

The Loss of Longing, or the Longing for Loss: A Survey of the Literature on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

RINITA BANERJEE

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband, Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. (*Housekeeping* 3)

Ruth's ingress into the canvas of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* is representative of the trajectory of her journey in life: a constant moving in and out of hands that cared, then fled, only to be replaced by another pair – interrupted by what would seem to be fragments of loss and absence, only to be filled by a longing unfulfilled through the presence of another. For Ruth, however, the one loss that separates itself and her experience of it from that of the others, one that curiously never gets mentioned in these first few evocative phrases of her story, is the loss of her mother Helen Stone “into the blackest depth of the lake” (*Housekeeping* 22).

In the end, Ruth's drifting towards and with Sylvie, her aunt, stands to become a solace that incarcerates – perhaps – the longing for the absent mother, the abandonment that she does not expect, the darkness that hides the fragments that are broken, the cinders from the ashes of the dead, the gone, the lost, drowned – those trampled by the train, those asphyxiated under the gluttony of the lake obsessively embracing and persecuting life as if only to crush it like a weak petal under foot. Also wet. Is it that Ruth's sense of loss remains alive in the acute longing for a ceaseless drifting, one that expects loss anyway? Or is loss permeable, erasable? Is transience a freedom from the loss, or deliberate escape from this throbbing wound, and in that for Ruth it is instead an all-encompassing presence dictating her drifting?

The survey of criticism on Robinson's masterfully told tale, while ably appreciative and critical of its handling of femininity, subjectivity, death, tragedy, spirituality, and encounters between the individual and social, as of borders and transience, also reveals interrogations and analysis of the portrayal of loss and longing in the novel. This survey looks closely at some of the paradoxes these interrogations express.

Noting of the narrative voice in *Housekeeping*, George Koles astutely points towards the conscious effort to de-pathologise the yearning for the lost mother through Ruth in the novel, which I read to be perhaps an echo

of what he concludes to be the “central metaphor” of Robinson’s fiction, i.e., “an emptiness that flowers into fullness is response to longing” (138). Drawing from what he calls Ruth’s hope rather than faith that “whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back” (*Housekeeping* 153), Toles sees Ruth’s “lack” to be the “weightiest true element in Ruth’s close-to-weightless-existence” (154). He observes Robinson’s *Housekeeping* as a “dream of flight fulfilled” (152) with Ruth’s emphatic embrace of “contemplation” where nature becomes savior in “the act of losing” (“that mothers have drowned in [the lake], lifting their children towards the air,” *Housekeeping* 193, in Toles 152); what is returned to us, says Toles, is not something we are cognizant of, but we feel, and this feeling renders greater presence to that which is returned to us (152). Contemplation, as it is for Ruth and Sylvie, is severing of bodies from lives thus also distancing oneself from the lack, and this helps ascend that oneness with nature, the spirituality that demands lightness. In this context, Koles discusses how the house where they live and ultimately abandon is representative of nature, one that assures no sense of security at all; and in this backdrop, Ruth and Sylvie achieve a lightness by being “not rooted” (150). Ruth attends to the nature around her without any expectation of it revealing her of her insignificance. It is in the imagination of being close to that which is lost, through language, that Toles sees “the sense of an approach ... [that] is crucial to Robinson’s experience of the world” (155).

Interestingly, in relation to Mikhael Bakhtin’s “irony” flooding all that man speaks, Koles observes the absence of “proclaiming” in *Housekeeping*, i.e., whatever is said by the first person narrator is spoken with the “indispensable” “almost” and the “conspicuously repeated phrase” “say that” (149). However, that which is being said is said with the intention of speaking the truth. Owing to this ambiguity, Koles questions Ruth’s sanity in the novel, and in doing so observes Robinson’s unfazed perspective of the assertion of self as being coexistent with nature, illustrated through Ruth’s mindspace. “What is thought, after all, what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate? The images are the worst of it,” says Ruth, “frightened by the thought of shattered images knitting themselves up again” (Koles 149). This is Robinson’s insistence on a world that will be mere remembrance through images that one builds off of what is not left to one by memory; but, as Koles writes, *Housekeeping* does not leave memory behind (152). When Ruth says that “need can blossom into all the compensations it requires” (*Housekeeping* 152), Ruth’s need is assuming a reality that is separate from the nature

