

# THE BIPHASIC NARRATIVE IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S "A WOMAN'S STORY".

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## ABSTRACT

*A Woman's Story* is Annie Ernaux's powerful autobiographical novel which deeply recounts the memoirs between a mother and a daughter, youth and age, and dreams and reality. Upon her mother's death from Alzheimer's, Ernaux embarks on an intimidating journey back through time, as she seeks to capture the real woman, the one who existed independently from her, born on the outskirts of a small Normandy town, and who died in the geriatric ward of a hospital in the suburbs of Paris.

This paper explores the bond between the author and her mother, insubstantial and unshakable at once, the estranging worlds that separate them, and the inescapable truth that we might lose the ones we love. In this quietly powerful tribute, Ernaux attempts to do for her mother the greatest justice she can: to portray her as the individual she was. She writes, "*I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world.*" P.37. Thus, we notice that Annie Ernaux's writing is sharp and she makes no effort to soften the truth which is probably why it is so touching.

**Keywords:** Alzheimer, motherhood, autobiography, Ernaux, geriatric.

## INTRODUCTION

Annie Ernaux was born on 1 September 1940 in Lillebonne, but spent her childhood in Yvetot, Normandy. Coming from a modest social background, she studied literature, became a certified professor, and then a graduate of modern literature. Annie Ernaux published her first novel *The Empty Cabinets* in 1974. Crowned by the Renaudot Prize in 1984 for *The place*, she is notably the author of *A Woman's story* (1988), *Simple Passion* (1992) and *The Shame* (1997)), published by Gallimard. Annie Ernaux, assuming a literary approach intensely marked by sociology, has entirely redefined the genre of autobiography and brought a breeze of curiosity and freshness to French writing.

*A Woman's story* by Annie Ernaux is a story that explains the deep bond between the author and her mother. It takes around the journey of her mother as a wife, as a mother and more importantly as a woman. The woman of the title in this work is the author's mother who was born in a small town in Normandy and finally was a victim to Alzheimer's disease. The death of the author's mother influenced her to go back in time and recall all the memories of her mother, the one who was an independent woman, a passionate reader and altogether a strong mother who strived hard to give her daughter something better. Annie has explored the immense bond between her mother and herself, the difficult situations they have been through and the bitter truth of losing someone you love the most.

## HER LIFE WITH HER MOTHER

For the author, her mother meant the most. Her mother was always with her. The gift of writing and reading was passed on to her from her mother. She got to know that self-improvement and knowledge were an important aspect of life only because of her mother. She was highly influenced by her mother.

When her mother was in forties, there was a sudden change in her behaviour. Her mother used to call her "*beast, a slut and a bitch, or told her she was unpleasant.*" p.44. Her mother used to hit her by slapping and punching, because she wasn't in a proper state of mind. But then she would also caress Annie by taking her into her arms. She also used to receive gifts like toys, stationary and books from her mother. Annie's mother was very particular about her health and education as her mother's concern is seen as she has mentioned "*Her overriding concern was to give me everything that she hadn't had.*" p.45. Her mother taught her how the real world is and how to learn to survive in this world. The author used to satisfy her mother's

thirst for knowledge by telling about her school and the subjects that she used to study. She and her mother used to read the same books. Her mother made her to explore different places and taught her various skills like climbing up the cliff etc...

During her adolescence, she had a kind of repulsion with her mother and this phase was difficult for both of them. Even when Annie got her first period, there was an acute embarrassment felt by her as her mother didn't like to see her grow because she wanted her to be a child, as innocent and pure she was.

Annie Ernaux was also let down by her mother sometimes during certain stages of her life. Her romanticism was smacked by her mother. She couldn't share her unhappy love affair with her mother as her mother didn't want her to fall for anyone; at the same time she was also scared if her daughter would fall prey to the bad world or the fake people and also didn't want her to get hurt. For her better life, her mother was able to bear the pain of separation while Annie had to go to London for her higher studies. While she was away, she used to see her mother in a simpler light, without any shouting and violence. She always longed for her mother *"For many years, my relationship with her consisted of a series of homecomings."* p.59.

