

MOTHERHOOD, LOSS, AND FEMALE AGENCY: A FEMINIST READING OF *THE LIGHT BETWEEN OCEANS* .

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the themes of motherhood, emotional trauma, and female empowerment in the *The Light Between Oceans* by M.L.Stedman. Employing a feminist lens, the novel delves into how women cope with grief, desire, and ethical dilemmas within confining societal frameworks. The differing journeys of Isabel and Hannah showcase the impact of motherhood on identity and emotional strength. Isabel, motivated by her experiences of multiple miscarriages and her longing for motherhood, makes ethically complicated choices that defy traditional patriarchal norms. Hannah, whose baby is taken from her, represents the pain of women, resilience, and the quiet power of maternal affection. The novel ultimately highlights the psychological and societal challenges women face while reclaiming their agency in a world influenced by war, patriarchy, and moral scrutiny. This study seeks to examine the ways in which Stedman depicts the emotional complexity of women. Their coping with grief, and their efforts to regain authority over their lives.

KEYWORDS:

Motherhood, Feminism, Female Agency, Loss, Trauma, Patriarchy, Identity.

M. L. Stedman, an author from Australia who grew up in Western Australia, is celebrated for her intensely emotional and profoundly human storytelling. After starting a career in law, she shifted her focus to writing, where her works began to be recognized for their psychological richness and examination of ethical dilemmas. Her debut novel, *The Light Between Oceans*, released in 2012, is her most recognized work. This novel has garnered worldwide acclaim for its depiction of grief, motherhood, and moral challenges. Set in the early 1900s, the story reflects Stedman's fascination with the emotional experiences of individuals enduring personal and historical traumas. Her writing combines historical intricacies with deep psychological understanding, resulting in a work that is both literary and emotionally impactful.

The Light Between Oceans is a piece of literary fiction that delves into themes such as motherhood, grief, guilt, the aftermath of war, and the quest for emotional identity. The narrative centers on Isabel Graysmark, a young woman stationed at the isolated Janus Rock lighthouse, whose deep desire for motherhood following several miscarriages influences the moral direction of the story. The novel unfolds through various viewpoints, including the personal struggles of Tom Sherbourne, a war veteran grappling with psychological wounds, and Hannah Roennfeldt, whose child is taken from her due to uncontrollable circumstances. Instead of merely being a straightforward fictional tale, the novel acts as a commentary on the social, emotional, and ethical challenges women face within patriarchal systems. Through its intricately woven narrative, *The Light Between Oceans* examines the interplay between grief and love and illustrates how female empowerment can arise amid emotional upheaval and societal pressures.

Stedman examines the effects of sadness and yearning on the female psyche through Isabel's journey into parenthood. Isabel feels cut off from the outside world after suffering several miscarriages, but the birth of Lucy brings her one step closer to a life she feels was meant for her. The moral mystery at the heart of the narrative draws attention to the continued difficulties women encounter in expressing their emotional needs in cultures that frequently silence them. Stedman serves as a powerful reminder of the danger of losing one's identity, agency, and sense of maternal connection through interlacing the story with Hannah's grief as a biological mother and Tom's war-shaped guilt.

Audiences are deeply touched by Stedman's poetic language, which melds psychological insight with subtle emotional depth. In addition to providing a subtle remark on moral conflict and resiliency, she vividly depicts the post-war climate in Australia. *The Light Between Oceans* maintains emotional and philosophical depth while being readable by a broad audience thanks to its rich structure. The novel's depiction of moral struggle and human frailty has won it plaudits from critics, and the film adaptation increased its cultural influence. Isabel Graysmark plays a crucial role in the book. She illustrates how parenting can be both a place of healing and an emotional struggle via her relationship with Lucy. The limiting gender norms emphasised in Feminist Perspectives in Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist* that **"we can do nothing... the only thing they think we can do is produce children"** are reflected in Isabel's desire for a child.

Isabel attributes this idea, forming her identity around motherhood and seeing Lucy as the solution to her inner emptiness. Tom's war-related silent guilt adds to her stress and illustrates how women frequently bear a disproportionate amount of emotional strain in patriarchal societies. Another layer is added by Hannah's anguish as the biological mother, illustrating the suffering of a woman where the situation has stripped her of her identity as a mother. Although Hannah's journey parallels Isabel's, it ultimately leads to the recovery of her voice. Hannah reclaims her identity as a mother and her agency as she faces the reality of her absent child. Many women who deal with trauma, discrimination, and displacement face similar challenges. Together, Isabel and Hannah mirror the larger feminist issues covered in *The Miniaturist* by embodying the nuanced link between motherhood, pain, and female agency.

The story's central conflict, which revolves around Hannah's attempt to reclaim her voice and Isabel's need for maternal identity, essentially examines the boundaries of female agency within patriarchal expectations. Sylvia Plath's critique of domesticity, in which the protagonist Esther's observations expose the true cost of traditional marriage, finds a potent thematic resonance in this battle, where a woman's deepest emotional needs are frequently constrained by restricted social obligations. The idea that marriage itself is often seen as a trap, marked by a lack of equality: **"Esther says marriage is a lifelong unsigned agreement that a woman will be a servant to a man"** illuminates the novel's subtle critique of **"the gendered dynamics of accountability"** and the emotional burden placed on women.

This perspective emphasizes that a system intended to safeguard women or "re-establish her sense of identity" might actually strip them of their freedom, forcing them to confront societal pressures of servitude along with the emotional weight of their loss. *The Light Between Oceans* effectively illustrates how women's emotional landscapes are shaped by parenthood, grief, and female agency. The novel illustrates the intricate ways that women deal with sorrow, moral dilemma, and social expectations through the connected experiences of Isabel and Hannah. Maternal identity is neither straightforward nor singular, as both characters represent distinct types of motherhood one moulded by pain and separation, the other by longing and desperation. A feminist interpretation emphasises how patriarchal systems that frequently deny women complete autonomy have a significant impact on their decisions, but it also demonstrates the subtle strength with which they exert their agency. In the end, the story highlights how women's experiences of suffering, love, and responsibility are incredibly complex and need compassion rather than condemnation.

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