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Role of Memory in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract:

Memory often acts as a narrative device, providing the backdrop for works of fiction. Flashback reveals the interpretation and recollection of the past, narrated through selective episodes. However even first person narrations can at times be unreliable as in the case of a faulty memory, as evident in the skillful use of the unreliable narrator that writers like Henry James attempted. The narrator may knowingly or unknowingly distort or suppress and alter memories which may, in turn, shift the course of a narrative. Trauma is unique mode of remembering, which reveals itself in spite of these altered narratives through its delayed response. The paper attempts to study the depiction of the trauma of aging in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* and the trauma of suppression in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* by portraying memory as an agent of both remembering and forgetting.

Keywords: Memory, Aging, Trauma , Nostalgia and Forgetting , Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood

Memory is concerned with holding up past and present experiences for comparison: it enables the speaker to chart an ongoing process of alteration, both in the landscape before him and within himself

Anne Whitehead in *Memory*

Memory studies are a field that has seen a growing interest in recent years. The post world war scenario saw holocaust testimonies, collective memory and post-traumatic stress disorder deliberations increase. Individual recollections and trauma narratives also began to be studied. It is against this background that around the world there was an upsurge of interest across disciplines in not merely remembrances, but also about forgetting. Sigmund Freud's expression of trauma as a state of return to the past, a revisit to a memory which lay in the unconscious layer was altered by trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth. Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* saw trauma as an experience rooted in the present which constituted not in recalling the past, but instead revealed the thereto hidden, forgotten or buried moment or episode reflecting the bewilderment and shock of the victim. Trauma, according to Caruth, is a painful incident that stays outside the mind's grasp. It essentially is a delayed response and the intensity of the return of the true implications of the remembrance lie in its latency.

The trigger point of an associative memory proves to churn the mind into a vortex or a whirlpool of memories. The remembrances conjoin with memory gaps and provide the tapestry of the unknown but charged with a terror that is unexplained.

Also important was the debate around the 'False Memory Syndrome' (FMS) in the 1990s about "long repressed and buried memories" and the notion that "... it hinges on remembering a moment of forgetting". It also deliberated whether the 'truth value of a memory be judged by its relation to a past event, or by its meaning in the present for an individual?' (Whitehead, Intro. 6). The fragility of memory and identity was also the centre of debate.

Strains of trauma are usually seen to be inherently problematizing the lives of the aged and the young alike in the fractured ethos represented in works like *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence and *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. Both the novels reveal the past through nostalgic memories. However, the alienation and the skepticism with which that the protagonists view the present is understood only when the trigger of a memory association makes them sort their lives by finally revisiting their pasts and reordering the narratives and finally forgiving themselves and others. It is nostalgia for the past and the trauma of the death of a son along with the trauma of aging that Hagar Shipley *The Stone Angel* confronts. Similarly, Atwood has her protagonist of *Surfacing* traumatized with guilt for aborting her child and suppressing the memory and replacing it with an alternative narrative.

In *The Stone Angel*, Laurence tackles memory through the aged Hagar Shipley and her reminiscences. It tells the story of Hagar coming to terms with her past and reconciling with the present. Hagar is 90 year old and is unwilling to admit that her life now is filled with nostalgic memories. The memories have a prosthetic effect as she prefers to negotiate with the past rather than indulge herself with the present. "Now I am rampant with memory. I don't often indulge in this, or not so often, anyway. Some people will tell you that the old live in the past—that's nonsense" confesses Hagar. (1964 5).

Her memories surprisingly are projected in a linear, sequential and chronological manner. It appears in total contrast to the present which reflects the confused and battered life she's led. Hagar is impatient with her failing health especially with her inability to walk with the confidence she would prefer to as her movements are restricted by arthritis. She clings on to the past, remembering her happier childhood and her growing up in the fictional town of Manawaka. The novel traces Hagar's story from a six year old to her infirm days in the nursing home where she awaits her end.

Hagar is a proud woman who has lived her life on her own terms. Her remembrances reveal her rebellious nature, her marriage with Bram whom her father did not approve of, her late and bitter realization of the character of her husband who was merely a squanderer, and her sense of independence that makes her leave Manawaka to become the housekeeper of Mr. Oatley. The deaths of Bram and of John, her favorite son, actually leaves her enslaved her to her memories. In the course of the narrative, there are instances when Hagar is under the

delusion that both Bram and John are alive. It is only in the final chapter that she frees herself from those delusions “Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh, my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years.”(1964292)

Her inability to recognize her elder and surviving son, Marvin’s concern for her is clouded with her distrust of Marvin and his wife, Doris, both who she believes see her as a burden. She dislikes Doris and believes they want her to be shifted to the nursing home and later while at the nursing home she gathers that they were unable to attend her granddaughter’s wedding. “Then all at once I understand, and know, too why Doris never mentioned it. They have to wait and see what happens here. How inconvenient I am proving for them. Will it be soon? That’s what they all are asking themselves. I’m upsetting all their plans. That’s what it is to them—an inconvenience.” Forgetting becomes problematic to Hagar. Her age is a factor that remains to her an irritant. She portrays the helplessness of the aging on their inability to remember and the jubilation when finally they are able to.

