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Layers of Class Distinction in Annie Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*: A Bourdieusian Analysis

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Abstract
This study explores the multifaceted portrayal of class in Annie Ernaux's autosociobiographical narrative *A Woman's Story*, focusing on both visible and invisible layers of class distinction. The research problem stems from Ernaux's own witness to class distinction at first within her family; between her father's modest working-class values and her mother's aspirational bourgeois outlook and later, within herself; between her roots and the elite world she enters through education. These personal contradictions disrupt the simplistic view of class as purely economic, instead calling for a deeper psychosocial investigation. The study delves into the apparent class distinction through the depiction of three generations: her grandparents, parents and Ernaux's own. It explores that after their social ascent to middle class, her father clings to working-class origin but her mother wants to learn and implement bourgeoisie's norms, values and cultures to keep up one's position. Not only in terms of their contrasting tastes, but class distinction also becomes more apparent in their markedly different lifestyle choices, usage of languages and manners they exhibit. Moreover, the study investigates how class distinction operates at the deeper psychological level of the class immigrants through their deeply internalized experiences of humiliation, inferiority and social dislocation. Furthermore, situating itself within the broader framework of social theory of Pierre Bourdieu, this study concludes that *A Woman's Story* exposes class distinction as a psychological and symbolic burden, not merely economic condition.
Keywords: Distinction, habitus, split-habitus, symbolic violence, tastes

Introduction

Annie Ernaux is one of the pioneer French female writers. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2022 for the "courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory" (*The New York Times* para. 3). Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* is a deeply personal yet sociologically revealing narrative that particularly portrays the life and death of her working-class mother.

Through a blend of personal and social analysis, she captures the nuances of class distinction through her own experiences as well as her witness to family's way of living. Her mother, father and Ernaux herself are the victims of upward class mobility in which they raise their class status but somewhere remain attached to their working-class codes. The research problem arises from Ernaux's observation of class distinction; first within her family, between her father's working-class values and her mother's bourgeois aspirations, and later experiencing by herself, torn between her origins and the elite world of education. These tensions call for a deeper psychosocial reading beyond economic definitions of class. The visible layer of class distinction is reflected through her mother's and father's contrasting tastes, language, manners and lifestyle. Her father's modest way of life, his practical tastes, and manners expose his working-class origin, but her mother tends to maintain one's position of middle-class and bourgeoisie yet making her distinct from those with greater cultural and economic capital.

Ernaux, having acquired proper education from elite school and university, and moved into a different social sphere, becomes painfully aware of these differences, often recognizing them in small, everyday interactions that reveal the rigid boundaries of class. Beyond the operation of class distinction at visible level, the text also explores the invisible weight of class conflict, a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority and social discomfort internalizing by those who have working-class roots even though they experience upward social mobility. She and her family possess class-based anxiety because of lingering internal conflict, shaped by their transition from one class to another. This paper argues that Ernaux's narrative not only exposes visible layer of class distinction but also reveals how inferiority becomes internalized in the dominated fractions shaping their identity, emotions, and one's sense of belonging. By drawing on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction, this paper examines how class distinction manifests in both explicit and implicit ways in Ernaux's text for the purpose of analysis. Even these days, class boundaries remain rigid despite outward progress and social mobility. Today, education often acts as a catalyst for social distinction rather than an equalizer. The significance of my study lies in highlighting how class continues to shape identity not just economically but psychologically in contemporary societies. It also speaks to the psychological toll faced by many intellectuals and students who, through proper education and migration, are uprooted from their class origins.

Literature Review

Several scholars have offered their views on Ernaux's *A Woman's Story* from different perspectives. Margaret Peller Feeley highlights the ambiguity of the book's title, that, the title does not specify whether it is about a particular woman (be it herself or her mother) or representative of a universal female experience. She notes it is ". . . Annie's story, and it is the story of her mother, whose death opens and closes the book . . . [I]t is the story of every woman who grows old and every woman who loses a mother" (46). The text portrays Ernaux's care, love and dedication towards her aging mother who suffers from chronic Alzheimer's disease and has a painful death. From the ambiguous title, Feeley also hints at mother-daughter relationship and universal struggles of them through common experiences of femininity.

