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Memorable Anita Brookner: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

The goal of the research paper is to analyse the various standpoints taken by the eminent writer's selected novels where she proves herself a feminist not in radical way but in a simple as well as decent manner as her text is like a postmodern painting or fashion show which significantly ejects the culturality of her times. It proposes to dwell at length on the expansionist considerations of texts, before fixing the rhetorical significations of the novelist. To establish how the artist is entwined by her epoch. The epoch factor is pivotal fact, as it constitutes the narrative paradigm of art.

Keywords: Postmodern, Inner self, Hotel, Masculine, hegemony, Identity

Anita Brookner (16/7/1928 – 10/3/2016) is a British writer, French Romantic Art historian, Slade Professor, and Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. She is familiar with putting pen to paper to explore moral, social, and gender issues. Her fiction demonstrates a captivating experimentalist visualization instituted by placing a dreary picture of feminine passivity and the eventuating solitary confinement of psyche to attend the compulsive conception of femininity which is always a victim of the masculine pride and male chauvinism.

Brookner's novels have been centred on the anarchic politicization of the postmodernist woman. The postmodernist woman is a cultural consequence of the modernist avant - garde. For instance, Miriam Sharpe in *Falling Slowly* is a post-feminist version of Foucaultian relationship between knowledge and hegemony. Furthermore, Miriam is constituted by a post structural semiotics. She has been artistically fabricated to posit a message of rebellion. She also epitomises a critique of the dependence of women on male hegemony. Miriam is semiotically constituted by the biblical prophetess, Miriam, who claims propriety over future. She is, in due course, dumped a leper, on the outer reaches of the Israelite camps.

Brookner's fiction is an illustration of the postmodern text carries this historic impulse. Her text is a radical structure; yet, it is pressurized by the Jamesian notion of historic impulse. A woman's dependence on male hegemony is constituted by the shopping mall. This is one Jamesian notion of male hegemony which legitimizes it through the male constructs. This is how Brookner describes Miriam Sharpe as she walks in the street. While walking, Miriam

keeps on looking at the pictures in the shop, in their galleries, as well as those in the windows of Duke Street. She admires each and every picture even the tiny one in a single board. In *Falling Slowly*, Miriam hopes to find a picture:

Something to lift the spirits, to transport her on an imaginary journey, to give a hint of transcendence which was so blatantly lacking in her everyday life of words and paper ... A small brass plate proclaimed: Place du Chatelet under snow. She looked closer, drawn in by the dirty yellow sky, smoky where it met the roofs of the buildings, under which she could imagine herself trudging home after a cold day. (3)

Those pictures resemble the happy life and the ideal one, she dreams about. It not only is her dream, but also that of her sister, Beatrice. Miriam used to spend seven to eight minutes admiring while others passed her by without noticing. The great cities, tall buildings, museums and gardens are also monarchial constructs characterised by a triangular dimension; the male, the masculine, and the masochist. Therefore, the seventeenth century and eighteenth century garden designs as mentioned in *Leaving Home* are signs of male anarchy. Emma Roberts, in the novel, watches the city and its busy life as she becomes free following her mother's death:

My bed in Paris had looked out on to a busy street. All night cars passed, footsteps sounded. I could hear voices in the hotel, taps running. Here I faced a small blank space between two unidentifiable buildings. The temporary euphoria of buying this flat had quite evaporated. In bed - expensive, comfortable - I waited with the usual trepidation for the onset of sleep. (123)

One can find the need for such these monarchial constructs to the Brooknerine female to welcome sleep. In *The Bay of Angels*, there is another example to support the same idea, since Zoë is happy when she is in the French garden with children:

I found a place I thought I could call on my own, the small garden of the Musee Massena, frequented by children parked there by their Swedish and Danish au pairs. I looked out for them both, the children and the nannies; both became my friends. Theau pairs seeing me as a safe pair of hands could leave their charges with me. (22)

The description of the hotel by Edith, in *Hotel du Lac*, becomes an illustration of a male construct. The Hotel is described thoroughly. It belongs to the family Huber and has the reputation for distinguished service and 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. (13)

In *The Rules of Engagement*, both girls spend time in Paris. This city is by and large identified with the Eiffel Tower; one of the best illustrations of masculine pride. The Eiffel Tower is an iron lattice tower located on the *Champ de Mars*. It is named after the engineer, Gustave Eiffel, whose company designed and built the tower. Erected, in 1889, as an entry arch to the World Fair, it has become both a global and cultural icon in France as one of the most recognisable structures in the world. The tower is the tallest structure in Paris; it stands 324 metres (1,063 feet tall), about the same height as an 81 - story building. Elizabeth retreats to London and her safe marriage, whereas, Betsy falls for a handsome, damaged, and exploitative student revolutionary. Nevertheless, Elizabeth envies Betsy. Elizabeth is unsatisfied, bored by her domestic routine, and her nice, dull husband, Digby. She begins an affair with Edmund, one of his married friends, and discovers the erotic exhilaration of illicit sex, in a rented flat, on summer afternoons. As the novelist puts it in *The Rules of Engagement* :

Edmund's flat was in a small street bounded on one side by a public garden, where I would spend the afternoon, almost innocently, with a book ... when the tired mothers wheeled their babes home ... I would get up, put away my book, and cross the garden to the flat in the Britten Street, let myself in with my key, and wait for Edmund, who would join me shortly after five. Our time together was brief. (41)

Here Brookner's fiction having been devoted to the postmodern feminist stance, establishing huge constructs as male superstructures. This is one concept of institutional critique on which a postmodern text stands. Brookner parades more than a few male characters. The woman, therefore, is expected to look and not look beyond. Brookner's protagonists hail from postmodernist epoch negotiate with the social circumstances of these cultural arte facts. This is one textual strategy to contest the old fashioned perception of gender.

