



The Individual on Trial: Female Identity in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*

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Abstract

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Feminism, Gender, Ideology, l'écriture feminine, Patriarchy.

This paper undertakes to examine how Anita Brookner reveals her female character's crisis in her quest for identity in her novel, *Hotel du Lac*. Portraying women in a post-war British society who has lost the balance between self and the world, Brookner attempts to expose patriarchal forms of power as the underlying cause of the unequal and subordinate status of women and their inevitable internalization of enduring limiting aspects of patriarchal ideology. Focusing on the protagonist of the novel, Edith Hope, and several minor female characters, the novelist has recorded their ordinary experiences in a calculated style to portray their spiritual world and inner reality. Regarding the constructive feminists' claim of the culturally-constructed female identity, this paper attempts to reveal how female characters internalize patriarchal values and norms—that is, these values and norms become integrated in the cognitive, emotional, and structure of the self. Likewise, contrasting images of “the angel in the house” and “the ideal woman” it seeks to examine how while some female characters adapt themselves to the authority, Edith undergoes the process of self-recognition instead of resorting to the “safe” and accepted conventions of a patriarchal society and how she finally succeeds to accept her existential loneliness, which is the only way towards freedom.

فردیت در بوته آزمایش: بررسی هویت زنانه در رمان هتل دو لاک اثر آنیتا بروکنر

این مقاله بررسی می‌کند که چگونه آنیتا بروکنر بحران شخصیت زن خود را در جستجوی هویت در رمان خود، هتل دو لاک، آشکار می‌کند. بروکنر با به تصویر کشیدن زنان در یک جامعه بریتانیایی پس از جنگ که تعادل بین خود و جهان را از دست داده است، تلاش می‌کند تا اشکال مردسالارانه قدرت را به عنوان علت اصلی وضعیت نابرابر و فرودست زنان و درونی‌سازی اجتناب‌ناپذیر آنها از جنبه‌های محدودکننده پایدار ایدئولوژی مردسالارانه افشا کند. این رمان نویس با تمرکز بر قهرمان رمان، ادیت هاپ، و چند شخصیت فرعی زن، تجربیات معمولی آنها را به شیوه ای حساب شده ثبت کرده است تا دنیای معنوی و واقعیت درونی آنها را به تصویر بکشد. با توجه به ادعای فمینیست‌های سازنده هویت زنانه ساخته‌شده فرهنگی، این مقاله تلاش می‌کند نشان دهد که چگونه شخصیت‌های زن ارزش‌ها و هنجارهای مردسالارانه را درونی می‌کنند - یعنی این ارزش‌ها و هنجارها در ساختار شناختی، عاطفی و خود یکپارچه می‌شوند. به همین ترتیب، تصاویر متضاد «فرشته در خانه» و «زن ایده‌آل» به دنبال بررسی این موضوع است که چگونه در حالی که برخی از شخصیت‌های زن خود را با اقتدار تطبیق می‌دهند، ادیت به جای متوسل شدن به «امن» و قراردادهای پذیرفته شده یک جامعه مردسالار و اینکه چگونه او در نهایت موفق می‌شود تنهایی وجودی خود را که تنها راه رسیدن به آزادی است، بپذیرد.

واژگان کلیدی: زنانه، پدرسالاری فمینیسم، جنسیت. ایدئولوژی

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Introduction

Anita Brookner, A Modernist Author

The 20th century was the century of change, a period in which technological developments, inventions, industrializations, wars and economic, political, and social upheavals weakened the traditional stabilities and the presupposed realities. The world became more complex and stranger, which made humans more individualized than ever before, but also made them fail to find their positions in society. Modern people who faced these upheavals found themselves isolated beings trapped in a callous world. Having lost the balance between self and the world, they found themselves disintegrated and self-alienated. As George Simmel points out in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture and of the technique of life." (151). What was the result of that distortion between the world and the self? Identity crisis. This crisis was the result of the loss of real self and organic wholeness and so being passive in making decisions and choosing possibilities.

