UNIT 23 ‘SUNDAY AFTERNOON’ : ALICE MUNRO ‘WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM’ RUDY WIEBE

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23.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will examine two stories; ‘Sunday Afternoon’ by Alice Munro and ‘Where Is The Voice Coming From?’ by Rudy Wiebe. Incidentally, these stories deal with different problems. ‘Sunday Afternoon’ focuses on the problems AND vulnerability of women in the modern society. ‘Where Is the Voice Coming From?’ looks at how the natives were exploited by the white man. Though these areas look disparate, there is an undercurrent linking them- both the stories deal with the problem of the marginalized. For one reason or the other, the women and the natives live on the margin of the mainstream society, how they are exploited or ignored links these stories thematically. Our aim will be to look at these stories in this manner.

23.1 INTRODUCTION : ‘SUNDAY AFTERNOON’

‘Sunday Afternoon’ by Alice Munro deals with the problems and vulnerability of women in the modern society. Women have been the focus of Munro’s works. In her very popular work “Lives of Girls and Women”, she examines the process of growing up from a feminine perspective. Life is not easy for women, especially for those who are placed at the lower end of the social ladder. The present story examines the condition of Alva, a maid in a rich household: how she is ignored, yet is important enough to be exploited. Her life is contrasted with that of the rich- she has no hope, no future, only a drudgery of existence. And if she has to go up the social ladder, she should be willing to oblige. Howsoever advanced the society may consider itself to be, the basic human instinct (or should we say the male instinct) remains the same: a low class woman is not worthy of any attention except as an object of sex. The story, in a way, deals with the subject of man-woman relationship, but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability as well as self awakening of a woman, or rather a girl. There is not much action in the story. The account of the drab existence of a maid is spiced with physical description of things and people minutely
observed and colourfully presented. There is a twist towards the end of the story, a certain ambivalence which lends a fascinating peculiarity and uncertainty to the ending.

23.2 ALICE MUNRO: LIFE AND WORKS

Alice (Laidlaw) Munro was born in Wingham, Ontario and now lives in nearby Clinton. Much of her fiction records - with apparent photographic fidelity - this region of rural Ontario: its space and its restrictions, its oblique speech, many ties and close connections. Some stories, too, refer to the environment of the West Coast, and to Victoria in particular, a city Munro moved to shortly after her first marriage in 1951. Yet much of Munro’s work concerns itself not with documenting the landscape at all but with the processes by which people - especially women - break free of closed worlds. They break free in fantasy, in memory, in delusion, in madness, by choice, by profession, and in art. But as so many of her stories reveal: “The Office,” for example, the other stories in Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), or the episodes of her novel Lives of Girls and Women (1971) - the knowledge that comes from art is at once as pressureful, dangerous, and potentially isolating as experience itself, even though it can only ever approximate the empirical life to which it is related.

It is this sense of paradox and parallel, of apparent objectivity and relative understanding, which constitutes the core of Munro’s work. The techniques she uses - oxymoron, irony - emphasize the meaning that derives from apparent contradictions, and delineate the kinds of uncertainty and dislocation with which people find they must live. In collections like Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You (1974) and Who Do You Think You Are? (1978), the stories stress the processes of accommodation. The linked stories that form “Chaddeleys and Flemings” first published separately in Chatelaine in 1978 and Saturday Night in 1979, and collected in The Moons of Jupiter (1982) further illustrate how shifts in perspective alter facts, alter histories, until the processes of memory and the art selecting and arranging details surface as the effective shapers of the realities we accept.

23.3 SUNDAY AFTERNOON: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

23.3.1 Critical Assessment

Alice Munro is known more for her short stories than for her novels. Munro does not find large narrative structures congenial to her talent; she is the master rather of the compressed tale. But what is most remarkable about Munro’s fiction is her style; in her prose the sentences are painstakingly crafted, their effects carefully balanced. Her writing has been compared to magic realist painting, for she has a remarkable eye for surface detail, for colours, shapes, textures. Often, the narrator in Munro’s fiction is a young girl who carefully observes life, not making judgements but noting all the peculiarities in the world around her. That world is realized by the descriptions of setting, matters of dress, standards of conduct, mannerisms of speech etc.

