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**RELATIONSHIPS REDEFINED: AN ANALYSIS OF ANITA BROOKNER'S THE BAY OF ANGELS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The contemporary novelist, Anita Brookner's novels bring to light how the feminine self is also a patchwork of social injunctions as well as images inscribed in the literary canon. Her novels fictionalize the self in the process of rethinking and seeking its worth through a more meaningful identity than just the self-denying or sexually desirable conceptions of womanhood, reflected through cultural representations. Brookner's novel, The Bay of Angels (2001) is an exploration of self-restraint, dignity and obligation within a tale of love and loneliness. Being orphaned and dejected by her flirtatious lover, Adam, she hopes to have a lifelong commitment characterized by certainty. Finally, Zoë happily accepts the present arrangement and considers her relationship with Dr. Balbi a precious one as it has involved no change of character, no effort to meet each other's requirements. Zoë's idea of love shows her broad vision as she does not want the man she loves for herself alone but is generous enough to let him share his affections with his helpless sister. This attitude of not wanting to be loved for oneself alone, in the broader sense, serves as the foundation for a healthy and harmonious society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Feminine sensibility, harmony, loneliness, love, contemporary, womanhood.

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary British novelist, Anita Brookner's novels bring to light how the feminine self is also a patchwork of social injunctions as well as images inscribed in the literary canon. Her novels fictionalize the self in the process of rethinking and seeking its worth through a more meaningful identity than just the self-denying or sexually desirable conceptions of womanhood, reflected through cultural representations.

Brookner's novel, The Bay of Angels (2001) is an exploration of self-restraint, dignity and obligation within a tale of love and loneliness. The heroine, Zoë Cunningham lives with her widowed mother, Anne in Edith Grove, London. The novel starts off with the following statement of the heroine, "I read the Blue Fairy Book, the Yellow Fairy Book and the stories of Hans Andersen, The Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault (The Bay of Angels, 1)." In short, the common theme of these tales is that the gentle, altruistic, generous, kind, honest, hard-working and obedient Cinderella is opposed to the selfish, lazy and materialistic Ugly Sisters. At the end, Cinderella wins over her rivals and gets the right man due to her virtuous nature. Zoë goes on to explain that she firmly believes the moral lessons these tales embody and continues to fashion herself like the virtuous heroines of fairy tales like Cinderella.

Zoë and her mother are frequently visited by Millicent and Nancy, who are related to them through Zoë's great grandfather. Millicent and Nancy have married to the rich twin brothers who are in hotel business and they embody the typical upper class wives and their predicament is explained by Zoë thus:

They [Millicent and Nancy] were sensuous, but not sensual, felt relieved that neither one of them was entirely satisfied by their husbands' company, took refuge in material comfort and busy social arrangements. Marriage was no less than their right; it was also their alibi, protecting them from any form of censure, and may have been entered into precisely for that reason (5).

Both Millicent and Nancy do not believe that a woman can manage her life well without a man and so they pity Zoë's mother, Anne for her solitary state. Unlike the vulgar and selfish Millicent and Nancy, Anne is virtuous and patient. Zoë describes her mother's nature thus, "She was entirely lucid, had devoted her life without complaint to a child who may not have been rewarding...and by dint of suppressing almost every healthy impulse had maintained both her composure and her dignity (10)."

Millicent and Nancy, who served mainly as showcases for their husband's success, regarded Anne not only with anxiety but also with curiosity; as if in her place they would have gone mad. Zoë feels that both the sisters interrupt the peaceful lives of Zoë and her mother, with their incessant suggestions as to how her mother can improve her solitary condition and so Zoë dislikes them. They suggest that Anne should socialize, attend parties and should get married again so that she can be reinstated in society.

Anne meets Simon, a business man at Millie's party and decides to marry him. He is a widower and an old man who is self-conscious about his age, which he dismissed as 'nearly the wrong side of seventy (13).' Simon marries Anne and they move to his flat in Onslow Square in France and Zoë continues to stay in Edith Grove, London. Though Zoë is happy for her mother, she cannot avoid feeling lonely in her flat which makes her realize how much her mother must have felt lonely, which is revealed in Zoë's observation, "The physical emptiness of the flat I had felt in the morning did not frighten me, nor did I dread going back to it, but I began to see it in a new light, was struck anew by the loneliness my mother must have felt, a loneliness compounded by the silence of the street...(19)".

