



PORTRAYAL OF MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA IN SHAPING IDENTITY AND CHARACTER IN SELECT NOVELS OF MARILYNNE SUMMERS ROBINSON

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ABSTRACT

American writing in English has been praised around the world for its innovative approach towards novel writing. The American writers match with the pace of the world, with their individuality, creativity and originality. The women novelists are recognized from their novelty and versatility of their works. They reflect the realistic picture of their contemporary world with the revolutionary spirit. These women writers have shaped their literary endeavors to establish American literature as an inextricable part and have highlighted the new dimension and profundity of American fiction. The twentieth century novelists have played a significant part in modern fiction and have observed the society from a realistic attitude and humanistic concern. The novels of Marilynne Summers Robinson offer a thoughtful exploration of how nostalgia and identity are intertwined. Whether it is the longing for a lost family, the reflection on generational legacy, the struggle for personal redemption or the search for belonging, these themes are central to understanding the complex, richly drawn characters and narratives in her works. Robinson's nuanced portrayal of nostalgia and identity not only define her characters but also invite readers to reflect on how these themes play out in their own lives.

KEY WORDS: Domesticity, Identity, Memory and Nostalgia

Marilynne Robinson's novels present nostalgia in various forms as a yearning for lost stability, a reverential look back, a means of seeking redemption and a search for belonging. Each novel offers a unique perspective on how nostalgia shapes the human experience. In her view nostalgia and identity are not isolated themes but are deeply interwoven, each influencing and shaping the other. She attempts to answer to the cult of domesticity in her novels. She creates a new American gothic. Robinson, who has been a housewife, writes about domesticity. She structures the domesticity as a power in her novel *Housekeeping*, "domestic space that has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant unless something is done to arrest it and restore order and normally back to the house" HK (1). The house in her novel, the domestic extent, is

established to be a refuge from the outside dangers but stands as an inescapable place from trauma. It endangers the well-being of the characters and as a result, the artistic figure of the novel, deconstructs the house and creates a new concept of domesticity. Robinson's domesticity elaborates women who step out of their homes.

Marilynne Robinson's novels portray the traditional notion of home and domesticity. She reveals that the home imperils trauma rather than secures. It becomes a clutch for a woman from which she cannot escape from. The house becomes a place of discomfort, in spite of its life-threatening. Her elucidation to the unsafe nature of the house is her journey out of the sequence of suffering and the transformation to an artistic figure.

The search for identity has its remedy in Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*. It accounts the events of Ruth and her sister Lucille who moved from one house to another to seek shelter after the suicide of their mother. Ruth and Lucille are sent to live with Sylvia after their grandmother's death. In between Nona and Lily, their aunts, provide shelter for the girls. However, their young age could not accept the responsibility to take care of the girls. Another caretaker, Sylvie, accepts the responsibility of taking care of the girls. The girls become dumbstruck at the chaotic and unsystematic world of Sylvie. Ruth adjusts with her aunt but Lucille is dejected at Sylvie's lifestyle. This difference of opinion, frames the individual identity of the sisters. When Ruth imitates Sylvie, Lucille leaves her aunt and shelters with her economics teacher. The court of Fingerbone intervenes with Sylvie's parenting and tries to save Ruth from her aunt's disorganized world. Ruth and Sylvie begin their journey from their unsafe house and they commence into a new life, away from Fingerbone.

Robinson presents the novel *Gilead* through Ames and expands her focus on the identity of her characters. Ames recognizes himself as a responsible person of forgiveness and brings forth a change in Gilead. Ames wants Gilead to be a town for his son to be proud of. The novel's nostalgic treatment of childhood locates within the pastoral tradition, the rural setting and domesticity, the sacred qualities of nature and its importance demonstrated by the novelist. It is an amalgamation of three elements namely, the nostalgia for childhood, glorification of the rural life and the configuration of nature within the North American cultural climate. This defines *Gilead* as neo pastoral. It offers a purposeful form of engaging humanity with the modern world.

Laurence Lerner writes in *The Uses of Nostalgia* on the pastoral literary genre, "nostalgia poses two different times, a present and a longed for past, and on its contrast (Literature) can be built" (44). Robinson's type of nostalgia does not differ from Lerner's description of a "longing for a simpler, happier condition, for the freshness of the early world, for escape from the great city . . . (for) the familiar and rural" (45). Lerner writes the "familiar and the rural" (46) account of the novel's characters in a slow and simple way of life.

Home provides the intricacies and difficulties of relationships among offenses and misunderstanding. Jack left Gilead by refusing his fatherly responsibility so his father and sister try to protect them. Jack and Glory return to their native home after twenty years and the Boughton's house triggers with the memories of the happy and severe past memories, that leads them towards the future. Coming home for Glory meant the same terror as Jack, namely encountering with the man, whom she met and results in failure of their relationship. She wondered to face her native town, who knew that she had not progressed in her life.

The past memories transform the characters from a different perspective. Their familial relationships and their influence transform the characters. The novel transforms its characters through their retelling, writing and actions. For Ames the transformation becomes reality through writing 'begets'. His letters to his son emphasizes the need of appreciation and understanding the good and hardships in his life. It provides opportunities to experience familial relationships and places that frame their identity to adapt their individual stories.

Philips Sheldrake's *Spaces for the Sacred* asserts "Each person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place and also has to come to terms with the many layers of story that already exist in a given location" (16). Ames wants Sheldrake's transformative memory work in *Gilead* which is buried in his identity and memories. Also, he is aware of his demise and so takes up the responsibility to narrate his experience for his son to live in future.

Gilead proves itself distinct by preserving a generation's thoughts for the future generations. Ames in *Gilead* and Jack in *Home* believe in their generation, who shall build themselves to be more forgiving than their predecessors. The solitude and the creation of distance helped to shape Jack's identity. Ames distanced himself in solitude in the church and Jack leaves Gilead for new experiences and Glory takes up a new position as a school teacher in Gilead that leads to her life to a different experience.

The themes of the other two *Gilead* novels like nostalgia, home, identity and the city of refuge approaches the thoughts and experiences of Lila from a new vantage. Robinson's focus on the novel *Lila* is about little baby, Lila, abandoned by her biological parents. She is rescued by

Doll, her peripatetic mother. Doll sends Lila to a school in Tammany and later she was persecuted for murdering a man who tried to harm Lila. Lila reaches a house in St. Louis after the death of Doll. When Lila enters into Gilead, she runs into a church to escape from the rain and meets the Presbyterian, Reverend John Ames. Each other's loneliness blooms as a friendship and they both get married after Ames baptizes Lila. Ames and Lila are possessed by their past memories.

Robinson's Ames, Glory and Jack, who experienced their own form of pain, cannot be paralleled with the dejections of Lila. Those characters had a home, where they could return and be forgiven but Lila did not possess a name to call herself by. The dichotomy reflects in the titles of Robinson's novels namely *Gilead* and *Home* that literally relates itself to the geographical locations but Lila has neither a place for shelter nor a constant relation to cling herself with. The realistic novel deals with human characters in social situations and man as a social being. It emphasizes on characters than the plot.

The author masterfully demonstrates how our sense of self is inextricably linked to our memories and our past. Her narratives reveal that nostalgia, far from being a mere sentimental longing, is a powerful force that shapes our identities, choices and perceptions.

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