

## Reading Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* through the Lens of Stream of Consciousness Technique

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**Abstract:** The present article tries to explore how Margaret Atwood has employed postmodern stream of consciousness technique in her celebrated novel *Surfacing*. The novelist in her employment of this postmodern technique has abandoned traditional fictional devices which lay stress on external details and linearity of plot or action and adopted a completely new style in her formulation of own distinctive technique in the form of stream of consciousness technique which is a new and postmodern way of writing where psychic details in non-linear form are written instead of concentrating more on external actions. The protagonist of Atwood's *Surfacing* makes a psychic journey from ignorance to knowledge often interrupted by her past memories, which come in the form of flashbacks and associative manners. The novelist has employed all devices in this new technique that make this novel an interesting study from postmodern perspective.

**Keywords:** *Consciousness, Technique, Memory, Flashback, Action, Association, Internal, Postmodern*

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Stream of consciousness writing is the method or technique by which postmodern literature is mostly influenced. Since its origin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when a group of writers took interest in writing in this technique, it has been flourishing and becoming rich. It is a technique popularly employed in non-dramatic fiction as a form of narration “that undertakes to reproduce, without a narrator’s intervention, the full spectrum and continuous flow of a character’s mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings and random associations” (Abrams 299). The objective of such narrative technique is thus to “reveal the character’s feelings, thoughts and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence without commentary by the author” (Hurley 19). “The full richness, speed and subtlety of mind at work” (Richetti 36) along with “snatches of incoherent thought, ungrammatical constructions and free association of ideas, images and words at the pre-speech level” (36) are other characteristics of stream of

consciousness technique. In view of the above, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* truly comes into the category of stream of consciousness novel where all principal characteristics of this technique — non-linearity of plot, unusual employment of syntax and grammar, repetition of words and phrases along with the development of action through internal conflicts and associative leaps rather than external and logical details are embedded within the very structure of the narrative. The action is more interior than exterior taking place in the inner psychology of the unnamed protagonist who after a long repression of mental pains and agonies resulting due to past injustices done to her, undergoes a radical change and seeks an outlet to come to the surface leading her to an animalistic stage at the end.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, published in 1972, belongs to the time when postmodernism was at its height. The novel not only belongs to the period of this new literary movement but also corresponds to almost all characteristics of this movement in its employment of stream of consciousness technique, which is completely new and modern beyond conventional way of telling a story. Postmodernism when applied to literature is a protest against conventional way of narrative technique with linearity of plot or action and more stress on exteriority of detail than interior human psychology. Diverting from the usual track of modernist way of writing that emphasized on precision both in form and style and took every effort to present a very significant point, postmodernism moves away from all these established tradition. Postmodernism also protests against strict time frame. Instead of moving in the linear and straight time flow, it follows irregularities of time, which, in the words of John Barth, are "tales within tales within tales" (45) in which linear and straight flow of time and events is subverted and intermingling of past and present comes to the fore. True to the postmodern idea of fragmentary time and action, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* reverses all accepted values of totality and wholeness and the action of narrative holds its rein through fragmentations as regards both time and action, which intentionally keep readers far from the wholeness of sense, which becomes clear and evident only when the narrative comes to its conclusion. Postmodernism decenters the central structure as it "narrow(s) down the amount of fragmentation in "the total form" (Derrida 278). Atwood's *Surfacing*, instead of giving any clear and distinct idea of its central theme, decenters both time

and action from the very beginning and runs in the same terrain of fragmentary thoughts and action till its end when these fragmentations get structural unity and wholeness. This means that “the concept of centred structure...is contradictorily coherent.” (Derrida 279) Free from the constraints of time, human consciousness is rather fluid and unstable which can hardly be regulated through reason and intellect. It is free and endless, and so comparable with a free flow stream, which runs unchecked on its own will. Atwood’s *Surfacing*, being a narrative of stream of consciousness technique, is never fixed and static as regards human consciousness; rather it is so fast and dynamic that its intensity and swiftness goes beyond the control of human reach resulting in many disorganized thoughts and actions, which often come in disjointed form in several occasions of the narrative.

Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* is a story of a woman who, born and grown up in Toronto, Northern Quebec, is in quest of her lost father throughout the narrative, which also leads her to the quest of her place and identity through mental dilemmas, situational ironies and associative leaps. Unable to bear the hard and stark reality that she had to undergo forced abortion much against her wishes, she invents for herself a different reality towards an animalistic stage after having been driven and overtaken by past painful experiences. The narration moves on with the mingling of past, present and future. We learn her past through flashbacks and memories when the narrative starts with her search for her lost father in the company of her lover Joe and young couple David and Anna, the reader could hardly make any sense of conflicting ideas related to the narrator’s past life which are brought into surface only through memories and flashbacks by which the reader comes to know most of the events occurred in the narrator’s life. How she came into wedlock with her past lover; how she was forbidden by circumstances to return her parental home after marriage and keep her pregnancy hidden from her parents and how she was forced to abort her impregnated child, get revelation only through memories and flashbacks, which come to her unpremeditated in fragments instead of logical sequence.

When the action of the story unfolds, the unnamed protagonist’s life has already passed through many bitter experiences of the past which we come to know only through memories and flashbacks when the story progresses. We are supplied with information about the narrator’s

childhood and her growth, her parents and her husband through fragmentary details and these fragmentary details turn into synthetic wholeness only when the narrative reaches at the verge of ending, there is hardly any shadow of ignorance left and the narrator's mind is delivered from constraints of past experiences and in the same light of knowledge readers are also liberated from the web of ignorance. The narrator has already lost her parents and is separated from her husband who has driven her to kill her unborn child. The news of the narrator's father's sudden disappearance, which later proves to be his death, forces her to visit her parental home where she spent her childhood, with her friends David and Anna, a married couple and her childhood friend Joe who, being her suitor, seeks her favour. However, the narrator does not feel the same intensity of passion as Joe feels for her due to her past experience of estrangement with her husband, which is also aggravated more by her observation of David-Anna relationship. Though David and Anna, the narrator's friends, are husband and wife in relation, they do not lead a happy conjugal life as the latter is not properly treated by the former. This relation indicates the dark side of marriage. The narrator herself is a victim of the institution of marriage. These observations and the reflections of the narrator's past memory play havoc upon the narrator's mind and she sinks into deep despair. She undergoes an unpleasant and disturbing mind. Her insensitiveness for her present lover Joe grows gradually. The narrator with her disturbed mind moves to her parents' cabin, which is situated in a small island in the middle of a vast lake adjoining a town, after her failure to find out any information about her father's disappearance in her place of childhood. When the narrator with her friends arrives at the place of her parents' cabin, she tries to trace out the clue of her father's disappearance. She first gets in touch with a stack of papers, which reveal strange drawings made by her father with what come to light to be random words or letters with illegible handwriting resulting in generating her worries and anxieties over her father's nearby presence and his probable madness. However, the narrator soon discovers that her revelation of strange drawings is not an output of insane brain but they may be tracings of old rock paintings on which her father had been doing research for long time. This revelation calms her to some extent but forces her to visit the site of paintings where they are supposed to be existing but the narrator is disappointed as she finds herself standing there empty-handed. She however, does not surrender herself to circumstances and continues her

searching which finally leads her to a location below the water taken into her consideration to be another possible location of painting that might have changed due to change of water level in due course of time. Canoeing to the place situated somewhere below the water she fixes her mind to dive down into it. But this diving again disappoints her as her finding proves something else instead of her father's rock painting as she is confronted with a hard realization of her aborted child that comes to pass into her memory as a flashback when she is reminded of her brother's nearly drowning incident happened somewhere in the past before her birth. This realization along with the discovery of her father's death reported by some fishermen few days later breaks her completely down and leads her to animalistic stage.

Past memories that give rise to pain and suffering can hardly be erased from human mind. Painful memories are more fresh than sweet memories and cause pain haunting from time to time, though man tries to the best of his ability to escape such memories through repression which can hardly bring any positive result to the mind as a repressed mind cannot be a healthy mind and a mind when repressed much may have chances to be prone to mental disorder impacting a man's healthy and daily activities. "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger tips, betrayal oozes out of him at every pore." (Freud 69) Here is evident that desires, which are unconscious in the form of repression, seek an outlet in order to come into surface whenever situations arise. Such happenings are unavoidable and happen in much disorganized manner, one may call it 'phenomena' or 'Freudian Slip' or 'Parapraxis' in modern psychology. The narrator in Atwood's *Surfacing* is the victim of 'Freudian Slip' or 'Parapraxis'. She is always surrounded with embittered past memories which after being long repressed, come to the fore occasionally disturbing her present course of action and the narration finds herself in the face of eternal dilemma and question of marriage, motherhood and man-woman relationship.