Women are her subject matter. Munro’s most popular work, “Lives of Girls and Women” details the story of a girl growing up in rural Ontario. It examines the process of growing up from a specifically female viewpoint. The heroine becomes aware at an early age of the socializing process where by sex distinctions determine her relations to others. Life is not easy for women especially for those at the lower end of the social ladder. In most of her Ontario stories, Munro focuses on her own past, the difficulties faced during adolescence and the problems associated with interpersonal relationships. A quote from the “Lives of Girls and Women” is self-explanatory, “There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their
connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really than
domestic animals”.

The story ‘Sunday Afternoon’ also deals with the subject of man-woman relationship
but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability and the self awakening of
women. Alva, the maid in the Gannett house hold is taken for granted. Wearing ill-
fitting clothes, living amongst discarded furniture, she leads a mechanical life without
any expectations. Aware of the difference between herself and the guests that fill the
Gannett house on Sunday afternoon’s, she does out drinks and food till a cousin of
Mrs. Gannett walks to her nonchalantly and kisses her passionately. Suddenly Alva
becomes confident, realizing, that after all, there is not that much difference between
her and them. But the difference been bridged or has she been used just as an
object of sex? This ambivalence lends a fascinating peculiarity to the ending.

A party is going on at the Gannett house on Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Gannett comes
into the kitchen to inspect things where Alva, the maid, is washing glasses. Alva
notes that the guests were the usual people, she had seen most of then before although
she had been working with Mrs. Gannett only for three weeks. There was Mrs.
Gannett’s brother and his wife, the Vances and the Frederick’s and Mrs. Gannett’s
parents had also come for a short while bringing with then a young nephew, or
cousin, who stayed back when they went home. Alva found Mrs. Gannett cranky and
aloof as the women in Alva’s own family would have been with a maid.

When Mrs. Gannett told Alva that lunch should be laid, instead of saying “yes,
madam”, she said, “All right”. Alva was not rude, but a country high-school girl
couldn’t be expected to have the manners of a trained maid. Alva was still quite
clumsy in her work, and used to admire the elegance and superiority of Mrs.
Gannett’s demeanor.

Filling themselves with food and drinks, people would become excited as well as
relaxed. But it was not allowed for Alva to show a little relaxation or excitement. Of
course, she was not drinking, except from the bottom of glasses when they were
brought back. But the feeling of unreality, of alternate apathy and recklessness,
became very strong in the house by the middle of the afternoon. Alva would compare
the large spacious rooms of the house with her own small, over crowded rooms. She
also felt a bit out of touch with reality.

As she carried the dishes Alva wanted to look presentable before the high society
guests. The guests would carry their dessert plates and coffee-cups back to the
kitchen. Mrs. Vance praised the potato salad and Mr. Vance, quite drunk, just kept
repeating lovely, lovely. He stood right behind Alva at the sink, so very close she felt
his breath quite touch her. “Going up north, Alva, up to Georgian Bay?” Mr. Vance
said, and Mrs. Vance said, “oh you’ll love it, the Gannetts have a lovely place,’ and
Mr. Vance said, ‘Get some sun on you up there, oh?’ and then they went away.

Mr. Gannett felt concerned about Alva, he felt a responsibility for her and seriously
asked her whether she was getting enough to eat. Alva reassured him flushing with
annoyance; was she a heifer? She said she was going to the den to get some book to
read. Mr. Gannett, trying to be helpful asked her which book would she like, and
Alva, in order to impress him asked for ‘king Lear’. She thought, “A man would be
more impressed by ‘King Lear’ then a woman. Nothing could make any difference to
Mrs. Gannett; a maid was a maid.”

The difference between the male and the female attitudes was a major area of
attention, for Munro looked at this aspect in ‘Lives of Girls and Women’, in which
the heroine Del Jordan is expected to be gentle in her behaviour, submissive to
authority, and modest about her accomplishments. The difficulty in being a young
woman for Del arises over the matter of intelligence. Society honours a boy who
shows intellectual promise, but an intelligent girl is considered suspect. However, in
the incident mentioned above, Alva mentions ‘King Lear’ in order to impress Mr.
Gannett with her knowledge and interests.
But in her room above the garage, she did not want to read. She looked out at the elegant street, big bungalows with manicured gardens, everything looked hard and glittering, exact and perfect. There was no haphazard thing in sight. Her room was full of unwanted furniture, the only place in house where one could find things unmatched, unrelated to each other. Sitting in the midst of such things, the suggestion of how unimportant Alva was becomes apparent. She began to write a letter to her family: ... houses are just tremendous, mostly quite modern. There isn’t a weed in the lawns,... Don’t worry about me being lonesome and down trodden and all that maid sort of a thing... I don’t feel lonesome, why should I? I just observe and am interested. Mother, of course I can’t eat with them... Also I prefer to eat alone... In a week we will be leaving for Georgian Bay and of course I am looking forward to that.” Her feeling of loneliness and wretchedness is scarcely concealed though, typically, she wants to reassure her family of her well being.

