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## Enigmatic Protagonists as Victims of the Masculine Force in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*

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Literary Master Anita Brookner's elegant style is manifest in every page of her brilliant novels. Born in London in 1928, she became the first woman to hold the Slade Professorship at Cambridge University in 1967. Since 1977, she has been associated with the Courtauld Institute of Art. However, since winning the Booker Prize in 1984 for *Hotel du Lac*, she has become better known as a novelist. Her fiction is mostly set in London, and often explores the alienation of a character, usually female, whose quiet, solitary lives are punctuated by destitution and disappointments in love. Her style has often borne her comparisons with Jane Austen and Henry James. This paper analyses the female Enigmatic Protagonists as victims of Masculine force with special reference to the novel mentioned above.

Dr. Anita Brookner (1928 - ) is a contemporary British novelist and French Romantic art historian known to write novels which explore moral, social, and gender issues similarly to her great influences Henry James and Edith Wharton. It reflects an uncertain postmodern world about lonely, single women.

### Author Introduction

Born in London on 16th July 1928, Brookner is educated at James Allen's Girls' School. She was born and brought up in a large Victorian Villa in Herne Hill in South London. Brookner received a Ph.D. in art history at the Courtauld Institute. She had spent some time in Paris doing post - graduate studies. In 1967 - 1968, she was the first woman to serve as Slade Professor at Cambridge University. From 1977 to 1988 she was a Reader at the Courtauld Institute and in 1990 was elected a Fellow of King's College where she had worked until her retirement in 1988. Brookner is made a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1990. She is a Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge. Brookner has published her first novel, *A Start in Life*, in 1981 at the age of 53. Since then she has published approximately a novel every year. Her fourth book, *Hotel du Lac*, published in 1984, won the Booker Prize.

### General Characterization of women

Brookner's women are basically the commentators of the stoical society which has relegated them to the secondary position. They are passionately involved with domesticity and poignantly carried away by the duplicity both of which have been conferred on them by the masculine. They are yoked to a male superstructure which attaches the gender to the dreadful independence of motherhood irony characterized by divinity. This precarious condition is capitalized by Brookner who works out a strategic framework before creating paradoxically an independent feminine devoid of framework.

In the twenty - five novels she has written over the past twenty - nine years, she has created a distinctive world, a world of widows and widowers, of the divorced and the never -married lonely people who yearn for connection with others at the same time as they cautiously guard their privacy. If one looks at the descriptions on her book jackets, one might conclude that her range is narrow. Yet Brookner, who won a Booker Prize in 1984 for *Hotel du Lac*, inhabits her main characters so persuasively, commits her imagination so thoroughly to each novel, that almost every time she returns to her territory, the results are powerful and fresh.

#### Types of women

Brookner's women are divided into those who watch (the Stoics before victimization) and those who are watched (the victims of Masculine force), the over modest (the Stoics after victimization) and the immodest (happy victims). Edith covers all the categories.

#### *Hotel du Lac* (1984)

The novel begins in late September at a quiet, respectable hotel in Switzerland where Edith Hope, a thirty- nine year old English writer of romantic novels has just arrived as a Stoic after victimization; as Edith's friends have persuaded her to take a month's break away from her house in London. Edith describes the details of her trip and her mixed feelings upon her arrival to David. After finishing the letter, Edith unpacks, although she superstitiously leaves most of her clothes in her bag as if she could be leaving at any moment. She is one typical illustration of Brookner's women. As Dave Mote, Editor of *Contemporary Popular Writers Gay and Lesbian Literature Series* writes:

The protagonist that Brookner most commonly portrays tends to be well - educated, kindly, and gentle. Although, she may have an immensely successful career, like Edith Hope as a domestic, security - loving individual the standard Brookner heroine finds it difficult to be selfish and mean, instead constantly emphasizing a proper, dignified civility. Brookner's heroines, of course, come in contact and/or in conflict with other viewpoints. (www.go.galegroup.com)

#### The First Masculine force

David is the first male as well as the husband – substance, who appears to be her well – wisher. One must not deny the fact that Edith, a Stoic, happily accepted David's way of treating her to satisfy his cravings for food, sex, chat and to wait for his arrival to soothe him physically unaware of her being victimized. Edith thinks of the meals she cooks for David every now and then and how he always appreciates her cooking, she watches him intently when he eats, serving more to satisfy his appetite until he drinks his tea. She firmly believes that she could not marry this married womanizer; yet she is truthful to write everything addressed to him without posting the same. When she decides to post her last letter, she identifies herself worth living as single and does not post it.

