

# Existential Neurosis: A Critique of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972)

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## **Abstract**

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) is an early novel that established Atwood as a great literary writer. The novel has been researched with reference to themes like quest, death, mortality, survival, woman hero, trauma, and madness, but to date, themes of neurosis and existential tropes have not been the focus. Taking the similarities between Karen Horney's concept of the neurotic detached personality and Salvatore R. Maddi's notion of premorbid personality, this article analyses the phenomenon of existential neurosis in *Surfacing*. It answers the following questions: a) How does a disturbed childhood lead to a neurotic personality? and b) How does neurosis affect the identity and existence of the protagonist in a selected novel? This article primarily draws upon Horney's theory of neurosis and Maddi's scholarship on existential neurosis.

**Keywords:** Neurosis, inner conflict, identity, premorbidity

## **Introduction**

Canadian author Margaret Atwood has positioned herself as an astute observer and analyst of the female self and psyche. In her writings, she portrays women as potential survivors who face various difficulties in gaining their identities in patriarchal societies; as Ellen McWilliams says, "Atwood's early novels (that is, those of the 1960s and 1970s) evince a genuine struggle with identities and are far removed from the current confidence of Canadian literature."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, many of her novels, such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and *Alias Grace* (1996), share an overarching theme of inconspicuous mental suffering of their female protagonists. Regarding *Surfacing*, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer remarks that it is "a remarkable, and remarkably misunderstandable book,"<sup>2</sup> as readers and researchers often only focus on the physical manifestation of psychic disturbances in the protagonist<sup>3</sup> (which is idiosyncratic, and the character would appear mad, much as Bertha

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen McWilliams, *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, "It Is Time That Separates Us": Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*", *The Centennial Review*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1974), p. 319.

<sup>3</sup> Erinc Özdemir, "Power, Madness, And Gender Identity In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: A Feminist Reading", *English Studies*, vol. 84, no. 1 (2003), pp. 57–79; Gönül Bakay, "Examining Female Madness in Atwood's *Surfacing*: Madness or Awakening?", in *'And Then the Monsters Come Out': Madness, Language and Power*, ed. Fiona Ann Papps (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 65–73; S. Pinar Kayacan, "An Analysis of the Laingian Concept of Madness in Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" (Master's Thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2002). At: <https://open.metu.edu.tr/handle/11511/12943>.

Mason is in *Jane Eyre*) and less on the causal reasons (context) and the process of those manifestations. This study focuses on the interior process of the psyche in its scrutiny of the physical manifestation of neurosis in the novel. Further, Fiona Tolan noted that *Surfacing* is a novel that deals with a crucial theme of repressed childhood trauma.<sup>4</sup> However, we go beyond trauma studies and explore the teleological effects of disturbed childhood as neurosis.

This article analyses Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from a psychosocial perspective. It focuses on the psychological process of neurotic personality formation of the protagonist and elaborates on the social experiences that result in her neurotic condition. It employs Karen Horney's idea of neurosis and Salvatore R. Maddi's notion of "existential neurosis" to scrutinise the text. While studies exist on the identity and gender aspects of the novel, a psychosocial approach to probe the fiction from a neurosis perspective remains a gap this study will fill. As a psychosocial study, it examines certain experiences of the protagonist and their impact on her psyche alongside a brief commentary on the importance of familial environment and healthy parental upbringing. As Horney's and Maddi's theories give importance to the social surroundings in neurosis, they prove to be very relevant for the current purpose.

Neurosis is a mental disturbance caused by socio-cultural or accidental traumatic factors resulting in the inability of a person to adapt to one's environment and to harmonise one's mental state. It was first introduced by Scottish doctor William Cullen in 1769 to refer to the disorder of nerves and symptoms that did not have a physical explanation. It is interesting to note that prior to the late twentieth century, the term used was "hysteria", which was specifically associated with diseases related to wombs or females in general.<sup>5</sup> Jean-Martin Charcot, a French neurologist, believed that the origin point of hysteria was a woman's ovary, which results in neurological damage with symptoms such as motor paralysis, sensory losses, convulsions, and amnesia. Charcot called this phenomenon "the Great Neurosis."<sup>6</sup> It was an Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud, and his associate Joseph Breuer who provided some explanation for such nervous disorders. They differentiated between the disorders of the body and those of the psyche. While Freud reasoned the uncontrollable libidinal instincts of the Id, which points toward a weak ego, as the primary cause of neurosis, the German psychoanalyst Horney maintained sociocultural factors as the primary causes of neurosis. She writes, "neurosis is due not simply to the quantity of suppression of one or the other instinctual drives, but rather to difficulties caused by the conflicting character of the demands which a culture

