



Research Paper

## Re-memembering her Mother: Annie Ernaux's *I Remain in Darkness*

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses Ernaux as an unorthodox writer of autofiction, refusing to be constricted with traditional literary genres. I Remain in Darkness is an account of Ernaux's unmediated and unedited response to her mother's illness along with repeated mirroring and projection of the author's self on the mother. The record of the author's pain at such witnessing is punctuated by her reflections on the process of writing this event. She unapologetically exposes the vulnerable relationship between the two and powerfully brings forth the intimate yet social aspects of this relationship. The work is the ultimate act of memorialisation her mother, where Ernaux's vocation as a writer and her relationship with her become inseparable.*

**Keywords:** autofiction, re-membrance, gender and writing, class and gender.

Received 12 Feb., 2025; Revised 22 Feb., 2025; Accepted 24 Feb., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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When in 2022, Annie Ernaux at the age of 82, became the first French woman to win the Nobel prize, the conservative newspaper *Figaro* shunned the decision of giving the award to the “high priestess of autofiction” for a “lifetime spent writing about herself,” and the *Le Nouvel Observateur* ridiculed her as “Madame Ovary” (March, 2024). The literary orthodoxy in France has been consistently critical of Ernaux’s style, though in her Nobel Prize citation she is celebrated “for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory” (Nobel Prize, 2022).

Born to working class parents and steadily moving up the class ladder, Ernaux is no stranger to a hostile reception of her writing in France. In several interviews Ernaux exposes the misogyny that undergirds the French literary establishment. She says: “This reaction is specific to the French literary landscape... The truth is, even if this goes unsaid and is taboo, literature [in France] is the preserve of men. It’s not just misogyny; it’s really a cultural institution in France.” (Ernaux.org) For Ernaux, class snobbery is an adjunct to misogyny. Ernaux received harsh criticism from the French literary elite for *A Man’s Place* for depicting her father with unfiltered frankness. Defending her style, Ernaux stood firm in her conviction and refused to be either populist or assume the voice of a victim. She says: “And I was doing none of those things: I was just making statements, observing without sentimentality. And that’s not how people wanted me to write about the working class”.

Ernaux’s working-class parents did not finish school, worked in factories and later bought and ran a café-grocery in a poor cotton mill region. Ernaux’s education and her ascent to the literary elite was a painful process. Her distance from her parents’ class produced feelings of alienation, self-humiliation, and shame in her that runs through her writing. But instead of rendering her disquiet with sentimentalism, Ernaux developed a detached and objective style which is described as flat writing. Ernaux’s aesthetics and literary project make it imperative to read her within the larger context of her working-class background. As a working-class writer, she describes herself as a “class defector”. She is writing into and against the bourgeois tradition of French literature in which the people she grew up with had no voice. In *A Man’s Place* (1983), Ernaux writes about her father and his death, and records her educational trajectory that opens an unbridgeable social chasm between her family and herself. The book opens with an epigraph from Jean Genet: “May I venture an explanation: writing is the ultimate recourse for those who have betrayed” (Ernaux, 1983). Ernaux displays a deeply self-conscious style and deliberately lays bare the contradictions, sensibilities, and psychological contests that produce her truths and representations. Her working-class context informs her insistence on recording the profundity of the ordinary. She fuses the working-class language register with the discourse of the elite thereby doing away with linguistic hierarchies. She positions her writing at the intersection of literature, sociology and history. She insists on recording lived experience with bareness and objective honesty and refuses to fix her form within constricted generic boundaries.

Generically, her writing meshes the autobiographical and the novelistic, expanding the possibilities of both forms and challenging their implicit expectations.

Though none of her works can strictly be categorised as autobiographies, there are obvious overlaps between her protagonists' and her personal life. Her works demand an unflinching link between lived-life and the practice of fiction. Unlike conventional autobiographies, the autobiographical aspect of her writing does not reveal an exceptional individual life, but is presented through an ethnographic dissection of the self in society, embedded in the class and gender matrix. The 'I' in her narratives is an instrument and a tool of inquiry. In the 1960s and 70s when Annie Ernaux started her writing career, the use of the 'I' was a political act, as these were the decades when women writers were asserting their right to tell their stories. Ernaux insists that the more personal a story is, the more socially relevant it becomes. And in Ernaux's writing, the 'I' is not only tells a woman's story but a working-class woman's story who, through her education, transcends her class. Ernaux is preoccupied with her class metamorphosis and her guilt about betraying her parents. Writing for Ernaux becomes a confessional act, an attempt to record and seek salvation for her many transgressions. The subject of writing, as mentioned earlier, is a crucial part of her narratives, a conscious meditation on its diverse functions as a personal and public act.