Hotel Du Lac tells the stories of people who experience such an identity crisis. Those who are exiled from society and sent to the hotel in order to change themselves. In the novel, Anita Brookner portrays the situation of modern people who are rootless in the universe and depicts the identity crisis and ontological insecurity of people due to anxiety, loss of autonomy, and authenticity. Her fluid style expresses her characters' desires and responses. She often employs first-person narrators, but they also employ limited on-looking narrators. In both narrative perspectives, Brookner "represents tensions between the possibility of knowing how desire, frustration, and anxiety are formed within consciousness and the external social and cultural forces that impinge on narrative and shape character" (Lassner 16).

Born on 16 July 1928 in a British Jewish family, Anita Brookner studied at King's College-London- and at the Courtauld of Art in London. She spent three years studying in Paris as a postgraduate and went on to lecture in art at Reading University and the Courtauld Institute, where she specialized in eighteenth and nineteenth-century French art. A specialization that affected her picturesque style. She became the first woman to be named as Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge University in 1967. She wrote more than 20 novels most of which "explores themes of emotional loss and difficulties associated with fitting in the society, and typically depict intellectual, middle-

class women, who suffer isolation and disappointments in love"(Wikipedia Foundation). She was awarded the 1984 Man Booker Prize for her novel *Hotel du Lac*. Brookner never married but took care of her parents as they aged. She died on 10 March 2016, at the age of 87.

Hotel du Lac is populated with female characters. The multitude of female characters suggests a female point of view. As Lassner continues in her essay " Brookner's novels show women who have internalized enduring and limiting aspects of patriarchal ideology" (17). Captured in a patriarchal society with a romantic illusion these female protagonists would like to demonstrate their love and devote their lives to the men, who would supposedly validate their being, but the novels do not lead the readers to a safe conclusion as the old type of romance did. Rajini Walia opens chapter one, "Feminine Self-Appraisal in Contemporary Women's Fiction," discusses this frustrated love relationship in modern female writers like Brookner and asserts that such novels possess " an absolute lack of sentimentality" as they depict women who are lonely and isolated and are not fulfilled in their relationship with men.

However, Brookner never claims to be feminist in the true sense of the word, gender always has some effect on the style of writing " on describing the emotions and on the perception of the world " (Prace 17). As a female writer, Brookner had been writing in a cultural climate affected by feminism. Both for Brookner and the feminists, the topic of self is critical because it is pivotal to questions about personhood, identity, the body, and agency that feminism must address. Regarding the constructive feminists' claim that gender " is made by culture in history" (Rivkin 766), women internalize patriarchal values and norms—that is, these values and norms become integrated into the cognitive, emotional, and structure of the self. Once embedded in a woman's psychic economy, internalized oppression conditions her desires. To maximize the satisfaction of her desires, then, would be to collaborate in her own oppression. Paradoxically, the more completely she fulfills these desires, the worse off she becomes.

The Brookner visual narrative represents tensions, frustrations, and anxieties which are formed in the characters' consciousness and shape their identity in a patriarchal society. Identity crisis and ontological insecurity are shared features among the female characters in this novel, whether minor or major. In fact, "the oppression of the society and the inability of individuals to achieve their self-autonomy lead them to be directed by the authority" (Yuksel 147). This is the major character, Edith Hope, who in the process of self-recognition, finally attains such ability to

accept her own existential loneliness rather than resorting to the "secure" but paralyzing values of patriarchal society. Trapped in a world where biological and social determinism predetermines the lives and attitudes of all the people as well as she herself, Edith's final solution for such paralysis is a Stoical acceptance of the situation while not conforming to those patriarchal, ideological values.