around her. There is no sublimation. The drifting, the exile that it brings, offers, like nature, no assurance, and the movement is towards “darkness that is disturbingly impersonal and akin to death” (Koles 148); the home, Ruth’s “deep refuge” (148) proves insufficient and necessitates the exile. At the end of the novel, she returns out of everyone’s sight imagining being searched for by the occupants of the house she and Sylvie leave burning. In this, the loss that she felt of her loved ones, especially her mother, is being healed. Elsewhere and otherwise, she remains lost. Thus when Sylvie takes Ruth to the abandoned homestead and leaves her alone, Ruth’s thoughts achieve a realization as palpable as the loss she feels of her mother, for she comes to entwine herself with the inevitability of loss and its distinction from *perishing*. I ask: Is keeping the loss alive, healing?

Reading the loneliness and regret in the novel as extensions of the author’s conceiving of them as “redemptive” and “high sentiments,” Paul Tyndall and Fred Ribkoff positivise Ruth’s mourning the loss of her mother through the use of the “optative mode” of “say that” which they describe as an “inherently speculative mode of discourse” (88). By such means, the “restitution of all that is lost” is made “inevitable” (88); it is also by this being the “defining narrative characteristic” in the novel that, as the authors suggest, Ruth comes to experience individuation.

In one of the several examples from the text that the authors provide, that of Ruth’s description of her grandmother following her grandfather’s death, a mundane act of hanging sheets on the line is turned by Ruth into a representation of her grandmother’s “arrested state of mourning” (90) where through the tenuous drifting of the “hard old snow” to “an earth here and there oozing through the broken places,” is woven a passage towards loss being “celebrated” and not simply “lamented” (90). Here, they write, Ruth relies on *imagination* instead of memory, removing herself from being first person narrator.

With reference to Ruth’s continual return to the loss of her mother in the novel, Tyndall and Ribkoff perspicaciously observe how the desire for a “maternal presence” gets displaced in their running alongside a moving train to “stay beside” the woman inside it, and also in their building a snow man which instead turn out to be a “a figure of a woman in a long dress, arms folded” (91). In both cases, the strange and the fictive, the one who stands for the mother figure is a fleeting presence that ultimately rushes off in the train, and melts, respectively. In Sylvie too, Ruth begins to see a surrogate mother, and it is through Sylvie that the memory of her

mother by her own admitting begins to blur and then be displaced. From recalling her frustration at her mother's tearing the letter received from her father, Tyndall and Ribkoff gauge the contrariness of mourning being a social act, to it being solitary.

There is also the portrayal of loss being universal that is derived from Ruth's imagination of her Aunt Molly as being one of Christ's disciples who by means of her "net" will, as Ruth "fantasizes" sweep the "floor of heaven" and also the "black floor" of Fingerbone Lake, the ones swept inclusive of every single individual without discrimination – "swimmers, boaters, canoers" (in Tyndall and Ribkoff 92). This way, Ruth absents the loss of her mother from an exclusivity from the "universal chain of losses" (92). Further, Sylvie's leaving Ruth alone in the middle of the lake is allowing the realization seep into Ruth that loneliness is ineluctable. When Ruth says, "... if only darkness could be perfect and permanent" (*Housekeeping* 116), with Sylvie as spiritual guide, Ruth aims a denouement to grieving. The darkness is read here as the Romantic sublime which allows for a severing from desire and Ruth's inundation into spiritual wholesomeness. It is also after this journey, of and towards spiritual insight, that Ruth begins to coalesce Helen's death into her present, and also realise the distance between her and her sister Lucille. Also, while Ruth realistically perceives Helen as "abandoner," Lucille continues to view her as "sensible" and "vigorous" (94); their perception of their mother's death too differs considerably. The "transfiguration" (99) that Ruth adheres to at the end, is spiritual in nature and the optative interpretation of her past is thus an indispensable requirement to realise the "world's true workings" (94).