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<sup>4</sup> Fiona Tolan, "The Psychoanalytic Theme in Margaret Atwood's Fiction: A Response to Burkhard Niederhoff", *Connotations*, vol. 19 (2009), pp. 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> During the nineteenth century "female hysteria" was used to imply an anomaly in female sexual behaviour, and, in extreme cases, female madness. Thus, neurosis came into existence to define vague nervous disorders, specifically in the female body. We criticize this vague link between neurosis and the female sex. However, this phenomenon delineates that the patriarch and medical sciences prior to the twentieth century, which engaged in blaming and ostracizing the female body instead of exposing the social oppression that was causing women's psychosomatic disturbances. This also supports the idea that neurosis results from patriarchal social circumstances distorting the psychological balance of the protagonist in Atwood's novel. See Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Harold Merskey and Paul Potter, "The Womb Lay Still in Ancient Egypt", *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 154, no. 6 (1989), pp. 751–53.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Herman refutes Charcot's linking of neurosis and the female sex. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Hachette, 2015), p. 11.

imposes on its individuals.”<sup>7</sup> Her concept of neurosis is widely accepted and most relevant to the purpose of this article, as she gave a psychosocial approach to her theory of neurosis, giving due importance to childhood experiences. Extending the concept of neurosis, American psychoanalyst, Maddi, explores it as an existential trope and introduces his idea of existential neurosis as employed in this study.

The article first defines its theoretical approach and then analyses the text in two sections. While the first section explores the protagonist’s childhood experiences and her resultant vulnerable personality, the second section elaborates on the teleological aspects of her vulnerable personality in the form of existential neurosis. The study primarily answers two questions: a) How does a disturbed childhood lead to a neurotic personality in the novel? and b) How does neurosis affect the identity and existence of the protagonist in a selected novel?

### Theoretical Framework

Karen Horney’s approach to neurosis is based on a maladjusted personality in which inner (psychological) conflicts give rise to other external conflicts and affect the personality of a person. She believes maladjusted personalities are formed by an imbalance among three trends or attitudes in every individual: moving towards people, moving against people, and moving away from people. Further, a neurotic adherence to any one of these trends results in three types of neurotic personalities, namely compliant, aggressive, and detached, respectively. Bernard Jay Paris argued that all these trends in unison help people “to overcome feelings of being unsafe, unloved, in a potentially hostile world.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, harmony of attitudes results in a healthy mental personality. On the contrary, a distressing environment in childhood or any traumatic incident can cause disturbance in this psychological balance, resulting in neurotic adherence to one of the attitudes and affecting a person’s identity. On the other hand, Maddi explains the “ideal personality” as a combination of social, biological, and psychological expressions. In this structure, the lack of psychological expression leads to a “premorbid” identity for a person, who then becomes a player of mere social and biological roles. He defines a premorbid person as one who “does not have available to him the generalizing, unifying, humanizing effect of psychological expression.”<sup>9</sup> Many of Atwood’s female protagonists can be observed living in this premorbid state, such as Elaine in *Cat’s Eye* (1988), Marian in *The Edible Woman* (1969), Grace in *Alias Grace* (1996), and the narrator in *Surfacing* (1972).

This article draws on the idea that since all three attitudes mentioned by Horney are part of a person’s psyche, a person with a premorbid personality exhibits similar manifestations to a “detached personality type” neurosis, leading to “existential neurosis.” Further, Maddi asserts that there are different premorbid personalities, though he does not specify them., as his focus was on existential neurosis. Thus, considering Horney’s and Maddi’s arguments, the following classifications of neurotic trends and premorbid personalities emerges: compliant premorbid

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Dietmar Meinel, “Introduction: A Cultural History of Neurosis, From Diagnostics to Poetics”, in *A Poetics of Neurosis: Narratives of Normalcy and Disorder in Cultural and Literary Texts*, eds Elena Furlanetto and Dietmar Meinel (Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2018), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Jay Paris, *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Salvatore R. Maddi, “The Existential Neurosis”, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, vol. 72, no. 4 (1967), p. 319.

personality, aggressive premorbid personality, and detached premorbid personality. The argument in this section emphasizes that these revamped trends include the elements of premorbidness and psychic disbalance among attitudes.

