



## Dissociative Amnesia and Memory: A Critical Study on Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House A Memoir of Incest and of Healing*

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**Abstract:** *My Father's House* by Sylvia Fraser is an impressive attempt to depict the realities and horrors of father-daughter incest. Even though it is an incest memoir, the memory of the act is long forgotten or dissociated from the true self. The non-fiction thus throws light into the concepts of memory gap and dissociative amnesia and illustrates how dissociation helps to maintain the equilibrium of a person's sanity. The paper cross-examines how these gaps in memory as well as the reclamation helps to overcome the physical and mental trauma suffered as a result of sexual abuse. Fraser distinctively portrays reality from her regained memory. It analyses how the abuse transformed the trajectory of Fraser's life and her immediate relation to the outside world.

**Keywords:** Incest, Sexual Abuse, Memory Gap, Dissociative Amnesia

### INTRODUCTION

Life writing is a much-debated genre of thought these days with the surge of memory studies. Partly, would be because, as British biographer, Hermione Lee says, 'when the distinction between biography and autobiography is deliberately blurred sort of'. One might form the idea that autobiographies or, testimonies for that matter, rely purely on the dynamics of memory to take their course on writing/telling. That is the reason why Sylvia Fraser's 1987 non-fiction book *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing* needs to be validated. *My Father's House*, even though it is an incest memoir, the memory of the act is long forgotten or dissociated from the true self. Fraser, after forty years of amnesia, found herself diving into a whirlpool of shadowed memories which brought forth the painful reality of incest, abuse and trauma. It is difficult for the author as well as the reader to comprehend the upwhirling of memories triggered here and there and for the ease of understanding, Fraser has made use of typography to demark her reality from her memories.

I have used italics to indicate thoughts, feelings and experiences pieced together from recently recovered memories, and to indicate dreams. (Fraser)

This typographical distinction is to provide a definite boundary between how things were before and after her memory disturbances. It can be considered a deliberate effort by the author to find the missing pieces to her coherent soul. The italics represented her recovered memories.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, dissociative amnesia is an inability in a non-medical condition to recall important, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature, that is too extensive to be explained by normal forgetfulness. Dissociative amnesia is one among the group of dissociative mental disorders. 'It involves disruptions or breakdowns of memory, consciousness, awareness, identity, and/or perceptions'. It happens when an individual tries to block out a particular incident or information, accompanied usually by a stressful or traumatic event. In such cases, memory loss goes well beyond normal

forgetfulness and induces memory gaps in a person's life. The memories are not erased but deeply buried in one's subconscious mind brought to the surface by any triggering incident/s. Fraser's buried memories were the effect of her abuse at the hands of her father. Fraser created a split personality to break away from the sexual abuse she endured.

When the conflict caused by my sexual relationship with my father became too acute to bear, I created a secret accomplice for my daddy by splitting my personality in two. Thus, somewhere around the age of seven, I acquired another self with memories and experiences separate from mine, whose existence was unknown to me. In future whenever my daddy approached me sexually I turned into my other self, and afterwards I did not remember anything that ever happened. (Fraser 15)

And her real, socially projected self becomes the 'other', while her split personality takes control of her life. All the memories of abuse get buried within this split personality, making it difficult for the 'real' Fraser to understand what was happening to her.

Down down down the stairs I go, dragging Teddy Umcline by one ear. It is midday. My daddy, who works the night shift, is in his blue-striped pyjamas, I hitch at the pink sunsuit that Granny Cragg made for me, waiting to be invited into his bedroom. My daddy give me candies. My daddy gives me chocolate-chip cookies. Of all the people in the world, I'm my daddy's favorite. My daddy and I (5)

Fraser's earliest memory of her abuse did not allow her to completely own the truth that her father was abusing her. It is not a submerged memory as it is not italicised. It can be read as a form of denial from her 'real' personality to acknowledge that truth. To overcome the emotional imbalance created by the abuse, initially, she focused all her hate and anger on inanimate objects and other people rather than her father, her abuser. For example, her house, her brown stockings, and very importantly her own body. She pushed the memory of pain which slowly turned into fear and guilt and consoled herself that she is her father's favourite child and that is all she needs to consider. This is where the split personality Fraser created helps her. It helps her to swamp her physical pain as well as the mental anguish of being betrayed by one's father to her shadow self. These facilities Fraser to lead a 'normal' life because she is not overburdened with the emotional weight of her truth. so, whenever her father abused her, her shadow self is the one suffering it and once it is over, the 'real' Fraser no longer had any memory of it. The gaps in her memory signify the absence of the 'real' Fraser throughout her childhood whereas the abuse was inflicted upon her split image. Fraser's life is a baffling contradiction with/ without her knowing the bits and pieces of it.

Although forgotten memory may be inaccessible to consciousness, it sometimes continues to influence behaviour. These submerged memories and associated trauma influenced her behaviour in more than one way i.e., Fraser experienced nightmares and convulsions.

I am running running running. My rubber boot catches an invisible wire, pitching me forward on my belly. When I come to I am lying in the snow screaming while my hands tear at bare branches. My sister fetches our mother. "She's having another fit. She's turning blue!". (11)

Psychological studies show that non-epileptic seizures are induced as a result of sexual abuse. "They resemble epileptic seizures but lack the physiological symptoms of genuine epilepsy and are psychological in origin. physiological symptoms of genuine epilepsy and are psychological in origin". Fraser continued to have convulsions throughout her childhood. Slowly her fits were given little to no importance.