The Brookner universe is closed and complete, not susceptible, it seems, to the ravages of outside incident or the menaces of modernity. Here melancholic women step carefully through sad lives filled with small and inevitable disappointments. To Michele Hewitson, a book critic for the New Zealand Herald, it is all immensely reassuring; in a rather dismal manner of this subdued world of circumscribed Englishness, the values and vocabulary of another era pepper the "long pages of introspection, honoring concepts like obligation, penance and propriety. Readers seeking spontaneity, magic, vigour, may wish to run rapidly, screaming, in the opposite direction. Yet all this elegant restraint weaves its own insistent spell" (Hewitson par 1)

Ramona Mc Daris, a Reviewer of the website, www.biography.jrank.org, says that Brookner, in her opinion, "is the most interesting author of the past century. Her word pictures are stories in themselves, anyone with normal intelligence should be able to find the plot of her stories, as long as the reader possesses some sensitivity" (Mc Daris, Web). Nobody can

plumb the inner thoughts of her characters in the way that Brookner can. Brookner, who has said she does not wish to be ghettoized, deplores any Jewish eagerness to reclaim lost souls. Instead she prefers to be known as an English writer and has indeed achieved fame and recognition as one of the most accomplished writers of English fiction. To Dr. Sorrel Kerbel, the Editor of Jewish Women's Archive:

She is known for her elegant turn of phrase and elegiac description of mood, often a deep well of inner loneliness. She initially gained eminence in the field of art history, with a passionate espousal of French eighteenth century painters such as Watteau, Greuze and David. Yet few are aware of her Jewish background. (Kerbel par.10)

In *The Bay of Angels* one feels that the gap between the action and telling is filled with interminable pages of reflection, which suggest Elizabeth's need to fill up her loneliness with endless analysis of what she thinks and feels, fantasies of what she might have done. Since her subject is the life that is not lived, Dr. Jessica Wheeler, a Professor at University of Houston, Texas, in her review says

Brookner cannot be fairly blamed for choosing to reproduce this at the level of style. The result is the enactment of depression through the flatness of the story telling. Long sentences bandage the reader in gloom. Everything is remembered rather than witnessed."(Wheeler par. 28)

Interaction is described from a distance, as though close-ups are embarrassing. Dialogue is rare and clumsy, mirroring the misanthropy of the protagonists. The very title of *Leaving Home* announces a quintessential Brookner theme. Her heroines always face a struggle to escape, not only from an airless, restrictive upbringing, but almost invariably embodied in a claustrophobically close relationship with her mother. These traits embedded in her own character. The problem is that Brookner has moulded by maternal genes and love, so bonded and bounded by her environment that as Caroline Moore, a Reviewer in *The Spectator* writes:

Her character has become inseparable from her upbringing -- and can, indeed, only be described as a mindset. Self-pity alone, always leads to absurdity. No self-conscious older woman could possibly welcome the notion that an unknown and naked young man might wake to find her spying upon him. As for that willingness to talk, the mind begins to boggle. (Moore par 37)

Here that ploy seems desperate as Emma, the self-deluded narrator, looks back at the late 1970's from the myopic distance of the early-to-mid-1980s. Emma is writing a dissertation on classical garden design, a project that keeps her shuttling between London and Paris. As Michele Hewitson, a book critic for the *New Zealand Herald* says that Brookner's women are a type of: "outsiders who are close to their mothers, circumscribed by a strong familial devotion, egregiously introspective. But they are very real even if they do not fit into a post-feminist mold" (Hewitson 1).

Brookner plumbs their thoughts, feelings, and isolation to a depth no other living writer does. She is fifty — two when her first novel appeared, known for quaintly charming novels of manners. Now a musty smell wafts from each new Brookner book. A stale whiff arises partly because she has tweaked the same novel twenty - three times in the twenty - four years. It is largely because of her shrinking- violet heroines, who live in a hermetic, increasingly unconvincing world. It is a place detached from time, where even bright young women act like little old ladies.

