here exhibits an economy of words. But Char's silence, immediate departure and the playing of the piano in a dark room conveys what probably spoken words can never boast to capture. We get a first glimpse of Char's still alive, yet pain-ridden love for Blaikie though we never get to see words like 'love', 'pain', 'sorrow', anywhere in Munro's description of Char in the story. Here the images of the dark, piano and absence become the associated images of Silence, a part of the lived space or the representational space. Munro presents Char as a monument of silence. When she was a part of the Amateur Dramatic Society and the Oratorio Society, she always played the cold, beautiful heroine in the plays. Munro writes:

In one play Et never forgot, she was a statue. Or rather, she played a girl who had to pretend to be a statue, so that a young man fell in love with her and later discovered, to his confusion and perhaps disappointment, that she was only human. Char had to stand for eight minutes perfectly still on stage, draped in white crepe and showing the audience her fine indifferent profile. Everybody marvelled at how she did it. (15)

The image of a statue perfectly shows what Char has been to all the characters in the novel. She is a beautiful image. Et is jealous of Char's beauty, Arthur is obsessively fascinated by it and Blaikie had a fleeting affair with it. They do not seem to see anything beyond her beauty. Char herself starts associating her identity with her beauty after the failure of her first love. Munro is able to capture through words the beauty of Char. But at the level of emotions beyond the physical, Char's existence is articulated by Munro through her silence. Beauty is the easily conceivable idea. But emotions lie in the realm of the lived and thus the incommunicable. Her silence is a representational space which is a passively experienced space because she lives more with the identity ascribed to her by her beauty which is evident in the efforts she takes to maintain her physical beauty. A person's identity, even the way she thinks about herself is constructed through the Word. Thus what a person thinks of himself may not completely be what he really is. The person as thought and perceived is different from the person as a lived being. The stillness is again an associated image of silence. Everyone marvelled at the ability of Char to remain still and silent for so long. What sets Char apart is the nature of her silence- it is an intentional silence. She is not silenced. She chooses not to speak or if she speaks-not to reveal. Finally when she chooses her death, she chooses silence.

Et is presented as a person who believes that she understands Char's discourse of silence. In fact she prides in the fact that she is able to decipher what is left unspoken by Char unlike Arthur who seems to see nothing beyond Char's beauty. Et represents the illusion of transparency often associated with the Word. She is repelled by the mystery of Char. Even Char's beauty was undecipherable for Et. We read:

All the same it would have suited her better to have found one of those ladies beautiful, not Char. It would have been more appropriate. More suitable than Char in her wet apron with her cross expression, bent over the starch basin. Et was a person who didn't like contradictions, didn't like things out of place, didn't like mysteries or extremes. (7)

Anything mysterious, incommunicable, or untranslatable is not *appropriate* for Et. But ironically she leaves many things unsaid, and emerges to be the most mysterious character in the story. She is a paradoxical combination of Word and Silence. When Et discovers Blaikie and Char make love in their backyard, she runs into her bedroom and falls asleep in order to escape the embarrassment of having been an unwelcome witness. Char never said a word about it to her the next day. But even if Et questioned her she would probably tell it was a dream. Et feels a sadistic pleasure about what she saw. She believed that she was able to see what "Char looked like when she lost her powers, abdicated" (11). Though Munro never makes a verbal exposition of Et's sadistic antipathy towards her siblings, she reveals it through the gaps between words. We read:

She didn't like the bleak notoriety of having Sandy's drowning attached to her, didn't like the memory people kept of her father carrying the body up from the beach. She could be seen at twilight, in her gym bloomers, turning cartwheels on the lawn of the stricken house. She made a wry mouth, which nobody saw, one day in the park when Char said, "That was my little brother who was drowned" (7)

In the above passage, Munro leaves gaps for the readers to perceive the uncommunicated. Sandy's drowning is not described by Munro anywhere in the story. It finds a mention only in relation to Et's memories. Even then, without an elaborate description, the readers are able to discern that it is Et's silence even on seeing her brother drown, that lead to Sandy's fatality. With a single statement like "didn't like the memory of her father carrying the body up from the beach"- Munro reveals the unwritten and the unspoken- it is the desire to possess the father's love all for herself that she lets her brother drown. When she discovers Char making love with Blaikie, she is happy to have witnessed her in a powerless position. Even "Sandy drowned, with green stuff clogging his nostrils, couldn't look more lost than that" (11). She enjoyed watching Sandy drown as he no longer would be a threatening presence.

When Et finds a bottle of zinc phosphide in Char's kitchen, she believes that Char along with Blaikie, is planning to kill Arthur. But the readers understand that Et's understanding of Char is

manipulated by her own desires. In the past Char had attempted suicide by gulping down blueing after Blaikie ditched her. So it is pretty much evident that when Et discovers the rodenticide, she chooses to believe that Char is planning to murder Arthur, rather than probably kill herself, because it justifies her innermost, unspoken desire for Arthur. Munro plays the Telling/Not Telling binary to perfection to convey to the readers of Et's hidden desire.

