



Exploring Trauma And Memory: A Thematic Analysis Of Annie Ernaux's Works''

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Abstract:

This paper examines Annie Ernaux's writings, delving into dynamics of trauma, memory and narrative through the multiple perspectives. Ernaux's works are identified by multi-layered narrative and indistinctness between fact and fiction. Her writings propose a peculiar stance through the complexities of traumatic experience, memory fragmentation and narrative reconstruction. This research draws on psychoanalytic theory, trauma studies and narrative psychology to analyse Ernaux's portrayal of childhood trauma, emotional regulation and identity formation. By investigating Ernaux's narrative structures, stylistic choices and cultural context, this study aims to: Illuminate the impact of trauma on memory and narrative, her therapeutic potential of a number of writings and this paper helps to find out the understanding of trauma, memory and identity in social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Annie Ernaux, trauma, memory, writing, identity.

Introduction

Annie Ernaux is known for her personal narratives, trauma and memory throughout her works. Although she defies to accept that she has written autobiographical narrative, somewhere her works are a reflection of her own life's experiences. She aims to portray how a personal narrative becomes political in context and situations. She has penned down a number of works like: *A Man's Place*, *A Woman's Story*, *A Frozen Woman*, *Happening*, *Simple possession*, *A Girl's Story*, *Possession*, *Years* and others. It is believed that these works are representative of a psychological journey of Annie Ernaux. She picturises women's life in French society, a Western country where women are expected to follow sophisticated manners and lives. In French culture, society demands women to maintain social status and respect. Annie Ernaux discloses the social and familial issues like: gender inequality, identity crises, devoid of rights regarding body, class distinction and psychological traumas. Her works have proclaimed the statement like; how 'personal becomes political' through the characterization of women characters and explore transforming of their trauma into resistance using writing and memory as a tool. This study investigates how personal and collective memory of Annie

Ernaux manifest the theme of loss, grief, social stigma, mental trauma, identity crises, gender disparity and class based discrimination.

Trauma and memory play a very crucial role in the works of Annie Ernaux. Cathy Caruth defines trauma - "the impact of the traumatic events lies precisely in its belatedness." Annie Ernaux's works proclaim this definition of Cathy because she revisits her diary while writing about those traumatic and memorable experiences. Ernaux always tries to connect her personal memories to collective memories to represent a universal theme and an appeal to people of society. She wants change in law, class system and gender binaries through this prominent work, 'A Woman's Story'. She discusses her own experiences in social and cultural contexts, referencing the ideology of 'the personal is political', popularized by Carol Hanisch.

In 'A Woman's Story', the narrator of the story examines her mother's life, her disease and pitiable death. Her mother's life is representative of the lives of so many women in social and cultural contexts. She wants to give voice to her mother's suppressed voice and desires. In the story, her mother suffers from identity crises, gender discrimination and class distinction. Her mother tries to make an end to upgrade her social status and foresee a different future for her daughter. Before her marriage she worked in a coal mine and after marriage she opened a grocery cafe to earn her livelihood and to nurture her daughter. Due to the impact of the patriarchal system, she forgets to live her life and starts living for others as Simone de Beauvoir has mentioned: "a woman considers her existence in relation to others". Ernaux picturizes how her mother lost her identity being a mother: "She had no life of her own, her life was mine." (11)

This refers to how a woman starts living in false beliefs that her joys lie in a maternal role. It also portrays the traumatic experience of blurred identity after marriage. A woman who is bold initially, now fragmented and fragile physically and mentally.

Ernaux investigates the concept of 'double operation' regarding women; the first is being a woman and the second is the class system. Crenshaw defines this oppression under intersectional feminism: "it examines how gender oppression intersects with class, economic status and social mobility." The narrator's mother suffers from a class inferiority complex. She is well aware of her economic status. It glimpses in her actions and attitudes. When she arranges marriage for her daughter in an upper class family, she feels insecurity about class status and has fear of class conflicts also: "My mother had mixed feelings about my husband's family. Although she admired their style, their manners, and their education, and feels naturally proud to see her daughter fit in, she feared that beneath their icy politeness they held her in contempt." (56) Here, her mother is confident because of her daughter's higher education. She assured her daughter's in-laws about her daughter's way of living: "of my mother-in-law, she once said a few years ago: "anyone can see she wasn't brought up the way we have." (56) Although the narrator feels proud because of her mother's hard work and efforts to educate her, she criticizes the internalised gender role also because her mother sacrifices her whole life to liberate her daughter from the clutches of class system and gender binaries. She works twenty four into seven hours without thinking of herself to shape and to secure her daughter's future: "She spent all day selling milk and potatoes so that I could sit in a lecture hall and learn about Plato." (51) Her mother thinks that education is the key to break the class and gender binaries. That's why she believes in educating her daughter to make her free from class struggles: "For my mother, rebellion meant only one thing - the denial of poverty and called for only one possible course of action: get a job, earn money, and work one's way up the social ladder." (52) Although her mother works day and night to educate her daughter, the consequences of this efforts bring a generational and an emotional gap between mother and daughter relationship. It creates conflicts and emotional detachment between them: "I stopped trying to copy her. I found my mother's attitude brash. I was ashamed of her brusque manners and speech. I blamed her for being someone who I, by moving into new circles, no longer wanted to be." (53)

