

Annie Ernaux's Writing on Mother-Daughter Relationships from the Perspective of Postmodern Feminism

Xinran Zhang¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China

ABSTRACT

Annie Ernaux's works delve into the mother-daughter relationship from a postmodern feminist perspective, particularly in her novels "A Woman's Story", "I Can't Walk Out of My Night", and "The Long Years", showcasing the multiple dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship. Current research mostly focuses on traditional narrative structures, neglecting the role of postmodern narrative techniques in portraying mother-daughter relationships. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing Annie Ernaux's three novels and revealing how her non-linear narrative and fragmented-memory narrative techniques challenge traditional narrative patterns, revealing emotional entanglements, power struggles, and value differences between mother and daughter. In addition, the work emphasizes the profound influence of social and historical background on the mother-daughter relationship, and realistically reproduces the intimacy and conflict between mother and daughter through a simple and natural language style. Therefore, postmodern feminism not only redefines the expression of mother-daughter relationships, but also provides a new perspective for understanding female identity in modern society and a new theoretical framework for contemporary women's literature research.

Keywords: *Annie Ernaux, Postmodern feminism, Mother-daughter relationship, Non-linear narrative, Personal memory.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise and development of the feminist movement in the 20th century, the study of women's literature gradually established its indispensable position in the literary world. Under the profound influence of postmodern feminism, the brushstrokes of female writers not only capture and reflect gender concepts at that time, but also contribute rich textual resources to the study of gender issues. In such an academic atmosphere, Annie Ernaux, as the most influential female writer in France in the second half of the 20th century, has attracted worldwide attention for her unique exploration of issues such as women's status, gender identity, and mother-daughter relationships in her works. Especially her novels "A Woman's Story", "I Can't Walk out of My Dark Night", and "The Long Years", through exquisite and complex narrative techniques, showcase the multiple aspects of mother-daughter relationships, providing new entry points for examining and interpreting

mother-daughter relationships from a postmodern feminist perspective.

Mother-daughter relationships, as a core issue in women's studies, have long been deeply explored by scholars in various disciplines. However, existing research mostly focuses on traditional sociological and psychological frameworks, and the interpretation of mother-daughter relationships from a postmodern feminist perspective is relatively limited. Chinese and foreign scholars' research on Annie Ernaux's works mainly focuses on, firstly, exploring themes such as family, gender, and identity, such as Hou Nan's "The Alienation of Women in Annie Ernaux's Works" and Zhou Xi's "A Study of Maternal Identity in Feminist Theory"; The second is to analyze the narrative techniques of works from the perspective of narratology, such as Shen Xinjie's "Memory Rewriting: A Modern Narrative of Annie Ernaux's 'A Woman'" and Peng Yingying's "Who Am I? — The Unnamed Narrative in Annie Ernaux's Social Autobiography", Guo Yumei's "Annie Ernaux's

Pursuit of 'Reproduction of Reality' and 'Inner Exile' - A Review of the Creative Characteristics of Annie Ernaux's Female Autobiographical Novels", and so on. However, the application of postmodern feminist theory to the in-depth study of mother-daughter relationships in Annie Ernaux's works is not yet sufficient. Therefore, this academic gap provides exploration space for the research in this article. This article aims to explore the significance and value of the mother-daughter relationship in the postmodern feminist perspective through the analysis of "A Woman's Story", "I Can't Walk out of My Dark Night", and "The Long Years", providing new perspectives and thinking paths for the study of mother-daughter relationships and the development of feminist theory.

2. POSTMODERN FEMINIST THEORY AND MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

2.1 Overview of Postmodern Feminism

2.1.1 The Development and Main Viewpoints of Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism is a feminist movement that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, closely integrated with postmodern theory. The emergence of this trend marked the third wave of the feminist movement.¹ As Michel Foucault emphasized in his theory of power, "Power is not concentrated in a particular institution, but operates through a network of countless micro relationships at various levels of society." This concept of power makes postmodern feminism more inclined to criticize grand theories, advocate theoretical models of small-scale local theories, emphasize the reality and power dynamics of social construction, and believe that gender is not biologically determined, but constructed by culture and society.

Postmodern feminism is closely linked to the previous two feminist movements, and is a relationship of theoretical evolution and practical deepening. The first feminist movement occurred in the late 19th century and reached its peak in the early 20th century, with its core demands focused on fighting for women's suffrage, employment rights, and education rights.² The second feminist movement,

which followed closely, surged in the 1960s and 1970s, echoing the civil rights, counterculture, and anti-war movements of the time. It expands the scope of struggle to multiple levels such as marriage, family, employment, political participation, and childbirth, covering a wide range of issues from abortion rights to social welfare.³ However, postmodern feminism has brought about a significant shift in perspective on gender issues, deeply deconstructing the mainstream theories of the previous two feminist movements. Therefore, postmodern feminism emphasizes differential politics, values the diversity of differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and gender orientation, and advocates a diverse and inclusive social model.