Alva goes to Mrs. Gannett’s fourteen year old daughter Margaret’s room who had spread all her clothes on the bed, unable to decide which one’s to carry to Georgia Bay. Alva touched the fine clothes, feeling a great delight in their colours and shapes, but was not envious, as she was well aware that Margaret’s world was different from hers. While collecting used glasses and doing other chores, Alva was thinking of the Island. A whole Island they owned, nothing in sight that was not theirs. She could visualize the rocks, the sun, the trees and the deep cold water of the Bay. What would she do there, What did the maids do? She would go swimming at odd hours, go for walks by herself, and sometimes... perhaps- she would go along in the boat. There would not be so much work to do as there was here, Mrs. Gannett had said. She said the maids always enjoyed it. Alva thought of other maids, more talented, perhaps more accommodating girls; did they really enjoy it. What kind of freedom or content had they found, that she had not. Munro not only establishes the gap that exists between the upper class society and a maid like Alva, but also suggests, very subtly, that unless you are accommodating, you may not be able to enjoy. Another point to note is that there is not much action in the story. The account of the drab existence of a maid is spiced with physical description of things and people minutely observed and colourfully presented.

While washing glasses, suddenly Alva felt heavy, tired uncaring and lonely- it was other people’s lives, nothing much for her. And then something happens. Mrs. Gannett’s cousin came in the kitchen to hand over his glass. He stayed on in the kitchen. “She waited, her back to the counter, and Mrs. Gannett’s cousin took hold of her lightly, as in a familiar game, [a familiar game only for him] and spent some time kissing her mouth.” This was most unexpected but not unwelcome. “This stranger’s touch had cased her; her body was simply grateful and expectant, and she felt a lightness and confidence she had not known in this house. So there were things she had not taken into account about herself, about them, and ways of living with them that were not so unreal. She would not mind thinking of the island now... She saw it differently now”. For the first time, in a long time, Alva felt wanted, in some sense equal to them, and felt exhilarated and excited. She has something to look forward to. She may, after all, be able to enjoy the visit to the island. She may not feel lonely and unwanted.

The kiss has changed her whole attitude, has given her confidence and identity. But the last sentence of the story gives a further twist to the situation by introducing an element of doubt. “But things always came together, there was something she would not explore yet - a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation.” Has the difference been really bridged or has she been used just as an object of sex, to be used and dropped later on. Alva is not dwelling on this aspect yet, but this ambivalence lends a fascinating peculiarity and uncertainty to the ending. The awakening may just be a mirage, a flash in the pan, as man is wont to use the woman as a play thing and then is known to discard her at his convenience.

23.3.2 Theme

The story deals with the process of growing up of a girl and the problems she faces in an unequal world. The story is written from a female perspective. It focuses on the
vulnerability and self awakening of the maid, who is at the lower rung of the social ladder. Ignored most of the time, she leads a mechanical life, without any hope of any future. She is not a trained maid and at times finds herself a misfit in the job. People would eat and drink at the Sunday afternoon party, and as a result would become rockless. Alva would look at them with a feeling of unreality. When she compared this world with her own, she also felt a bit out of touch with reality.

The difference between male and female attitudes is brought to the fore when Alva, to impress Mr. Gannett, asks him to take out 'King Lear' for her. She knew that a man would be more impressed by 'King Lear' than a woman, but nothing would make a difference to Mrs. Gannett; for her, a maid was just a maid, nothing more.