Laura Barrett's reading of *Housekeeping* places Ruth's transfiguration in a state of nowhere-ness. The Latin equivalent of 'remembering' is *memorari*, i.e., "to be mindful of" (2), of that which is not there. Barrett views the latter to be akin to "dismembering," and hence there is the mind overriding the body. However, in being with Sylvie, Ruth "solidifi[es] her commitment to corporeality" (2). That corporeality, Barrett argues, proves at the end to be fluid. She begins with reference to the "litany of losses" in Ruth's life, acknowledging how for Ruth "this incompleteness is both painful and soothing" (11). For Ruth the corporeality of the body is a nothing, for she sees everything that comes before the eyes as "apparition" (12), and even de-fleshes her mother's suicide. Thus, it comes as no surprise to Barrett that Ruth feels "minimally existent" (*Housekeeping* 105) in terms of her body (12). She further suggests that the structure of the house that Edmund Foster builds in Fingerbone with walls

“appear[ing] in unlikely places and stairs culminat[ing] in a trapdoor rigged with pulleys and window weights” is singularly representative of the dualities of “containment and possibility, enclosure and dispossession,” also echoing Sylvie’s system, or a lack thereof, housekeeping (12).

The shadows and darkness that Lucille gets weary of and rebels against, forms for Ruth the envelope that she gets accustomed to. While light illumines the dilapidated state of the house in its physicality, darkness brings the protagonists closer to the innards of their being. The enclosure that the walls of a house provides, according to Barrett, is pretentious and Ruth is cognizant of the “instability” it poses for that house has stood through the abandonments she has faced. Therefore, she “opts for homelessness” (14) and also the emotional attachment to her aunt Sylvie. However, although considerate of the novel’s “transgression of boundaries” (15), Barrett, reiterating Julia Kristeva’s elucidation of “abjection as ‘the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’” (15), is conscious of the dangers of transgression. In other words, what is rejected – here, “a life of the mind” (16) - is what the subject is reminded of. The witnessing of the “vortex,” for instance when on the boat with Sylvie on her journey to the lake or even at the end when she is crossing the bridge over the lake, represents the potential of removing Ruth from the world of corporeality and into that of the mind. And thus, owing to this “mind-body split” (Barrett 17), Ruth must “put [her] foot directly [before] her” and have Sylvie in front of her (*Housekeeping* 211), a split that Sylvie traverses with ease.

“[S]uspicious of documents and images which purport to tell the truth,” Barrett points to Ruth’s “fraudulent” description of the “black” lake in which Ruth’s mother drowned: “... the lake of charts and photographs, which is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and innumerable fish, and in which one can look down into the shadow of a dock and see stony, earthy bottom, more or less as one sees dry ground” (qtd in Barrett 19). Barrett concludes that Ruth’s narrative in the novel is “about longing” for those absent and the ending does not offer a strict end to it; instead the ambiguity and ambivalence words like “if,” “perhaps,” and such like provide “create[s] a world between the material and spiritual realms” (20). With body and mind paralleling representation and meaning, corporeality becomes less representational and the abject is what floats up.

Contrary to the reading of loss and longing as spiritual and speculative, an insight that renders coming to terms with grief and loss a positivity, given its inescapability, or closer to perceiving the longing as above

transience, Christine Cavar, in her provocative article “Nothing Left to Lose: Housekeeping’s Strange Freedoms,” presents a contested interpretation – one that I concur with. She says and I quote: “*Housekeeping* represents the power of traumatic experience to destroy not only language and the illusion of a coherent self capable of agency, but also a person’s place within a larger community” (111). Acknowledging feminist readings of the novel as a “transgressive” text wherein Ruth’s choice to flee societal conventions is taken as symbolic of challenging patriarchal tendencies to disallow females space for innovating herself, Cavar argues against them suggesting that Ruth’s “mobility” cannot be perceived as “social fulfillment” (113), for her flight is derived from the trauma of abandonment than an assured coming to terms with it. In this context, Cavar says that there is a certain *unspeakability* in trauma that Ruth’s phrasing of her life inks in the novel; it makes itself present through a “dual-voiced narrative” (116), i.e., while she cannot voice the darkness inside of her to others around her, she writes them in “lyrical interior monologues” (116). Through several instances from the novel, Cavar points to the distance between what Ruth *thinks* and thus *writes*, opposed to what she *says*. Ruth keeps reverting to the story of her mother’s death obsessively, and yet she fails to emotionally express her position towards it – this being representative of the “fragmentation of language” that survivors of trauma experience, one that makes them “silenced figures” (115).