Literature Review

The question of female writing has been considered an important issue in analyzing women's novelists in recent years. Regarding the significance of language, some feminist thinkers state that women should create their own language, reject notions of objectivity and neutrality and write from subjective positions informed by specific circumstances. However, this subjective position does not mean to overlook the ordinary experience. In fact, as Liesl Olson refers to in *Modernism and Ordinary*, the ordinary has attained a new centrality in modern novels. Studying some selected modernist novels such as Woolf, Joyce, and Proust, Olson grounds her analysis in wide-ranging philosophical and cultural studies. She challenges the primacy of transcendent epiphany in modernist novels and studies the modernist focus on the ordinary through its defamiliarization. By drawing attention to the ordinary, such novels attempt to reveal and signify unnoticed moments and details.

Privileging this approach in modernist novels, Phyllis Lassner, Ann V. Norton, and Margaret D. Stetz in their paper, "Anita Brookner in the World," have attempted to respond to those critics who criticized Brookner as a writer whose concerns are narrow because of her attention to the ordinary details. The paper claims that although, unlike Woolf, Brookner does not use subjective methods of narration such as stream of consciousness, her "narrative points of view often question attempts to represent the interior stream of consciousness in order to investigate selfhood" (15). This paper studies how the psychological life of the characters is represented through graphic, visual-descriptive details and how the "exteriors define and express their desires and responses" (Ibid).

In "Anita Brookner's Visual World", Margaret D. Stetz claims that Anita Brookner expands the boundaries of realism. While working with the categories of realism, manner, and comedy she does not remain inside them. As a child of a Jewish Polish family, her texts refer to post-Holocaust time and the realism and the studies of manners refer to the realm of the political. Rejecting Brookner's works as "miniature", Stetz claims "her narrative is instead large with references to

secrets, terrors, exiles, and losses that are not only personal but communal. Regarding her novels as moral allegories, Stetz studies how her knowledge of painting contributes to her visual world and claims that the objects in her novels “announce their own allegorical status” (35).

Examining and analyzing the style and narration of three women novelists, Rajni Walia utilizes autobiographical links between the writers and their novels. Studying Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, and Anita Brookner, Walia discusses that a woman novel is a novel that attempt to illuminate the female experience and portrays the writer’s “own aspirations, longings, and emotions”. She reviews the feminist movement from the second wave and claims that feminist reform and women’s liberation were not successful enough to challenge and change the fundamental ways in which women see themselves. To prove her claim, she refers to those three novelists and their female protagonists who “would like to shower their love and devote their lives to the man, who would thus validate their being”(3). She believes that the depiction of lonely, isolated women who are not successful to have a fulfilling relationship with men signifies their inability. Contrary to her, this paper attempts to justify that the protagonist’s acceptance of loneliness is a courageous decision attained through and existential view in her life.

Perspectives on Female Identity

The shared perception among the diverse feminist theories is that women have been oppressed by men and by the social and literary structures that are devised. They pay attention to (whatever the specific subject matter) the nature of patriarchy and its consequences for women. To free themselves from being oppressed, some feminists declare women must analyze and challenge the established literary canon that has helped shape the image of female inferiority and oppression ingrained in any culture.

Virginia Woolf, the twentieth-century novelist and feminist critic, in *A Room of Her Own* asserts that reading literature with feminist eyes involves a double perspective: First, she emphasizes the gendered representation of women in literature. A short survey of great works of literature shows that women are presented as secondary creatures with negative stereotypes whose existence is defined by the male characters in the form of father, husband, and brother. Second, she showed that “representations of women in literature, while not depicting innate characteristics

of actual women, might disrupt the traditional symbolic order or language system of patriarchy” (Humm 2).

In America, Mary Ellman’s *Thinking About Women* (1968) discusses the contemptuous stereotypes of women in literature written by men. One of the most influential works written to study the relation of sexual power in society through the examination of literary works is Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970). According to Millet “power is the issue in the politics of literature as it is in the politics of anything else” (25). She believes that this system of power should be reconsidered. She continues “when a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion but also to change” (58). Power is transmitted through language, a language which is not neutral for women or men so femininity and masculinity disclose themselves in language.