Just the way he said her name indicated that Char was above, outside, all ordinary considerations- a marvel, a mystery. No one could hope to solve her, they were lucky just being allowed to contemplate her. Et was on the verge of saying, "She swallowed blueing once over a man that wouldn't have her," but she thought what would be the good of it, Char would only seem more splendid to him like a heroine out of Shakespeare. He squeezed Et's waist as if to stress their companionable puzzlement, involuntary obeisance, before her sister. She felt afterwards the bumpy pressure of his fingers as if they had left dents just above where her skirt fastened. It had felt like somebody absent-mindedly trying out the keys of a piano. (17)

The bumpy pressure of Arthur's fingers left "dents just above where her skirts fastened" (17). Readers get a first glimpse into Et's feelings for Arthur. Munro's minimalistic use of words to reveal the most dramatic revelation of the story again reasserts the fact that Munro sees language as a system limited signs. The piano image once again appears in the story, this time to symbolise Et's silent, unspoken love for Arthur. Et's love for Arthur also exists in the realm of Silence and not Word. She is never able to communicate her love for Arthur. Again Et's love for Arthur too is an example of the 'unresolvable gap' between Word and Silence. Et's lie about Blaikie's marriage, may not have entirely stemmed out of her suspicion about Char's intentions. Her deliberate silence about the presence of rodenticide in the kitchen, not telling Arthur about Char's earlier suicidal attempt, not clarifying about it with Char- all these instances display a lack of communication- reveal her desire to possess Arthur's affection all for herself. Surely, Char is a threat, like how Sandy was.

Munro's writing never *describes* Et's intentions or her antipathy for her siblings. But her writing *reveals* it. Et's silence communicates her emotions. Char's silence conveys her pain. Munro's writing conveys through the absence of words. So the Word/Silence dichotomy works through the unspoken words of the characters and Munro's unwritten words. At the end of the story Munro writes:

Sometimes Et had it on the tip of her tongue to say Arthur, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you." She didn't believe she was going to let him die without knowing. He shouldn't be allowed. He kept a picture of Char on his bureau. It was the one taken of her in her costume for that play, where she played the statue-girl. But Et let it go, day to day. (23)

The motif of the unspoken looms large in the lives of Et and Char. They seem to resist communication of deep feelings, as if words fall short of the real meaning. They 'let it go, day by day'. The gap between Word and Silence persists even at the end of the story, with Et not being able to say Arthur that she loves him. But Munro's depiction of her silence through the words "something I've been meaning to tell you", conveys the meaning to the readers. She doesn't tell, yet tells.

*Material*, the second story in the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* throws light on the idea of writing as a tension between the representations of space and the representational spaces. *Material* is a story about the art of writing itself, and the title refers to a writer's material for a work of fiction. Munro had once said in an interview to Harry Boyle that her writing always had "a starting point in reality" (11). In *Material*, Munro deals with the problem of representation in writing. Representative qualities of writing is often problematized by the underlying tension between language and reality. *Material* focuses on the difference between men's writing and women's writing. It also takes up the representation of women in men's writing. Ajay Heble writes on the nature of material reality in Munro as follows:

The world of material reality, for Munro, is also textual, though its textuality is perhaps not

as self-evident as the textuality of the real-seeming world of her fiction. Though Munro does not subscribe to the experimental narrative techniques used by writers John Barth, Jorge Louis Borges, and Michael Ondaatje, she remains interested in and fascinated by some of the same problems which are raised in their texts. Despite Munro's insistence that she is an "old fashioned" writer, there is a sense in which she, [...] questions the assumption that language can transparently represent reality. (12)

Material reality is the representational space, which resists representation by the representations of spaces. Many aspects of the material is lost in the translation through Word. Thus reality is pushed into the realm of Silence, and is lost forever. But certain writers like Munro, are able to ease (not resolve) the tension between the two spaces, and convey Silence through the technique of 'telling and not telling' (Heble 75). In *Material*, Munro critiques the idea of writing as an *academic act*. Writers can't be men and women who are separate from the everyday life. Hugo, the central protagonist of the story, emerges as a man of Word(s), a practising academic and writer. Munro in *Material*, separates the academic life from the everyday life. It is in another sense a separation of the conceptual space from the lived. We read:

Hugo had flown in to discuss the state of the novel today, or the contemporary short story, or the new nationalism in our literature. Then I think, will people really go, will people who could be swimming or drinking or going for a walk really takes themselves out to the campus to find the room and sit in rows listening to those vain quarrelsome men? (24)

The above passage also suggests the apparent contradiction that exists between Word and Silence. For Munro, women are closer to the lived reality of everyday life. They are more acquainted with the ordinariness of life. The wives of the academic writers are concerned with groceries, food, mess, houses, car and money, because "their husbands are such brilliant, such talented men, who must be looked after for the sake of the words that will come from them" (25). So can such male writers be expected to translate into words the representational space of women in literature? The representations of space is, thus, the space largely occupied by men. The polysemic space of women's reality, in most cases, exists in the realm of Silence. Word largely fails to communicate. Thus Word dominates Silence when it comes to representations of women in men's writing.