Maddi expresses that the occurrence of existential neurosis is dependent on the proneness of certain 'stresses' upon premorbid personality. He writes, "Premorbid personalities define predisposition to particular neurotic manifestations because they incorporate vulnerabilities to a particular kind of stress."<sup>10</sup> He mentions three kinds of stresses that attack the vulnerable psyche of a person with a premorbid identity and result in existential neurosis: a) death threat to oneself or someone close; b) gross disruption of social order; c) and self-confrontation with "the accumulated sense of failure in living deeply and committedly."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, in Horney's notion, any situation and condition against one's neurotic trend functions as stress for episodic neurotic manifestation. When a neurotic person is forced to deal with such situations, s/he faces severe phases of anxiety, confusion, and depression. The narrator in *Surfacing* is living with a detached premorbid personality (moving away from people trend), but she must confront her past to search for her lost father, which triggers her premorbidness into the deadly effects of existential neurosis. Maddi links this phenomenon with characters such as Meursault in *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus and Ivan Ilyich in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) by Leo Tolstoy. He defines existential neurosis as "the belief that one's life is meaningless by the effective tone of apathy and boredom, and by the absence of selectivity on actions."<sup>12</sup> Meaninglessness, chronic inability to believe in truth, boredom, and low to moderate activity levels are a few characteristics of existential neurosis. Michael F. Steger et al. further associate this meaninglessness with fear, anger, shame, and sadness.<sup>13</sup>

Horney discusses the formation of a dominant attitude due to unresolved inner conflict, and Maddi discusses the lack of psychological expression as the cause of a neurotic personality. However, both discussions show the commonality of a weak ego. Both Horney and Maddi gave importance to childhood experiences for developing one's personality, in which the development of the ego is crucial and gets affected due to disturbed circumstances, resulting in a weak ego.<sup>14</sup> Regarding ego growth during the early stages of life, Otto Fenichel writes, "The ego develops abilities with which it can observe, select, and organize stimuli and impulses: the functions of judgment and intelligence."<sup>15</sup> Inferentially, a neurotic's underdeveloped ego lacks judgment, resulting in chaotic decision-making, as noted in the behaviour of the protagonist of the selected novel. So, unresolved inner conflict between three attitudes, which provokes a neurotic trend, can result from a weak ego. In Maddi's model, the ideal personality combines social, biological, and psychological expression. Yet, if the psychological expression is not performed, the other two expressions cannot function independently. So, the psychological expression, which functions as a generalizing, unifying, and humanizing trait in personality, is also related to the ego as it also has the same function by balancing the demands of the id and superego. A weak ego affects an individual's biological and social expression. It represses

<sup>10</sup> Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 312.

<sup>11</sup> Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 313.

<sup>13</sup> Michael F. Steger et al., "The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life", *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 53, no. 1 (2006), pp. 80–93.

<sup>14</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and The Life Cycle* (USA: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 14.

undesirable events and experiences (an unconscious process). Such repression produces what Horney calls inner conflicts and the rest of the disturbances related to the psyche of a neurotic.

The issue of differences between existential neurosis and crisis also should be addressed. While existential crisis refers to a type of meaninglessness that leads to “an internal process of growth, during which the losses are adopted, and a relationship with a higher being is discovered,”<sup>16</sup> “existential neurosis” is a state when, due to the inability to cope with situations, a neurotic is not only unable to find meaning but, in certain cases, is even unaware of the fact that one’s life is meaningless. In extreme cases, the neurotic suffers from a type of psychological death; as Maddi writes, “The symptoms of the neurosis all point to a rather comprehensive psychological death, where there is no longer anguish or anger to remind the person that he is a person, and a very dissatisfied one at that.”<sup>17</sup> Viktor E. Frankl calls this phenomenon an “existential vacuum.”<sup>18</sup> The article employs this framework to analyse *Surfacing* from a psychoanalytic perspective.