I can’t recall her name. Wong. That’s her last name. If I could think of her first name, I could call out to her. How else can I address her? “Miss Wong” sounds foolish, coming from someone my age. I can’t say “my dear”—too obviously false. Young lady? Girl? You? Hey, you--how rude. Sandra. Her name is Sandra. (1964 299)

The Stone Angel in the cemetery is representative of the infringement of the past onto the present. Hagar’s decision to escape from being admitted into the nursing home and hide in a deserted cannery starts of the beginning of her self-realization. The atmosphere of the past lingers on in the description of the landscape of Manawaka, the house where she lives, the deserted cannery by the sea shore and finally in the nursing home that provides a relief from the pain of living for both the aged and the young.

It is the yoking of memory to the narrative structure that lends credibility to the sense of alienation of the aged and the dependency of the infirm and to seek as in a quest a resolution of one’s life looked at in retrospect. Her failing health and isolation due to aging and her inability to accept her dependency acts as a trigger to make her run away from her home. This also acts as a trigger for other memories to haunt her and slowly make her realize the hallucination, pain and illness continue to cloud her. All Hagar has is her pride and just a handful of memories. This slow realization of her inability to let go of her pride makes her struggle with herself and finally reconcile her past to the present.

On the other hand, Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* has an unnamed protagonist who is young. She also is the narrator who shares her observations, her reflections, and her emotional breakdown through the narrative. She begins the narrative by describing the journey she undertakes in search of her missing father. Her boyfriend, Joe and a couple, David and Anna are with her. Her return to the place where she stayed when she was a child

becomes a trigger for unleashing a flood of images from the past. The narrative reveals, unlike for Hagar, her alienation right from the beginning where she states "...it doesn't seem right, either the three of them are in the whole place or I am."(1972 4).

Her awareness of her sense of 'unbelonging' heightens as the inability to bond with the rest of the team is evident as the narrative progresses. They are busy planning to film a collage of events and reordering them into a unique film titled *Random Samples*. She, however, is preoccupied with the changes that have occurred since she left. "Nothing is the same, I don't know the way anymore."(1972 8). Various images both from the past and present merge to make the narrative.

At times the past has a prenatal sensitivity as the narrator once remarks on witnessing the drowning of her brother. "It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar" (197228). Later, she contradicts herself when she talks about her brother thus –"After my brother started going to school in that winter he told me it was called the Mass ..." (1972 52).

She shares her impression of her marriage and remarks, "That was the feeling I had all the time I was married; in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom." (1972 45). Also, she confesses her pain on being separated from her baby:

"I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget." (1972 45)

As the story unfolds, the reticence in the narrator towards building relationships is attributed to her divorce from her husband who has the custody of her son. But in contrast is her ability to communicate with herself as she meanders from the present to the past especially when she dives into the lake. It is only towards the end of the narrative that we realize that her past was a false memory and the truth was a different narrative. "It formed again in my head: at first I thought it was my drowned brother, hair floating around the face, image I'd kept from before i was born; but it couldn't be him, he had not drowned at all, he was elsewhere. Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise."(1972 144)

The shock of confronting the past and the buried truth comes in the guise of a quest. The quest in search of her father symbolized a search within herself too. The story about her marriage and the baby fade into oblivion as she confronts a suppressed image of her aborted foetus.

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air.....Whatever it is, part

of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it. (1972 144)

The pain of aborting a child, the guilt and the inability to accept herself makes the narrator delude herself with a false memory. She acknowledges her manipulating of her memories thus --"I needed a different version..... A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I've lived in it till now."(1972 145).

On confronting the truth, she prefers to disintegrate into the primordial self and escape into the wild. Her lack of courage is in total contrast to Hagar whose escape is premeditated and a planned one. As truth surfaces, the unnamed narrator succumbs to her identity of a girl brought up to live in harmony with nature. Her escape coincides with her emotional breakdown and it is only as she purges her guilt and admits the futility of the subterfuge, that she is finally able to confront the past and to resolve her future. The exorcism is over.

Hagar compromises with her pride while at the nursing home, when she realizes there is joy in giving. In *Surfacing*, the narrator purges her bondages of the past in isolation realizing the happiness of bonds and relationships. Memory acts as a balm for Hagar while it becomes a farce in *Surfacing*. *The Stone Angel* has nostalgia while *Surfacing* has suppression of the past or rather a distortion of the past.

The plight of both the aged and infirm as well as the traumatic young woman is crafted with ease using memory as a pliant narrative tool in the accomplished hands of both Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood. The character of Hagar evolves to present a humane insight to the skepticism of the present and a flavour for the past that the aged seem to nurse. The narrator in *Surfacing* also represents any woman who may unconsciously resort to cling to a false memory in order to forget a traumatic episode. Forgetting is also a memory – a gap that engulfs. The fusion of the past and the present in the narratives exhibits a totality of summing up the lives of the central characters. The readers have known them as much as the narrators know themselves. Therein lay the successful use of memory as a narrative device in the novels.

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