Aesthetizing Trauma: The Politics of Narration in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Surfacing’

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Abstract:
The field of trauma literature has received critical attention from Freudian and Lacanian perspectives in works of theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman. Understanding trauma in fictions, poetry, short stories and plays under the lens of socio-cultural framework has also remained under discussion. Comparative approach for in-depth understanding of trauma in works of literature has been carried out to explain the formation of cultural identities. This paper endeavours to present how experience of trauma becomes symbolic expression through a critical reading of Margaret Atwood’s ‘Surfacing’. Another aim of this paper is to analyze the author’s approach in representing multiplicity of aesthetic emotions through the protagonist’s voice of narration. The methodology is to focus on the theoretical premises on narrative structures given by Gerard Genette in ‘Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method’ and by Roland Barthes in ‘An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative’ to comprehend the politics of narration in ‘Surfacing’. A critical study of the narrative technique of ‘Surfacing’ would reveal how language in symbolic ways operates in representing surplus emotions which aesthetically empowers the novel. This paper seeks to elaborate that narration of trauma emotions can be achieved through metaphorical language.

Keywords: Trauma Fiction, Trauma Emotions Narrative Structure, Symbolic Expression.

“The rejection of narration and recovery and the one-sided focus on the crises caused by trauma is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, theorizations with too narrow an emphasis on how trauma disrupts and hinders narration risk overlooking the fact that trauma also has a strong tendency to produce narration” (Schonfelder 32-33).

Margaret Atwood in her novel, ‘Surfacing’, presents an account of trauma voiced by an unnamed female protagonist. Along with her boyfriend, Joe, and a married couple, David and Anna, she sets out to her village in North Quebec in search of her missing father. Although, David and Joe go to the trip with their agenda of shooting a film, “Random Samples”, as they remain oblivious to the feelings of the women in the novel. In ‘Surfacing’ the narrative function of the author is to provide a testimony of traumatic emotions of the central female character by making her the narrator who falls prey to her past. Atwood adopts a first person narrative strategy to illustrate the direct representation of overpowering emotions in the protagonist, related to guilt and pain as a confession to the readers. Such style of storytelling allows readers to get access to the thought process and characteristics of the protagonist in a direct manner. In her seminal essay, ‘Narrative Discourse’, Gerard Genette expounded on the concept of internal focalization which caters to the restricted level of narration from the point-of-view of the central character “where the central character is limited absolutely to and strictly inferred from his focal position alone” (Genette 193). In such narrative structure, the readers stay as passive observers because the narrator is in constant performance of representing emotions and
delivering information. But such structure becomes justified in the genre of trauma fiction because the inner tragedy faced by the victims of trauma can only be recounted truly from the perspective of the victim as a narrator.

Cathy Caruth in ‘Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History’ and Anne Whitehead in ‘Trauma Fiction’ have elaborated upon memory of trauma and how it creates the fabric of narration. In trauma fictions the narrative layout is always structured by the “paradox of the incommensurability and impossibility of language and representation in relation to trauma, on the one hand, and the desperate need for a means of expression, on the other” (Wiel 2). The narrative structure of trauma fictions is disjointed due to formulaic flashbacks and the narrators’ approach in articulating the painful memories or episodes of trauma in complex ways through metaphors. Christa Schonfelder in her book titled, ‘Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction,’ has asserted that there has been a debate on understanding the relation between narrative structure and expression of trauma emotions because such emotions represent a hindrance in narration.

The ambivalence between the need for expression of emotions and a representation of failure at expression through language justify a homologous bond between such narrative formats with psychic experience of trauma. In ‘Surfacing’, the tension between the desire to express traumatic emotions and arduous search for appropriate words in communicating the narrator’s perspective by the author gives rise to a conglomeration of varying metaphors in the narrative. The narrative takes refuge in symbolic expression through metaphors to narrate the female protagonist’s chaotic and painful state of mind. Her search for her father starts with a search for her past from the time she arrived at her village. The novel progresses through her flashing memories from her childhood, her divorce and how she abandoned her child and husband which introduces the readers with her “unpardonable sin” (Atwood 32), a constant guilt surfacing within her.

The narration talks about her alienation from herself as well as the overpowering emotions of pain which invades her mind and somatic realm. In the first part of the novel, Atwood reveals the character’s chief guilt which is located at the centre of her psychic zone, spreading gradually and taking control over her. The narrator comes under an illusion that she had an abortion with her art professor after seeing her father’s dead body in the lake which she confuses with a dead child. Through the metaphor of ‘Siamese twin’, the narrator encodes the onus of traumatic experience which is located at the centre of her experience. “A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget” (57). The psychic experience of pain infiltrates her somatic realm as a memory which was repressed but returns sporadically in the novel during the period of quest for her missing father in the village.

