
Reading Fe/male Shame: Vocabulary of Guilt in Writings of Annie Ernaux

Harshita Singh, Priya Jain

Vivekananda College, Delhi, India

Email-2020489@vivekanand.du.ac.in

Abstract

Erica Johnson and Patricia Moran explain in the introduction to *The Female Face of Shame* how, "In contrast to guilt, which is evoked by an action or behavior about which one feels badly and for which one might hope to make amends, shame resides so deeply within one's sense of being that it cannot be absolved." The shame assigned to femininity can be located in their bodies, which traverses the individual confines of self and becomes the sprout of familial and cultural contexts.

The male gaze often creates a sense of shame in women, as they internalize the message that their worth is based on their ability to conform to male standards of beauty and desirability. This paper will mainly focus on Annie Ernaux's 'A Girl's Story' to explore the conditioning of young girls to feel ashamed of their desires.

Reading Female/male Shame: Vocabulary of Guilt in Writings of Annie Ernaux

Annie Ernaux, the first French woman to win a Nobel prize for literature, is often described as the writer of memory, shame and History. Although most of her works carry the theme of shame and class, Ernaux repeatedly points out how she as a young girl would often examine herself through the male gaze and also felt burdened by the “heavy gaze” and “obtrusive stare” of “H”, “pinning her down”, making her feel “guilty of misconduct”. The paper will be analyzing the connection between female shame and male gaze in this novel along with her subsequent emancipation and self-realization later in life.

Ernaux is known for her flat writing style in which she presents the truth as is instead of embellishing it. Considering this writing style, the paper will attempt to examine the lexical shift of the description of the sexual acts and desires from being “rough” and “brutal” to “fading” and “dissolving”. The paper aims to look at 'Shame' from a critical lens and dissect its origins and its consequent and unbalanced shift towards femininity through male mechanisms

Keywords: Shame; Feminism; Gaze; Annie Ernaux; vocabulary

The paper intends to take *A Girl's Story* by Annie Ernaux (née Duchesne) as principal text to explore the theme of shame induced in women by the male gaze.

Why are we talking about gaze, a *visual* element, in a literary piece? The male gaze creates a sense of shame in women, as they internalize the message that their worth is based on their ability to conform to male standards of beauty and desirability, that is the *social male gaze*. Ernaux attempts to negotiate through the oppressive male gaze in her auto/biographical work and find the path to self-realization through the labyrinth of shame and humiliation. Since 1971, “there has been a rapid increase in the literature on the psychology of shame, thus redressing a long-standing neglect of the subject,” writes shame theorist Helen Block Lewis.¹

This paper intends to analyze the effects of male gaze on a woman's physical as well as literary body.

As one is already aware of the discrimination faced by women writers in the past, it can be established that apart from social male gaze that forces women to feel shame, there exists also a literary male gaze that has been forcing women to mimic the writings of men to be taken seriously, publish anonymously or under male pseudonyms and still be excluded from literary canon. Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" talks about how a woman writer has to learn the act of looking back and establish a critical direction as an act of survival to refuse the 'self-destructiveness of a male dominated society'. Rich identifies how women always have to be on guard, even while writing of their 'own selves', about how it will be perceived and interpreted by the men.²

Therefore, by opting for this book and author, this paper aims to examine both the literary and the social male gaze and its profound effect on women. French feminist critics also attempt to decode the relationship between social structures and language, particularly the language used in literature. They believe that masculine language is dominant in literature and feminine language, like women in social structure, is suppressed. This is due to the fact that patriarchy has appropriated the world and thus, linguistically colonized the women. These critics implore women to write through their bodies in order to topple the hierarchies, "hierarchies of mind over body, reason over emotion, power over vulnerability."³ Helene Cixous says "woman must write woman"⁴ and Luce Irigaray calls for a need to "find our body's language"⁵ because the men have claimed to know the women but not their bodies; without a language of their own the women will remain deprived of their movements, their desires paralyzed in eternal slumber.

While reading Ernaux write about the body and desire, one can notice how the eighteen-year-old "Girl of '58", Annie Duchesne, dreams of her first sexual encounter, always analyzing herself through the male gaze. The expression of her own desires is negligent and during the actual sexual encounter she does not receive the spiritual catharsis of love but rather remains intoxicated by the event held captive by disbelief at its existence. Ernaux points out that she often attempted to write about her past self but never managed to do so. She says that, "I too wanted to forget that girl. Really forget her, that is, stop yearning to write about her. Stop thinking that I have to write about this girl and her desire and madness, her idiocy

and pride, her hunger and her blood that ceased to flow.”⁶ It is clear how the author had to face multiple internal struggles before putting the shame of that summer to paper. The readers can note her hesitation to write a truthful account of her past and publish it for all the eyes in the world to read and critique. This brings us to the fundamental questions this paper will attempt to answer: Why is the "Girl of '58" made to feel ashamed of her desires and her body? Why are female autobiographies ridiculed for their emphasis on body? Why is a novel whose title is *A Girl's Story* filled to the brim with navigations of shame, guilt and disgust?

