On Ethical and Moral Education from the Domestic Violence in Alice Munro’s Dimensions

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Keywords: Ethical education, Immorality, Domestic violence, Dimensions, Self-salvation.

Abstract. The short story Dimensions was written by Alice Munro, the winner of 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. It tells us a miserable family story between the husband Lloyd and the wife Doree, in which domestic violence resulted in the family tragedy. Their three children were killed by their father Lloyd when Doree left her house to her female friend Maggie to escape abuse at home. This paper explored the ethical and moral themes in Dimensions through the ethical literary criticism to find out why Munro created this bloodcurdling murderer and what were the factors of the tragedy. The research and analysis have interpreted that Munro wants to give us ethical and moral education. Happy family should be established in prudent marriage choice and correct outlook on life. Everyone should find one’s own dimensions and self-reliance is the effective way to self-salvation.

Introduction

Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro, obtained Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. She is called “one of our greatest contemporary writers of fiction.” Her most stories shows the complexities of humanity. Alice Munro’s short stories are related to feminism, Eco-feminism, or family problems. The short story Dimensions is one of them, which described domestic violence and family morality. It tells us a miserable family story between the husband Lloyd and the wife Doree. In Dimensions, Doree, as a 16 year-old young girl, went to the hospital to look after her mother and met Lloyd, an orderly in the hospital as old as her mother. Lloyd and Doree fell in love with each other and they married. However, after that, Lloyd changed and became rude to Doree. Once after quarreling, Doree ran away from home and stayed at her friend Maggie’s home for a night. The next day, when Doree returned home, she was grieved to see that her three children were killed by her husband. Such a terrible thing hurt Doree deeply. She got self-salvation after she met an accident and Doree took control of her own life by saving the life of a young accident victim.

It is evident that from moral aspect Lloyd’s action is family abuse against ethics as an cruel animal, and from legal aspect he is a murderer. What Munro would like to tell us is worth of analysis. Professor Nie Zhenzhao believes “whether literary writers to create works or literary critics to comment on texts cannot violate the ethical value of literature or damage morality. The value of literature lies in its function of ethical edification.”[1] In Dimensions, Alice Munro has described a murderer and devilish character Lloyd not for the readers to follow, but for us to attack the evil and to show sympathy for the weaker Doree. This is the ethical value of the story.

Immorality of Domestic Violence in Dimensions

The story tells us that Lloyd is a murderer who killed his three children. This action evidently violates the ethics. Ethics is also called moral philosophy, which “seeks to resolve questions of human morality by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. As a field of intellectual inquiry, moral philosophy also is related to the fields of moral psychology, descriptive ethics, and value theory.”[2] The major areas of study within ethics include normative ethics, concerning the practical means of determining a moral course of action, and applied ethics, concerning what a person is obligated to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action.[2] Killing one’s own children is obviously against basic ethical principles. According to Chinese sayings, Even a vicious tiger will not eat its cubs, which means no one is
capable of hurting his own children. Therefore Lloyd’s action is against ethics. Although he was put into prison, the writer would like to transfer her instructive ideas to the readers. In the story, Lloyd is an image of devil. Almost all of his actions are against ethics or morality. Ethics is the study of right and wrong which can analyze and theorize about the nature of morality and ethics. And morality may also be specifically synonymous with "goodness" or "rightness". “Morality is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper. Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal.”[4]

On the other hand, domestic violence is also an action of family abuse which is immoral. In Dimensions we can find out the physical abuse, the emotional abuse and the verbal abuse. The first example is a physical abuse in Dimensions. When Doree and Lloyd’s third kid Dimitri was born, they found that Dimitri was the only one colicky child in the family. Doree though that the reason was because her breast milk was too rich or not rich or Dimitri was not getting enough breast milk. Then Lloyd invited a lady to talk with Doree and she told Doree not to use a supplementary bottle to feed the baby. However, Doree had already used the supplementary bottle. Though Doree kept in secret, it was no use for Lloyd. “She told him that her milk had dried up, and she’d had to start supplementing. Lloyd squeezed one breast after the other with frantic determination and succeeded in getting a couple of drops of miserable-looking milk out. He called her a liar. They fought. He said that she was a whore like her mother.” [3:9] In this part, we can see that Lloyd treated Doree quite savage and boorish.