Overall, postmodern feminism, based on the inheritance of the previous two movements, provides new perspectives and methods for understanding and addressing gender issues, emphasizes the complexity and diversity of gender, and promotes the development of feminist theory and practice.

2.1.2 The Way of Postmodern Feminism Deconstructing Traditional Mother-Daughter Relationships

Postmodern feminism poses a profound theoretical challenge to the deconstruction of traditional mother-daughter relationships, particularly in terms of role positioning, power structure, and emotional bonds, through in-depth reflection and criticism.

In terms of role positioning, postmodern feminism questions and challenges the solidification of gender roles, advocating for the liberation of mother-daughter relationships from the constraints of traditional frameworks. It opposes viewing mothers only as symbols of sacrifice and dedication, and daughters should not be limited to a single path of becoming "virtuous wives and mothers". Judith Butler's theory of gender performance provides a theoretical basis, as she believes that gender is a product of social and cultural interpretation, an illusion created through repeated gender performances, rather than a fixed biological essence. At the same time, it advocates gender diversity, encourages mothers and daughters to transcend the boundaries of binary gender, and move forward together on the path of gender equality, making mother-daughter relationships an important force in

1. See Wang Miao, The Origin, Development, and Contemporary Impact of Postmodern Feminism. *Theory Horizon*, 2007(1): 79-80.

2. See Sun Shaoxian, Feminism. *Foreign Literature*, 2004 (5): 48-56.

3. See Sun Shaoxian, Feminism. *Foreign Literature*, 2004 (5): 48-56.

promoting gender equality and eliminating gender bias.

In terms of power structure, postmodern feminism questions the authority hierarchy in traditional mother-daughter relationships, supports the elimination of this authority, promotes sincere dialogue between mothers and daughters based on equality and respect, and achieves balance and sharing of power. This viewpoint of postmodern feminism has received support from some theorists. For example, postmodern feminist theorist Ros Gill pointed out that women are no longer just passive, silent, and subject to male gaze, but have become active and eager subjects.⁴ This viewpoint helps to understand the power structure in mother-daughter relationships, pointing out that power is not one-way, but can flow and redistribute between both parties. Postmodern feminism also focuses on how power is exercised and manifested in daily life, including micro power in mother-daughter relationships. It believes that by recognizing and challenging these micro powers, traditional power structures can be gradually changed, promoting more equal and healthy relationship development. Through this approach, postmodern feminism provides new perspectives and solutions for power structures in mother-daughter relationships.

In terms of emotional bonds, postmodern feminism has re-examined the emotional expectations in traditional mother-daughter relationships. In traditional mother-daughter relationships, emotional bonds are often endowed with high expectations, such as maternal love and filial piety. Postmodern feminism advocates breaking through these emotional shackles and establishing a healthy emotional relationship between mother and daughter on the basis of sincerity and equality. Meanwhile, postmodern feminism emphasizes respecting and valuing individual emotional experiences. The proposition put forward by postmodern feminist theorist Luce Irigaray to create a language system and female lineage that belongs to women themselves, as well as its analysis of language, body, and emotions, provides a theoretical basis for understanding the complexity of emotional bonds between mother and daughter.

In short, postmodern feminism has deeply deconstructed traditional mother-daughter relationships, revealing issues of power, gender, and identity within these relationships. By advocating for

a new type of mother daughter relationship, postmodern feminism provides new ideas for women's liberation and has a positive impact on promoting gender equality and social progress.

2.2 Literary Expression of Mother-Daughter Relationships

In the evolution of literature, the representation and interpretation of works related to mother-daughter relationships have undergone a transformation from traditional to modern and then to postmodern. In traditional literature, the mother-daughter relationships are often depicted as warm and harmonious, emphasizing the selflessness of maternal love and the filial piety of daughters. For example, Mrs. March and her four daughters in Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" and Mrs. Bennet and her five daughters in Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" in British literature not only showcase the intimate relationship between mother and daughter, but also reflect the expectations of society for female characters at that time.

However, in the modern literary era, works on mother-daughter relationships began to take on more complex forms. For example, the character of Mrs. Ramsey in Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" reflects a deeper understanding of female roles and motherhood in Western culture. In addition, female writers of the 20th century such as Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" and "Ariel" portrayed more authentic mother daughter relationships through sharp confrontations and conflicts.