Most of English-speaking feminists insist on reconsideration of the ways that we read literature. In *On the Politics of Literature* Judith Fetterley states that if the readers want to get a new effect from literature, they should create a new understanding. She emphasizes that literature is the reflection of society thus “To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change” (569). Thus, a conscious reader attempts to uncover the hidden system of sexual power in a text by identifying the “images of women”. Those images which usually fall into two groups: the first picture belongs to “idealized projection of men’s desires...on the other side are demonic projections of men’s sexual resentments and terrors” (Abrams 236). Such works make the female readers identify themselves with such characters so they unconsciously take part in the process of internalization of those unrealistic and antithetic patterns. The first step to “expose” this system of thinking is to become a conscious reader for as Judith Fetterley states “Consciousness is power” (569).

The question of female identity is a crucial point for feminist critics. Feminist theories related to the matter of self or identity are divided into two groups: one is those who believe that identity is a purely linguistic, external, and largely unmysterious phenomenon. This group is known as the “constructivists”. One of the most important figures of this group is Judith Butler for whom identity has no being or basis outside the cultural domain which constructs it. “there is neither an 'essence'

that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, because gender is not a fact various acts of gender create the idea of gender" (Butler 903). The second group who are called "essentialists" expresses the idea of a subversive **excess** that undermines the man-made linguistic order. " Excess is variously conceived as pre-cultural libidinal energy (Julia Kristeva/Helen Cixous), the untapped resources/unrealized possibilities of the self (Helen Cixous), or that which transcends masculinity systems of repressive binary opposition (Luce Irigaray)" (Mousley 168).

Although all these critics are often categorized under one heading, the difficulty of classifying these feminists under one or another heading is partly the subversive point of their writing. There is a paradox in identifying these feminists in terms of their foundationalism since foundation and identity are what they resist. Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman* states that women's imagination is inexhaustible, like music, painting, and writing. She states that writing is a unique empire in which women can present this imaginary. This fluid type of writing is called **l'écriture féminine**. This term refers to a particular kind of critical writing by women which is mainly associated with Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Kristeva. What unites this form of feminist criticism is the belief that there is an area of textual production that can be called "feminine", or as Luce Irigaray posits a "woman's writing" which " evades the male monopoly and the risk of appropriation into the monolithic phallus, the diversity, fluidity, and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and erotic functioning of the female sexual organs and in the distinctive nature of female sexual experiences" (Abrams, 238). Thus, the expressive female self is something that places itself beyond all boring confines. Unlike Butler who regards agency and excess as linguistic phenomena, Cixous and Irigaray point out that the female body and/or self are located somewhere outside or beyond language as creative, transforming agencies.

In modern fiction, women mostly are captured by inner strife in affiliation with existential problems because of the loss of harmony between body and self. ontological splits, inner decay, pessimism, and alienation. Furthermore, they are anxious due to uncertainties, conflicts, confusion, and dilemmas in their lives. one of these pictures is presented in Anita Brookner's *Hotel Du Lac*. A novel that tells the stories of people who are exiled from society and sent to the hotel in order to change themselves. In the novel, Anita Brookner portrays the situation of modern people who are rootless in the universe and depicts the identity crisis and ontological insecurity of people due to

anxiety, loss of autonomy, and authenticity. The next part of the paper is going to discuss the oppression of society and the inability of individuals to achieve their self-autonomy led them to be directed by the authority. However, this is only Edith Hope, the protagonist, who does not resort to the safe but conventional and paralyzing values of a patriarchal society. Instead, she prefers to accept her own existential loneliness and to live her own female identity.