### Formation of the Premorbid Identity in *Surfacing*

She does do harm; in fact, both her parents do harm by encouraging the idea that there is no evil in the world, which is in fact quite harmful to the central character. It’s an idealism gone mad, if you like. And I think that that can be just as harmful to someone as to encourage them to believe that there is nothing but evil. The mother doesn’t intend to do harm, but neither does the mother monster in *Lady Oracle*. She is not intentionally harmful, she is just harmful.<sup>19</sup>

In an interview, Atwood comments on the mother figure in *Surfacing*, emphasising the significance of domestic relationships between parents and children in her novels, such as *Cat’s Eye* (1988), *Lady Oracle* (1976), and *Surfacing* (1972). She observes that it is not conscious evil on the part of the parents, but also the lack of unified rearing, emotional passivity among family members, and the underdevelopment of an understanding of external social realities that problematizes the mental well-being of their children. In *Surfacing*, the roots of the narrator’s neurotic state are buried in her childhood. Atwood employs a stream-of-consciousness narrative device with an unreliable first-person narrator. The form serves two purposes: firstly, it lets the reader access the narrator’s psychic realm; secondly, the unreliability of narration indicates that the protagonist herself has started to believe in her often repeated lies about her fictitious marriage, husband, and child at the outset of the novel, which is a sign of a neurotic personality. How and why she became a neurotic is depicted via her reminiscences and memories in the novel. Here we scrutinize the narrator’s disturbed childhood that forms her ‘detached premorbid personality.’ We also address the importance of a positive environment during childhood and what adverse situations caused a disequilibrium in the narrator’s psyche.

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<sup>16</sup> Joana Butėnaitė-Switkiewicz, Jolanta Sondaite, and Antanas Mockus, “Components of Existential Crisis: A Theoretical Analysis”, *International Journal of Psychology: A Biopsychosocial Approach*, vol. 18 (2016), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Maddi, “The Existential Neurosis”, p. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (London: Rider, 2021 [1946]).

<sup>19</sup> Cathrine Martens, ““Mother-Figures in *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*”: An interview with Margaret Atwood”, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, vol. 16 (1984), pp.45-54.

The novel opens with the unnamed narrator's spatial and mental movement toward the repressed memories of her childhood. After nearly a decade, she is returning to her childhood home in northern Quebec along with her current boyfriend, Joe, and two married friends, Anna and David, to look for her mysteriously disappeared father. As she moves toward her childhood residence, the repressed memories of her past surge into her mind. The sign of a repressed past itself directly indicates her weak ego, and her movement toward that past represents her unconscious willingness to resolve inner conflicts and regain identity. The protagonist had extremely rational parents who believed only in the practicalities of life, thus ignoring their children's emotional and social needs. The parents are represented as 'detached' in the novel; they frequently resorted to voluntary breaks from city life or civilisation by taking refuge in the wilderness of Quebec. As rationalists, they renounced religion and aesthetic values. Her father considered religion as the illusion of reality and as a thing of distortion of perception without any significance in life; Christianity "was something he'd escaped from; he wished to protect us [his children] from its distortions."<sup>20</sup> Thus, following a fanatically utilitarian life, every activity of the narrator's childhood was strictly confined to serve some practical purpose; the parents did not converse with their children unless required, did not allow them to play with other children, nor let them attend Sunday school as it was based on biblical teachings. Such eccentric rearing at home created other difficulties for the narrator at her school, such as she used to be bullied by her peers and being treated as "socially retarded."<sup>21</sup>

This asocial upbringing detached from a unified social reality with emotions, values, dogmas, and deceit resulted in the narrator's distorted understanding of social reality. It limited her worldview to the bare minimum requirements of biological and social expressions (as Maddie suggested) throughout her adult life. The propensity for isolation and detachment from others was certainly imposed on the narrator's identity due to the damaging rearing by her parents. It is pertinent to note that the narrator's parents were already living with somewhat premorbid personalities, which was either inculcated through the socialisation process in the narrator's personality or was a resultant dissonance between the social demands (a different set of norms and codes) and her personalised values (the value that her parents inculcated in her). This is the reason why the narrator's adolescence was a difficult time for her. This argument is supported by Helga Ask et al.'s study on the intergenerational transmission of neuroticism in children.<sup>22</sup> The narrator's parents' utilitarian perception kept her from experiencing the outside world's social reality, resulting in her 'anxiety' of isolation,<sup>23</sup> which had developed since early childhood, making her 'the detached type.' Her unconscious resorts to the coping mechanism of 'moving away from people' to survive in society. In other words, she embodies a premorbid identity to fulfil society's social and biological roles at the cost of psychological disharmony.