Postmodern literature further deconstructs the traditional mother-daughter relationship, emphasizing the diversity and complexity of gender issues. For example, Amy Tan's "The Joy Luck Club" showcases the cultural exchange and conflict between China and the West, as well as the separation and identification characteristics in the mother-daughter relationship, through the stories of four mother daughter pairs, ultimately achieving a state of reconciliation. In addition, postmodern feminism emphasizes the diversity and multidimensionality of gender issues in the exploration of mother-daughter relationships, demonstrating a more complex process of power dynamics (how decision-making power, discourse power, and influence are distributed between the two in mother-daughter relationships), providing new perspectives and methods for understanding and addressing gender issues.

In short, the portrayal of mother-daughter relationships in Western literature has evolved from

4. See Huang Yanhua, Yi Lin, Post-feminism Redefined: Realistic Dilemma and Political Possibilities. Sociological Review of China, 2021(1): 220-37.

the harmonious and intimate aspects of traditional literature to the conflicts and confrontations of modern literature, and then to the deconstruction and reinterpretation of postmodern literature, presenting a rich and diverse picture that deeply reflects the deepening of society's understanding of female roles and the development of the times. It demonstrates the unremitting efforts of women in seeking self-identity and expression in the constantly changing social structure.

3. MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S WORKS

3.1 Reconstruction of Personal Memory and Mother-Daughter Relationships

Postmodern literature has taken a crucial step in deconstructing the mother-daughter relationships between traditional and modern literature, with a focus on exploring the diversity and complexity of gender issues. Annie Ernaux's work "A Woman's Story" is a model of profound analysis of mother-daughter relationships in postmodern literature.

In Lidia Ginzburg's non-fiction theory, people can clearly appreciate the concept of "memory is writing". This concept is vividly reflected in Vladimir Nabokov's novel "Desperation", as mentioned in the book: "The real author is not me, but my restless memories".⁵ Nabokov believed that writing is not just a creative and imaginative labor, but also the manifestation of memory under urgent demands. Memory is not calm and objective, but carries emotions and preferences that dominate the writing process. This subjectivity, as stated in the poem by R'radi, is the essence of the moving memory. Therefore, this section will explore the reconstruction of Annie Ernaux's relationship with her mother through her personal memory in "A Woman's Story".

In this work, Ernaux uses the technique of recollection to reshape the image of a mother, surpassing the traditional stereotype of a virtuous wife and mother, and presenting a three-dimensional and authentic individual mother. She expressed her writing motivation as follows: "Now I write about my mother, as if it's my turn to have her born again."⁶

5. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Desperation*. Translated by Zhu Shida. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006, p41.

6. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p24.

This method makes the image of the mother more vivid and closer to real life.

Personal memory plays a crucial role in the reproduction and understanding of mother-daughter relationships. As written in the book, a mother's life is a history full of challenges and struggles. She was born at the bottom of society, but carried a firm dream of changing her destiny. From a worker to successfully running her own grocery store, her mother gained a foothold for the first time in a male dominated society. This is not only a personal victory, but also a subversion of traditional gender roles. In order to achieve social class advancement, she spared no effort and sacrifice, demonstrating the rise and awakening of women's power. She hoped her daughter can enjoy the happiness she dreamed of but never touched when she was young, and for this, she was willing to double her efforts and work hard. As the book states, "My mother is always too busy to cook or take care of the house 'decently'. The button on my clothes fell off, and she always sews two stitches on me one minute before I go to school. The shirt is also ironed on the table one minute before it needs to be worn. At 5:30 in the morning, she wakes up to wipe the floor and unload the goods. In the summer, in front of the store, she also has to weed the garden with roses and so on. My mother always says indignantly, 'I have to do everything.'"⁷ However, despite her best efforts to create better living conditions for her daughter, she gradually realized that these efforts did not make her daughter feel happier.

"A Woman's Story" focuses more on the retrospective of the mother's life, while "I Can't Walk out of my Dark Night" deeply depicts the specific life of the mother during her illness and the author's inner world. This work documents the last two years that the author spent with his mother after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. The two works overlap in content, but have different focuses and complement each other. Together, they present the full picture of a mother's life.

"During the days when my mother was still living with us, I started unconsciously recording her every move. Every night, my son and I help our mother upstairs to rest. I trimmed my mother's nails, and there was dirt hidden under her nails. 'I can't walk out of my dark night', is the last voice left by my mother. I would rather live my mother crazy than face losing

7. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p31.

her." ⁸ Through recollection, Ernaux not only reconstructed the image of his mother, but also reconstructed his relationship with her, demonstrating the ultimate reconciliation of the mother-daughter relationships.

In addition, Ernaux demonstrated the power of memory, using it to connect the past and present, and to connect his mother with himself. She wrote, "It is she, along with her language, her hands, her posture, her walking and smiling habits, who connects the woman I am now with the girl I used to be."⁹ This memory connection helped the author gain a deeper understanding of their past and mother.

In Annie Ernaux's work "A Woman's Story", the author uses memory to process and express emotions towards the mother, which deeply reflects the role and importance of personal memory in the mother-daughter relationships.