Individual on Trial

All of Brookner's novels deal with women. They represent women as intelligent and sensitive subjects who are tussling with complex realities of work, marriage, human relationships, and ethical values in a male-dominated value system. *Hotel du Lac*, which won the 1984 Booker Prize, portrays the reality of Edith Hope, a thirty-nine-year-old unmarried woman who writes popular, romantic fiction. The novel begins with her arrival at Hotel du Lac. She reaches there in a state of bewildered confusion at the turn of events in her life. After a secret and often lonely affair with a married man and an aborted marriage, she is banished by her friends. They advise her to go on "probation" so as to "grow up", "be a woman", and atone for her mistakes. Edith comes to the hotel swearing not to change. However, the hotel's silent charms and her observations of the guests there all tug at Edith with questions about her identity, forcing her to examine who she is and what she has been. At the hotel, she observes people from different walks of life — Mrs. Pusey and her daughter Jennifer, their love for each other, and the splendid oblivious lives they live; Mme de Bonneuil, who lives at the hotel in solitary expulsion from her son; and Monica, who came to the hotel acceding to her husband's demands. 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. This also finally leads her to realize what her life is expected to be. Once again, she breaks the chains and decides to take things into her own hands, and leaves Hotel du Lac.

One of the main concerns of modernistic novels is to portray the modern human and his/her quest to find the meaning of self in a new world where old values have been weakened or destructed. As Georg Simmel said: "The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture and of the technique of life"

(154). Modern issues such as civilization, authority, control, oppression, and chaos have so much affected the lives of people that they seem to be spiritually paralyzed and left with a disintegrated self. Many modernist novelists reflect this spiritual crisis through experimental methods such as interior monologue, stream of consciousness, free association, and impersonal narrative. As a modernist novelist, Brookner also attempts to focus on the portrayal of the spiritual world of her characters and reveals the character's inner reality. However, she prefers to depict this inner sense through her visual narrative which proves her factual, partially opinion-free presentation of what characters see. Her novels certainly use first-person narrators, but they also employ limited on looking narrators. As we see in *Hotel du Lac*, Brookner attempts to depict the inner desires, fears, and frustrations of her female characters conflicting with the external social and cultural codes of behavior and conventions.

In this novel, the characters, particularly the female characters, suffer from spiritual paralysis. The oppression of society and the inability of the individuals to achieve self-autonomy led them to a kind of paralysis which is reflected in the physical setting and environment as well as the spiritual stasis of the female characters in the story. Brookner's choice of a novelist as the narrator of the story whose visual narrative describes everything in the written word like a painted picture echoes the characters' as well as Edith's inner reality upon the objects. At the beginning of the novel, the author vividly depicts the depressive environment seen through the window:

From the window, all that could be seen was a receding area of grey. It was to be supposed that beyond the grey garden, which seemed to sprout nothing but the stiffish leaves of some unfamiliar plant, lay the vast grey lake, spreading like an anesthetic towards the invisible further shore, and beyond that, in imagination only, yet verified by the brochure, the peak of the Dent d'Oche, on which snow might already be slightly and silently falling (1).

The imagery of the first paragraph establishes the atmosphere of disillusionment and passivity which suffuses the story. The metaphoric use of "window" which refers to Edith's eyes illuminates her condition of mind and feeling. The repetition of color "grey" with the simile of "spreading like an anesthetic" heighten the sense of paralysis which is projected upon the landscape. The words like "unfamiliar" and "invisible" make clear that nothing is clear, everything is vague and based on supposition. Edith is framed by the window as she observes everything out, an

observer who is surrounded by " a land of prudently harvested plenty, a land which had conquered human accidents, leaving only the weather distressingly beyond control" (1).

The female characters in this novel not only does suffer from spiritual paralysis but also from alienation. The alienation of the self and the world which leads to an identity crisis. Alienation emerges as the natural consequence of existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms which is the result of loss of identity, a loss which is rooted in the anxiety and loss of self-authenticity. Brookner projects this sense on the objects, sceneries, and even locations. In fact, these are the tools to embody the loneliness of the characters. For instance, Monica's dog, Kikki, which should be always looked after and is caged whenever intrudes on its owner's privacy, symbolizes its owner: a lonely woman and an extra, decorative, luxurious tool for her husband who sends her to exile apparently for having peace but actually to get rid of. Monica is a self-alienated and non-autonomous person because she cannot succeed in negating her social self, a self that is not complete unless she becomes a mother. It seems as if a female identity is shaped if only a woman experiences motherhood. When Monica becomes aware of her inability to be a mother, she prefers to be alienated as if she was an imperfect being in society.