Maddi suggests that the curtailment of psychological expression in life precipitates premorbidly. This curtailment is conspicuous in the narrator's underdeveloped faculty of

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (London: Virago Press, 2009), p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Helga Ask et al., "Intergenerational Transmission of Parental Neuroticism to Emotional Problems in 8-Year-Old Children: Genetic and Environmental Influences", *JCPP Advances*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2021).

<sup>23</sup> The three neurotic trends depend upon three types of 'basic anxiety' during childhood: helplessness, hostility, and isolation. An isolated and ignored child will use his/her loneliness as a coping mechanism as an adult. See Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

judgment, resulting in her many impulsive decisions to fill the unknown void of the psyche. In her early adulthood, the narrator falls in love with a middle-aged married man who dupes her into a treacherous relationship. This incident also marks the unconscious fulfilment of her neurotic need for a partner to gain the comfort and safety lacking in childhood. There are glimpses of the narrator's neurotic and wild attachment to her lover in the novel. She sought his validation in every act and aspect of her life; however, all she "had was the criticisms in red pencil he paperclipped to [her] my drawings. Cs and Ds, he was an idealist."<sup>24</sup> She assimilated her being with the ideologies of her lover, gradually crushing and repressing her own beliefs in the wild chase of so-called love and company. Instead of supporting her professional and personal preferences, the narrator's lover reproached her for the futility of her being a full-time woman artist. Owing to her fragmented self with inner doubts, confusions, and conflicts, the narrator lacked self-confidence; she could not take a stand for herself. This is what Maddi means by the dysfunction of the "unifying" effect, a lack of integration of aspects of one's experiences and identity.<sup>25</sup> The narrator's psyche failed to combine different elements of the self into a harmonious and coherent identity; thus, she became apathetic. As a result, she surrendered to her lover's demands and "went to design and did fabric patterns," leaving her love for sketching behind, and was unable to recognise her subordination.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, her disturbed upbringing during childhood, where there was no warmth, affection, intimacy, and love but rudeness, isolation, coldness, and remoteness, stunts what Maddi calls the "generalizing effect." This refers to the ability to discern one's experiences in a broader context, recognizing commonalities with others' experiences. It is the capacity to understand that one's struggles are not unique but shared by many, which can reduce feelings of isolation; the lack of this element accounts for premorbid personality in the protagonist's personality.

### Stresses Precipitating Existential Neurosis

The state of premorbid personality, in a way, refers to a weak and disturbed psychological condition, which requires some type of stress that turns a personality into an existential neurotic. In the novel, the narrator's very process of growing up forces her toward this unconscious state of detached premorbid personality. This section elaborates on how her premorbid personality leads to 'existential neurosis' through certain stresses and social situations in the novel.<sup>27</sup> Two types of stresses can be observed in the story: first, death/killing, and second, self-confrontation. The incident that functions as the first stress is the coerced abortion of the child inside the narrator's womb, which leads to the narrator's existentially neurotic personality. In the past, the narrator's married lover impregnated her but refused the responsibility of fatherhood. He coerced the narrator to have an abortion; as she describes in the novel, "he said I should do it, he made me do it.... He said it [the foetus] wasn't a person, only an animal."<sup>28</sup> He repeatedly emphasized the meaninglessness and insignificance of the foetus, and she eventually agrees to the abortion.

<sup>24</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 190.

<sup>25</sup> Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 319.

<sup>26</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Normal situations can be very stressful for premorbid persons since their psychic state is already disturbed. Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 312, says "the amount of stress necessary to precipitate a neurosis should depend upon the intensity of the vulnerability constituted by the pre-morbid characteristics."

<sup>28</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 185.

It was due to premorbidly that she could not judge the righteousness of her act. The lack of psychological unity distorted her faculty of what Maddi calls the “humanizing effect,” which is about recognizing one's own humanity and that of others. It involves empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the human condition, which fosters a more connected and meaningful existence. It was due to this deprivation of humanizing effect that she was confused about herself being guilty of killing/murdering her child for almost a decade. However, the faint realization of this guilt at the time of abortion stimulates “self-confrontation stress,” resulting in “the accumulated sense of failure in living deeply and committedly.”<sup>29</sup> After the abortion, this stress led her to get separated from her married lover and to move away from her guilt; however, constant unease, dissatisfaction, and dysphoria permeated her life for a long time as she had become existentially neurotic at that stage.