From the solitary bachelor, in Henry James's *Beast in the Jungle*, , a novella to the solitary butler in the novel of Kazuo Ishiguro (1954 -), a Japanese - born British novelist, *Remains of the Day*, fiction is always filled with memorable hesitators. In the context of Brookner's fiction, there is both Brookner the-writer-as-artist, and Brookner's protagonist as cultural observer. From her role as an historian of the artist, she is well aware of the significance that emotions for both the artistic producer and consumer. As Peta Mayer declares:

Romantic painter has designs on the spectator, she writes. He is out to remove the spectator from his normal or appropriate perceptual field and in doing so to infect him with his own personal doubts. The discomfort that arises from reading Brookner's fiction comes precisely from her skilful wielding of pathos. The critical backlash against Brookner and her stereotyping as a boring, lonely woman stems from her ability to restage cultural anxieties in her fiction. (Mayer par.10)

Brookner is the most intrepid contemporary explorer of this terrain. In the twenty - four 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 or the never -married lonely people who yearn for a connection with others at the same time, cautiously guard their privacy. If one looks at the descriptions on her book jackets, one may 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 this territory the results are powerful and fresh. Gustave Flaubert (1821 - 1880) said once that a writer should have the same relationship to his novel as God has to the universe: he should be felt everywhere and seen nowhere. In novel after novel, Brookner rigorously fulfills this dictum. She never steps out from behind the curtain, or indulges in jazzy little riffs to show her cleverness. All she does is, tell her stories.

With unfashionable restraint, with the glow of intelligence on every page, Brookner writes with a brevity and directness in her novels, and with her self-effacing willingness to put her imagination entirely at the service of the story she is telling, Brookner is an artist of an exceptional purity. In *Romanticism and Its Discontents*, Booker prize winning novelist and celebrated art historian, Brookner offers a stunning assessment of the masters of French Romantic painting in the context of nineteenth century poetry, literature, and criticism. Peta Mayer senses that, in *Romanticism and its Discontents*, Brookner writes with an infinite longing characterized the nineteenth century Romantic Movement, by producing an

organically connected number of resounding masterpieces in a relatively short space of time.

The Battle of Waterloo was fought on Sunday, 18 June 1815, near present day Belgium part of the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. The Imperial French Army under the command of Emperor Napoleon was defeated by the armies of the seventh coalition, comprising an Anglo allied army under the command of the Duke of Wellington combined with a Prussian army under the command of Gebhard von Blücher. It is the culminating battle of the Waterloo Campaign and Napoleon's last. Following the death of God in the Enlightenment, the death of Reason in the French Revolution, and loss to a traditional enemy in the Battle of Waterloo, to Kenan Malik,

it is the Mal du siècle from which the figure of the Artist was born; the personae whose reputation for genius and madness still pertain today. This suffering, self-examining figure cultivated experiences either real or imaginary in order to produce a range of idiosyncratic emotional responses which stimulated artistic expression. (Malik par 52)

Mal du siècle is a term referring to the ennui, disillusionment, and melancholy experienced primarily by the young adults of Europe's early nineteenth century in terms of the rising Romantic Movement. Through recourse predominantly to the emotions, the artist has become a symptom of the culture and aims to make this type of historical malaise accessible to everyone.

Brookner provides an encounter with the plausibility of perceiving the Battle of Waterloo as a political identity against history. The novelist reinforces the battleground with growing grievances of gender to acknowledge the influence of male structures on organising femininity. Again the Battle of Waterloo projects the objectivist view of the novelist. The semiotic Battle of Waterloo ends up eventually a cultural manifestation of male crisis.

She deconstructs the battle of Waterloo. While historically enunciating principles of masculinity which Brookner deconstructs in ways that betray a male in crisis. This is one example of a deconstructive approach that returns variegated meanings to the reader. Through the deconstructive technique she 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. (Butler par. 27)

Hence, there appears an unfortunate conjunction between perfect wifhood and pure near to the ground status. Likewise, the hotel is another illustration of the postmodern anarchy

metaphorically signaling a glass box in which the identity of a person is eliminated. This is one resolute postmodernist position projected by the neo-marxist postmodern theorist, Frederic Jameson:

Postmodernist conceive sheer text, as a process of production of representations that have no truth content, are, in this sense, sheer surface or superficiality. It is this conviction which accounts for the reflexivity and its resolution to use representation against itself to destroy the binding or absolute status of any representation.(Jameson par. 31)

Consequently, Brookner's text is like a postmodern painting or fashion show that significantly ejects the culturality of her time. This postmodernist deconstructive perception is one feminine discourse in which Brookner has engaged. The research paper has brought into focus how the novelist operates in collaboration with the socio - cultural backdrop. Presumably, landscape is one concept that intrudes upon psyche; for humankind is not only a part and parcel of the landscape but also a consequence of landscape which projects a cultural pattern. A cultural pattern is externally devised by the elements of transition. For instance, the urban dictates on the human beings. There has always been a struggle between natural backdrop and the intruding cultural arte facts which eventually pressurize psyche. Hence in accordance with the encounter, within and without, evolution begins its process. The human characters are naturally caught up in the whirlpool of transition. As a result, the human characters are burdened by the parading conflicting elements of the cultural backdrop. Therefore the paper dwells at length on the expansionist considerations of texts, before fixing the rhetorical significations of the novelist to establish how the artist is entwined by her epoch to constitute the narrative paradigm.

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