



## REVIVING THE CONFUSED SHADOWS OF IMAGINATION AND REALITY: A STUDY OF SURREALISM IN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is an attempt to present the early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement as the reviving postmodern technique in the present era. Defining the movement, 'Surrealism' and extracting its characteristic features, this paper analyses how this technique is being revived in literature and other forms of arts. Though there are many literary works written based on surrealism, this paper takes Emily St. John Mandel's novel **Station Eleven** as an illustration to study its features because it is a 21<sup>st</sup> century novel published in 2014. Additionally, this novel speaks about the plights of Pandemic condition that the world faced during Spanish Flu and the exact condition is being experienced now due to Covid-19. Thus, this paper expresses how surrealism made its influence in the recent postmodern theories.*

**Key Words:** Surrealism, illogical representations, uncommon images, pandemic, chaotic sequence.

### INTRODUCTION

Surrealism is a 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural movement developed after the World War I particularly in painting later in literature and other arts. The artists and writers adopted this movement as an escape from the plights of World War and the most threatening Spanish Flu pandemic. This movement is best known for the juxtaposition of uncommon, unnerving and illogical imagery represented both in paintings and writings and now took a transition even in

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photographs by presenting uncommon images recorded at various places and instances. This technique paves way for the creation of strange images through clustered realities and dreams and in turn allowing the unconscious to express itself through the images. Surrealism was formulated by Andre Breton during 1920s from the influence of Dadaism which was flourished as a reaction for World War I. Surrealism was active from 1920s to 1950s in literature and other arts now it is starting its second coming through photography as an absolute bridge between reality and imagination creating a super-reality.

Though the term ‘Surrealism’ was coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917, the movement started when Andre Breton proposed his ‘surrealist manifesto’ in 1924 in Paris. This movement was actually formed as a revolutionary movement and is highly associated with Communism and Anarchism. Though this movement is political, this created great impact in literature and arts. To be clear, any movement that started in postmodern era had the influence of Surrealism in it. The themes of almost all the theories and methods are found with the shadows of Surrealism. There are many defined features of Surrealist models in literature, few of them are as follows:

1. Dreamy scenes and symbolic fantasy images.
2. Unexpected and unanticipated twists
3. Illogical representations
4. Chaotic assemblages of common images
5. Special techniques to create multiple effects
6. Visual puns
7. Distorted or Child-like designs.

The novel, *Station Eleven* is a perfect example for the surrealist concept of literature, written by a Canadian novelist Emily St. John Mandel. This was Mandel’s fourth novel written in 2014 but the plot of the novel dates back to early 20<sup>th</sup> century particularly during the Swine Flu Pandemic commonly called as the “Georgian Flu”. This novel brought the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Mandel in 2015. This novel narrates the stories of people who were scattered due to the Georgian Flu Pandemic and met after several years. Their life after their separation was well pictured by the novelist using the surrealist imagism. Mandel’s first three novels are mysteries and hated to be called as the mystery novelist, Mandel made this story with less twists and more realities in super – realistic way. The incidents took place in this novel like the real incidents took place during the Georgian Flu Pandemic. Mandel in an interview with the national book foundation says thus,

*“I’ve always been interested in writing about memory, and in what it means to live honourably in a damaged world”.*



The great Spanish Flu tragedy took place during the same period which the writer has given the name as Georgian flu. Thus, this novel is better considered as the post – apocalyptic novel which shares the inner conflict of people who undergone the pandemic and got separated and thrown away to different places. This novel circles around the band of musicians and actors who were scattered everywhere during the pandemic condition and happened to meet them back after 20 years at various instances. Like other novels by the writer, this novel also projects the fragility of life and other crisis like starvation and testing the ability to live in the world and also the chaos in the society and in life as well. Mandel considered the characters not less than the warriors who survived after the war. She has glorified her characters as the 1% survivors of the pandemic.