Maddi also points out that the lack of psychological expression hinders the full potential of social and biological expressions. It renders a person deprived of personal identity. A premorbid person focuses on fulfilling the minimum biological and social needs to survive in society by ignoring/repressing internal conflicts and maintaining an artificial sense of normalcy according to society. Brander comments, “The narrator represses the abortion and instead only remembers it as her failed marriage. In fact, the narrator has never been married but needs this lie in order to cope with her past.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, for almost a decade, the abortion is repressed and remains in the deeper spaces of her psyche. The protagonist is apathetic and purposeless in her decisions. She takes a job as a visual illustrator (not her interest) to maintain the normality society expects from her (social expression), and makes Joe her boyfriend satisfy her biological needs (biological expression). Joe became a source of only biological fulfilment of her desires, which points out the above-mentioned lack of a psychological self in the protagonist. Further, her repetitive rejection of Joe's proposals of marriage shows the meaninglessness of their relationship for her and her lack of a strong will to form an attachment and to give a commitment, which she knows she might not be able to keep. The narrator fell into a state of existential neurosis after the abortion and has been living a neurotic life since then. Thus, she had stopped meeting her parents, detaching herself from her past and people. All the symptoms of existential neurosis, such as apathy, purposelessness, detachment, the meaninglessness of things, a fear of commitment, and so on, are quite apparent in the narrator's behaviour.

Therefore, it is interesting to observe that the novel begins with the revival of what has been repressed for almost a decade. As the narrator, who is now existentially neurotic, travels to her home to look for her lost father, she feels nervous, flustered, and reluctant. Thus, Atwood brilliantly oscillates between the protagonist's past and present while she is travelling toward her home in her narration. The physical proximity of the space parallels the psychic recalling of the repressed past for the narrator. In this regard, in his translation of Arno Heller, Brandner (2008) comments, “The rehabilitation of old traumata, the exposure of the suppressed are necessary if the physical return should be accompanied by a psychic one.”<sup>31</sup> The narrator's

<sup>29</sup> Maddi, “The Existential Neurosis”, p. 322.

<sup>30</sup> Ina Franziska Brandner, “Madness and Women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*” (M. Phil Dissertation, Universitat Wien, 2008), p. 90. At: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Madness-and-women-in-Charlotte-Perkins-Gilman%27s-and-Brandner/f13c357a08dc245e1dd90a698f670eb34384f29c>.

<sup>31</sup> Brandner, “Madness and Women”, p. 95.



return to her home is her exposure to her own 'old traumata.' Thus, the journey coincides with her self-reflection on her identity and existence. She questions herself if she feels things and finds the answer that she does not; as she puts it, "I hunted through my brain for any emotion," but there was none.<sup>32</sup> In this narration, the employment of the stream-of-consciousness technique also justifies its role in portraying a traumatic psyche in the novel. The narration oftentimes becomes scattered and dispersed, sketching the broken psyche of the protagonist.

As Maddi argued, stress/es over premorbid identity demonstrates the frenzied neurotic psyche in the behaviour of a person, such as Meursault's violent shooting for no apparent reason in *The Stranger*. While the narrator's physical movement toward her home functions as an initial stress for her psyche, the central incidents of the sight of a dead hanged heron in the forest and subsequent encounter with her father's dead body are the primary stimulators for untangling her repressed guilt about killing her unborn child. The incident shatters the wall inside her psyche that was protecting her consciousness from her unconscious trauma of killing the child under duress, the guilt of her absence at her mother's funeral, and multiple childhood traumatic experiences stream in a series of reminiscences before her eyes. She narrates her confounded experience in the following words,

Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering that had been a disguise ... it was in a bottle curled up, staring out like a cat pickled ... 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.<sup>33</sup>

In *Surfacing*, Atwood emphasises confrontation of the traumatic past to recover lost identity. Returning to this wilderness symbolises her reaching the heart of her conflict; she is now in the interior of the problem, her past, where she no longer needs to pretend or conform to social norms. At this point, the narrator realizes that all she wanted was to lift herself from the past mistakes she had made; therefore, she seeks redemption, which is why she looks for esoteric directions or trajectories if her parents have left for her. This place stands for the values and beliefs (eccentric reality) that her parents inculcated in her. She believes that her parents "had control over their death", and they got their salvation.<sup>34</sup> She strangely deciphers the drawing found in her childhood home as a sign from her mother to conceive the lost child again.

