

Self, Identity and Space in Annie Ernaux's *A Frozen Woman*

Ms. Bijal Oza

Temporary Teaching Assistant in French, Dept. of French & Russian

The Maharaja Sayajirao Univ. of Baroda Vadodara 390002 (Gujrat) India

Abstract

In her autobiographical work, *A Frozen Woman*, originally a French literary work entitled "Femme Gelée", Annie Ernaux narrates her story from a 20th century, contemporary French feminist perspective. Being an autobiographical work Annie Ernaux's *A Frozen Woman* cartographs a woman's journey from childhood to a working woman who effectively strikes a balance between her personal and professional lives. In the process, the novel very impressively captures the variegated shades of a woman's life from childhood to adulthood along with the portrayal of her parents, her relatives, her husband, her children, her in-laws, and so forth. Along with this, Ernaux has attempted to deal with the issue of women's emancipation. *A Frozen Women* also adopts a sociological point of view in order to express a woman's thoughts and feelings which no doubt will invariably push the reader to become a part of such an ensemble. Apart from this, *A Frozen Women* also throws light on the cultural milieu and temper of the French society of the time.

Key Words: feminism, women's emancipation, gender bias, balance, personal journey, patriarchy

Annie Ernaux is a well known woman writer in francophone literature. She is, "popular and widely read and reviewed author in France and her books have been translated into many languages, yet she is not widely known in Anglophone countries outside university French departments."¹ Ernaux's works have not just blossomed in France but in many other countries, where her texts and their reception attract the attention of sociologists as well as literary critics. In fact, Ernaux's texts are unique in French women's writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries because of their foregrounding of social class (Thomas, 2006). Her writings are bestsellers in her country especially because of its feminist prerogatives and orientations and because

of this her works often appear on university course lists in France as well as in the United States and Britain.

Much of her writings document her entire life, from her childhood in a small town in Normandy, France, through her day-to-day fears and aspirations and into her old age. Her works in translation are also widely read and well appreciated especially for its matter of fact manner narrative style. Her writings are lucid and words are arranged in a certain harmony and grace which we have noticed is a hallmark of most French writers. Moreover, many of her books have been translated into different languages. *A Frozen Woman* is a slim volume filled with her memories as a young girl and her reflections regarding her place as a woman in French society from birth on, her parents' expectations

¹ Thomas 2006:159

which are surprisingly high and free from all sexist overtures against the unavoidable social pressures interlinked with her own insecurities. The book is mainly autobiographical in nature and entitled “Femme Gelée” in French; however, one is intrigued by the title which seems to signify that although a woman is surrounded by many activities like domestic work, professional work, a mother’s duty and so forth, nevertheless she does not get enough space for herself.

The narrative is replete with a number of women who populated the writer’s childhood – her grandmother and her many aunts and great aunts. She delves into the lives of these ancestors to search for a perfect female model, but instead of the “good fairies of the home” she finds disappointing women - with their too-loud voices, bodies “too fat or too flat, sandpapery fingers, faces without a trace of makeup or else slathered in it, with big blotches of color on the cheeks and lips.” Her mother is the only person who comes closest to her idea of an emancipated woman...not because she is perfect but precisely the opposite. She had only one true domestic obsession – intolerance for unmade beds. In her mother’s open and democratic understanding of life, the writer and her father were employed as equal partners and proprietors of a small grocery. It is her mother who tells her that she should be “someone” and also insists on a good grade in school; offering praise for high grades in academic subjects and forgives the low marks in the more traditional feminine pursuits like sewing and conduct.

In such an egalitarian environment one would expect Annie Ernaux to be spared some of the gender biases and expectations

which can be so constricting and imprisoning. “I know,” writes Ernaux: “that I was spared at least one shadow over my youth, the idea that little girls are gentle and weak, inferior to boys and that they have different roles to play. For a long time the only world I know is the one where my father cooks and sings nursery rhymes to me, where my mother takes me out to a restaurant and keeps the family accounts.” (Ernaux, 1995:33)

Through her text with a profound understanding of the society of her times she has definitely depicted women’s internal and external conflicts in her narrative. When one looks at the writer’s depiction of her school days, one finds that the teachers at her school fill the students with stories of the martyred female saints, influencing young Annie and her schoolmates to consider a life of renunciation. She also falls under the spell of a friend named Brigitte, who is ‘boy-crazy’ that: “even star-gazing is turned to good use: if you count nine of them for nine days running, then you’ll dream of the man you’ll marry” (Ibid.).