Apart from universal struggles and experiences of every daughter who cares for her aging mother fighting with illness and ultimately loses her, as well as every mother who grows old and sick, the text also focuses on representation of struggles of every working-class mother. There is a shift from universal representation to political representation. Siobhan McIlvanney interprets *A Woman's Story* in the light of political representativeness in which the narrator "re-establishes contact with working-class background through the

portrayal of others, whether parents, or ordinary men or women" (108). Through her mother, Ernaux attempts to provide a representative image of socio-political reality of twentieth century France, that is, double marginalization or exploitation suffered by every working-class woman because of patriarchy and class-based oppression. Deep inside, the other not only indicates her mother as she situates her mother within a broader social framework and presents her as representative of working-class figures. As per McIlvanney, Ernaux's mother is situated within a "general category rather than in her familial relation to the narrator" (89). Do not end the paragraph in citation.

But regarding familial ties and intimate bond shared by Ernaux and her mother, E. Nicole Meyer in her review analyzes *A Woman's Story* based on mother-daughter relationship. She suggests that Ernaux's sense of self is in relation to her mother's identity in such a way that, in writing the very book, "she juxtaposes the mention of her own birth with giving birth, conversely to her mother: I was to be born in September./ I believe I am writing about my mother because it is my turn to bring her into the world"(30). Similarly, Meyer explores another twinning identity of Ernaux and her mother which is "generous nature" (35). Her mother prefers giving to everybody and "hope[s] to be loved for what she would give instead of taking from them" and the same trait she develops in relation to her mother even after her death, for which she writes in the text, "Isn't writing also a way of giving?" (36).

Moreover, some other critics have observed the text based on genre. Susan Ireland identifies *A Woman's Story* as genre-blending or hybrid text. She contends that the text seems to bear the feature of a "traditional biography" including narration from birth to death of her mother and "narrative elements of autobiography, fiction, and sociological and historical analysis [which] gives rise to a multifaceted exploration" (115). Similarly, Jennifer Willging suggests a form called "ethnobiography" that Ernaux adopts in which the narrator draws on "not just the personal memory of the mother" but also "the social, economic, and historical forces that shape her life in order to create her mother's story" (99). In addition to hybrid form, Chloe Taylor Merleau examines Ernaux's confessional style in *A Woman's Story* that oscillates between preserving and letting go. She posits that, "Ernaux writes in order to retain her deceased parents and her memories of them . . . [S]he also writes to achieve a form of therapeutic catharsis, to get rid of rather than to get" (68). Furthermore, there is also another reason for Ernaux to confess as she discloses specific mistakes of her past and her realization in her present.

Lyn Thomas and Emma Webb investigate that the text's portrayal of femininity can be wholly comprehended when it is seen in conjunction with the pain and aspirations of working class. They remark that intersecting line of class and gender is at the heart of Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*, "If class is in many ways Ernaux's dominant theme, it is never separated from issues of gender and sexuality" (29). They also state that the text comprises both of her personal and political motives, "Ernaux makes the combination of political and personal motivation in her writing abundantly clear; she is concerned to bring her working-class culture of origin into literature, through the account of her mother's life" (29). In the similar line, Alina Dhakal explores the text through the lens of feminist auto-ethnography, emphasizing on the interplay between personal experiences and broader socio-political structures. She finds out that in the text, there is Ernaux's balance of ethical and moral relations, that is, writing her mother's and her story within the ethical frame of mother-daughter relationship to, addressing all collective working-class women of her mother's generation and community. She comments, "*A Woman's Story* bears the politics of feminist auto/ethnography, that is, personal as political by depicting personal stories are shaped by, and reflect, social conditions" (1) which highlights the fact that Ernaux's text is both personal and political at the same time.