3.2 The Influence of Social and Historical Background on Mother-Daughter Relationships

Personal memory is a valuable resource for writing, providing a unique perspective and emotional depth for the work. The historical background provides a broad narrative framework and profound contemporary significance for writing. The combination of personal memory and historical background can stimulate readers' emotional resonance.

In mid-20th century France, against the backdrop of a time of intertwined change and conflict, Annie Ernaux's "The Long Years" delicately connects the protagonist's life scenes through 14 photos spanning over 60 years, reflecting the enormous changes in French society from the end of World War II to the early 21st century. During this period, French women's consciousness awakened and they began to speak out for their rights, but they still faced the constraints of traditional family values, especially the traditional expectations of motherhood.

In this work, the mother-daughter relationships are deeply influenced by ideological trends. As the center of the family, mothers bear the responsibility of shaping and educating the next generation. This role positioning gives the mother an authority in the

family, while the daughter is often in a submissive position. This highly contradictory and tense conflict makes the mother-daughter relationship complex.

Annie Ernaux, in "The Long Years", draws a picture of the evolution of mother-daughter relationships over social and historical stages through profound memories and introspection.

The photo from 1941 records the author's family environment at the time of her birth, presenting readers with the starting point of her childhood. The footage taken in 1949 at the seaside of Sauterville captured the early post-war living conditions and documented the author's holiday time spent with his father. The 1955 photo depicts the author's daily life during her teenage years, reflecting her exploration of personal identity and future. The snapshot taken in the university town in 1963 captured the author's youthful appearance and life fragments, reflecting her yearning for knowledge and freedom.

In 1980, the author's photos in Spain depicted her travels as a mother of two children, showcasing her process of seeking balance between family life and personal growth. In the photo taken in Truville in 1999, the narrator revealed the author's role as a middle-aged mother, as well as her profound reflections and insights on life.

The last photo of Christmas in 2006, as the conclusion of the book, presents the author's reflections on his later years and a retrospective of his life. The book not only records the author's personal growth trajectory - from early dependence and admiration for their mother, to questioning and rebellion during their growth, to understanding and acceptance after maturity, but also reflects the physical and mental changes of women in the wave of sexual liberation, as well as the gradual awakening of gender and class consciousness.

In addition, the novel also depicts important social and historical events in France and even the world in the mid-20th century and the second half, such as World War II and the Hungarian Incident. She delicately explained the impact of these historical events on daily life, such as proposing the concept of time "after September 11th", believing that the era began to be globalized after that.¹⁰ Thus, it outlines in the reader's mind the close connection between the grand historical events and personal life.

8. See Annie Ernaux, *I Can't Walk out of my Dark Night*, Translated by Huanghong. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2023, p12.

9. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p66.

10. See Annie Ernaux, *Long Years*, Translated by Wu Yuetian. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2021, Translator's foreword.

In this work, the emotional entanglement between mother and daughter transcends the realm of private narrative and becomes a prism reflecting the profound background of social history. The book "The Long Years" not only records the emotional journey of individuals, but also reflects broader social dynamics and historical processes, providing us with a new perspective for understanding mother-daughter relationships. Through Ernaux's writing, people can gain insight into how social structures play a decisive role in the formation and development of mother-daughter relationships.

3.3 The Complexity of Self-identity and Mother-Daughter Relationships

As a cultural practice, writing not only provides readers with a way to reflect and examine the real world, but also promotes the exchange and collision of ideas, thereby advancing and innovating social consciousness.

There is a common view in the Western philosophical tradition that regards women as products of male fantasies rather than independent subjects. Simone de Beauvoir sharply pointed out in "The Second Sex" that "women are the second sex, the 'other' beyond the definition of men".¹¹ Under this patriarchal discourse, the situation and self-identity of women have been deeply impacted and questioned. This section will explore the importance of female self-identity through Annie Ernaux's profound analysis of the mother daughter relationship in "A Woman's Story".

In the context of patriarchal culture, being a mother is the "only valuable destiny for women", and motherhood is the core of becoming a female identity and the main way for them to gain value in society. Traditional beliefs hold that female identity is closely linked to the role of a mother, and that "understanding a mother is understanding a woman".¹²

Firstly, Annie Ernaux's maternal grandmother had the potential to become an elementary school teacher, but her parents opposed her leaving the village because they firmly believed that women leaving home would bring misfortune. Her grandmother was meticulous in her budgeting and can sustain the family's livelihood with minimal resources, ensuring

that children can maintain dignity even in poverty. She was extremely frugal, never wasting any goods, and proficient in the way of survival in poverty. Her lifestyle reflects the profound imprint left on women by the patriarchal society.