On the other hand one notices that she suffers under the burden of double standard, in which boys are described as the victims of a “sudden, imperious impulse they cannot control” and girls, who are never expected to suffer such sudden, imperious impulses, must be on guard against boys. In fact, she begins to resent her virginity, “that mute and tiresome scrap of skin” (Ibid.). Just a look of appreciation from a boy makes them thankful. For instance in one of the episodes in the book, when a boy happens to glance rather flatteringly at Brigitte and young Annie, they are humbled and filled with gratitude: “Flattered that he chose us,

when there's so much better around. The murmurs of slaves.[. .]. The discomfort of feeling most alive when seen by boys, when viewed as objects of desire.

At one stage one can see that Annie Ernaux as an adolescent is sidetracked by her sexual urges, the mystery and power of the flesh. In fact she begins to long for her period so that one day she can be a girl who “struts about in a halo of red glory.” Yet she also begins to experience dissatisfaction with her body, and longs to have the body parts of her classmates whom she considers sexually more attractive - her friend Roseline's long, blond hair, Françoise's pretty cheeks, Jeanne's slim frame: “The body under constant surveillance and restraint, abruptly shattered into a heap of pieces--eyes, skin, hair--that must be dealt with one by one to reach perfection.” (Ibid. p.72)

However, the reader finds that when she eventually marries, she finds herself often compromising on her roles, rising to quell the hiss on the stove: “I don't kick, scream out coldly announce well today's your turn ... Just some pointed allusions, some tart remarks... is it really worth jeopardizing our happy times together by fighting about peeling potatoes?” (Ibid. p.138)

Ultimately, when she becomes pregnant, considers abortion, and then affirms her desire to have a child: “Why choose yes,” she writes. As a couple, she supposes, they wanted to “ward off a breakup, to transform what was only chance into fate.” (Ibid.p.144). She surmises that her husband must have liked to see his virility confirmed by their having a child. On the contrary, she wishes him to participate in family life, in bringing up children, which preoccupation she faces mostly by herself -

perhaps even for revenge, to draw him away from his Bach and his studies into the real world of diapers and developmental milestones of the children.

She soon gives birth and Kiddo, as the child is known in the book, arrives, and soon with it follows a nice apartment, furnished ‘fetchingly’, but eventually she feels the profound loneliness of a young mother, left behind to spend her hours: “keeping a mayonnaise from separating, or turning Kiddo's tears to smiles.” For two years, still young, she sees “all the freedom in my life hang by the head of a dozing child.” (Ibid. p.163)

Interestingly, the description of domestic suffocation and self-denial figure in the latter part of the book. The joy that Annie should have felt by the birth of her children is overshadowed by feelings of her envy of her husband and her tendency to devalue anything to do with women's activities - the soufflé, the stroller, the stove. The writer imagines that as time goes by she would also turn into one of the brittle older women she sees from time to time – “...a frozen woman” (Ibid.).

The baffling irony and contradiction in the book is that - while lamenting her life as a wife and mother as shadowed and weak and filled with self-abnegation, Annie however writes on these very subjects with honesty, energy and an intimacy that could only have been the product of a strong, self-assured woman.

Unfortunately, human society has been shaped by patriarchal values since time immemorial! Even today, for basic fundamental rights, a woman has to fight and work much harder than men to get some space and achieve equality. It is only in the beginning of the 20th century, and in many walks of life including some

disciplines that women started enjoying freedom, but this freedom was also limited. However, total freedom was a far cry, our question then is: Did women enjoy any freedom at all? In the novel "A Frozen Woman", the writer, Annie Ernaux has tried to depict contemporary French society in her autobiographical work.

Her novel's title represents her world, the reality of the occidental world. Very effectively Annie has presented her voice, a woman's voice in her work. As her novel progresses one sees that it was considered to be a woman's destiny to be overloaded and overcharged with domestic chores, social pressures, and professional duties etc. which fall mainly in the women's realm as thought by male patriarchy. It was felt that women were born or bound to all these duties since their birth. It is obligatory for them to equilibrate all their duties, wishes and rights without forgetting the dictates of society, their customs and their families.

However, it does not matter from which part of the world a woman comes from; in her narrative one finds the voice of the universal *woman* the voice which portrays the entire feminine world and this aspect finds space in the review of the Boston Globe:

"Annie Ernaux's A Woman's Story can be read as fact or fiction, as a particular story or a universal one. Any way you read it, it's a stunning emotional testament."