The reviews on *A Woman's Story* for the most part discuss the ideas of ambiguous title, hybrid genre, confessional mode, mother-daughter relationship, universal representativeness, gender-class intersection and personal as political, whereas this study focuses on visible and invisible layers of class distinctions which are portrayed in the text but neglected by above critics. By bringing enough instances and evidence from different markers of class distinction such as taste, manner, lifestyle, language, upbringing and deeply ingrained internalized feeling of humiliation/ inferiority, this study analyzes layers of class distinctions that operate not only in material reality/level, but also in symbolic or psychological experiences/level.

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods in order to analyze the text *A Woman's Story* on the basis of its portrayal of class/social distinction at various layers/levels. Secondary sources including books, journal articles, critical reviews of different scholars and analyses available through online databases are utilized to meet research objectives. The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from social theory of Pierre Bourdieu.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a French sociologist and philosopher known for his influential contributions to social theory, particularly in the study of power, class, cultural reproduction and social stratification. His contemporaries were twentieth century thinkers like Freud, Sartre, Beauvoir, J.L. Austin and Wittgenstein. His works explore how social class and cultural practices shape individuals' identities and life trajectories.

Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, states that "distinction" arises from "the conscious intention of distinguishing oneself from common people" reinforcing the divide between "the dominant" and "the dominated" (39). His concept of "distinction" will be utilized as a major analytical tool to explore the visible layers of class difference across three generations in *A Woman's Story*: from Ernaux's grandparents' working-class life, through her parents' upward mobility, to Ernaux's own assimilation into the dominant class.

In the same book, Bourdieu also conceptualizes "tastes" as "manifested preferences [which] are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" and categorizes it further into "taste of necessity" and "taste of luxury/freedom" (56). These distinct "categories of tastes" will be used to examine how Ernaux's familial and generational shifts in consumer habits, aesthetic preferences, and cultural orientation reflect her mother's and father's varying class positions. Additionally, Bourdieu's external markers of class distinction such as "lifestyle, language, and manners" from the very book will serve as critical parameters that will help to unpack how housing, fashion, reading habits, conversational style, bodily comportment, and even modes of parenting reflect one's socio-economic condition. Together, these theoretical tools will guide the analysis of the visible, external dimensions of class as represented in *A Woman's Story*.

In another book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu defines "habitus" as "The system of dispositions-a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future, an internal law" (82). This concept of "habitus" will be applied to analyze how Ernaux's grandmother, mother, and Ernaux herself embody a working-class disposition that both constrains and propels them-marked by determination to succeed. It will also help to illuminate how Ernaux's mother's thinking, perceptions, and actions are profoundly shaped by her ingrained class disposition.

In his book, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, as per his own experience, Bourdieu puts the concept of "habitus clivé/ split-habitus/ cleft habitus" which represents "a very strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin, [which is] inhabited by tensions and contradictions" (100). This concept of "split-habitus" will serve as a useful

framework to examine Ernaux's psychological rupture as she transitions from her working-class upbringing to elite academic and intellectual spaces.

Also, in his book *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu defines "symbolic violence" as "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victim, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition" (1-2). This concept of "symbolic violence" will be deployed to explore how both Ernaux and her mother become the victims of invisible domination, and internalize shame, inferiority, and guilt. Together, these three interrelated concepts of "habitus, split-habitus and symbolic violence" will provide a critical lens to uncover how class distinction in *A Woman's Story* is not merely a visible economic condition, but an internalized structure that permeates psychological experience, shapes identity, and governs behavior at a deeply symbolic level.

Michael Burawoy's critique of Marxism underscores why Bourdieu's framework is essential for a full account of class distinction. As Michael Burawoy notes, "Marxism did not incorporate a theory of symbolic domination," which limited its capacity to explain how individuals internalize their class position and reproduce it through everyday practices (Burawoy 3). He shows the weakness of traditional Marxism in the sense that it was unable to show how power operates through non-economic domains once the "symbolic world" emerged alongside "distinct cultural and educational fields in the late nineteenth century" (Burawoy 3). His observation is true because Bourdieu's above concepts of "habitus," "habitus clivé," and "symbolic violence" enrich the exposure of psychological and cultural imprint of class operation beyond its material markers.