For that we need to understand the weight *Shame* carries. In Kaufman's psychology, a role of developing conscience and identity is ascribed to shame. He writes, "The optimal development of conscience depends on adequate and appropriately graded doses of shame. Conscience will misfire because of too little or too much shame"⁷. His psychology describes the internal damage that shame inflicts on a person's psyche because it functions like a self-inflicted wound that has no physical remedy. The relativity of our sense of self, both universal and particular, with the alienation one faces in society leads to *Identity Formation* and "answers to the questions, Who am I? and Where do I belong?"⁷ resurface steeped in shame. It is no surprise Silvan Tomkins refers to the experience of shame as "sickness within the self, a sickness of the soul"⁸ and thus when Ernaux writes about shame, it is a way to heal. She is creating a language for shame and providing tools for translating inner states into awareness. Instead of creating hiding places Ernaux is confronting shame and exorcizing the contempt it carries in the process.

Ernaux has been an unfamiliar name, only recently brought into the spotlight after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022 and visiting India on the account of France as guest country of honor at the World Book Fair 2023. Although she has published over 20 books since 1974, there exists a paucity of criticism and discussion of her works beyond England and France. Her works carry, familiar for English readers, a confessional and autobiographical element, occasionally blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Still she finds herself excluded from academic spotlight and even while researching for this paper, the authors have observed the lack of research material available for Ernaux's works, particularly for this book *A Girl's Story*.

Ernaux is known for her flat writing style in which she presents reality without much embellishment. She says that she wishes to write the kind of books her father, who had received limited education, could easily read. However, this had led to her marginalization from literary canon as she's "too accessible and modest". Siobhán McIlvanney notes in her study of Ernaux's works that "...the very reasons for her popularity with a more general readership – the accessibility of her writing, its apparent simplicity and candor, its representation of everyday experiences – are exactly those which would seem to have discouraged a more academic appreciation of her work, particularly in France." ⁹

This brings us to the genre of autobiography which, when written by men, is often applauded as a great work of self-reflection but the moment a woman writes one, it is not shown a similar admiration. Instead, there is a special show of contempt reserved for these autobiographies of women, as is evident in ostracization of Ernaux from literary circles despite her own background in academia. Linda Anderson explores the feminist subject in an autobiography and discovers that many of the autobiographies written by women opt for a degrading tone when talking about their "shameful" life experiences. A woman's autobiography is then "seen as regressive for women, co-opting them back into a familiar dynamic where their acts of self-assertion can be allowed to exist socially or psychologically only if contained within a rhetoric of self-abasement and denial." Anderson goes on to note the obsession with a single self in the genre of autobiography and how it is prone to falling prey to the essentialization of the varied experiences of women hailing from different times and places. She highlights the problem of pronouns arising from this problem of identification and the hesitancy to use a collective noun and thus the prominence of the individual "I" gains ground. She also comments on the complete trust on the writer's memory when they are writing an autobiography but memory, as we all know, is not concrete and singular but fleeting and fluid.

¹⁰

Ernaux at once complies with as well as defies the norms of a traditional autobiography. She begins by focusing on her past self, but she mixes fact and fiction in her other works as well. When focusing on her past self, she gives space to others – her parents, friends, the boy with whom she had a short fling, the roommates, the ones who taunted her at the camp, and the authors she has read – since all these interactions contribute to her journey of self-discovery. Ernaux believes these interactions with the 'Other' play an important role in formation of the self and thus, in her works, private and public are often intertwined to an

extent that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the two. On the correspondence of shame with the 'Other', Helen Block Lewis asserts, "Shame is the vicarious experience of the other's negative evaluation. In order for shame to occur, there must be a relationship between the self and the other in which the self cares about the other's evaluation." ¹¹ In such a 'doubleness of experience' the increased sensitivity to the 'Other' renders the self-alienated and invisible. At times, so intense is this disillusionment with self, that the other could be an imagined appearance and yet the judgment remains accompanied with burning shame.