The traditional social concept holds that "for a woman, marriage is a matter of life and death, and the key to changing her own destiny."¹³ Under the domination of this concept, women's position is fixed within the family, and their position within the family is determined by their role as mothers. However, Ernaux's married mother was not bound by household chores. Despite coming from a working-class background, she always worked hard to change her social status. She opened a shop and became a businessman, enthusiastically dedicating herself to her career and actively seeking to improve her social status.

In the dilemma of female self-identity, individual psychological factors also play an important role. Although social norms made her want to "try to follow the requirements of public opinion and be a 'reliable female worker'",¹⁴ the mother did not take on the role assigned to her by social expectations, just as the mother in her youth had already demonstrated. In addition, in an era of pride in having multiple children and a male dominated social system, women were seen as machines for giving birth as mothers, while Annie Ernaux's mother only had one child. Therefore, in Ernaux's childhood years, "her mother was very young and beautiful. She dyed her hair, loved to laugh, and liked to sing while ironing clothes". "She was fashionable, and often applied powder, lipstick, and perfume".¹⁵ Her mother set an example for Annie Ernaux through her actions and attitudes, making her realize that women can transcend traditional roles and pursue their own individuality and freedom.

Annie Ernaux's mother placed great emphasis on her daughter's education and even sent her to boarding school for further studies. She strived for language standardization in her daily life, avoided using dialects, and strives to learn etiquette, remembering trendy knowledge and habits. She firmly believed that improving her social status first

11. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Translated by Zheng Kelu. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014, Introduction part.

12. See Liu Yan, *A Theoretical Reader in Motherhood*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2000, p4.

13. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p18.

14. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p17.

15. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p26

requires learning knowledge, as she often said, "Knowledge arming the mind is the most beautiful decoration."¹⁶ She was eager to share her learning achievements with her daughter and even took her to visit historical sites and museums to cultivate her interest in culture. It is not so much the appreciation of art that satisfies the mother, but rather the guidance of her daughter into the world of knowledge and culture that makes her feel more proud and honored. In Ernaux's eyes, a mother is the embodiment of authority and the law. However, behind this authority lies the mother's expectation for her daughter, who yearns to make up for her unfulfilled dream (achieving class crossing) through her daughter's success. It was this expectation that to some extent sparked Erno's later rebellion.

The female characters in Ernaux's works, after experiencing various difficulties, begin to explore and grow themselves. As time passed, Ernaux believed that the romantic qualities in his mother had completely disappeared. During their adolescence, the mother-daughter relationships began to break down, leaving only arguments between them. "At that time, people couldn't talk about 'sex'." "My mother never talked to me about anything related to this, and I never asked her about it because curiosity itself was seen as the beginning of depravity and decadence."¹⁷ Therefore, during Annie Ernaux's first menstrual period, her mother did not say a word to her on how to use it. Ernaux's mother did indeed refuse to consider her family as her only career in the pursuit of self-identity, but she still vaguely cast the shadow of "Charlotte (an image of daring to pursue herself)" from "Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table" onto her. She occasionally acts as a "nanny" in a patriarchal society, but as a mother, she has lost the physiological sense of "motherhood" and only has the social and ethical sense of "motherhood".¹⁸ There are intimate moments between mother and daughter, such as mothers sewing clothes for their daughters and telling their own stories. There are also times of alienation and estrangement, such as when the enthusiasm and patience shown by the mother in running the store contrasts sharply with her silence and indifference in the family. The coexistence of

intimacy and alienation reflects the complexity of the mother daughter relationship.

With the rise of the second wave of feminism and the impact of social change, Annie Ernaux gradually realized her independence and self-worth as she grew up, and began to resist her mother's authority and control. She began to disdain social customs, religious activities, and money. Her biggest wish at that time was to leave this home and attend high school in Rouen and university in London, in short, to escape her mother and pursue her own studies and dreams. This kind of resistance is also a response of the daughter to the dynamics of power. And as Annie Ernaux became more mature and independent, entering the marriage hall, the power dynamics between her and her mother gradually changed. Ernaux began to have more autonomy and decision-making power, while his mother gradually stepped back into the background and became a supporter and backing for her daughter. Her mother once said that if she lived with Ernaux, she could still help take care of the house. As for Annie Ernaux, she felt a great sense of guilt and guilt when she thought of her mother. "We live in a 'big bourgeois house', we already have a second child, and our mother can't 'enjoy' anything."¹⁹ In the process of changing power dynamics, both mother and daughter are striving for balance.

Annie Ernaux's works "A Woman's Story" and "The Long Years" delve into the issue of female self-identity. The delicate depiction of the mother-daughter relationships contains unique insights and profound connotations, providing us with a new perspective for understanding the issue of women's identity in modern society.

4. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ERNAUX'S MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP WRITING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POSTMODERN FEMINISM

4.1 Narrative Strategy and Structural Analysis

Annie Ernaux portrayed the emotional bond between mother and daughter through the reconstruction of personal memory in her works, delving into the influence of social and historical backgrounds on this relationship, as well as the

16. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p33.

17. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p36.

18. See Zhang Chuanxia, *A Study on the Survival Theme and the Strategy of Canon Reconstruction in Margaret Atwood's Works*. Doctor's Thesis of Shandong University, 2014.

19. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p45.

complexity of self-identity and mother-daughter relationships. This multidimensional narrative construction naturally guides people to analyze the narrative strategies she adopts and explore how these strategies cleverly serve the expression and deepening of this theme.

Annie Ernaux's "A Woman's Story" and "The Long Years" use non-linear narrative and fragmented memory strategies to showcase the complexity and multidimensionality of mother-daughter relationships. This section will delve into how Ernaux cleverly employs this narrative strategy in these two works.

Nonlinear narrative is a technique that breaks traditional narrative patterns by using time jumps, time misalignments, and subjective consciousness to reassemble fragments of a story, thereby uncovering new levels of meaning and emotional depth. Fragmented memory refers to the process of presenting characters' psychological states and emotional changes through scattered and disjointed memory fragments, making the narrative more realistic, vivid, and three-dimensional.

Firstly, Ernaux broke the traditional linear narrative structure through the jumping of narrative time. The novel begins with a heart wrenching sentence, "My mother passed away on Monday, April 7th, in the geriatric ward of Pontoise Hospital."²⁰ This sentence directly draws the reader into a sad and heavy atmosphere, while also marking the starting point of narrative time - the death of the mother. However, the narrative quickly jumps to the mother's childhood and other life moments, reflecting the enormous leap of time. Following the opening description, the novel quickly traces back to the scene of its mother's birth in 1906, and this non-linear flow of time constructs the unique rhythm of this narrative.

Secondly, Annie Ernaux cleverly blended the misplacement of time, embedding the dialogue between the narrator and the middle-aged mother into her childhood writing, such as "In her mother's words: 'Until the age of 25, I could still swallow the sea and all the fish in the sea!'"²¹ Especially when recalling her mother's youth, although the narrator "I" was not yet born, the voice and perspective of "I" frequently appear in the book. This temporal misplacement is intentional by the author, creating a chaotic narrative of time. Through this highly subjective time setting, a

modern narrative feature is presented, with subjective aesthetic characteristics of modernist literature.²²

Thirdly, the interweaving of the authenticity and ambiguity of time in the narrative, such as the repeated appearance of narrative time markers without precise directionality in the text, such as "those years, a Sunday, a summer, a certain afternoon...", reflects the ambiguity of "I" in recalling my mother, and also reflects the jumping of narrative time, making the narrative time have both a sense of historical reality and the ambiguity of personal memory. Through this narrative technique, Annie Ernaux successfully infused new vitality into the image of her mother, while also providing readers with a fresh perspective for reading and thinking.

In terms of narrative perspective, Ernaux often adopts first person and third person narrative perspectives, that is, Ernaux combines the protagonist's retrospective perspective (daughter's perspective) in the first person narrative with the witness's perspective. "In the days after my mother passed away, I was deeply saddened. No matter where I was, I often shed tears and couldn't bear the pain of losing a loved one. Without writing about her, I couldn't do anything." This indicates that the narrator of the novel is "I", and it is also the genuine expression of the author Ernaux. It can be seen that the narrator begins to present their inner world and memories of their mother to the reader from a first person perspective. The uniqueness of this novel lies in the alternating appearance of first person and third person perspectives. "My mother once smiled and said to me with a red face, 'Many young men pursue me and want to marry me, but I only care about your father.' Then he added, 'He looks extraordinary.'"²³ This sentence can only express emotions towards one's beloved when spoken by the mother in the third person, making readers feel the rationality of the story. Furthermore, when describing his mother's later years of suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Ernaux not only expressed his concern and pain towards her from the perspective of his daughter; From the perspective of the mother, it also portrays her helplessness and confusion under the torment of illness. This shift and contrast in narrative perspective makes the mother-daughter relationships more three-dimensional and comprehensive. This fusion of perspectives not only allows one to explore their

20. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p3.

21. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p13.

22. See Shen Xinjie, *Memory Rewriting: A Modern Narrative of Annie Ernaux's A Woman's Story*. *The World Literature Criticism*, 2013(17): 19-24.

23. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p19.

relationship and emotions with their mother from the perspective of a daughter, but also allows them to step out of personal emotions and examine their mother's life experiences from a broader social and historical background.