External (Visible) Layer of Class Distinction

The narrative of *A Woman's Story* reveals a visible account of social distinction that operates across three generations, beginning with Ernaux's grandparents who belonged to the dominated class, rooted in agrarian labor. Their survival depended on low-paid and manual work in rural settings as Ernaux recalls her "grandfather worked as a carter on one of the local farms, and grandmother earned a living from cottage weaving... they rented a small cottage with a courtyard in a rural area" (Ernaux 13). Even after the decline of weaving, her grandmother continued with menial labor: "she took in people's laundry and cleaned offices" (15), and despite poverty, she "managed to feed and clothe her family on practically no money at all" (14). These statements illustrate the family's embeddedness in the working class, characterized by economic hardship. Bourdieu defines a "field" as "a structured social space, [which] contains people who dominate and people who are dominated" (qtd. in William Nicholas Padfield 15), and the rural agrarian field in which Ernaux's grandparents operated clearly positions them within the dominated class.

A modest form of social mobility appears in the next generation, Ernaux's parents, who, though born into the same working-class background, gradually shift into the middle-class. Her mother "left school at the age of twelve-and-a-half [and] got herself a job in a margarine factory where she suffered from the cold and the damp" (18), and her father also "worked at the rope factory. . . left school at the age of twelve to start working in the fields" (23-24). Despite early hardships and continuing low wages, they showed aspirations for upliftment. Their transition from factory workers to small business owners marks a crucial move toward the petit bourgeoisie: "In 1931, they took out a loan on a grocery shop and a small adjoining cafe" realizing her mother's strong dream (27). However, their social ascent was marked by continued struggle; the business was not lucrative enough, and her father supplemented income by working "on building sites" and later, he was hired by a "refinery" where "he ended up as foreman" (27). This intermediate position of her parents aligns with Bourdieu's class schema where "Distinction works with a simple Marxian schema of class: dominant class, petite bourgeoisie, and working class" (qtd. in Burawoy 18), showing how

Ernaux's parents navigated a transitional zone between the dominated and dominant classes.

Ernaux herself represents a generational leap into the dominant class. Her parents' labor and sacrifices provide her with an access to elite forms of education "a private establishment run by nuns," proper medical check-ups, "good shoes, warm clothes, and all the right stationery" (38). Later, she attends "the *lycée* in Rouen and later to London" for higher education (51). Marriage also marks her entry into the dominant field; her husband, "a political-science student from Bordeaux," came from a family that "had been to university" and were "good conversationalists" (55). Professionally, both she and her husband have the same level of education and achieve high-status jobs; she begins "teaching at *lycée*," and he is offered "a senior executive position" (57). These developments point to an acquisition of not just economic capital, but also "cultural capital" which in Bourdieu's term is "convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and [can be] institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications" (qtd. in John G. Richardson 242). Bourdieu's concept of "distinction" incorporates wider inclusion of not only economic capital, but also cultural capital, "Differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes" (Distinction 69), and Ernaux's case illustrates how her mastery expressed through education articulation and rise in social status signals her successful shift into bourgeois space. Her narrative even reflects this rupture and ascendancy: "She [her grandmother] knew all the household tips that lessened the strain of poverty. This knowledge-handed down from mother to daughter for many centuries-stops at my generation. I am only the archivist" (15). Ernaux's generation marks not only material advancement, but also intellectual distance from the survival-based wisdom of her foremothers. In tracing her family's trajectory through shifting fields of class and labor, she not only reflects personal history but also, lays bare the structure of social distinction of the twentieth century French society, which all align with the very mechanics of distinction analyzed by Bourdieu.