But despite being separate from the realities of ordinary life, Hugo is able to create an image of himself as an ordinary man, through the power of Word. Word has the power to create identities. Word is used to create a marketable image. Writing, for Hugo, is drama. Clichés of everyday life can't be fiction. Hugo's existence as a writer is in the conceptual realm, for his experiences of everyday life is more a *material* for fiction rather than a *lived experience*. Writer, as a subject-position, in Hugo's thoughts, can't be a part of the representational space. We read:

Hugo felt the world was hostile to his writing, he felt not only all its human inhabitants but its noises and diversions and ordinary clutter were linked against him, maliciously, purposefully, diabolically thwarting and maiming him, and keeping him from his work. (36)

For Hugo, writing and life can't exist in the same spaces. Writing derives its material from life. Hugo's writing is an act in which the representational space is completely dominated by the Word. The space of 'human inhabitants' is incompatible with the space of Hugo when he performs the act of writing. When Hugo and the narrator of the story who was the first wife of Hugo, goes to a marriage counsellor to resolve their marital problems, the counsellor terms their problem as 'incompatibility'. And this tension between Hugo and the narrator is exactly the kind of friction that exists between representations of space and the representational spaces.

The character of Dotty represents reality of women in *Material*. It is her life that gets into the realm of Silence when it is inadequately translated by Hugo into the realm of Word. The Hugo's indifference towards Dotty, and lack of any kind of communication, or understanding of her life and situation, surprisingly, cannot be traced in his fiction. Hugo has mastered the art of writing. He knows the 'tricks' to

translate life into fiction, into an 'aesthetic form', no matter how little his understanding of that life is. Real Dotty is not the fictional Dotty. Real Dotty is in Silence. Fictional Dotty is in Word. It is however as the narrator admits, 'an act of magic' (43). We read:

There is Dotty lifted out of life and held in light, suspended in the marvelous clear jelly that Hugo has spent all his life learning how to make. It is an act of magic, there is no getting around it; it is an act, you might say, of a special, unsparing, unsentimental love. A fine and lucky benevolence. Dotty was a lucky person, people who understand and value this act may say (not everybody, of course, does understand and value this act); she was lucky to live in that basement for a few months and eventually to have this done to her, though she doesn't know what has been done and wouldn't care for it, probably, if she did know. She has passed into Art. It doesn't happen to everybody. (43)

Munro seems to appreciate the art of writing practised by Hugo. It is a talent. It is a creative act. And she too, is a writer like him, who takes up figures from life into fiction. But Hugo's writing is different. What his writing lacks is the *realization* of characters. He doesn't *realize* Dotty, he *dramatizes* her. He doesn't represent her, he makes a story out of her. When the narrator and Hugo fights over Dotty, she accuses him of his incapability to 'realize' (41). One of the lines sums up Munro's dissatisfaction with Hugo's kind of writing: "I said you don't realize, you never realize, and he said, what do you want me to say?" (41). Hugo's "what do you want me to say" shows his insistence on *words*. The Word and the unrealized, thus the Silence, is at conflict. So what remains unrealized in writings like that of Hugo's is the silent, intricate emotions which enrich the lived reality of human beings. Hugo takes up women characters and dramatizes them, while Munro takes up women characters and realizes them.

In the quoted passage above, it is also interesting to note how Munro is able to communicate the silent meanings that lay beneath the narrator's words. Words leave gaps for the readers to discern that there is an underlying contempt in her words for Hugo's 'business'. Also readable is her bitterness at the thought of how he has used Dotty to create Art, when he regarded her with contempt in reality. The conflict between Word and Silence, is seen here. The narrator, though still contemptuous of Hugo, appreciates him in Word(s), but what is unspoken, the hidden contempt and bitterness, is conveyed. We shall again return to that 'unresolvable gap' between the Word and the Silence which is very well demonstrated at the end of the story. The narrator decides to write a letter appreciating Hugo, but she ends up writing few lines she never intended to write- "*This not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo*" (44). But she never writes that letter to Hugo. This symbolises the untranslatability of certain feelings.

The textual space is a labyrinth. Munro believes in the numerous possibilities of the representational space. Her representation of the lived space is not a word-centred writing. It incorporates words as well as a non-verbal system of signs, often as absence or silence-an absence of words or silence of/between characters. Writing must balance both the spaces to capture, at least fleetingly, the essence of human passions.

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