In 1960, Annie Duchesne marries Phillipe Ernaux and adopts his name. Her marriage and her career as a teacher changes her class status. In *Cleaned Out*, she records how her marriage and education estranged her from her working-class parents and context. She comes to fiction writing consumed with anxiety and diffidence. She recounts how she wrote this novel pretending to write her PhD thesis because she was apprehensive of her husband's censure and ridicule. Interestingly, after the novel was published, Ernaux recalls her husband telling her: "If you're capable of writing a book in secret, then you're capable of cheating on me." Writing for Ernaux is a radical and transgressive act, as she relentlessly probes her life with brutal forthrightness. In the 1980s, Ernaux examined the lives and deaths of her parents in two separate volumes, *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place*) and *Une Femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story*), and later, *I Remain in Darkness* (1997).

Ernaux's relationship with her mother is the most challenging aspect of her writing. In this essay, I focus on *I Remain in Darkness*, which is a bare account of her mother's struggles with Alzheimer's disease and the complex intersections, overlaps, and identification that she experiences with her mother as she witnesses her cognitive decline.

The book is a series of journal entries Ernaux wrote over the last two and a half years of her mother's gradual mental and physical disintegration. The book is an intense, sore, and intimate account of the author's experience as a witness to her mother's decline. She keeps this journal private for almost a decade, and finally publishes it in 1997, without editing or changing its form. In the Preface to the work, Ernaux says that she has attempted to keep to the original form of the journal as a record of the disorientation and distress she experienced at the time. By choosing not to aestheticize the mood and moments through literary tropes, Ernaux retains the rawness of her mother decline, her challenges and distress through those years, in all its immediacy. Her writing is propelled by just one overarching thought: "she is my mother." She had ceased to be the woman who had always ruled my life and yet, despite her misshapen features, because of her voice... she remained my mother, more so than ever" (Ernaux, 1997, 8).

The title of the work, *I Remain in Darkness*, Ernaux says "was the last sentence my mother wrote" (8). While Ernaux's mother was living with her, she jotted down things her mother said in scraps of paper. She admits feeling compelled to write about her mother- details about her mother's body, her words, her demands, her desperation. In the process of writing, Ernaux moves fluidly between the past and present, between herself and her mother, fused and separated. She recalls being unmindful of the form and write hurriedly, overwhelmed with emotions, without consciously framing her thoughts (6). E. Nicole Meyer in an insightful study of Ernaux's relationship with her mother and the act of writing avers, "Ernaux revisits and poignantly relives the agony of her mother's degradation into Alzheimer's-induced dementia. This disease gradually robs her mother of her memory, of her voice, and eventually of her life" (Meyer, 2002, 83). Meyer goes on to suggest that one of the intentions of Ernaux's writing is to restore her mother's voice which she gradually loses as her illness progresses, and finally when she dies. By writing her mother Ernaux gives her a narrative order that is destroyed by her debilitating mental degeneration (36). The journal becomes the archive of her mother's last years and the last record of her fading voice.

While writing her first work on her mother, *A Woman's Story*, Ernaux had agonized over the content, choice and sequence of words that could appropriately convey the truth about her mother. (Ernaux, 2004, 31-32). Though unsure of what "truth" really means, she remembers that as a writer, organizing her narrative in order was of crucial significance. In the Preface to *I Remain in Darkness*, Ernaux recounts her complex and failed attempts at writing about her mother. While her mother was in and out of hospitals, fading gradually, Ernaux began writing about her mother's life with deep feelings of guilt. She was tormented by the fact that she was writing about her mother as a young woman while witnessing the reality of her passage toward death. After her mother dies, she tears up the draft and starts working on *A Woman's Story*. But this story did not contain the notes and journal

entries she had written during her illness. She says: "Somehow, I felt I hadn't the right...In a strange way, the diary of those hospital visits was leading me to my mother's death. (7).

The work records Ernaux's unmediated and unedited response to her mother's illness along with repeated mirroring and projection of the author's self on the mother. The record of the author's pain at such witnessing is punctuated by her reflections on the process of writing this event. Faced with the mother's looming death and gradual loss of memory, the diary becomes a space where her mother's voice, even as it fragments into illegibility, is preserved. The diary paradoxically both holds time as a record of the present unfolding, and simultaneously, is also an account of temporal fluidity where the past, present, and future exist in a seamless continuum. Watching her mother struggle evokes memories of the author's past, and often the mother-daughter become indistinguishable- "Because of time passing, because of the past. And because of the body which I see is also mine" (15). "No woman will ever be this close to me; it's like she is inside me" (17). "As she walks into the dining room, I am "her". (17). The identification is not only felt by her but is expressed by her mother too. For instance, in one of her visits, she is told by the nurse that her mother talks about her relentlessly. At other times, Ernaux affects distance and recognises that she is not like her mother, though they are entwined viscerally. Robin Tierney argues that Ernaux's attention to the physical body and its role in forging memory performs a critique of the invisibility of the body so often found in writings of the everyday. Emphasising and writing the body allows Ernaux to evoke emotions that arise from the permeable border between the public and private worlds. (Tierney, 2006, 113).