In *A Woman's Story*, the external layer of class distinction is powerfully illustrated through the collision of tastes between her father and mother, which are reflective of the different social classes within the same family. Taste operates as an external social marker in which dominant and dominated ones express their positions through their different respective tastes-taste of luxury/freedom and taste of necessity. The taste of necessity is rooted in survival and economic constraint. According to Bourdieu, "taste of necessity" denotes "what is technically necessary, practical (or, as others would say, functional), i.e., needed in order to get by, to do the proper thing and no more" (Distinction 379). Ernaux describes her mother's working-class childhood, with "the six children packed into one room, sharing a bed with one of her sisters . . . the dresses and pairs of shoes handed down from one sister to the next" (16), which starkly illustrates the lived experience of material deprivation. At adolescence, her mother's life was shaped by hardship and self-denial; she worked in a factory and had to give her pay to her mother, with little savings used only to "afford some face powder" and a copy of "Sunday magazine" for herself (18–19), marking a meager indulgence within a world ruled by necessity. Even after economic upliftment, her parents' middle-class lifestyle retains the imprint of necessity: ". . . [T]here was a large courtyard, a cider press, several barns for storing firewood, straw and hay" (34), and her father continued to keep "a few rabbits and hens, and make apple cider, which [they] sold to the customers (35), echoing their agrarian past which is deprived of luxury. Her father's choices further exemplify the working-class taste of necessity; "My father would read only the local newspaper. He didn't go to places where he didn't feel at home . . . He liked gardening, playing cards and dominoes, and doing odd jobs around the house" (41). Also, Ernaux's early experiences of being taken to the "funfair," "circus," and being taught how to "ride a bicycle and recognize the garden vegetables" (45) by her father show his

adherence towards the taste of necessity.

In contrast to her father's inclination to the taste of necessity, Ernaux's mother exhibits a markedly different orientation, one that aligns with what Bourdieu terms the "taste of luxury/freedom". According to Bourdieu, "taste of luxury/freedom" characterizes "the tastes of individuals who are the product of material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity, by the freedoms or facilities stemming from possession of capital" (Distinction 177). Although Ernaux's mother originated from a background of deprivation, her later choices match with taste of luxury/freedom. She actively distances herself from the limitations of necessity and also cultivates in her daughter a disposition associated with the dominant class. This is evident in the outings she arranges: "She took me to Rouen, to see the museum and other historical monuments, and to visit the graves of Victor Hugo's family . . . When she took me to the museum, it wasn't so much for the pleasure of admiring Egyptian vases, but for the satisfaction of helping her acquire the knowledge and tastes that she attributed to cultivated people" (44). Her actions demonstrate a conscious effort to transmit the cultural codes and practices of the bourgeoisie to her daughter.

Moreover, her participation in literary culture reinforces this tendency. Ernaux writes that "She [her mother] read the same books [that Ernaux] read, the ones recommended by the local bookshop" (44), suggesting her mother's deliberate alignment with a literary taste often associated with the educated elite. This is further supported by Bourdieu's insight that "Intellectuals, by virtue of the cultural capital they hold, comprise a fraction of the dominant class" (qtd. in Elliot B. Weininger 166). Ernaux perceives this distinction clearly, noting that "I thought her a cut above my father because she seemed closer to the schoolmistresses and teachers than he did" (45). Their relationship, unlike the playful rapport she shares with her father, is grounded in intellectual exchange: "We shared an intimacy centred on books, the poetry I read to her . . . With him I had fun, with her I had conversations" (45). This duality within the same household reflects Bourdieu's argument that ". . . [T]he dominant fractions always tend to conceive their relationship to the dominated fractions in terms of the opposition between the serious and the frivolous, the responsible and the irresponsible" (Distinction 93–94). Ernaux's mother, in adopting tastes that align with seriousness, intellect, and refinement, distances herself from the working-class culture embodied by her husband. However, her mother's adoption of taste of luxury/freedom is not due to inherited economic or cultural capital but emerges from a desire to maintain and legitimize her petite-bourgeois status after social mobility.