In the story, Munro exposed an example of an emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is also called psychological abuse or mental abuse. It is “characterized by a person subjecting or exposing another person to behavior that may result in psychological trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder.”[5] Lloyd is a typical emotionally abused housewife. The bloodcurdling scene that Lloyd had killed her three children became the trauma in Doree’s mind and destroyed her last line of defense. After that, “Doree kept stuffing whatever she could garb into her mouth. After the dirt and grass it was sheets or towels or her own clothing. As if she were trying to stifle not just the howls that rose up but the scene in her head. She was given a shot of something, to quite her down, and this worked”. [3:18] This shows the emotional abuse hurt Doree cruelly. Lloyd’s interference in Doree’s getting in touch with other ladies also belongs to emotional abuse to Doree.

The third example of immorality in Dimensions is about the harassment and trespassing, and it is an example of emotional abuse. Once Doree and her friend Maggie had a talk and Doree told Maggie that when she was a young girl it was easy for herself to be pregnant. However, now it became difficult. It made Lloyd suspicious and “he went through her dresser drawers looking for birth-control pills—thinking must be taking them on the sly”. [3:12] Lloyd rumbled Doree’s dresser drawers without Doree’s permission was a kind of trespassing. Meanwhile, Lloyd suspected Doree that she had taken the acceptance, it also hurt Doree’s heart.

The fourth example of Lloyd’s immorality in Dimensions was as follows: “Other times she had been able to scare him out of it herself, by weeping and howling and even banging her head in the floor, chanting, ‘It’s not true, it’s not true’.” [3:15] In order to ask Lloyd to forgive and to escape from his punishment, Doree had to hurt herself by bumped her head into the floor. It shows that she had lost her dignity and was in deep fear. This is a kind of emotional abuse of domestic violence.

In Dimensions, Lloyd often immorally used some words to hunt Doree in order to intentionally control his wife. This is a kind of verbal abuse. One time Lloyd said that Maggie’s boys’ allergies and asthma might be Maggie’s faults but Doree didn’t think so. She wanted to argue with Lloyd. Lloyd didn’t listen to Doree and retorted her answer such as “Since when are you such a medical authority?”, “No. And you’re not” and “Careful. Don’t call me silly.” [3:15] According to the conversations between Lloyd and Doree, we can see that Lloyd’s behavior was overbearing and he also had a kind of menace.
All Lloyd’s actions mentioned above are immoral, which is against both ethics and morality. Munro would like to use this negative example to awaken female readers. This is the moral value of the story.

The Factors to Result in Lloyd’s Immorality in Dimensions

In Dimensions, Lloyd was a negative character and he was the major one who caused the tragedy. The factors to result in his immorality is worth studying.

So he controls Doree on his way even abusing or fighting. Meanwhile, the mental activity of Doree also shows that she depends on Lloyd: “No matter how worn out she got with him, he was still the closest person in the world to her...”. [3:16] Doree was stay at home and didn’t have any source of income. Lloyd was her pillar of life and she did not dared to obey his rule. In the lopsided status, the family was predominated by male. In Doree’s family, Lloyd also controlled his wife. He disliked Maggie, so he asked Doree not to stay with Maggie. Sometimes he even tends to prevent Doree from riding to school and grocery store with Maggie. Lloyd controlled Doree’s daily life and monitored her every act. Doree lived without freedom.

Influence of Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Lloyd is a man with androcentrism or patriarchy. He is the social product in patriarchal society. Lloyd felt more confident because he owned the right to dominate the family which Doree should never have, and he thought Doree could not live without him. Lloyd believed that he himself was superior and was free for him to express his superiority, thus he showed his power and strength by violent behavior. In many cases, a man’s position of superiority over a female partner can lead him to gain control over different aspects of her life. Doree was treated only as a slave, or a breeding machine. That’s why Doree never asked her friend Maggie for help. For instance, when he found that Doree had used a supplementary to feed Dimitri, he squeezed Doree’s breast from one to another in a violent way without listening to Doree’s explanation. From other side, Doree depended on her husbands financially and emotionally. This leaves Doree particularly vulnerable to domestic violence or immoral actions. Her dependence resulted in Lloyd’s expanding of androcentrism. However, Doree’s dependence came from her lack of financial position in the family. Thus, Lloyd forced Doree to become a complete housewife or a family slave. She must absolutely submit to her husband. Lloyd’s violence and immoral actions became the symbols of a master. He has the power to decide whether his wife can work, study, socialize, participate in the community, or even leave the house. He asked Doree to stay at home to take good care of his children and banned Doree from staying with Maggie, her only intimate female friend. If Doree did anything he dissatisfied with, he can beat or scold his wife. Even if it was he who cruelly killed their three children, he blamed Doree’s going out. Lloyd controlled his wife deeply and he used the rude ways to dominate Doree and keep Doree ‘in his place’. Under such circumstances, Doree became less confident, she gradually believed that she could not live without her husband. She could not leave such an abusive relationship since she must depend on her husband. She came to realize that no matter where she went and no matter which man she married, this was her destiny. These made her hopelessness. She had no courage to struggle, thus she surrendered.