Since in *A Girl's Story*, Ernaux is writing about her past self after several decades, she recognizes that she has come so far that she no longer identifies with this "Girl of '58" and therefore, instead of using "I", she distances herself by using "she" for this girl and keeping the "I" for her present self. She takes into account the ever-shifting aspect of memory and does not trust it blindly. She documents her research, recollections, along with the points where her memory starts fading and shifts back to being Ernaux the author from Annie of '58. In fact, she also recognizes that the shame of the events forced her to actively forget them, instead of initiating a process of preservation. Therefore, memory too becomes a victim of the male gaze that has been modified by the emotion of shame.

Ernaux attempts to give a realistic representation of life through her flat writing. She is not looking to write something that is difficult to understand but on the contrary, her aim is to make the readers aware of the "taboo" subjects like abortion, sexual explorations, death and disease, while focusing on women and the middle-class. In *A Girl's Story*, the protagonist experiences a profound sense of shame and self-doubt. She feels that her worth as a person is tied to her ability to conform to patriarchal standards of femininity, and she is constantly aware of the ways in which men are looking at her and evaluating her. Kate Millet writes how the situation between the sexes throughout history has been based on a phenomena defined by Max Weber as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination.¹² The idea of female shame thus stems from the idea that women are objects to be evaluated and looked at based on their appearance and sexual desirability. Ernaux writes on the first page of this book:

There is no submission, no consent, only the stupefaction of the real. All one can do is repeat "This can't be happening to me" or "It is me this is happening to," but in the

event, “me” is no longer, has already changed. All that remains is the Other, master of the situation, of every gesture and the moment to follow, which only he foresees:

Then the Other goes away. You have ceased to interest him. He abandons you with the real, for example a stained pair of underwear. All he cares about is his own time now, and you are alone with your habit of obeying, already hard to shake: alone in a time bereft of a master. (Ernaux 2020, 6)

Ernaux clearly demarcates the patriarchal boundaries set on the body and life of a woman. She points out how she as a young girl would often examine herself through the male gaze and also felt burdened by the “heavy gaze” and “obtrusive stare” of “H”, her first “lover”, “pinning her down”, making her feel “guilty of misconduct”. The male gaze of “H” triggers a sense of physical as well as mental suffocation in the young girl on the following morning of their encounter. Shame theorists like Nathanson and H. Lewis bring forth the idea of gaze in context of shame. They talk about “a moment of exposure” which can induce shame, as one can see Ernaux buckling under the weight of exposure of her insecurities to indifferent eyes of the men in camp. H.Lewis emphasizes the “self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other” aspect of shame. This is exactly what Ernaux brings about in this novel, the struggles of a young girl to come to terms with her body and sexuality which the society has conditioned women to view with shame, self-hatred and loathing. Another example of conditioning can be seen in this instance- Annie Duchesne remembers how, “From the moment he invited her to dance, she has done everything he has told her to do. There is no difference between what she does and what happens to her...She had no right to abandon this man in the state he was in, raging with desire, all because of her. It was unimaginable that he had not chosen, elected her over all the other girls.” (Ernaux 2020, 29) This girl feels the responsibility of continuing to stay with this man not out of love or pleasure but out of the norms of patriarchal society, her sense of self is a product of the commercial value that the man’s selection provides her.

She says “In my memory I am unable to find a single emotion, let alone a thought. The girl on the bed watches things happen to her that she never would have imagined happening an hour before. That is all.” (Ernaux 2020, 29) She is merely a spectator, not an active participant, despite her internal consent. Though the girl is not protesting, she is neither participating, because the man never asked but simply assumed her consent. This ambiguity has driven critics to label this as “complicity” in the sexual act. She clearly states that “I do not

know exactly when she inwardly consents to losing her virginity. It is not from resignation; she wants to lose it, collaborates.” (Ernaux 2020, 29) This collaboration is, however, not equal at all. Her Erotic desire gets reduced to a pornographic one under the man’s influence as she is led to the “false belief that only a suppression of the erotic within their lives and consciousness can make women be truly strong,” but as Audre Lorde claims, “that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power”.¹³

She never got an orgasm at this camp this summer, neither with “H”, nor with any other man. She feels that she might get it if the man would be gentler but she is ashamed to voice her desires. Ernaux writes:

“He repeats that he wants her to come. She cannot: he handles her sex too roughly. She could perhaps if he caressed her sex with his mouth, but she does not ask him to do so. It’s a *shameful* thing for a girl to ask. She only does what he wants.