In addition, the use of fragmented memory is the most unique and touching part of Ernaux's works. These memory fragments are like scattered pearls, although they may not appear complete individually, once connected, they can reveal their internal logic and emotional context. In "A Woman's Story", these fragments record the bits and pieces of the mother's life, as well as the moments of warmth or conflict between mother and daughter, making people feel the complexity and reality of the mother-daughter relationships. In "The Long Years", fragmented memories bear more of the changes of the times and the trajectory of personal growth, reflecting the grand background of social history from a personal perspective.

In short, the complexity and multidimensionality of mother-daughter relationships are demonstrated through non-linear narrative and fragmented memory techniques. This narrative strategy gives the work a strong sense of reality and depth, allowing readers to feel the love and contradiction, dependence and conflict between mother and daughter during the reading process. Ernaux's works provide people with a unique perspective to examine and contemplate the significant importance of mother-daughter relationships on the path of life. At the same time, it showcases the modernity of the work.

4.2 *Expression of Language and Style*

Annie Ernaux's literary works are mostly short and concise, striving for restraint in narration and deeply cultivating memories of ordinary trivialities, depicting the subtleties of daily life through delicate writings. For example, "My mother wakes up at 5:30 every day, cleans the floor, loads and unloads goods, and weeds the rose garden. The main theme of my parents' argument is that they both think they do more work." Ernaux used simple and natural language to present the seemingly mundane details that are actually filled with the charm and tension of life one by one. Such as, "People won't say 'I found a worker'. We live in a big bourgeois house, and we have a second child who hasn't been exposed to any light."²⁴ She also often used simple sentences and loose

everyday speech to depict daily life and the inner world of characters in an almost white line style. For example, "I really don't understand why she (the person in the same ward) is still alive despite her poor health, while my mother has passed away."²⁵ Therefore, the simple and straightforward language style and the "wizened and frosty" narrative style in Annie Ernaux's works make her more authentic and powerful in expressing mother-daughter relationships.

In 'A Woman's Story', Ernaux used linguistic contrast and contrast to express the complexity of emotions in the mother daughter relationship. For example, the book depicts the mother's vastly different language attitudes in different social situations. During work, when facing customers, the mother wears a smile and her tone is gentle and kind. However, when the mother returned home and faced family life and intimate relationships, her language style underwent significant changes. In the family environment, especially when Annie's behavior may affect her work, her mother's tone becomes harsh and sometimes even appears rough. This transformation is not only a direct response to Annie's behavior, but also an external manifestation of her inner stress and exhaustion. This intense reaction reveals her conflict and struggle between the dual roles of work and family, while also profoundly revealing the contradictions between mother and daughter due to differences in communication styles and expectations.

The dialogue between mother and daughter often exacerbates their emotional tension. Dialogue is not only a carrier of emotional communication, but also a trigger for conflicts to erupt. For example, the conversation on dressing style shows the dispute between a mother and daughter due to their differing ideas, as well as when "I" wanted to confide in "my mother" about things other than studying. At first, "my mother" was very interested, but suddenly scolded and warned "me" that studying was the most important thing. The interweaving of harmony and conflict can make every communication full of unspoken tension. When Annie told her mother that she wanted to get married and pursue her dreams, although her mother appeared to support her, she was very skeptical in her heart. Therefore, the tension and conflict in this dialogue not only drive the progress of the story plot, but also deepen the understanding of the complexity of the mother daughter relationship.

24. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p45.

25. See Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p4.

4.3 The Challenge of Postmodern Feminism to Mother-Daughter Relationships

By exploring the narrative strategies and structural analysis of Ernaux's works, as well as the expression of language and style, it is not difficult to find that her works demonstrate a unique perspective and profound insight in challenging the traditional mother daughter relationship narrative mode.

Firstly, she broke the narrative framework of the "maternal myth". In traditional mother daughter relationship narratives, the mother is often portrayed as selfless and self-sacrificing, while the daughter is often in a passive accepting or rebellious role. However, in "A Woman's Story", not only is the complexity and vulnerability of the mother as an ordinary person revealed, but also the deep-seated contradictions and conflicts between mother and daughter, such as emotional dependence, power struggles, and differences in values. This narrative style allows readers to see that the mother-daughter relationship is not a single harmony or opposition, but is full of complex emotional entanglements and dynamic changes.

Secondly, she emphasized the influence of social and historical backgrounds. Annie Ernaux's works often examine the mother-daughter relationship within a broad social and historical context. In works such as "A Woman's Story", she revealed the profound influence of social environment on the formation of mother daughter relationships by depicting the contradictions and conflicts between social classes in France after World War II. She believed that environment and experiences can shape a person's personality and behavior, and mother daughter relationships are no exception. This narrative style challenges the overly individualized perspective in traditional mother-daughter relationship narratives, emphasizing the important influence of external factors on mother daughter relationships, making the work more profound and extensive.