Fraser's behaviour also underwent considerable changes during this period. Even though she still obliged her father, she recalls that she started to develop a genuine aversion towards her father, though she knew not the reason to do so. Not only her father, anything and anyone who resembled her father or his actions. Like, she stepped back whenever she had to establish physical contact with anyone for that matter, Fraser recalls that she hated to kiss her grandmother whenever they visited her:

I struggle against the heaving of my stomach, the yammering of my heart, trying not to experience, before I have to, that instant when the sweet smell of Other grandmother's gardenia powder overwhelms me and my lips are swallowed in the decaying pulpiness of her cheek. Why this revulsion for an old woman's kiss? (19)

Later when the gaps in her memory started to fill, she realised that her grandmother's caved-in cheeks resembled the texture of her father's scrotum. Her active memory failed her for almost forty years when she tried to find answers to numerous questions. She bethought about how she hated having anyone over at her house, even for a birthday party. For her house was an epitome of something dark, unnameable. She failed to understand the deep-rooted cause for her hatred and fear.

Her father's abuse transformed the trajectory of her life in multitudinous ways. Fraser's high school days, as she recounted, resulted in the creation of a third personality, who craved for and thrived in attention. She channelled all her energy into moulding herself into an epitome of sexuality. One can see it as a defensive mechanism where Fraser is attempting to regain her power where her sexual appeal just becomes a tool. According to Cynthia Roller, Donna S Martsof., et.al, children who underwent sexual abuse result in engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours like "having sex at an early age, having many sexual partners, having frequent or unprotected sex, and having sex while using drugs or alcohol to excess". Fraser started seeing her as a sexual being above all. But this also limited her from forming any sort of intimate relationship with anyone. Her three personalities were in constant conflict with each other. During this time Fraser remembers Mr Brown, their tenant, grabbing her by the wrist. But she has no recollection of whatever happened afterwards. Her other self completely hid the memory of her rape for forty years. When all memory came back, she remembers what he said to her that day "Don't try to fool me kid. I know what goes on in this house. Don't you think anybody's got any ears?". This made her question whether her sister and her mother were aware of what was happening to her all those years.

As per clinical studies conducted by L C Terr, it is observed that recollection of a single-time traumatic experience is fairly easier while that of a repeated series of abuses is more likely to end in amnesia. Fraser especially endured chronic abuse, occasionally having a normal life in between two years, and that is one of the main reasons for the persistent utilisation of dissociative defences i.e., amnesia, into adulthood. Her other personality blocked out the entire memory of sexual abuse for forty years till an incident in her late forties triggered it to the front. This also threw her personal life off the grid. She was not able to understand the reason for all those shelved anger and frustration in her. The outer shell was broken partially by her marriage when she allowed Daniel to enter into her personal life. Still, she needed validation from her parents to go forward with that relationship. One gets the impression that marriage was an escape route for her to move out of her father's territory. Fraser could not even come to terms to have children after marriage.

The sexual violence Fraser was subjected to conceal her true self. The dissociative amnesia can then be considered as a coping mechanism so that she can take control of her own life without the omnipresent 'father' in this case. The shadowed self in Fraser needed the 'father' figure and that might be a reason she indulged in an extra-marital affair with Paul, her childhood best friend Lulu Lawson's aged father. Fraser was aware of the devastating effects of such a relationship which ultimately resulted in her divorce. This problematises the whole equation Fraser had with her father. It puts the reader in a dilemma to read Fraser in terms of moral grounds. It also threatens the genuineness of the above-said 'reclaimed' memories. There are instances in her memory where she attempts to call out the abuse, but all in vain. Why Fraser never confided in her mother or sister is a serious question to ponder upon. There is an unconscious effort to place her father on a God-like pedestal, who possessed complete autonomy over her.

But one can also see the relationship with Paul as a passing milestone in reclaiming her submerged memories. She was slowly triggered to the extent of realising how volatile she is in terms of her mental health. With her father's death, there came a newfound freedom for her to explore the questions that she never, asked or answered. Rather he came alive or his memories, after his passing only. Her real, social personality never dared to cross the threshold of her shadowed one till then. The breaking point was when she came to know about Gerald. It was the news of Gerald's attempt to molest Bab's daughter that pushed Fraser to confront her other self. Her introspection leads to the only answer she was searching for for the past forty years. Her memories came in bits and pieces, in intrusive images/ flashbacks of reliving or re-enacting the traumatic experiences. These reactivated memories are "highly charged experiential states, that encompass frightening representations of the event as reproduced through some or all perceptual modalities and concomitant emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses".

## CONCLUSION

*My Father's House* helped to open up the subgenre of memoirs about incest survival. Even though the depiction of incest is unsettling, the way Fraser mustered up the courage to open her wounds and corroborate her claims is inspiring. The work not only limits itself to being an incest memoir but a very influential work on the concept of dissociative amnesia and memory gaps. Wading through the fog of memories, Fraser could eventually meet the 'self' she left behind long back. In a way, her amnesia and regaining of memory transgressed her personality by widening her understanding of trauma and survival. The work put forth varied opinions supporting and contradicting the actuality of Fraser's claims.

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