#### A Dull Masculine force

Edith views herself as a serious, responsible person who is seen by her friends as being beyond the age of indiscretion but they are ignorant of her innate nature. That is why they are happy when she agrees to marry Geoffrey Long, a worthy but dull man whom she has met at one of her friends, Penelope's parties. She agrees because she thinks that at the age of thirty - nine, it would be her last chance after being a victim of David.

### Revelation of the Feminine force

On the day of the wedding, as her Chauffeur - driven car approaches the Registry Office where groom and guests are assembled; she changes her mind and asks the Chauffeur to drive on to the nearby park. In this regard, Paul A. Doyle's observation warrants mention here. He says:

Brookner stresses loyal and dependable love. An open marriage is unacceptable. The heroine of *Hotel du Lac* receives a promising marriage proposal that would give her considerable wealth and social status. Infatuation is not enough; she cannot accept such a marital union without genuine love. Brookner does, however, let some of the characters in her novels espouse the opposite point of view. ([www.go.galegroup.com](http://www.go.galegroup.com))

Edith makes the groom a laughing stock and talk of the town without any regret. Again she feels nothing bad to arrive at the hotel. She is even ignorant of her chauvinist nature. What she has done is enough to brand her as a bubbling feminist but she is as cool as a cucumber in the month of May.

### The Hotel

The description of the hotel by Edith in *Hotel du Lac* too becomes an illustration of a male construct. It belongs to the family of Huber and has the reputation for distinguished service and for the quiet retreat it provides its guests. Each of the hotel's guests is either a longstanding patron or a new guest with references from one or more names already in the hotel's files, as required by a hotel of its calibre:

The Hotel du Lac (Famille Huber) was a stolid and dignified building, a house of repute, a traditional establishment, used to welcoming the prudent, the well-to-do, the retired, the self - effacing, the respected patrons of an earlier era of tourism ... Its furnishings, although austere, were of excellent quality, its linen spotless, its service impeccable. Its reputation among knowledgeable professionals attracted. (*HDL* 13)

The Brooknerian Edith deconstructs the masculinity and posits the radical principle as supplemented by Christopher Butler, a postmodern critic thus:

For a highly objectionable dominance of men over women is disguised and made acceptable to men at least by the pretence that women can indeed reign over men - but only in morally acceptable ways. They have the virtue, we have the power. But virtue, particularly of the peculiarly self - abnegating kind praised by Tennyson, isn't a power at all. It is allowed to arise only in a metaphorical rather than a literal, marriage context in which women are powerless. (27)

Hence there appears an unfortunate conjunction of perfect wifehood and pure near to the ground status. Likewise the hotel is another illustration of the postmodern anarchy as it signals metaphorically a glass box in which the identity of a person is eliminated.

### Women at the hotel

Edith takes to observing the women at the hotel. Edith's observations and interactions with them, and her consequent reflections on her own life form the substance of the novel. As Edith looks

around the dining room that evening, she remarks to herself that she has been reduced to complete the tortoisedom. Edith notices that the thin Monica who has come to the hotel acceding to her husband's demands, barely eats any of her food, instead letting it fall mostly on her lap, where her dog picks it up; Mrs Pusey and her daughter Jennifer's extra terrestrial show of love for each other as well as their splendid oblivious lives; Mme de Bonneuil's solitary expulsion from her son and the lone Neville.