She belonged wholly to her mother before her marriage. After Annie's father's death, her mother started to live with her. She used to take care of Annie's house and her kids. Annie was relieved of all the household chores. Her mother did not like being dependent on her. Hence later on, she moved to her own flat in Yvetot and when Annie visited her, she used to find reasons so that Annie could stay longer with her and spend time.

After Annie Ernaux's divorce, her only support was her mother. She was happy to go with her as she will be able to take care of her mother just like she did when she was a child. Later on, her mother was shifted to a hospital as she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and this was way too difficult for Annie. As the disease progressed, her mother used to forget things, to the extent that she forgot Annie and her kids. Annie was petrified to look at her mother's miserable conditions. When she used think about her mother in this condition, she *"pictured her with the expression and the features she'd had before, and never with those of the woman she had become."* p.90. Annie never thought that such kind of a disease would change her mother completely; she wanted her to have the look as she had before.

Annie also used to bring her pastries, chocolates and take care of her mother like a little girl. She did not want her mother to die. She felt like *"I needed to feed her, to touch her and to hear her."* p.91. In this circumstance, she was ready to sacrifice anything to look after her mother as her mother did for her. One Sunday, she visited her mother with some forsythia and kissed her goodbye without knowing that she won't be alive the next day. The unanticipated death of her mother made her everything looked alike.

## HER LIFE WITHOUT HER MOTHER

Her mother's death made her cry for no particular reason *'as soon as I awoke, I knew my mother was dead.'* p.15. Annie was very disturbed, she was incapable of doing her daily activities. She left her hobby of reading. At any occasion, while doing any kind of work, a thought would hit her mind *"She will never be alive anywhere in the world again"* p.15. She realized as the days passed by, that she does not have to do anything for her mother. She used to feel all alone by thinking *"This is the first spring that she will never see"* p.16. She always used to feel her mother's presence by looking at her in the photographs. Every now and then Annie felt the absence of her mother; she was not able to overcome her mother's demise and could not imagine her life without her mother; she kept realizing the attachment between herself and her mother.

When she used to visit her mother's room in the geriatric unit at Pontoise hospital, she realized *"Someone else has taken her place."* p.93. She couldn't imagine herself in her mother's condition. She also dreamt of her mother every now and then. She had a feeling *"which puts my mother's illusory presence before her real absence-is no doubt the first stage of healing."* p.94.

Annie's imagination of her mother's presence and making herself happy made her to slowly overcome through the tough phase of losing someone important in life forever; someone who was so close to her and will never come back in her life made her feel left alone.

People and relatives shared many memories and stuff related to Annie's mother to her, but Annie was not in a state to know any such things and cherish them after her mother's death, as it made her feel that she missed those beautiful moments with her mother when she was alive *"Now that my mother is dead I wouldn't want to learn anything about her that I hadn't known when she was alive."* p.95. Annie felt lively when she used to spend time with her mother, their bond was awesome. Annie understood that she has lost the one who gave her the gift of life, the one who introduced her into this beautiful world, *"I shall never hear the sound of her voice again. It was her voice, together with her words, her hands, and her way of moving*

*and laughing, which linked the woman I am to the child I once was. The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed.” p.96*

## CONCLUSION

As a personal narrative, Annie Ernaux reconstructs her deceased mother's past in her attempts to keep her alive. No matter that this novel is bittersweet in its account of intense grief and its tender tribute to her mother. As in all her writing, Ernaux does not sugar coat. How can she, when what she is seeking is the truth about her mother? Consequently, in this novel Annie tries to re-live her life she had with her mother when she was alive by recalling and writing her beautiful memories she had with her mother. Thus this paper showcases the two phases of Annie's life; one completely related to her mother and the other without her mother. Her writing clears the idea that she had such pure and unbreakable yet awesome bond with her mother which is irreplaceable by any means.

## REFERENCES:

- A Woman's Story by Annie Ernaux
- <https://www.annie-ernaux.org/>