Her submission is not to him but to an indisputable, universal law: that of a savagery in the male to which she would have had to be subjected, sooner or later. That this law is brutal and dirty is just the way things are.” (Ernaux 2020, 30)

The same gaze propels her into making herself more attractive – the standards of beauty were set by another slim and blonde girl in the camp. Despite quitting the camp after summer, she continues to be haunted by these standards of beauty and develops an eating disorder which led to irregularity of her periods. When her mother learns of her daughter’s periods not occurring, she is horrified and even restricts her social interactions until she “gets her periods again.” But why does a rejection of the gendered female role of reproduction frighten the mother? It is because women have been indoctrinated by patriarchy to face either ostracism or self-destruction when they realize the enigma of femininity. The mother’s obsession with her daughter’s periods reinforces Freud’s phallogocentric idea of the oedipal completion of the man that leaves behind the castrated woman who seeks for substitution or replacement in bearing children.

The French girl’s obsession with physical desire might be difficult to understand. But for this young girl who has no experience of a secular world, confined to the private spaces of

her parental home and the religious institution of Saint-Michel convent school, this “secret of secrets”, held a key to freedom because her sexuality has undergone the utmost oppression, made oblivious to the point it becomes an alien subject even to her. The author defines the girl who is about to enter the summer camp with an extract from Andre Gide, “Each one of my desires has enriched me more than the always-deceitful possession of the object of my desire” (Ernaux 2020, 22) which explains why the fantasies of a sexual encounter was a more enriching desire for the girl rather than the actual materialized desire where, “She does not feel anything. She is subjugated by his desire for her, a man’s desire, wild, unbridled ... She has no time to get used to his total nudity, his naked male body” (Ernaux 2020, 28). The binary of the master and his servile/submissive object of desire is why Kaufman says, “Woman’s deathlike rigidity serves to keep feminine ‘masculinity’ in a state of repression”.¹⁴

However, after the summer of ‘58, she felt the “desire to forget H, the summer camp at S, the shame I had felt, since my year studying philosophy and reading the works of Simone de Beauvoir, at having been a “sex object.” (Ernaux 2020, 90) But through her language, one can notice the subtle shifts from sexual innocence to sexual experience in *A Girl’s Story*, “I think I have come as close as possible to the reality of it, which was neither horror nor shame, only an obedience to what was happening, the lack of meaning in the things that happened.” (Ernaux 2020, 30) After a few years and various sexual encounters which leave her more and more disillusioned, she comes to the realization that neither her desires are something to be ashamed of, nor are they the only means to attain “freedom”. Later in this book, she alludes to the borderline kleptomaniac tendencies of her and her friend, which they believed made them rebels, “We did not think of ourselves as delinquents, but simply as girls who were more intrepid and open-minded than others.” (Ernaux 2020, 92)

Towards the end of the book, Ernaux declares that she “no longer had anything to do with the girl of ‘58.” (Ernaux 2020, 100) She has made peace with her past, the shame, and she has achieved what she intended to while writing this book, i.e. “Explore the gulf between the stupefying reality of things that happen, at the moment they happen, and, years later, the strange unreality in which the things that happened are enveloped.” (Ernaux 2020, 101) But despite all the claims of marketing that Ernaux’s writing is universal and accessible, it was still a challenge for a reader in 21st century India. The authors of this paper then looked for more works from the Indian subcontinent to unravel the theme of female shame.

The short story *Aurat Zaat* by Manto brilliantly shows in fewer words how the woman is “ashamed” only in presence of a man but is perfectly comfortable with the “shameful” things in the absence of male gaze. Another story of Kamala Das, titled *The Kept Woman*, explores the idea of “master” as mentioned in the very beginning of the novel by Ernaux. Mona, the protagonist, has become so disillusioned and foreign from her individual identity that she says, “Perhaps I am mad, but I like this madness” (Das 2010, 101).¹⁵ The idea of her master abandoning her is so repulsive to her that she fabricates a vision of his crying like a baby and dying of love sickness in case she gets married to another man. However, in reality it is the master who has left her behind and she is unable to function with a possibility where her actions are not guided by a sense of servility but rather her individuality. Kristeva argues, “In cultures that develop rigid gender distinctions that subordinate women to men, women will seem irrational, uncontrollable, needing restraint and confinement”¹⁶ and it targets the female body and its primal status as abject.