The author alternates between acute pain and numbness as a participant witness to her mother's agony. The mother-daughter dyad has been the subject of many studies (Gilligan, 1982; Chodorow, 1978; Collins, 1987; O'Reilly and Abbey, 2000). In studying mother-child narratives, theorists have warned against daughter-centric bias (Juhasz, 2003; Malin 2000). Critical studies on the mother-daughter relationship bring up the contested issue of authority. In Ernaux's work, especially *A Woman's Story* and *I Remain in Darkness*, she consciously explores questions of genre, identity, and narrative authority. Ernaux is aware that "Writing a book about one's mother inevitably raises the issue of writing (38).

According to Michele Bacolle-Boskovic, in Ernaux's oeuvre, the intimate and the social cannot be neatly segregated. "For her, the intimate and the social cannot be separated" (Bacolle-Boskovic, 2013, 152). Ernaux's book about her father's life explained her decision not to write fiction. She refused to adopt an artistic approach to his life, and instead chose to discuss his taste, outlook, and events of his life that she shared too. In her first book about her mother, Ernaux reached after an objective style, to record her mother as a woman, without focussing exclusively on her role as mother. The title of the book are drawn from Ernaux's mother's words. The title indicates that the authorship of the work is shared. In *I Remain*, which a testimony of her mother's dissolution, she is aware that- "There is no distance between the two of us. Rather, a sense of identification" (29). Refusing to change the form of the journal retains the sense of this identification and the shared authorship between her mother and Ernaux. She says, "I shudder at the thought of a book about her. Literature is so powerless" (86). In her mother's gradual annihilation and intimations of her death, Ernaux can project her own future. Her mother's state is the prefiguration of Ernaux's life ahead. But it is in the act of writing that her mother's death is both recorded and suspended. And by resisting converting this to a literary work, interestingly, Ernaux is also raising the question of the function of literature.

The work which is Ernaux's attempt at re-membering (Toni Morrison's term) the unforgettable and painful event of her mother's death, she discards the narrative compulsion of creating order and dwells instead on the sporadic moments of lucidity in which she can hear her mother's voice. That voice is also the echo that resonates Ernaux's past. The chronicle swings between contradictory feelings, and Ernaux leaves these uneven creases undisturbed. One of the abiding characteristics of her mother's personality was her compulsion to give without expecting a return. Ernaux says: "She preferred to giving to everyone, rather than taking from them. Maybe to get attention, to be acknowledged?" (67). But during her illness, her mother demands things, and expresses her desire to live with Ernaux. Despite her best efforts, Ernaux is unable to keep her mother with her, as the personal caregiving her condition demanded was beyond Ernaux's capacities. She is tormented with guilt at her failings. The chronicling her mother's last years becomes a compensatory act. "Isn't writing, and my particular style of writing, also a way of giving?" (67). *I Remain* can be read as Ernaux's effort at restoring or preserving her mother's voice against the blinding silence of her death. The search for her mother's love brings her to the pages of her journal. This, she says, "is not literature I am writing" (88). Writing was "a way of holding on to life" (89).

In one of the entries, after her mother's passing, Ernaux thinks that perhaps someday the journal could become the material for a book where she would order the chaos of feelings. She hopes the chronicle of her pain and loss, with time, could be reunited in a story once the pain dulls. Her own record terrifies her. The entries post her mother's death express her inability to read her own writing- "Saturday, 12...I am terrified to reread what I have written" (91). The finality and unbearable pain produced by her mother's death, makes Ernaux aware of the limitations of fiction. Ernaux has, throughout her writing career, rejected the fictional tropes of bourgeois literature

where she found no space for her class experiences. The conventions and framework of fictional narratives is inadequate, Ernaux realises, to hold the agony of the simple sentence- “Mummy is dead” (93). She realises that she could never express the immensity of this event in a fictional work.

As mentioned earlier, the title of the work comes from the last articulate sentence her mother utters. By placing this at the heart of her narrative, Ernaux symbolically shares the authorship with her mother. The chronicle of disintegration, however, paradoxically becomes a testament to the unbreakable bond between them, as Ernaux’s voice, body, and emotions intertwine with those of her mother. The act of witnessing the loss of her mother, and the consequent trauma and could not be contained within a neatly ordered narrative driven by a singular consciousness.

This journal, instead, becomes a tableau of unresolved emotions: shame, guilt, and pain, which Ernaux refuses to sanitize. Finding herself in the unfamiliar terrain of bourgeois life, Ernaux experiences an intense sense of social alienation, which creates a split within herself. For Ernaux, this rupture gives rise to a distinct writing style—what she terms as “writing from a distance”. Yet, this detached narrative stance proves insufficient when she documents her mother’s illness and death. Nevertheless, Ernaux’s relentless self-examination and raw honesty remain evident throughout. Her trauma, her observations of her mother’s decline, and the complex relationship between witnessing and writing come together in *I Remain in Darkness*. The work is the ultimate act of memorialisation of her mother, where Ernaux’s vocation as a writer and herself/mother become inseparable.

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