The pain of isolation and alienation due to feelings of long estrangement from parents and betrayal from husband often gets linked with external objects in the narrative when the narrator along with her company in search of her lost father comes across "three stuffed moose" clad in human clothes, she describes them as a father moose, a mother moose and a little boy moose but

overlooks a little girl moose on the roof until it is indicated to her. She can only notice the father-mother-son constellation but hardly can see the attachment of the daughter into this constellation resulting in her overlook of the daughter from the scene. This sense of loneliness and apartness still gets some association in many parts of this narrative and comes in broken images. In the same chapter where the incident of “three stuffed moose” dressed in human attire occurs, another such example of occurrence takes place at the end when the narrator moves to the past in her description of the present, the same sense of separation again revisits: “At intervals the old road arises us, it was dirt, full of bumps and patholes...”(Atwood 10) Calling up a family that once travelled on this road, the narrator addresses the family as ‘they’, only to exclude herself: “That won’t work. I can’t call them “they” as if they were somebody else’s family: I have to keep myself from telling that story”. (Atwood 12) These switches bring home the narrator’s present position of aloofness and present the internal drama of tension and conflicts in the novel. Such occurrences often checked and corrected by the narrator, still come and interfere in her present speech and action: “I have to be more careful about my memories. I have to be sure that they’re my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: If the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi...” (Atwood 70)

In search of her lost father, the narrator comes across some of her father’s paper drawings. Then, in search of the originals, she instead found her father’s drowned dead body and her search for her lost father ultimately comes to an end with the hard reality of death. The image of her dead father corresponds to her brother who was at the verge of drowning and stirs her with a sudden shock and realization when the image of nearly drowned brother serves as a substitute for memory of her aborted fetus. The veil of ignorance she has been wearing since then is removed by the sudden blow of hard reality and she comes to the realization that neither she had been a wife nor she had a baby but instead of a wife she had been a mistress and instead of a baby she had an abortion. Through flashbacks and memories, the narrator makes a slow journey from the state of ignorance to the state of knowledge and she reaches to the ground reality as soon as she

comes to know that the relation which she imaginatively believed to be true and pure, was in reality an affair with a married man who was her lover and not her husband and she was his mistress and not his wife. With this painful realization later aggravated by the sudden news of her father's death, the narrator is taken aback, goes to the animalistic stage, and begins to dislike human company. However, the narrator soon sets herself free from her psychotic state to the natural state of womanhood when the state of stress and tension lasts no longer to pain her. "Freud believed that regardless of the consequences, the release of the repressed urges and memories does more good than harm, resulting in a new balance and distribution of psychic energy". (Martin) The narrator who once being victim of repressed memories undergoes a radical change from emotional numbness to new life and energy that generate trust and love to Joe, her present lover to whom earlier she felt no emotion due to haunting painful memories of her past relation with her husband and forced abortion as once confessed by her, "Perhaps that was a what he liked about me...what impressed him, cool he called it, was the way I took off my cloths and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion." (Atwood 24) Joe once had been "merely an object in the bed, like a sack or a large turnip" to the narrator and the relation she sought with him was nothing but physical necessity which the narrator had to bear, "Everything I value about him seems to be physical; the rest is unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous." (Atwood 54) Now Joe appears to her to be trustworthy. When she catches a glance of Joe hidden in the woods the latter is looking for her on his revisit to the island and the novel ends with the future possibility of her love revival.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* picturizes the mental condition of its protagonist without following any certain boundary of time and action which is evident from the very beginning when the narrative just unfolds its action with the description of the narrator's initial journey with her friends: "I can't believe I'm in the road again, twisting along...that's success." (Atwood 5) The narrator's memories of growth, of her parents and of her brother, of her husband and of her separation from all of them appear through flashbacks. The narrative develops with the blend of past, present and future and unfolds through fragmentary details, which find wholeness of sense only when the narrator's repressed feelings and emotions come to the surface and this



surfacing is also suggestive to the theme and the title of the story. The novel, with denial of conventional mode of narratology where cohesiveness of time and action along with external details is preferred to disintegrated time and action shifting from past to present and vice versa in non-linearity of form, is postmodern in tone and spirit. The novel touches almost all postmodern literary devices through its employment of stream of consciousness technique. It ranges from “eclecticism” (Traditional concept of infusing elements and making it single entity from different parts) and “montage” (Side by side placement of broken parts in order to produce a creative wholeness) to “neo-scepticism” (Resistance against anything which deems to be true) and “anti-rationalism” (Resistance against anything which is the result of rationalistic bent of mind). Moving away from eclecticism and montage, which was a modernist outlook, the novel is a postmodern narrative through the employment of neo-scepticism and ant-rationalism with which postmodernism is basically defined. The novel presents a full view of devices and techniques employed in postmodern literature and hence it truly comes into the category of postmodern novel where the way in which the stream of consciousness technique is employed is truly an achievement in itself.

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