The wonderful novel of Rushdie, called *Shame* examines the emotion in various contexts including illicit affairs, breach of feminine inner quarters of a home, refugee situation and so on. He writes, “When children spoke of Mahmoud the Woman they meant Mahmoud the Weaking, the Shameful, the Fool. ‘Woman,’ he sighed resignedly to his daughter, ‘what a term! Is there no end to the burdens this word is capable of bearing? Was there ever such a broad-backed and also such a dirty word?’” (Rushdie 2011, 57)¹⁷ He highlights here the duality of the term and the association of shame with a particular gender. Taslima Nasreen too has written a book of the same name, but in an entirely different socio-political context, resulting in a ban on the book in Bangladesh.

Conclusions

There are various works, particularly women’s writings, dealing with the idea of shame throughout the world. However, what remains a mystery is whose shame is this? Blanche Cook states, “History tends to bury what it seeks to reject”¹⁸ and certainly this ‘guilt and disgust’ of shame is not an innate feeling that women are born with (resonating with De Beauvoir’s idea of one not being “born” but “made” a woman). Is it then the shame of inadequacy that men feel for being unable to give a woman an orgasm, resulting in a transfer of shame to the woman for having no desires at all? Is it the same shame that makes women hesitate before they write,

and ostracizes them after they have completed their writing? What is, in your opinion, shame's capacity to act as a veil, a masquerade, a denial of subjectivity to the 'Othered/Second Sex'?

Jacob Bronowski writes, "Our experiences do not merely link us to the outside world; they are us and they are the world for us; they make us part of the world".¹⁹ Following that, our reading of Ernaux's *A Girl's Story* establishes shame as a "multi-layered experience" which Kaufman elucidates as an individual, family and cultural phenomenon. The various examples taken up for discussion showcase how in each culture the sources and targets of shame may be distinct in nature. Women often have a shame-saturated relationship to their physicality which is apparent through Ernaux's account. However, throughout the novel, there is a move from feeling shame as a grotesque spectacle to its rectification as a resolved past. Ernaux finds her peace and is able to recount a tale of the gendered construction of shame through her vocabulary of guilt. It is a valiant attempt at transgression that allows her the agency of 'self-expression' and asserts how it is possible and even necessary to break away from the gendered fabrications of shame.

Works cited

1. Lewis, Helen Block. *The Role of Shame in Symptom Formation*. Psychology Press, 1987.
2. Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English* 34, no. 1 (October 1, 1972): 18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/375215>.
3. Weil, Kari. "French Feminism's *Écriture Féminine*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, 153-71. Cambridge University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807069.008>.
4. Cixous, Hélène. 1975. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Feminisms*, January, 347-62. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_21.
5. Irigaray, Luce, and Carolyn L. Burke. 1980. "When Our Lips Speak Together." *Signs* 6 (1): 69-79. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493777>.
6. Ernaux, Annie. *A Girl's Story*. Seven Stories Press, 2020.
7. Kaufman, Gershen. *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-based Syndromes*. 1989.
8. Tomkins, Silvan S., and Irving E. Alexander. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Duke UP, 1995.
9. McIlvanney, Siobhán. *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. Liverpool University Press, 2001.

Reading Fe/male Shame: Vocabulary of Guilt in Writings of Annie Ernaux

10. Anderson, Linda. "Autobiography and the Feminist Subject." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, 119–35. Cambridge University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807069.006>.
11. Lewis, Helen. "Shame and the Narcissistic Personality." Jan. 1987, psycnet.apa.org/record/1987-98141-003.
12. Millett, Kate. 2016. *Sexual Politics*. Columbia University Press.
13. Lorde, Audre. 1978. *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. Crossing Press.
14. Kofman, Sarah. 1985. *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press.
15. Das, Kamala. "The Kept Woman." In *The Kept Woman and Other Stories*. Om Books International, 2010.
16. Johnson, Erica L., and Patricia Moran. *The Female Face of Shame*. Indiana UP, 2013.
17. Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. Random House, 2011.
18. Cook, Blanche Wiesen. 1979. "'Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition." *Signs*, July. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493659>.
19. Bronowski, Jacob. *The Identity of Man: By J. Bronowski*. 1965.

Author's bio-note

Harshita Singh completed her graduation from Vivekananda College, University of Delhi in June 2023. Her research interests range from gender studies and popular fiction to metaphysical poetry. She is currently exploring the exhilarating domain of comparative world literature, reading works from all over the world. She is currently employed as English Language Assistant in France for 2023-2024 session.

Priya Jain is pursuing her undergraduate degree from Vivekananda College, University of Delhi. She is exploring the endless field of research and her current fixations are Feminist and Queer Theory. She writes poetry and enjoys reading thought-provoking books that border on absurdism, existentialism and nihilism.