The narrator's mother always instructs her daughter to dress-up in a mannered way, but she doesn't want to accept this way of living and that's why she is criticized by her mother when she wants to live a liberated life - enjoying, a romantic life, discussing social issues and personal issues with her mother. Her mother is not interested in this type of discussion. The narrator is told by her mother about her other girls' affairs and their pregnancy, but she cannot expect these things from her daughters. She wants only things from her daughter - to get education and economic independence. She indirectly wants to make her daughter aware about class struggles: "If we'd packed you off to a factory at the age of twelve, it'd be a different story. You don't know how lucky you are." (54) Although her mother wants to see her daughter's life away from working class women's struggle, she imposes patriarchal ideologies in her daughter's mind. She expects her to be an obedient wife and a sacrificed mother toward her children. She forces her for marriage. She remarks: "I don't want to keep her. It's woman's life to have a husband and children." (54) How surprising it is! She suffers throughout the whole life, yet she expects the same from her daughter. She believes that it is respectable to keep silence about her suffering whether in private or public places. She has fear and that's why she suggests her daughter for a successful married life. She tells her on the wedding day: "make sure you're a good housewife, otherwise he might send you back." (56) This refers her mother's internalized patriarchy. Although she is suffering in her life, yet she supports patriarchal system consciously or unconsciously. Her mother might be said to be the prime example of the statement given by Virginia Woolf: "Sometimes women themselves are responsible for their situations." (A Room of One's Own)

Annie Ernaux uses personal and collective memory as a tool to preserve her mother's identity and to claim women's sufferings across cultures. Her personal memories reflect her lamentation for her mother's situations and her use of collective memories picture women's struggles globally. Ernaux decides to write about her mother's life to portray the sufferings of women in writings so that people can read and may know about the issues. She remarks: "I believe I am writing about my mother because it's my turn to bring her into the world." (59) The narrator discusses how the suppressed desires and inner conflicts of her mother burst out into physical manifestation. Ultimately, her mother forgets to recognize herself to the end of her life: "She no longer recognized herself. She no longer belonged to the world of women." (43) Although the narrator feels empathy for her mother's sufferings, on the other hand, she proclaims her mother as a regulator of the patriarchal system. She considers her mother as a victim of social norms regarding sex, gender and class and as an enforcer of internalized patriarchy. She tries to sympathize with her mother's situations referencing theories of Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch's idea of 'post memory' - "the relationship of the generation after to the trauma of their predecessors, mediated through stories and images." The narrator remarks: "when I think of my mother's violent temper, out - bursts of affection, and reproachful attitude, I try not to see them as facets of her personality but to relate them to her own story and social background." (60) Although she gets higher education, she cannot make difference between her situation and her mother's situations. This refers the dominance of societal expectations because French society wants women sophisticated and gentle.

Furthermore, this paper is about how writing becomes a tool to visualize traumatic experiences and bodily autonomy through memories in other work of Annie Ernaux like *A Frozen Woman*. Ernaux narrates her own story using personal memories and with a few fictional elements in *A Frozen Woman*.

This work, *A Frozen Woman*, is a portrayal of the narrator's inner transformation from ambitious to emotionally frozen woman due to societal expectations. Simone de Beauvoir's notion: "women are made, not born; social norms create oppression" is very applicable. In this story, Ernaux tries to convey how a woman is nurtured since her childhood to accept imposed norms, to play a passive role without saying anything and to sacrifice her life for others and during this whole journey, a woman forgets her identity, her language and her inner self voices. This is how a woman becomes a frozen woman emotionally and psychologically: "Fragile and vapourish woman, spirits with gentle hands, good fairies of the home who silently create beauty and order, mute, submissive woman, perfectly organised into death." (1)