Suddenly everything is changed. Mrs. Gannett's cousin came in the kitchen and kissed her on the mouth. He treats her as a woman—not as a maid. She feels grateful and confident. The barrier between the higher echelons of society and the lower strata has been eclipsed. After all, there was not much difference between her and them. At the basic instinct level, at the level of sex, they were equal. This small act leads to a sea change in her attitude. She felt wanted and accepted, exhilarated and excited. But Munro introduces an element of doubt at the end - has she really been accepted, or is it another example of man using a woman as a plaything.

23.3.3 Characterization

Most of the characters in the story are stereotypical, playing the part assigned to them in the society. Mrs. Gannett is the mistress of the house, fussy and cranky, trying to be nice to the maid, without actually caring for her. She goes through the motions expected of a woman of high society. Taking care of small niceties, trying to help and guide the maid, taking care of the guests and their needs. Mr. Gannett, who makes a small appearance feels responsible for the maid, and tries to take care of her by making polite enquires. Mr. Frederick is a typical male, goes very close to Alva, so very close she could feel his breath and sense the position of his hands, but doesn't have the courage to touch her; though one feels he is capable of doing so in safer circumstances.

Alva is the picture of a neglected girl, one amongst many, who work in the houses of rich people to make a living. She is diffident, awe-struck. Unhappy with her situations. By putting her in a room together with unwanted furniture, Muro States her status in the house of the Gannett's. In between her work, she suffered from bouts of tiredness, heaviness and loneliness—it was other people's life, nothing much for her. And then the incident occurs and changes her thinking completely. She suddenly felt confident, light, excited and full of hope. The transition is very natural and suggests how naive and basically simple Alva is. She starts nurturing hope, thinks and makes plans for the future, and feels as if all her problems have been solved. She doesn't realize that this may be just a flash in the pan, it may not translate into a caring attitude. Munro wants to warn her, yet doesn't want to spoil her bliss. In the process, she shows how vulnerable such women are, a little care or concern and they are bowled over, start dreaming—but how will it all end. The world, in fact, doesn't change in this way. So Alva, after all, is immature, ignorant of the ways of the world.

23.3.4 Narrative Technique

The story is told in the form of third person narrative. This form of narration gives the author a lot of freedom to go back and forth and be an omniscient presence. The author in this form is able to objectively analyse the characters and situations help to and guide the reader's response. This is best exemplified the way Munro handles the ending of the story. Alva's reactions and assessment are different from those of the narrator. The narrator informs the readers of different possibilities, and she is so sympathetic to Alva, she doesn't want to interfere in her bliss, she doesn't want to prick the bubble of her happiness. But is it really a bubble; the narrator is not hundred percent sure so she introduces a touch of ambivalence; both the possibilities are presented before the readers. The readers are free to make their own choice.
Throughout the story, the narrator describes as well as comments. As she is a disinterested spectator of the scene, her assessments are objective and the readers can safely depend on them. Then she has an eye for detail - the setting, the household, the colour and dresses, the discrepancies between this social life and Alva’s meaningless existence - all these are minutely observed and correctly detailed. When Alva goes to Margaret’s room, all her colourful and expensive clothes are spread on her bed, the narrator informs us that she doesn’t feel envious of Margaret’s possessions, but is well aware of the fact that Margaret’s world is different from hers.

When she is unexpectedly kissed, her reaction, feelings and thoughts are very beautifully and realistically presented. These would be the reactions of a neglected person who suddenly feels wanted. And does she overreact - well yes and no; it depends upon how you read the situation. This kind of open endedness adds a lot of charm to the narration. All in all, as you must have become aware by now, Munro does a very competent job in first choosing the third person narrative technique and then doing full justice to it by describing and side by side commenting as the situation develops. The ambivalence at the end, as has already been mentioned, but can still bear reiteration, lends a fascinating peculiarity, charm as well as uncertainty to the ending. The ending in this manner, in a way, becomes a beginning - we begin to think of the possibilities that lie ahead and the pitfalls Alva should be careful about.

23.4 INTRODUCTION : ‘WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM?’

Though not a Mennonite Indian himself Rudy Wiebe lived and grew up with them, and when he started writing, he became their Voice - a Voice asking for recognition and justice, recreating a lost past, a forgotten culture, an ignored tradition. Better known for novels retelling prairie history, obsessed with gaining perspective, with seeing all sides of a story, Wiebe uses his short meditative narratives to capture a vanished voice in history - that of the Plains Indians. Making free use of data and documentation, Wiebe seeks to go beyond the message of history to liberate a voice that is visionary in its origin. This is a voice coming from the past, wanting to be heard, telling its own story- which may be different from the official story like the voice of a subaltern.