In the process of understanding the narrative framework, there are stages related to the understanding of the way in which a story unfolds through language and events. Choice of words by the protagonist of ‘Surfacing’ to express her grief and guilt points towards her actions and course of events. According to Roland Barthes, “the goal is to reconstruct the syntax of human behaviour as exemplified in narrative, to trace the succession of “choices” (Barthes 252-253) which implicitly structures the content and form of a novel. In the beginning of the novel, when the narrator reaches the lake which has been a symbol of repentance and death, she thinks to herself – “but they’ve cheated, we’re here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can’t really get here unless I’ve suffered; as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit” (Atwood 14). This arrangement of words
states the narrator’s deliberate wish to suffer, to repent for her past mistakes which signal her “choices” in the next sections of the novel. This sentence makes it evident that she has already started suffering and walking towards a path of painful redemption.

The emotion of guilt and a need for redemption in the narrator start consuming her since the onset of the narrative, in harmony with her quest for her disappeared father. Her idea of redemption sets in from the moment she beholds the lake in her village. Every time she dives in the lake, physical space of the lake drives her mind to the sentiment of redemption. Topography of the lake becomes a symbol of death and the concept of death can be connected to the idea of liberation and redemption. In the last section of the novel, when the narrator succumbs to her guilt and becomes hysterical, she imagines that she is undergoing redemption by detaching herself from her false body in the lake. The topography of the lake becomes a symbol of physical and psychic death for the narrator. In this novel, the lake acts as a liminal space operating as a place of quest for her father and a quest for her redemption. Atwood’s symbolic representation of the protagonist’s traumatic past and its damaging effects on her through continuous metaphors enriches the aesthetic quotient of the narrative as readers take time to deduce the metaphoric expression of a traumatic mind and overlapping waves of emotions. “From the lake a fish jumps/ An idea of a fish jumps/ A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting stone” (243) gestures towards pauses in her mind and her inability to structure her thoughts in elaborate language.

In understanding the politics of narrative structure of ‘Surfacing’, it is significant to focus on the linguistic dimension which not only shapes the content but also the form of the novel. “To understand a narrative is not only to follow the unfolding of the story but also to recognize in it a number of strata,” to project the horizontal con-catenations of the narrative onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read a narrative (or listen to it) is not only to pass from one word to the next, but also from one level to the next” (Barthes 243). As per the analogy of “horizontal axis” of meaning formation, the substitution of words in succession gives rise to the “vertical axis” which is an amalgamation of events, forming the tapestry of a novel. “Narrative thus appears as a succession of tightly interlocking mediate and immediate elements; dystaxy initiates a “horizontal” reading, while integration superimposes on it a “vertical” reading” (270). “A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there’s less of you” (Atwood 49) can be interpreted as a meaningful sentence structure from the angle of “horizontal reading” and from the angle of “vertical reading”, the sentence becomes a code for a probable future action to be performed by the narrator, thereby structuring the course of events in the novel. Atwood represents the narrator’s engulfing hysteria through her voice. The narrator compares her laughter with the sound of a mouse or bird about to be killed at the stage of her hysteria. Atwood represents indeterminacy in her voice through dialogic questions due to failure of meaning formation from her own thoughts and actions. She suffers from a gradual loss of identity and loss of communicative capabilities as well as a loss of hunger. The three losses are symptomatic of the hysteria she faces by surrendering to her guilt laden past.

In the first part of the narrative, Atwood shows her practical and cold hearted skill in catching a fish as she takes out a frog and attaches it to the fishing bait. In the second part, David catches a fish but she rejects it as a meal. Rejection of consuming flesh is symbolic to the rejection of her body. In the third part or the final section of the narrative, her complete dissociation from her body began after she imagined herself to be redeemed as she leaves her clothes and comes naked out of the lake. From denying eating fish and processed foods of tin cans, she detached herself from all sorts of food. She could feel hunger at the onset of her madness but gradually she forbids herself from eating as she
forbids herself from clothing. Her eating disorder at the middle of the novel can be perceived as a symptom of her stress resulting from past experiences. Due to her inability to deal with the powerful emotions of pain, she physically secludes herself from Joe, David and Anna. But at the end of the novel, she comes out of her hysteria and illusions as she allows herself to trust Joe who comes searching for her and decides to go with him. “To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions” (251), speaks of her decision of coming out from the manacles of her past for which she has repented.

**Conclusion:** Unravelling the symbolic expression of the narrator’s traumatic emotions involves an understanding of the politics of narration. Margaret Atwood’s expression of the narrator’s experience of terrifying emotions through motifs of trauma aesthetically enriches the narration. The oeuvre of trauma narrations is rooted in expressing the impossibility and failure of expression among the victims but symbolic expression of overwhelming trauma emotions develop the aesthetics of narration. Atwood overcomes the tension between narration and failure of narration by giving voice to the protagonist, enabling her to present her story which can be perceived as a therapeutic healing process from her past.

**References**