Identity crisis and ontological insecurity are shared features among the female characters in this novel, whether minor or major ones. What distinguished them from each other is their reaction and response in the face of this crisis. Some characters like Monica adopt themselves to the authority, without any attempt to question the framing situation." the oppression of the society and the inability of individuals to achieve their self-autonomy lead them to be directed by the authority" (Yuksel 151). This is Edith who undergoes a change in the course of the events in the hotel. In her loneliness, she is the same as the other female characters such as Monica. Brookner represents her psyche through visual details, such as objects, landscapes, food, places, etc. From the beginning of the novel, Edith suffers from opening her eyes and "gazing fearfully around the still deserted salon" (14). Although she is involved in an emotional relationship with David, her unsent letters to him express her emotions and thoughts. A one-sided relationship that reflects Edith's loneliness. This sense leads to a disintegrated self which makes her vulnerable and finally makes her accept Mr. Neville's proposal since according to the conventions of the society the meaning of womanhood is attained in joining the institution of marriage. In a conversation with Mr. Neville, Edith's view toward love and life is criticized by him, and her sense of fear and loneliness are described in a visual narration: " Edith felt the hair on the back of her neck begin to crepitate. She

had told herself as much, many times, but had been able to dismiss her own verdict. Now she recognized the voice of authority" (55). As the voice of a patriarchal society, Mr. Neville's proposal reflects the cultural and social codes. For an unmarried woman like Edith, marriage can provide a social position, and a safe future.

Consequently, Edith attempts to reach an idealized self by ignoring the real self, by adopting herself to the standards and norms of society. In her last letter to David, she confesses:

" I do not love Mr Neville, nor does he love me. But he has made me see what I will become if I persist in loving you as I do...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" (102).

Edith was always longing for a long, stable, secure relationship with a man who would love her deeply. Unfulfilled by David's love, she decides to escape from her loneliness by accepting Mr. Neville's proposal thus conforming to the norms of society. However, this desire does not last for a long time when accidentally she sees Mr. Neville, with his nightgown, come out of Jennifer's room. Edith faces reality. Brookner describes this moment of awareness very vividly: " And that door, opening and shutting, in her dreams, in her delusive waking moments, had been a real door, the reality and implications of which she had failed to take into account"(103). Facing the "reality" she is not that "romantic" woman anymore. Now she understands that living with Neville would " lose the only life that I have ever wanted, even though it was never mine to call my own" (105). Thus, instead of resorting to the safe but conventional and paralyzing values of the patriarchal society, she prefers to accept her own existential loneliness. In the final scene when she writes a telegraph, first she writes " Coming home" but after a moment she thinks that " this was not entirely accurate" so she changes her mind, crosses out the words, and writes instead " Returning", which may symbolically reflect her new vision, a return to her lonely world with a stoical acceptance.

Conclusion

The question of identity is central for modernist women writers. In many modern works, modern people cannot be autonomous individuals who are able to create their own values, decide and choose their possibilities because of the oppressive power of the patriarchal ideology. As constructionalist feminists believe female identity is socially formed and the women's relation to

shared beliefs about social values, morals, traditions, and culture that construct their social selves. Those who cannot negate these limiting and framing concepts, cannot attain autonomy and authenticity.

Gender has always played a central role in Anita Brookner's works. Categorized as a novelist of manners, Brookner represents the tensions between the inner desires, fears, and anxieties and the external social, and cultural forces. Her female characters demonstrate various reactions when they are tested in this conflict. In *Hotel Du Lac* while other female characters adapt themselves to the authority, this is Edith who attains a self-recognition through the very details of life. At the end of the novel, she understands marriage as a social protection would deprive her of the only life she ever wanted, therefore she chooses to accept her existential loneliness rather than escaping from it.

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