This situation of residing alone, ensures Zoë, the freedom to do anything at her own will but she realizes that such freedom only results in increased loneliness, as Alan Wilde, a notable critic notes "Freedom requires courage and ... Without courage freedom declines into existential anxiety (Altered States, 83)". In order to get rid of this anxiety, Zoë starts working on other people's manuscripts, checking grammar and the footnotes. She realizes the need to remain independent and self-contained. In this context, it is worthy to note that the author herself has the same notion, as Brookner says to Shusha Guppy, in one of the interviews, "I think it is good for women to earn their own living and thereby to control their own destinies to some extent. They pay a heavy price for their freedom though (Guppy 161-162)".

Zoë notices that Anne prefers to be out of the house in the afternoons and she remains grateful to Simon just for being a man, a facilitator or an enabler. Zoë suspects that her mother is not entirely at home in Simon's house as revealed in the following lines, "She [Anne] had never gone out much when we lived in Edith Grove. In France, however she evidently liked to be out of the house, on those mysterious afternoons when others slept. I suspect that she found it difficult to remain at close quarters with a man she still regarded as a miraculous stranger (35)".

Meanwhile, Zoë falls in love with the "extremely uninhibited (29)" and outrageously charming Adam Crowhurst, whom she likens to "Prince Charming (29)," explaining, "Women were easily attracted by his ease, considerable beauty, attracted too, it must be said, by his fearless bad manners, his unapologetic licence (41)". Her attraction towards Adam is so strong that she wants him in her life irrespective of the price, she has to pay for it. She wants to design herself according to the will and wish of Adam so as to please him which is revealed clearly when she says, "The conditions for being accepted by him, of being allowed to share his leisure hours, could be met only by total capitulation to his rules (41)".

Zoë is invited to dinner by Adam Crowhurst in Langton Street and she arrives for dinner, laden with carrier bags, only to find another girl "whose tousled hair had obviously made contact with a pillow (31)," coming down to meet her. Zoë summarily tells the readers that she was "able to enjoy one or two adventures (33)" in secret, during her "first summer in France (33)," and that she "had known no guilt when exchanging one partner for another (33)" and adds that somehow that was different, affectionate, as if "we were all children accustomed to harmless play on whom the shadow of the adult world had yet to fall (33)". This statement affirms that she is totally unhappy about Adam's behaviour and is ashamed as she feels that she "had been defeated (33)" and so she departs abruptly. This incident clearly shows Zoë's love for Adam and Adam's attitude of taking Zoë for granted as he has no concern for her feelings.

The same night, when Zoë is sleeping in Edith Grove, she hears the telephone ringing but Zoë does not want to get up and answer the call, as she is well aware of the person who is calling and the purpose of his calling. Later in the morning, Zoë thinks of Adam's behaviour at the party in his house, in a different light and admits that only Zoë herself is to be blamed for the whole event as she lacks the knowledge to come to terms with imperfections. This is clearly revealed when she says to herself that, "I knew that what had taken place was not very grave on the scale of human misdemeanours, and that I should come to terms with imperfection. The shocking encounter now began to fade, although the after-image of those two flushed faces did not. I returned to an awareness of how unequal I must have appeared (36-37)". Hence, Zoë decides to endure the relationship with Adam. She makes it a point to give her new number to Adam when she shifts to a smaller flat in London, the one bought by Simon for her.

Zoë and Adam visit her parents in France, where Adam and Simon exhibit their real nature. Her mother is bewildered by the freedom Adam feels in that house, where freedom is held at bay by rules and Simon dislikes him because Adam is young and careless. But Adam is much at ease and does not make any pretence of staying in the room given to him and stays in Zoë's room every night. Though it causes anxiety to Zoë, it is Simon's behaviour which horrifies her as she narrates, "I could hear Simon's steps in the corridor, patrolling his domain. Sometimes these steps slowed

down outside my door: there would be a creak as I imagined him bending down to listen for illicit sounds. This horrified me, put him momentarily beyond the pale (44)". She cannot understand how Simon can behave so, as she is not aware of "the sexual jealousy of the old, who realize that their powers have gone for ever...(44)". Now, she can see the condition of her mother in a very clear light and the reasons that must have driven her mother out in the afternoons.

On their way back to London, Zoë waits in the hotel, whereas Adam slips off to attend other "mysterious commitments (Wanquet, 187)". Reaching London, Zoë telephones her mother and an argument regarding her mother's submissive attitude towards Simon ensues. Zoë strongly argues that women need not be grateful to men just because men give them protection but her mother refutes saying "I was brought up to admire men, to be grateful to them. I may have wanted freedom, but also I wanted protection. Support and protection (50)". This response of her mother makes Zoë embarrassed and she decides to stop examining her mother's happiness and way of living.