So, she has sex with Joe, "pull[s] him down.... guide[s] him into [herself], ...it's the right season."<sup>35</sup> She calls it a "ritual" to replace the "seed of death" and an act of redemption from her guilt, "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long."<sup>36</sup> Following certain signs from her parents, she destroys everything related to her past life by burning and smashing it, and then she swims in the lake, asserting that God will absolve her from her guilt and provide her with knowledge of her deeper self. In a frenzy, she hallucinates the ghosts of her parents and believes in its reality until she places her foot in the footprint which was supposed to be her father's, but she finds it as her

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<sup>32</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 182–83.

<sup>34</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 223.

<sup>35</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 209.

<sup>36</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 209.

own. Then she had an epiphany; she understood that it was all an illusion about the idealism of the utopic existence of her parents. Regarding the spontaneous treatment of neurosis, Horney writes, "Life itself still remains a very effective therapist.... It may be the inspiring example of a truly great person; it may be a common tragedy which by bringing the neurotic in close touch with others takes him out of his egocentric isolation; it may be association with persons so congenial that manipulating or avoiding them appears less necessary."<sup>37</sup>

Thus, for the narrator, it is her exposure to the disillusioned reality of her parents' beliefs that brings out a type of unified sensibility in her psyche regarding her own identity. In the end, the narrator "refuse[s] to be a victim."<sup>38</sup> She accepts that it is a struggle to survive in society, and this survival will be balancing every expression of life. This psychic state indicates that the narrator has "relieved" herself from the guilt through her acceptance; she has gained her human side and has acknowledged her past.<sup>39</sup> She accepts that it was her fault to let others make the decisions of her life. Instead of looking for excuses as coping mechanisms to prove her innocence, as she has been doing for the previous decade, she recognises her responsibility for the killing of her baby. She comprehends and accepts the ways of society and accomplishes the balance in her life, the wholeness that was always lacking, the missing psychological expression. Through her confrontation with the reality of the delusional beliefs of her parents and her acceptance of the world as it is, she overcomes her neurotic condition and reclaims her individual self by asserting her conscious judgments in the matters of her life. Inferentially, the narrator comes to possess the "generalising, unifying, and humanising effect of psychological expression" in the denouement of the novel.<sup>40</sup> The novel, in a way, represents an account of the protagonist's eccentric experiences in the wilderness of her home, through which she purges her neurotic state. Arno Heller summarised the theme of *Surfacing* as "return, exploration, catharsis and restart."<sup>41</sup> The narrator's return to her childhood, exploration of truth, and cathartic experience through confrontation with her guilt provide her a chance to revitalize herself. She comes to possess a sense of self and personal identity; she is willing to take risks and accept the opportunity to start her life with Joe at the end of the novel.

## Conclusion

The article first proposes that, unlike trauma, neurosis is an inconspicuous mental condition that can last a whole lifetime without external manifestation. Second, its manifestations are seen as signs and traits of madness; however, they are created and triggered by a traumatic or disturbed childhood and stressful social circumstances. The brilliance of Atwood's works lies in how dexterously she weaves the subconscious of the protagonist into the consciousness of society, the inner world to the external reality, and how she shifts from stream-of-consciousness to realism. In *Surfacing* the reader has access to both realms of existence. The article concludes that the narrator in *Surfacing* suffers from neurosis due to her disturbed childhood. The 'safe'

<sup>37</sup> Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, p. 240.

<sup>38</sup> Atwood, *Surfacing*, p. 249.

<sup>39</sup> Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, "The Anatomy of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*", *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1979), p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Maddi, "The Existential Neurosis", p. 319.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Brandner, "Madness and Women", p. 95.

environment provided by her parents detached her from the harsh realities of the outside world and created a deep subconscious rift between the social and psychic realities for the protagonist, resulting in her neurotic state. Thus, we emphasise that a disturbed childhood upbringing by the narrator's parents makes her personality premorbid and existentially neurotic.