The Boston Globe, (Ernaux, 1995 cited in the preface of the book.)

Suffice it to say that one should consider her work as a discussion of the contemporary relevance of writing which operates predominantly in accordance with

Philippe Lejeune's *The Autobiographical Pact* (where the coincidence of name and identity of the author and narrator of the text defines the mode of reading; Lejeune, 1975). If the need to bring women's experience or as it might be of *feminist confessions* into creative writing which led to the blossoming of feminist autobiographies in the 1970s. One can interject here and ask - to what extent does the reading and writing of personal life stories have relevance and a place in feminist studies today?

Autobiography², as we understand is the type of writing in which authors narrate events in their own lives. Thus Autobiographies often want to make sense of incidents in their lives and to communicate an important personal statement about life. They may also want to acknowledge people who influence them.

To any reader and especially as a female reader, Ernaux's narrative stirs the innermost recesses. Whether one reads it as an autobiographical work or as a particular story, it has universal appeal. Any wo/man can relate it with her or his own story or her *voisine's* story. Ernaux shows that through the autobiographical work, an author can not only connect himself or herself with the reader, but also convey his or her thoughts to future generations. Thus while reading Annie Ernaux's *A Frozen Woman*, one gets the feeling that she is attempting to tell the future fe/male generations how wo/men have shaped their lives from the past.

In Ernaux's *A Frozen Woman*, one can find Rita Felski's 'feminist confessional'

² <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-purpose-of-autobiographical-writing> by Florence Moore, Professor at University of New Hampshire, Dec 1, 2017

i.e. an attempt to describe the sub-genre of autobiographical writing which presents as 'the most personal and intimate details of the author's life' in order to create a bond between 'female author and female reader'.³ For Ernaux, it was the need to articulate, convey and explore her own experience of class-based oppression and the losses involved in the process of changing class through education and this prompted her to pen her narratives. Then if class is in many ways Ernaux's prevailing theme, it is never separated from issues of gender and sexuality. In *The Frozen Woman*, notably, Ernaux explores the inter-relationship of these areas of oppression, in a first-person narrative focused primarily on 'clearing the path of my development as a woman' (Ernaux, 1981: 63). Later, in other works such as *A Woman's Story*, Ernaux fascinatingly blends the political and personal motivation in her writing and foregrounds her working-class culture of origin into her writings and more importantly into literature. Capturing the account of her mother's life, where she too is born into an oppressed culture which she wanted to escape from, which in a way prompts her mother to help and groom Annie to feel less alone and artificial in the world of words and ideas which, according to her wishes, has become the writer's means of expression.

In *A Frozen Woman*, one notices that Ernaux is willing to draw upon her experiences and transform it into her writing throwing light on her experience of oppression in terms of Ernaux's working class origins. This in fact becomes important for many of us as

interested readers to identify with the cultural and social exclusions described so vividly in her narrative, especially in a culture where the description of a woman's physical and sexual experiences lead to accusations of *impudeur* (shamelessness). Her work represents a crucial inquiring of gender differentiated conventions. As Ernaux breaks the rules and speaks the unspeakable in a narrative which is largely comprehensible and accessible – it gives many wo/men readers the sense that they can find the words to describe their experiences, identify themselves with these experiences and one is at liberty to do so.

The change of class which is the most important underlying force in the narrative has left Ernaux with feelings of guilt, anger and uncertainty and this dominant theme is prevalent throughout her writings. However, her critics are disturbed by her intertextual rewriting of her past. She uses the first person as a major voice to implicate the reader to take up a position vis-à-vis *A Frozen Woman*.

In many of her works Ernaux's writing focuses on her own experience as a white French woman of working-class origins moving into the intellectual bourgeoisie through education. However, two of her works also reflect Ernaux's move from living in provincial France (Normandy, then Annecy in the French Alps) to the Parisian region, change the focus from her own experiences of oppression in early life, to the many inequalities she sees reflected in her surroundings and dealings, interactions and encounters with others. In these works Ernaux depicts a postcolonial, urban space; a depiction of the new town outside Paris where she lives – and Paris itself. The transition from these entirely

³ Felski, R. (1989): "Feminist Theory and Social Change", in Sage Journal, Volume: 6, Issue:2 (pp. 219-240), May 1, 1989

white *milieux* inhabited previously is a significant one, though it is rarely commented on, by Ernaux herself, or by her critics. Her trajectory is from a monocultural working-class cultural space, into a double life between white middle-class settings, and finally into a life, as a well-known writer, of travel and constant exposure to new cultures, and a home in the 'multicultural' Parisian region.