Thirdly, the novel narrative technique of 'impersonality autobiography' was employed. Annie Ernaux pioneered the writing style of "impersonality autobiography" in "The Long Years", which blurs the identity and position of the narrator, allowing readers to objectively examine the mother-daughter relationships during the reading process. For example, at a family gathering, the author described the supervision and expectations of children, as well as the appreciation and satisfaction of their independence, demonstrating the inheritance and

development of mother-daughter relationships between different generations. Through this narrative technique, she not only recorded her personal growth process and the changes of the times, but also demonstrated the different experiences and feelings of different social classes and genders in mother-daughter relationships. This innovative narrative approach breaks the single subjective perspective in traditional mother daughter relationship narratives, making the work more diverse and inclusive.

Annie Ernaux's works not only depict the love and care between mother and daughter, but also deeply reveal the complex and genuine emotions of hatred and resentment, disappointment and expectation, understanding and misunderstanding between mother and daughter. As emphasized by Irigaray, there is an inseparable connection between mother and daughter: "One cannot walk without the other."²⁶ Annie Ernaux's works break the narrative framework of the "maternal myth", emphasize the influence of social and historical backgrounds, and use innovative narrative techniques to express complex and diverse mother-daughter relationships, which is in line with the views of postmodern feminism.

5. CONCLUSION

Postmodern feminism's redefinition of mother-daughter relationships emphasizes its diversity, complexity, reciprocity, negotiability, decentralization, and consideration of cultural and social backgrounds, while also focusing on the construction of identity and subjectivity. This redefinition is vividly reflected in Annie Ernaux's writing, starting with the removal of centralized subjects: postmodern feminism emphasizes the multiplicity and fluidity of subjects, opposing the view of women as a single, fixed subject. In Annie Ernaux's works, the mother-daughter relationships are no longer a fixed binary opposition, but a process full of change and fluidity. Daughters and mothers are independent individuals with their own thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Secondly, deconstruction and reconstruction of language have been carried out. Postmodern feminism emphasizes the complexity and diversity of language, believing that language is not only a tool for expression, but also a product of social culture. Ernaux's works use a lot of everyday language and fragmented narrative methods, which break the norms and authority of traditional literary

26. See Liu Yan, *The Beauty of Differences: Irigaray's Study of Feminist Theory*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, pp277-78.

language and allow readers to be closer to the characters' inner world and life reality. The third is a diversified narrative perspective, as postmodern feminism advocates examining women's experiences and social realities from multiple angles. In Ernaux's works, not only does she use the first person narrative style, but she also reflected on herself through different perspectives and flashbacks, showcasing the development and evolution of the mother-daughter bond at different stages of life, as well as the final reconstruction of the bond, confirming the correct direction and strong vitality of the postmodern feminist development wave. Her writing is not only a personal expression of emotions, but also a voice for marginalized groups in society, powerfully expressing their experiences and emotions for the "mute" group. This diverse narrative perspective makes the work more rich and three-dimensional. In addition, postmodern feminism emphasizes critical thinking about traditional culture and power structures. Ernaux's works are filled with profound reflections and critiques on issues such as gender, class, and history. She revealed the roots and harms of social inequality by depicting the subtle aspects of mother-daughter relationships, encouraging readers to re-examine and reflect on these issues.

Annie Ernaux's works, due to their genuine emotions and universal social significance, have become vivid practices of postmodern feminist thought, proving the unstoppable power and profound influence of the feminist movement.

REFERENCES

- [1] Annie Ernaux, *Long Years*, Translated by Wu Yuetian. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2021.
- [2] Annie Ernaux, *A Woman's Story*, Newly Revised Edition, Translated by Guo Yumei. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022.
- [3] Annie Ernaux, *I Can't Walk out of my Dark Night*, Translated by Huanghong. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2023.
- [4] Liu Yan, *A Study on Mother Status*, Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2000.
- [5] Liu Yan, *The Beauty of Differences: Irigaray's study of feminist theory*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.
- [6] Huang Yanhua, and Yi Lin, "Postmodern Feminism Redefinition: Practical Dilemma and

Political Possibility." *Sociological Review*, no. 1, 2021, pp.220-37.

- [7] Shen Xinjie. "Memory Rewriting: Annie·Ernaux's modernity of a Woman." *World Literature Review*, No.17,2013, pp.19-24.
- [8] Sun Shaoxian."Feminism." *Foreign Literature*, No.5,2004, pp.48-56.
- [9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Zheng Klu. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2014.
- [10] Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair*, translated by Zhu Shida. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006.
- [11] Wang Miao. "The Origin, Development and Influence of Postmodern feminism." *The theoretical world* no. 1,2007, pp.79-80.
- [12] Zhang Chuanxia. Grit Atwood's "survival" theme and "classic reconstruction" strategy research. PhD dissertation, Shandong University, 2014.