The present story tries to recreate the legend of a famous Indian - Almighty Voice. Almighty Voice (1874-97), a Cree Indian was arrested in 1895 for slaughtering a cow on a reserve near Duck Lake, North West Territories. He escaped, shot and killed a North west Mounted Police officer who was pursuing him, and became a hero to the Cree before he was finally killed by the police.

23.5 RUDY WIEBE : LIFE AND WORKS

Rudy Wiebe was born on the family farm - to parents who had emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1930 into a Mennonite community near Fairholme, Saskatchewan. Educated at the University of Alberta and at Tubingen, Germany, he has taught at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College and Goshen College, and he currently teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta. In their compulsion to explore the sources of moral behaviour, his stories Where Is the Voice Coming From? 1974; The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories (1982) and seven novels all draw on his Mennonite commitment to both independence and community. Peace Shall Destroy Many (1962) most directly portrays Mennonite life; with more structural and linguistic complexity, The Blue Mountains of China (1970) traces the history of Mennonite wanderings during the 20th century and the recurrent tensions between visionary quest and social integration. Wiebe’s fascination with the power of belief
and the dimensions of private choice have also taken him into oral history and into an attempt to adapt the art of oral narrative to the telling of a novel, as in *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973).

The story *Where Is Voice Coming From*? also draws on this distinction between the life of speech and art and the sterility of fact and record. Technically, it contrasts passive voice with active voice, as a way of contrasting historical artifact and documentary with art, belief, and vision. Given facts, we discover logical contradictions, Wiebe writes; if art and belief have the power to transcend them, how does this happen, and why? His story at once enacts the distinction and steps back from it, in order to invite the reader to reflect on the limits of fact and illusion, and on the fundamental difficulties of cross-cultural comprehension.

### 23.6 WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM? A DETAILED ANALYSIS

#### 23.6.1 Critical Assessment

Rudy Wiebe begins the story by presenting a problem before us- "The problem is to make a story." It is very difficult to make a story from bits and pieces of information; it is more like making a jigsaw puzzle, trying to fit in different pieces of information till it presents a complete and comprehensive picture. As the story is seventy five years old, Wiebe doesn’t know where or how to begin. "Sometimes it would seem that it would be enough- perhaps more than enough - to hear the names only". And such fascinating names at that; the grandfather One Arrow; the mother Spotted Calf; the father Sounding Sky; the wife Pale Face; the cousin Going-up-To-Sky; the brother-in-law Dublin. Then there are the names of the police and other important government officials. In this manner, Wiebe very cleverly introduces all the dramatic personae. He ends the list with, “And of course himself in the award proclamation named “Jean-Baptiste” but otherwise known only as Almighty Voice. Then Wiebe gives the proclamation in which an award of Five hundred dollars is announced for any person who will give such information as well lead to the arrest of Almighty Voice.

With such bits and pieces of information, Wiebe tries to weave the past events into a comprehensible pattern for a more meaningful understanding of events than official history suggests. The narrator is looking at the display in a Museum, where a piece of bone, purporting to be part of Almighty Voice’s skull, is on display. The bone is very small, from one eighth to one quarter of an inch thick and “Precision is difficult since the glass showcase is at least thirteen inches deep and therefore an eye cannot be brought as close as the minute inspection of such a small though certainly quite adequate, sample of skull would normally require". Again, very cleverly, Wiebe introduces an element of uncertainty about the reliability of the official claim.