Every one of them reminds Edith of her past. Mrs. Pusey and her daughter, Jennifer - two aging, voluptuous blondes who have made a vocation out of shopping - come to stand for all that Edith has missed or dismissed in her life. They are flirtatious, boastful, self-indulgent. Mrs. Pusey adopts Edith as an audience - mere witness to her monologues. Edith writes a letter to David in which she describes the people she has met so far and her feelings about each of them. Except the voluptuous Puseys, the rest are the victims of Masculine force. And here Donna Seaman, Reviewer, *The Chicago Tribune*, whose observation deserves mention as she writes:

Brookner presents a morbidly fascinating inquiry into the nature of stoicism and circumstances of bleak rectitude as though issuing an annual report on the psychology of helplessly solitary and obscenely idle individuals. Shrewd and idiosyncratic, these tense interior dramas offer piquant pleasures thanks to Brookner's mordant wit, gorgeous language, and acute understanding of the axis between pride and shame, loneliness and misanthropy, integrity and cruelty. She also offers sterling insights into the differences between men and women and the peculiar voluptuousness of obsessive self - regard. ([www.go.galegroup.com](http://www.go.galegroup.com))

#### The Second Masculine force

Philip Neville is the prominent male who satisfies his desire through many women yet he wears a false face of a gentleman to Edith. This is also a preliminary form of Male Chauvinism along with a masculine pride of having a famous wife under his control to ruin her life gradually. He teases the victimized Edith and lures her to marry him as she writes in the letter to David.

He assures me that I will very soon, under his guidance, develop into the sort of acceptable woman whose confidence and stamina and indeed presumption I have always envied. Rather like your wife, in fact. 'I have never been a great success in this way, and so it was supremely ironical that I should fall in love with a man who has always been a success in every way. (HDL 102)

#### Surprise Proposal

On a chilly day in October, Mr. Neville takes Edith on a day trip to the lake. After lunch, he unexpectedly asks her to marry him. He promises her an affluent life. Later that day, Edith decides to accept his proposal. She writes to David, saying it will be her last letter to him. She explains that she is to marry Mr. Neville and there is no reason why she and David should meet again. She also reveals that she has not mailed any of her previous letters to him. At six the next morning she is going to the front desk to buy a stamp when she sees Mr. Neville discreetly leaving Jennifer's room. This solves the mystery of the closing door she has vaguely heard several times in the early morning so she knows that Mr. Neville has made a habit of staying the night with Jennifer.

And if I were to marry him, she said to herself, knowing this, knowing too that he could so easily and so quickly look elsewhere, I should turn to stone, to paste: I should become part of his collection. But perhaps that is what he intended, she thought; that I should replace the item that was missing. And for me, those pleasures which are lightly called physical would remain where they have been for so long now, so long for me that they have become my lifetime. (HDL 105)

#### A bolt from the blue

Edith tears up her letter and makes a reservation for the next flight to London. Edith is a romance writer but seems to be Stoic; the inborn bubbling nature is emanated in the form of infatuation with David. When he is near her, she feels it as *déjà vu*, since she is whole heartedly ever present with him psychologically. The victimization provided happiness to her. The innate nature of searching for an ideal man and rescuer pops up when she decides to marry the dull man. The lack of the real husband substance in the married man, David provokes her mind to quit the wedding as the feminine in her heart judges being single as a virtue and moulds her along with Mr. Neville to be a bold feminist to disgrace the masculine force in them.

#### Vanquished Edith

Edith is vanquished as she comes under the protection of the male Construct, the hotel. The Stoic after victimization vanquishes once again to a womanizer, Neville but when the heart of the matter becomes obvious, she plans to remain in Single without any husband - like substance. Her decision proves to be a feminist one from the view point of Neville as he might expect her to be his wife. It nullifies the masculine pride. The postmodern feminine force may have one of its best examples in Brookner's Edith.

#### Victorious Feminist

The masculine force tried with leaving no stones unturned to make her subservient to the male hierarchy from the initial chapter of the novel. As she observes people from different walks of life, the Stoic Edith falls for the ambiguous smile of Mr Neville, who asks for her hand in marriage. She considers a life of recognition that being married to Neville would confer upon her, but ultimately rejects the possibility of a relationship with him when she realizes he is an incorrigible womanizer.

#### Winding up

The masculine force finally leads her to realize what her life is expected to be. Once again, she breaks chains and decides to take things into her own hands. The masculine world is always in and around her, yet she rises up from her vanquished state to become a victorious feminist returning to her world of books, friends at her house towards the end of the novel. Thereby Edith proves to be an enigma even after victimization by the masculine. It is true in case of Edith that victimization makes her enigmatic astoundingly. She has been artistically fabricated to posit the message of rebellion. She also epitomizes a critique of the dependence and independence of women on male hegemony.

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