The visible layer of social distinction in *A Woman's Story* emerges clearly through lifestyle choices: Ernaux's father retains a working-class mode of living, whereas her mother strives to embody a petite-bourgeois and even bourgeois lifestyle. Bourdieu notes that "Petit bourgeois are condemned to 'live beyond their means' and to be constantly attentive and sensitive, hypersensitive to the slightest signs of the reception given to their self-representation" (Distinction 345), and Ernaux's mother exemplifies this vigilance in every detail of her appearance and habits. Ernaux describes her mother's preoccupation with refinement in order to fit with bourgeoisie norms and values: "She longed to learn the rules of good behavior and was always worrying about social conventions, fearful of doing the wrong thing. She longed to know what was in fashion, what was new, the names of famous writers, the recent films on release and the names of the flowers in gardens" (43). Her efforts to learn and implement these cultured things in practical life are proof of being socially cultured. Before buying a dress, she would ponder "whether it was chic" (29), and "she loved style, anything dressy" (42). These choices and her secret purchase of "slimming pills" in Rouen "to lose weight" (37) and daily ritual of "powdering her face and dabbing perfume" (33) demonstrate what Bourdieu calls the petit-bourgeois aspiration to bourgeois norms: "The petty bourgeois exhibits a lifestyle born of the combination of an aspiration to

the bourgeois lifestyle" (qtd. in Weininger 134). She tries to maintain her body and beauty with her efforts, time and usage of cosmetic products which is similar to the bourgeoisie women's choices. By contrast, Ernaux's father remains rooted in working-class practicalities; her father "find[s] it more difficult to adapt" to such cultural pursuits and also, while her mother reads "Mauriac, Bernanos, and Colette's scandalous stories" (29).

Ernaux highlights language as a visible site of class distinction: her father, firmly rooted in the working class, does not "care about speaking properly and continue[s] to use expressions in the local dialect," whereas her mother tries to "avoid making grammatical mistakes and choose[s] her words carefully" (41–42). It seems that her mother tries to speak language of bourgeoisie that is grammatically correct and fluent. Bourdieu observes that "The most politically conscious fraction of the working class remains profoundly subject, in culture and language, to the dominant norms and values" (Distinction 396), and Ernaux's mother exemplifies this by occasionally deploying "unfamiliar expressions she had read somewhere or pick[s] up from educated people," even as her father "laugh[s] and poke[s] fun at her 'highfalutin words'" (42). She goes so far as to adopt terms that Ernaux speaks like "break, PE, and prep," expecting from her daughter, who is enrolled at a fine private school, to correct any "wrong word" (43–44). Despite her working-class origin, Ernaux's mother endeavors to master bourgeois language after social ascension, which is a poignant display of social mobility but comes at the cost of losing one's linguistic originality.

The social distinction is also made visible in the text through the markedly different manners of Ernaux's parents, her father's shyness and awkwardness contrasts sharply with her mother's growing confidence. Ernaux notes that "his experience as a factory hand had left him with a shy, gauche manner and somehow he never quite felt at home behind the bar" (29), a demeanor that Yulia Kosova, Elena Ponomarenko and Gerard Siary identify as characteristic of the dominated class: "shyness, seriousness, and subservience are characteristic of ordinary people in contact with the bourgeoisie" (126). By contrast, her mother slowly gains confidence as she "become[s] more 'civilized' because she had to go everywhere (the tax office, the town hall) and deal with suppliers and representatives" (29). She seems bold due to her "formidable voice" (32) and "dominating figure, the one who represented authority" in front of her father (45) as she is "in charge of the store, the accounts, and the orders and reigned supreme over all money matters" (35). Bourdieu argues that "The emphasis on manners, and through them on mode of acquisition, enables seniority within a class to be made the basis of the hierarchy within the class" (Distinction 95), and Ernaux's mother embodies this elevation through her assertive comportment which is an enactment of her petite-bourgeois status.

Internal (Invisible) Layer of Class Distinction

The internal layer of class distinction is evident in her grandmother's, mother's and her own thinkings as well as actions that are profoundly shaped by their working-class dispositions which both constrain and motivate them. Padfield notes, "Ernaux may be the first in her family to have become an 'intellectual', but she is not the first woman in her family to have acquired as part of her 'habitus' a determination to succeed" (76). This drive to succeed is evident in her grandmother to move from agrarian labor to factory work, and in her mother's ambition: "Working in a big factory made her feel civilized compared to the barbarians . . . And yet she realized how removed she was from her one and only dream: to become a shop girl" (20). In turn, Ernaux herself embodies this same ascertainment by transforming their "despair" into creative freedom and proving *A Woman's Story* as "a form of luxury" (58). She frames her act of writing as a luxury born from the very habitus that once imposed scarcity.