Then the focus is shifted to the seven pounder cannon, displayed close-by, which was used first in the 1885 rebellion and then on Saturday, May 29, 1897 (the day Almighty Voice was killed). Also preserved, though not with same care, was one 44 calibre 1866 model Winchester rifle which was apparently found in the pit where Almighty Voice had taken shelter. Even the police guardroom at Duck Lake in 1895 can be seen (from where presumably Almighty Voice made his escape) which had been subsequently moved from its original place. When the narrator looks at the small rectangular box like guardroom, he is transported into the past and seems to hear the threats that the police had used to frighten Almighty Voice: "Hey Injun you’ll get hung for stealing that steer Hey Injun for killing that government cow you’ll get three weeks on the woodpile". So bit by bit, piece by small piece, the legend of Almighty Voice unfolds before the reader. The landscape has changed, the place named Kinistino seems to have disappeared from the map but the Minnech***
The policeman he shot and killed are easily located in various cemeteries. The suggestion being made here is that the memory of the bravery of the policemen has been carefully preserved whereas, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to obliterate anything associated with Almighty Voice. The burial place of Dublin and Going-Up-To-Sky is unknown as is the grave of Almighty Voice. With this bit of information we come to know that Almighty Voice was not alone in his stand against the police - all three warriors fought from the pit - an uneven fight as they were totally and completely outnumbered. It is said that a Metis named Henry Smith lifted the latter's body from the pit in the bluff and gave it to Spotted Calf. Wiebe is at his ironic best when he juxtaposes the Indian version with the official one: "The place of burial is not, of course, of ultimate significance. A gravestone is always less evidence than a triangular piece of skull, provided it is large enough". In other words, the official version is supposedly the correct version, though it is not a fact.

Rest of the evidence can be gathered from pictures. There are numberless pictures of policemen in the case but the only one with direct bearing is one of Sgt. Colebrook, who perhaps got killed in his attempt to arrest Almighty Voice. But the picture of constable Dickson, into whose charge Almighty Voice was apparently committed in the guardroom, and who later on was convicted of negligence, does not seem to be available. "There are no pictures to be found of either Dublin(killed early by rifle fire) or Going-Up-The-Sky(killed in the pit), the two teenage boys who gave their ultimate fealty to Almighty Voice". There is however, one said to be of Almighty Voice-Junior - born in the period his father was a fugitive (two hundred and twenty one days to be precise). Several pictures of Almighty Voice's family members are duly available.

There is one final picture - that of Almighty Voice himself - it lies in the same showcase, as a matter of fact immediately beside that triangular piece of skull. "Both are unequivocally labelled, and it must be assumed that a police force with a worldwide reputation would not label such evidence incorrectly". But here emerges an ultimate problem in making the story. There are two official descriptions of Almighty Voice, and the nexus of the problem appears when these supposed official descriptions are compared to the supposed official picture." The repetition of the word 'supposed' clearly indicates doubts in the mind of the narrator about the accuracy of the official claims. The main objection is to the term "feminine appearance". The narrator seems exasperated and angry at this deliberate distortion to denigrate the legendary hero of the Indians. He says, "any face of history, and believed face that the world acknowledges as man- Socrates, Jesus, Attila, Genghis Khan, Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Stalin - no believed face is more man than this face." He further adds that even in this watered-down reproduction of unending reproductions of that original, a steady look into those eyes cannot be endured. It is a face like an axe.

The narrator, or the story teller has got so involved in recreating the real scenario that claims he is "no longer a spectator of what has happened or what may happen: I am become element in what is happening at this very moment." The narrator has become part of the event, so the element of doubt will be erased. He can see(or imagine) the bluff that sheltered Almighty Voice and his two friends he - can hear the sound of constable Dickens threatening Almighty Voice; the voice reverberates, the past resurfaces. The words that moved the boy to defiance come alive. His mind’s eye can visualize what the official version has tried to hide - and the authenticity of this vision cannot be questioned. The siege had continued for three days. "Twenty seven policemen and five civilians stand in cordon at thirty yard intervals and a body also lies in the shelter of a gully. Only a voice rises from the bluff:

We have fought well
You have died like braves
I have worked hard and am hungry
Give me food
But nothing moves.

The bluff is surrounded by a vast police force, watched by a large number of whites astride their horses, standing up in their carts, and there are "unnumbered Indians squatting silent along the higher ridges of the hills, motionless mounds, faceless" as passive helpless victims. "A crow is falling out of the sky into the bluff, its feathers sprayed as by an explosion" and the firing starts from all around. Nothing moves. But then an incredible voice rises from among the poplar trees, from among the dead somewhere lying there a voice that rises above the smoke and thunder of suns, "a voice so high and clear, so unbelievably high and strong in its unending wordless cry."

The narrator calls it a "Wordless cry" because he doesn’t understand Cree, so is not in a position to interpret it properly. And he doesn’t want to make a guess - that would tantamount to being inauthentic, and that is something he can’t afford to do because one of his aims is to object to the inauthentic official version of the events detailed above. Thus the story presents a powerful and sophisticated narration of the White man’s brutality and ruthlessness in his dealings with the native Canadians. The marginalization of the native, both in life and literature is evoked with rare control and clever contrast.