The protagonist of the novel Kirsten Raymonde, a child artist in a drama who witnesses the death of Arthur Leander on stage during the staging of *King Lear*. She lost her parents in the pandemic at her very young age of Eight. Her search for the missing copies of the comic Dr. Eleven gives the surrealistic effect to this novel. The novel starts with Arthur Leander’s death on the stage while staging Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Later, Mandel has named her second chapter as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and this proves the influence of Writer on Shakespeare. The setting and condition of the stage was explained through Jeevan and it acts as a good example for surrealism. The description follows thus:

*“not quite a room, Jeevan thought now, looking around the stage. It was too transitory, all those doorways and dark spaces between wings, the missing ceiling. It was more like a terminal, he thought, a train station or an airport, everyone passing quickly through.” (PP: 3)*

The pandemic condition was explained by the novelist through the conversation between Jeevan, a paramedic and his friend, a doctor on a phone call. The identification of new flu and the conversation about SARS pandemic makes their conversation little more serious. The seriousness of his friend on labelling the number of patients being affected from last night to till time adds seriousness to the condition. He asks his friend to be safe and secure himself from the situation by moving away to some other places. The symptoms of flu found for the people who travelled to Toronto in a same flight was first identified but the condition goes worse when the people with no direct contact from them also was affected by the flu. He also included that the people may even get quarantined to bring the condition under control. Their conversation just reflected the present Covid-19 pandemic which the world is experiencing now. When Mandel wrote all these ideas there was no quarantining process in reality, the concept was seen as the surrealist dream but now it has become a reality and the world is evidencing the plights of being locked down in homes and being quarantined to save lives.



The next chapter shifts immediately to exact 20 years after the pandemic happened. The story now moves around the child Kirsten who now has become young Kirsten. This sudden shift from one plot to another plot with no direct connection was one of the features of surrealism. When she comes again to the place after 20 years, she comes to know about a prophet who threatens the people and makes every woman as his 'wives' who comes in front of his eyes. The former airport was made as a museum where the things belonging to the lost civilization was kept. Another shock comes to Kirsten when the troupe came along with her starts missing. It is Kirsten and August who stays at the end. But then they goes in search of their lost troupe and eventually finds them at the end of the story. The image of Airport was brought at various instances in the novel, first the theatre where *King Lear* was staged then the Museum which was made by changing the airport.

In course of the novel, Kirsten comes to know that the Dr. Eleven comic was actually written by Miranda and finds the other volumes and reads it. The instances written in the comic more or less same as the instances seen in the post-apocalypse America. The situation extracted by Mandel is purely surrealistic. The lines are as follows:

*"On station eleven's surface it is always sunset or twilight or night... and the only land remaining is a series of islands that were once mountaintops. There has been a schism. There are people who, after fifteen years of perpetual twilight, long only to go home, to return to Earth and beg for amnesty, to take their chances under alien rule. They live in the undersea, an interlinked network of vast fallout shelters under station Eleven's oceans... all they want is to see sunlight again. Can you blame them?" (PP 83)*

Finally, the novel ends with all the chaos being cleared and Kirsten hands over the comic Dr. Eleven to Clare. Clare reads the comic with the post-Apocalyptic mindset which the world will experience soon in present. Clare's final imagination of getting back the lost civilization was the final touch of surrealism in this novel. His words are thus:

*"Is it possible that somewhere there are ships setting out? ...If there are again towns with street lights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain? ...Vessels..., steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge of the stars' embarking on intrepid journeys 'towards another world just out of sight'" (pp 332-3).*

Thus, this novel written in 2014, that is, early 21<sup>st</sup> century speaks about the pandemic happened during early 20<sup>th</sup> century and takes a turn to 20 years of post-Apocalyptic America and speaks about the lost relations and lost civilization and the surprise is it goes in parallel with the present Covid-19 condition of the world. Though this novel speaks about the early



20<sup>th</sup> century pandemic, the plot is particularized to America as the novelist belongs to Canada. The illusioned imageries and uncommon, chaotic and hectic portrayal of sequences makes it a perfect Surrealist novel. Thus, the early post-modern movement has now influenced many other techniques and still stands as a trend in making varieties in literature.

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