Bourdieu defines "habitus" as a "system of lasting, transposable dispositions which,

integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Outline 82–83). Her mother's working-class habitus consolidates her thinking that education and hard work are the only paths to transcendence. Ernaux observes her mother's determination and resilience, "Her overriding concern was to give me everything she hadn't had" (38) and "she was ready to make any sacrifice if it meant a better life for me" (51). For a mother who left local primary school at twelve and knew hardship firsthand, she wants to instill in Ernaux the value of learning: "Everything about my mother—her authority, her hopes, and her ambitions—was geared to the very concept of education" (45) and her opinion revolves around "nothing [is] more precious than knowledge" (43). In her mother's eyes, "rebellion meant only one thing—the denial of poverty—get a job, earn money, and work one's way up the social ladder" (50). So, habitus plays a crucial role to develop a sense of one's place by pouring in thoughts, perceptions and actions in invisible manner accordingly in order to reinforce distinction.

In *A Woman's Story*, Ernaux embodies her own experience as a class immigrant within French society, perpetually straddling between the world she was born into and the one she ascended to. Feeley underscores how education which is intended as a vehicle for social uplift, can paradoxically become a source of division within the mother–daughter bond, noting that "education becomes a gulf to separate them" (48). Ernaux's trajectory from a shopkeeper's daughter to a pupil in a private bourgeois school, to university student and ultimately to an intellectual and wealthy writer severs her last ties to her working-class origins: "The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed" (87). This dislocation and split identity perfectly exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of "habitus clivé," defined as "The tensions and contradiction [that one] attributes to a discrepancy between his/[her] social origin and the élite nature of his/[her] academic pathway" (qtd. in Padfield 102). For the very elite schooling Ernaux's mother arranges to secure upward mobility for her daughter, also instills in Ernaux a sense of estrangement and shame towards her parents' working class milieu. As Padfield notes that "the daughter's adolescent rebellion follows a bourgeois pattern" (76), which is clear when Ernaux begins to view her mother through the eyes of her middle-class peers. She tends to compare her mother's manners and body to their mothers who are "slim," soft-spoken, and call their daughters "darling," whereas she "find[s] [her] own mother's attitude brash", is "ashamed of her brusque manners and speech" (49) as well as her fuller figure. She recognizes and discovers that "there [is] a world of difference between wanting to be educated and actually acquiring that knowledge" which marks her shame-filled adolescence (49). She becomes aware of the limited cultural knowledge her mother possesses, "My mother needed an encyclopedia to say who Van Gogh was . . . My school curriculum was a mystery to her" (49). Yet, Ernaux's dislocation does not end with adolescence. Even after marrying into a more cultured milieu, she again remains a class immigrant as Susan Marson explains, "The text also aims to link the two worlds she herself inhabited, the working-class world of her parents and the middle-class one of her married life" (77).

Ernaux's use of the floral motif in her narrative serves as a powerful cultural metaphor that subtly reveals operation of class distinction at an invisible, symbolic level. While flowers might appear as peripheral details, they have different languages and codes as per class distinction. White lilies symbolize the code of bourgeoisie values in which they are not naturally available and need to be bought from florist. Distinction becomes clear during her mother's funeral when adult bourgeoisie Ernaux recalls: "I asked for white lilies but the florist advised against them: 'They were suitable only for children, possibly for young girls'" (5). At first glance, this may seem like a minor misunderstanding, but it carries deep sociocultural weight. As Regina Lisa Peszat insightfully argues as:

Ernaux discovers that her natural inclination to choose lilies is apparently an

inappropriate choice . . . [O]ne can imagine feeling embarrassed for not knowing the rules of etiquette for choosing the 'appropriate' flowers in this solemn social situation—in effect she is illiterate in the bourgeois language of flowers. The verbal exchange between the two women is a scene that subtly illustrates a clash of codes between two different social classes. (72)

This scene reinforces the idea of habitus clivé, or split habitus, already apparent in Ernaux's adolescent shame toward her mother's working-class mannerisms and her efforts to assimilate into the elite world of her peers. Yet, as an adult who outwardly embodies bourgeois success but her innocent choice of white lilies at the funeral reveals her continued dislocation due to her inability to fully embody the secret codes of the upper class. This shows that Ernaux remains suspended between two worlds, never fully at home in either, further portraying the existential isolation, shame and identity conflict experienced by a class immigrant at deeper level.