In CBC radio programme broadcast on 7th December, 1974, Rudy Wiebe was interviewed by Eli Mandel, the distinguished poet and critic. Mandel asked him whether he was recreating a history of these people, bringing them back into the land, to which Wiebe replied, "I'd always sort of thought that here where I walk is the first time anyone has ever walked here. But of course, this is not true. I suddenly discovered that many, many years before, 70 & 80 years before, there had already been dramatic historical events taking place here in connection with the Riel Rebellion, but I'd never heard of it. And this is what made me angry. And it was out of this, I suppose, indignation that I began to write... It's just the sense of somehow being deprived of knowing about your own place while you were a child when it would have been useful to you."

Discussing Where Is the Voice Coming From? Mandel commented that there is one voice speaking marvelously in the short stories. In one story there is one voice, in another story, there's another voice. But the question is where is this voice coming from for you? Wiebe answered, "Well, I think that is what the writers in this country have to discover... I think that what we're going to have to do is get close to and try to get to the genuine voice of those people... discover those things again... and unearth them you know shove away the ignorance about it and look at them..."

Next, Mandel asked whether he had any moral concern in his writings, to which Wiebe replied in the affirmative. It is very easy to write about petty bedroom problems that small people have. On the other hand, there are also great people who think in great, large and superhuman terms. And they need to be explored too. "But I do believe in human greatness, and I do believe that at our best moments we should explore it."

Mandel asked, "Is that the driving force too in, say, Almighty Voice? That great cry at the end... When he's trapped... and when he's about to die, is some sort of affirmation, some human affirmation". Wiebe, "That's different, because Almighty Voice is in many ways a petty human being. He's proud, petty... he's a kid. But I think he becomes great in that little pit among the trees, there in that bluff, when a hundred men are shooting at him, and a couple of cannons, you know... I think he becomes great... in a kind of terrible last desperate moment... because for an instant he regains the greatness that was his people... in his defiance of the police... because for 20 years before Almighty Voice did that, his people had been voiceless. It's a fantastic name, isn't it? Almighty Voice. That's the thing that hooked me first on him."
when I didn't know what he was about. But a name like Almighty Voice, which in the Cree means "the voice of the great spirit".

23.6.2 Theme

In this story Wiebe tries to resurrect the lost past of native Indians in Canada. History doesn't record properly the exploitation and the humiliation of native Indians at the hands of White settlers. Wiebe becomes the voice of the natives, their historian, who would like to put the record straight. Using bits and pieces of information, he reconstructs history as seen from the point of view of natives. The year 1857 is very important in our history, it is described as a mutiny by the Britshers, but we call it the 'first war of independence' - the same event is described so differently - it depends on which side you are on. Wiebe also attempts to present the history of the native Indian people of Canada, juxtaposing it with the official version and thus questioning the veracity of the official version. The way Wiebe reconstructs the events fills us with doubts about the white man's version. By showing the bravery of Almighty Voice and his two relatives against an overwhelming superior White police force, Wiebe is able to establish the Indians as heroes. Using irony as a weapon Wiebe exposes several of the White man's claims as hollow. By contradicting the official version, by juxtaposing his own finding against the official claims, Wiebe is successful in introducing an element of uncertainty about the reliability of official claims.

The bias of the Whiteman is exposed when Wiebe finds out that the policemen Almighty Voice shot and killed are easily located, but the graves of the three Indian heroes are unknown. The grave which the Indians believe belongs to Almighty Voice is not accepted as such by the whites. So, in recreating the history of the Almighty Voice, Wiebe is trying to establish the history of the Indians, which has been 'white' washed. The Voice that the title refers to is coming from the past, it is the collective voice of a people which has been hitherto suppressed- only now it is getting an opportunity to be heard and recognized.