Lloyd also dominated the education of his children. Lloyd thought their children should be educated at home. He pointed out that: “I just happen to think they are my kids”. [3:10] Lloyd did not want his children to be taught by the Department of education, because they were his children. The three kids were belonged to Lloyd himself and he should control them, including their education.

Doree’s Weakness in the Family

Lloyd’s immoral domestic violence partly resulted from Doree’s weakness. For the most part, Doree compromised with Lloyd. For example, when Lloyd ransacked her dresser drawers, she...
thought “it’s just kind of a joke when he goes looking for them.” [3:13] When facing such situations, she didn’t think her husband was invading her privacy but just let her husband rummaged her drawers. She was timid and did not dare to argue with her husband. One time, Maggie asked Doree if she was happy, without hesitation, Doree said that she was happy. After that, Doree became more careful about what she said, and “she saw that there were things that she was used to that another person might not understand”. [3:13] Although in Maggie’s opinion, Doree’s marriage was unhappy, Doree didn’t thought that she had compromised with it, and she didn’t think her marriage was unusual. Getting married provides Doree with security under her husband’s success, but also makes a lifelong commitment towards serving her husband and her children. The social pressures and expectations play huge roles in the perpetuation of the marianismo construct. Under such atmosphere, Doree was taught to surrender. She learned the importance of performing domestic labor and household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, because this is the role she had to play in her family. She was taught that these must be done well so that she can adequately serves her family and avoid punishment or discipline by her authoritative husbands.

Another sign of her weakness is her lack of self-protection consciousness. Lloyd was oversensitive about Doree and Maggie’s relationship, thus sometimes he wanted to ban Doree from getting a ride from Maggie. Doree thought that it would be inconvenient to her life. “But worse would be the shame. She would have to make up some stupid lie, to explain things”. [3:13] If Doree had been banned to ride to school and grocery store with Maggie, she would not told Maggie the truth because she didn’t want to let Maggie know about her situation, and she didn’t have courage to tell her the truth. Another example is that when Doree settled down in Maggie’s home after squabbling with Lloyd, she didn’t tell Maggie the whole truth. The mental description of Doree was that “she didn’t want to have to explain Lloyd. No matter how worn out she got with him, he was still the closest person in the world to her, and she felt that everything would collapse if she were to bring herself to tell someone exactly how he was, if she were to be entirely disloyal”. [3:16] In this description, Doree revealed her weakness and lack of self-protection. As Huang Furong commented that “If women want to walk out of tragic marriage, they need positive self-repair.” [6] It seemed that Doree lost the ability of living. Therefore, after her saving a man, she repaired her self-confidence and walked out of the shadow of patriarchy.

**Conclusion**

By analyzing the story *Dimensions*, we come up with the causes or factors of Lloyd’s immorality from the domestic violence, woman’s right, status, or independence. In the patriarchal society, Lloyd owned the supreme authority in the family because he thought he was the centre in the family, which made him more powerful than his wife. Thus, he tended to control his wife by using domestic violence. As for Lloyd, his violence and immoral actions showed us more symbols of a man. Because Doree was viewed as subservient to her husband, Lloyd had the power to decide her anything. Therefore the story created for us a immoral character without any ethical principle. However, Doree’s weakness was also the cause of this family tragedy. She was lack of self-protection consciousness because Doree depended on her husband too much financially and emotionally. From the patriarchal aspect, Doree’s female status was disdained by Lloyd. From the financial aspect, Doree was stayed at home without any income and lost her discourse power in the family. She did not dare to violate his immoral actions. All of these caused the family tragedy and made Lloyd against ethics and morality. In *Dimensions*, Alice Munro gives us the following ethical and moral education: Anybody must be independent and self-improvement; Immorality or ethical decay would be punished. Happy family must be established in understanding ethics of time and accepting the concept of civilization.
Acknowledgement
This research is supported by the Philosophy and Social Scientific Research Project Foundation of Guangdong Province, “Research on the ethics and morality in contemporary English-language classic novels”, No. GD18WZX23.

References