We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and the sorrow was released . . . sorrow is a predatory thing because birds scream at dawn with a marvelous terror, and there is . . . a deathly bitterness in the smell of ponds and ditches. (Qtd in Cavar 117)

To Cavar, the trauma, as evident from the quoted words above, is discernible in the seeming absence of it. Ruth’s inadequacy with language on the outside however proves to be alienating for her, in contrast to Lucille who conforms to the codes of the community. There is no middle ground that the society offers for the two personalities. Cavar perceives Ruth’s social identity as “dissolv[ing]” as compared to Lucille’s whose is rigidly defined by her community” (118). Cavar observes how Ruth treats her grandmother’s attitude to her grandfather’s death with the same deniability that Helen treats her father’s letter. In Ruth’s words, “The disaster had fallen out of sight” but the quietude that permeates the lives of the three sisters and that of Lucille and Ruth’s further to the absences of the fathers is not the erasure of the loss, but the muting or numbness that follows it (120). Even

following Helen's death, Ruth's recollection of her grandmother's "abstracted" and dreamy avoidance of speaking of it is conscious of not only her own sense of the disappearance of her mother, but also her grandmother's baffled response to the trauma of losing a child (121). Here too, the unspeakability is pervasive.

With Sylvie's arrival, Ruth's isolation finds a vessel of displacement. According to Cavar, Sylvie is representative of the lake – "the literal and metaphorical sire of trauma in the novel" (123) – and soon after she comes, the house is flooded; she is also the point which marks the breach between Lucille and Ruth. While Ruth sides with Sylvie, comfortable in the silent darkness she embodies, Lucille breaks out of it adopting society, although the latter's apparent solidity is as illusory (124). While Ruth's speechlessness continues and she almost becomes an extension of Sylvie in her increasing imitation of the latter's customary disillusionment, Lucille walks off to Miss Royce's home. With Lucille absent, Ruth "merges" with Sylvie, "surrender[ing] her identity to a grief without time, space, or – in the absence of a larger community – the ability to heal" (126). Cavar points to Ruth's drifting "into a reverie" that is her dreaming of "Sylvie ... teaching [her] to walk under water...." (127). For Ruth, Helen and Sylvie too become indistinguishable: "Sylvie 'could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child'" (in Cavar 128).

In the burning of magazines too, before they leave the house, Cavar reads the trampling of language and thus the distancing from community. With the Sheriff's threat of the impending hearing, the possible severing of another tie is too much for Ruth to bear; crossing the bridge with Sylvie is a choice she cannot give up. Finally, she does move out (rather keeps moving in and out of) of the community but into another "wordless realm" (118) where housekeeping is not necessary, and yet drifting does not keep her away from revisiting the space she has left behind, even *if* as an apparition imagining Lucille thinking of her in her absence. Ruth and Sylvie "smell like lake water," Cavar quotes. She is as good as dead to society; she has "nothing left to lose" (Cavar 133).

Cavar's reading of loss and longing in the novel, as opposed to Koles's and Tyndall and Ribkoff's, resonates the meaningfulness of Ruth's continual craving for the permanence of darkness and hence the meaninglessness of her existence. Even in Tyndall and Ribkoff's spiritual insight there is a recourse to imagination; however, fictionalizing tragedy can romanticize the inexplicability of abandonment, not take away from the wound that the inexplicability leaves behind. In Koles's argument, there is an accommodation of loss;

but in the separateness of nature lies also the continuation of Ruth's loneliness, the abjection and incompleteness that Laura Barrett points towards.

Loss is finally incarcerated, but only to surface through illegible holes and cracks that it has left behind. Much like flood, trauma allows an unspeakable wreckage, the darkness, which in being a reminder of the loss it hides, also makes it alive for Ruth, and through that, her mother. In the acute longing for drifting away, is thus the longing for remaining with that loss without interruption of words or people. On the other hand, in drifting with Sylvie, she may be transient, if the wish to escape the site of abandonment is transience at all. But, in it, perhaps more importantly, is Ruth's response to abandonment: she cannot be abandoner – of Sylvie, of Helen, of the mother. Either way, in the end, loss determines her longings, her lack, and Ruth herself - lost. In her own words, it therefore, or perhaps is "better not to have nothing" (*Housekeeping* 159) after all.

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