Both Ernaux and her mother internalize a deep sense of guilt, shame and humiliation when confronted with individuals who are materially and culturally privileged than themselves which again reveals how class distinction operates at an internal and invisible level. Ernaux's mother praises the refinement of her son-in-law's family regarding their "style, manners and education," yet she remains deeply insecure that, "beneath their icy politeness they [hold] her in contempt" (56). The same internalized sense of inferiority is felt by Ernaux too, "The feeling that she [is]n't worthy of them, a feeling which in her eyes applie[s] also to me" (56). Her mother's unease and subservience becomes more acute when she is at Ernaux's cultured middle-class home wh ere her activities are; her reluctance to "answer the phone when it [rings] next to her," her habit of "entering the living room" only after knocking when "her son-in-law [is] watching football on television" and "always asking for work" to justify her presence even though they treat her nicely (61). The purchase of a "dishwasher," removes her only last role in the household which leaves her feeling humiliated and useless to which she complains, "What am I going to do now?" (65). Ernaux also recognizes this shared experience of discomfort comparing her mother's unease at her own house to her own feelings at teenager when she is "introduced to people 'a cut above [them]'" (62). This kind of inferiority complex resembles to Bourdieu's insight of "symbolic violence" which is a form of invisible domination defined as "The dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural" (Masculine 35). Both Ernaux and her mother are the victims of symbolic violence because they both have come to judge themselves by dominant's class standards and internally accept that social hierarchy and their position in it is legitimate. Their internalized struggles illustrate how class distinction persists in subtle psychological forms, making up the core of invisible or internal layer of class distinction.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has explored the multifaceted portrayal of class in Annie Ernaux's autosociobiographical narrative *A Woman's Story*, focusing on both the visible and invisible layers of class distinction. It has been argued that Ernaux's text not only depicts class as an economic reality but also as a deeply symbolic and psychological experience that shapes identity, behavior, and emotion across generations. Class distinction is clearly visible in Ernaux's portrayal of socio-economic condition of three generations starting from her grandparents (dominated) to parents (middle-class) to her own (dominant). Additionally, visible layer of class distinction is articulated through material and cultural practices such as taste, lifestyle, language, and manners within Ernaux's family in which she witnesses distinction as a result of contrast in all these markers among her father and

mother. Her father's modest, necessity-driven habits contrast with her mother's aspirations for bourgeois refinement, while language use and bodily compartment further mark their differing class positions. Also, the invisible dimension of class unfolds through ingrained dispositions, psychological fracture of being in between two classes, and internalization of guilt as well as inferiority even though domination is not imposed abruptly. This study has found out that class distinction in *A Woman's Story* is not only visible in material reality like lifestyles and tastes, but also deeply embedded in the psyche, shaping desire, shame, and identity. In a global context marked by the rise of identity politics since the 1980s, class as a political and social identity has often been overshadowed by categories such as race, gender, ethnicity and religion. This shift has weakened class solidarity, fragmenting collective struggles among the working and middle classes. Ernaux's *A Woman's Story*, with its singular focus on class distinction, re-centers class as a fundamental structure of inequality and identity. The significance of this study, then, lies in its attempt to reclaim class as a central vector within the broader matrix of identity politics, arguing that a nuanced understanding of class, especially one that incorporates its psychological effects, is crucial to fostering solidarity and advancing social justice in both Western and non-Western contexts. What is at stake is not only how we understand inequality, but also how we build alliances across diverse identities in an increasingly stratified world.

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