In general, Ernaux's very clearly feminist writings have had a mixed reception from the French academic and literary establishment. Though she has won literary prizes, been received by Mitterand, interviewed regularly on TV and radio, her books reviewed in almost every national and provincial paper - yet, she is accused of destroying literary style, of threatening literature itself, of self-indulgence, of immodesty and 'obsession with sex', of living in and writing about the grim suburbs of Paris, of being provincial, of writing books that are too short, too long, too depressing and so on and so forth. It is interesting to note that this innovative and challenging writer was not included in early anthologies published in English of French feminist writing. The discussion of her works in anglophone universities is mainly confined to French departments. We notice that while Ernaux's work is theoretically grounded, it is also essentially concerned with popular culture, both contemporary and past. Perhaps this is not the kind of *Frenchness* that appeals, or translates, or is given wider significance. There have certainly been Anglophone feminist rejections of her work on the grounds of its failure to provide positive role models for women, and perhaps Ernaux's insistence on class has led at times to a suspicion that she does not pay enough attention to gender (see Thomas,

1999, pp. 141–142). Even so we see that her writing opens up new literary forms, and addresses not just discursive, material, but also cultural differences that make up the very being and the existence of women.

We have remarked that the interest in writers such as Cixous and Irigaray so noticeable in the anglophone academic world is arguably less in evidence in France. In recent years, for instance, we have noticed that Irigaray has found a more receptive audience for her ideas among Italian feminists. Writers like Margaret Whitford argue that countries like Holland and Italy are most interested in her works as a philosopher (Whitford, 1991). Perhaps, this reduced power is in part only of the refusal of some of its protagonists to fight for equality, which has had less influence in France, both in terms of mainstream academia and the general public. Despite the dominance of *écriture féminine's* view of French feminism, Ernaux has received more academic attention in the French departments in Canadian and British universities.

Although here we are clearly unable to provide a comprehensive idea of the reception of Ernaux as a writer in France, Ernaux is increasingly referred to in anthologies, and her works in universities and schools. Her brevity, plain style, and subject texts such as *Positions* and *A Woman's Story* have ensured their importance as texts which in turn has led to the publication of scholarly and critical commentaries in Britain and France. Possibly Ernaux's works are linked to the dominant theme of her writing: process of changing class through education which at the same time, she was for much of her

adult life alienated from her parents, both plagued by the guilt of her social migration and deeply ashamed of her origins. Perhaps the highpoint of Ernaux's literary recognition in France, apart from the initial acceptance of her first novel by Gallimard, one of France's most prestigious publishing houses, was the Prix Renaudot which she won in 1984 for *Positions*.

In conclusion, one can say that Ernaux's work impede the mind of the reader through her powerful portrayals and narrative skills in the process throwing light on the cultural and social exclusions visible during her time. Despite Ernaux's distrust in the Parisien intellectualism and her choice to work outside the margins, she no doubt figures prominently in the French media. The public is fascinated

with her writings as she questions the conventional definitions of both femininity and the literary. Her use of unadorned and direct language entwined with her own personal experiences may be a troubling presence in French contemporary culture and literary establishment whose view of women in literature as people unable to produce intellectual writings has not been flattering. Thus, Ernaux's clearly feminist perspective has had a mixed reception from the French literary circles. Though her work is concerned with popular culture, both contemporary and past but her writings are theoretically well grounded. According to Thomas (1999) maybe her insistence on class has led at times to a feeling that she does not pay enough attention to gender.

Bibliography:

- Brah, A. & Phoenix, A. (2004): 'Ain't I a woman?' Revisiting intersectionality", *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 5(3).
- Charpentier, I. (1994): *De corps à corps: réceptions croisées d'Annie Ernaux*, Politix, pp. 45-75.
- Day, L. (1990): "Class, sexuality and subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*", M. Atack & P. Powrie (Eds), in *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press.
- Ernaux, Annie (1981): *La Femme gelée*, Gallimard : Paris
- Moi, T. (1987): *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Blackwell: Oxford & New York.
- Thomas, Lyn (2006): "Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness: Finding a Place in the French Feminist Canon?", in *Journal of Gender Studies*, Volume 15, Number 2, July 2006, pp.159-168.
 - Thomas, Lyn (1999): *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, Berg: New York.
- Whitford, Margaret (1991): *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge: New York.