It refers to a very satirical tone for society, which expects a silent, sacrificing and representative woman. As Beauvoir remarks that women are not born but made, it can be observed through performing roles of gender. Since birth, nobody is man or woman, but it is society which creates such a type of phenomenon. The main protagonist of the story is taught to be polite, to be an obedient wife and caring mother by her family and society. These ideas are hegemonized in such a way in women's minds, they forget to think of themselves. They feel their pleasure in the happiness of family, husband and children. This journey numbs a woman emotionally and physically also. They think and talk mostly about their husband and children. It would be very satirical to say how a woman begins to play with kitchen utensils rather than pen and diary or office job: "I discover the joys of a day divided up by six diaper and six bottles...at five in the morning, I stare fixedly at the bottle heating glass eyes...A woman in her kitchen tossing some butter into a frying pan, three hundred and sixty five times a year, that's neither heroic nor absurd, that's just life." (151, 152)

Ernaux picturizes how their voices are suppressed under the patriarchal system and due to internalized patriarchy, regulated by women also. They cannot talk about sex, gender, class and autonomy. They don't have any rights regarding sexuality. If they enjoy sexual pleasures before marriage, they are criticized, but on the other hand, nobody talks about male with whom they enjoy sex. Due to this sexual discrimination, they suffer from sexual repression and psychological barriers. It is very pitiable for women when they are criticized by women themselves for their gender, sex and class: "For years I would never see anyone defend women's sexual freedom, not even women themselves. Freedom, the province of whores. I didn't feel strong enough to be a 'whore'." (25) These lines depict women's trapped situations, who are under the pressure of not only societal expectations but familial expectations also. In the family, they are supposed to be silent, obedient and submissive. Even women characters of the family support this patriarchal ideology. If a woman does anything wrong, she is punished by both men and women. Consequently, they accept and start living in a man-made world and use his languages. They see their success in the success of their husband. It doesn't matter how economically independent she is! She forgets about her success: "For the first time I envisaged failure with indifference - I'm banking on his success." (137) Ernaux critiques this patriarchal system which considers women's worth in the men's achievements. Although she is economically independent, she cannot hold financial power. Her husband doesn't feel secure to hand over financial power in her hands. Even he doesn't value her earnings. He always demeans her salary: "It doesn't surprise me when his salary is considered a handsome sum for the two of us while mine is a supplement." (182)

Initially, the protagonist is very optimistic for marriage, curious and ambitious, but finally she is numbs, emotionally frozen. She hoped for a secure future with her husband, but marriage becomes the cause of muteness, inequality, sacrificing herself for others. Ernaux uses Beauvoir's theory ironically to prove the point through her character: "I used to believe I was free. I thought love, motherhood, respectability would make me whole. But now I see - when the slavery I'd read so much about? - *The Second Sex*? Completely off base!" (137) When she comes to know that her husband doesn't show any interest in her talks or doesn't want to know what is going on in her heart and mind, she stops to share anything with her husband. Even she cannot discuss anything related to jobs: "I keep my mouth shut about my job and others." (183) In married life, communication plays a very crucial role for a healthy relationships. She suffers from internal conflicts because her emotions whether positive or negative are suppressed. She has a blurred identity, as her individual identity is ignored and underestimated by her family and by society. She surrenders her life and goals under the constraints of patriarchy: "My former goals disappear into a strange blur. Less will." (151)

Ernaux portrays how a woman leads a monotonous life while living with her husband and children. As in, 'A Woman's Story', the narrator's mother feels a gap between herself and her daughter because of class upgradation due to higher education. Her mother was not educated like her daughter. So they cannot connect with each other. Their way of living, their ideologies and their class become different from each other. In *A Frozen Woman*, the protagonist has no class distinction with her husband and children, even though she feels alienated because of gender binaries. Being a woman, she is supposed to be an ideal wife and mother without

questioning anything. This alienation and monotonous life of women characters develop into inner conflicts, which results in trauma, loss of memory, disease like Alzheimer. This trauma is so affective, it might affect later generation also, as it can be seen in 'A Woman's Story'. The whole life of the narrator is impacted by her mother's life. She wants to live a different life from her mother, but she cannot escape away from her root. One thing cannot be ignored, while portraying women characters of Annie Ernaux. Although they are victims of the patriarchal system, class system and sexual repression, they are strong to discuss their trauma in their writing using memory. Either they narrate their story themselves or their story is narrated by their later generations, when they get affected by the traumatic experience of their mothers.

Thus, Annie Ernaux has explored universal trauma in social and cultural contexts, narrating her own stories. Her works raise voice for marginalized groups, who either suffer silently or surrender their lives. She aims to exterminate social issues such as class, sex and gender differences. She does not want to conceal social and personal issues, as she wants to convey these issues to signify a universal theme. Ultimately, Ernaux leaves an appeal to her reader to know and understand women's conditions, how they are nurtured to be silent, to accept systemic inequalities, to play a submissive role of wife and mother as a puppet and their struggles to upgrade their social strata.

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