23.6.3 Characterization

The main character in the story is Almighty Voice. But more important than a simple character is the collective character of the people - of the natives. Wiebe tries to recreate and restore a people, who have vanished from the pages of history, and from the memory of the modern generation. In the beginning of the story, when Wiebe says he doesn't know from where to begin - he feels it may be more than enough to hear the names only and such beautiful names such as One Arrow Spotted Calf, Sounding Sky, Pale Face, Going-up-To-Sky, and Dublin - such fascinating names. Just by naming names Wiebe weaves almost a magical spell- we are indeed impressed by the names which are very pictorial and meaningful, they have a lot of character in them. As against these, Wiebe juxtaposes the designations of policemen and important government officials- Corporal, Sergeant, Assistant Commissioner; Sir John Hamilton Gordon, etc. these names and ranks appear extremely pedestrian before the names of natives. Their very names have character.

It is very slowly and gradually that Wiebe builds the character of Almighty Voice. Initially the picture is hazy, then by adding bits of information as available in museum display and the photographs, Wiebe introduces clarity and flesh to the picture. And when we come to know the overwhelming odds that the three Indians in the pit faced, fifty six policemen and thirty five volunteers, besides their rifles- two pieces of cannon were also used, we realize the greatness of Almighty Voice and his two companions, Dublin and Going Up - To-Sky. So, in this story, in the shape of Almighty Voice, we see the character of a people, a nation.

23.6.4 Narrative Technique

The story is told in the third person narrative. The third person narrator acts as a historian who is trying to recreate the past of a lost people, a vanished tribe. Using whatever little data that is available, he records the past glory of the original inhabitants of Canada, and in the process, questions the veracity and reliability of
recorded history. The narrator wants to tell a story, the problem is how to make a story in the absence of documents and facts. The narrative, based on bits and pieces of information, is akin to making a jigsaw puzzle, trying to fit in different pieces till it presents a complete and comprehensive picture. Gathering facts from a museum display, deciphering photographs for their real value and meaning, using irony as a weapon to expose the falsity of the official position, the narrator performs a very difficult task in piecing together disparate bits of information to weave the past events into a comprehensive pattern for a more meaningful understanding of events than official history suggests. After looking at the Museum display of a piece of Almighty Voice's skull, the narrator introduces an element of doubt about the reliability of the official claims. Then the attention is shifted to the cannons and rifles used in the fight against Almighty Voice and his two companions. The narrator is transported into the past where he can hear the threats the police had used to terrify Almighty Voice. Thus, bit by bit, piece by small piece, the legend of Almighty Voice unfolds before us.

The narrator than questions the official claim about Almighty Voice's grave, using irony very effectively. “The place of burial is not of course of ultimate significance. A gravestone is always less evidence than a triangular piece of skull, provided it is large enough.”

Then the narrative shifts to the pictures and the narrator is extremely vehement in protesting the official version which claims Almighty Voice’s looks to be feminine. The narrator has become so involved in recreating the real events, that he claims he is no more a spectator, but has become an element in what is happening, so in his version, there can be no element of doubt. In his imagination, he can see the version of the great fight, his mind's eyes can visualize what the official version has tried to hide and recreates before us the reality of this piece of history. The voice that issues from among the poplar trees is the voice of history. In this manner, the story presents a powerful and sophisticated narration of the white man’s brutality and ruthlessness towards the natives.

23.7 LET US SUM UP

On the face of it, the two stories appear different. ‘Sunday Afternoon’ focuses on the condition of women at the lower strata of society, and how they are exploited, ignored and disgraced. ‘Where Is Voice Coming From’ looks at how the natives in Canada were systematically exploited, hounded and demoralized by the Whiteman. As you must have noticed, both the stories deal with the fact of exploitation of one class of people by another class which is more powerful and thus acts as superior. This exploitation links the two stories. Both women and natives lived a marginalized existence, both have suffered at the hands of socially superior forces. And both the writers protest this irrational and inhuman treatment meted out to this section of society. Both Munro and Wiebe use subtlety and irony to expose the different forms of exploitation. The women and the natives have raised their voice and they have become a force to reckon with not only Canada but all over the world. Both these stories, as you must have realized, achieve their objectives, poignantly and forcefully,

23.8 QUESTIONS

1. Can you term ‘Sunday Afternoon’ as a story written from a feminist point of view? Discuss
2. Comment on the ending of the story.
3. Wiebe projected the suppression of the Natives adequately in “Where Is Voice Coming From”? Discuss
4. What devices does Wiebe use to question the official claims about Almighty Voice’s legend?
5. Is there anything common between the two stories? Discuss