Zoë is informed by Adam that he is going to get married shortly. Zoë looks upon Cynthia, the wife of the man she loves and wonders to herself, "What must one do to inspire such love? Clearly it had nothing to do with superior qualities. Maybe it was the fascination exerted by sheer selfishness (53)". Though Zoë is heartbroken, she does not want to share this sadness with anyone. She feels very lonely as she considers neither her mother nor Simon close to her as "Their compromises, their adjustments removed them from the tragic single-mindedness which was to be my lot (53)". Having lost Adam, Zoë feels that her existence is meaningless, as it does not have any purpose and prefers to be isolated. Gradually she is able to understand the harsh reality and remarks, "The stories had ended on the highest possible note, whereas what they should have indicated was the life that followed (18)". Inversely, Brookner illustrates the harsh truth of real life, as the novelist expresses it to John Haffenden in one of the interviews, "Life is a serious and ultimately saddening business (Haffenden, 62)".

Later on, Zoë is informed that Simon is dead and her mother is hospitalised. Her mother is under the supervision of Dr Antoine Balbi, who is an excellent doctor and a caring person. Zoë finds herself plunged into a crisis and feels cast prematurely into an adult role of a caretaker, when her mother is incarcerated in hospital, seriously ill. She feels that she has to accept the unsought responsibilities and observes, "Though I was not yet old I felt old, for I was now to be my mother's guardian, a parent to my own parent (78)". It is noteworthy to remember that the author herself had undergone the similar type of situation as Brookner reveals to Shusha Guppy in the interview, "I was brought up to look after my parents (Guppy, 149)". Zoë ascribes all her problems to her mother saying, "My business was and always had been, my mother; however much I repudiated the idea it refused to go away. That was why my own hopes and plans had been so tentative, so nebulous (186)".

As per the suggestion of Dr Balbi, Zoë admits her mother in The Résidence Sainte Thérèse in Nice, after her recovery. Anne is well taken care of there and is visited by Zoë every weekend. Anne dies because of her weak heart and Zoë feels sad as she does not know how to live without any relationship or anyone to call her own. She feels isolated, the most wretched feeling that a person can ever have. Gradually, she strikes a friendly relationship with Dr Balbi and his unmarried sister

Jeanne, whom she considers an envious woman. Jeanne is jealous of Zoë because she suspects that her brother's affections are divided between Zoë and herself. But Dr Balbi, knowing his sister's nature, undertakes the difficult task of remaining loyal to both of them and he does so by virtue of his habitual discretion.

As a woman approaching middle age, Zoë is able to understand Jeanne very clearly. Jeanne is not a strong woman as she is dominated by her nerves and is not shy about showing her fears. Zoë can realize that "her [Jeanne's] fears are the same as my own; they are fears of what happens to a childless woman as she grows old (215)". Jeanne knows instinctively that she must hold on to her brother's affections as he is the one she has to fall back on. She is afraid that Zoë may take her brother away from her, though Zoë does not have any wish to hurt her or disrupt their lives. Zoë decides not to make Jeanne feel insecure and firmly hopes that in future they will become true friends which is implied clearly in the lines she speaks to herself, "Yet I think she believes that I am benign, that I wish her no further suffering. In that way she will eventually accept me as an ally in the great enterprise of wishing her brother well. It is on such a basis that I hope we will grow old as friends (214)".

Zoë and Dr Balbi exchange intimate information and thereby become close to each other. Due to their long drives to Aix or to Montpellier, Zoë realizes that she has achieved her desire for a truthful relationship, as she describes the relationship thus: Little is said: I respect his silences he respects mine, for, like him, I have become taciturn. Thus there are no tedious confessions of past affections, no digressions from what is truly our affair. We know each other so well by now that there is no need to ask questions, to offer explanations. Even our returns to Nice are devoid of regrets. We turn to each other with a reminiscent smile before he sets me down in the rue de France... He is my certainty, and I am able to accept the fact that I am his (212).

The desire for a lifelong commitment characterized by certainty is evident from the reflections of Zoë, "He does not ask when we shall see each other again, for he knows that I will always come back to him. I know this too, for at last I have a certainty in my life (216)".

Zoë, orphaned, finally settles for compromises: her life alternates between London, where she is a working woman, and Nice, where her mother died and where she has found what she calls "a simulacrum of a family (216)" in her lover Dr Balbi and his sister Jeanne. She comments, "This is a love affair, not the rapturous kind I have read about, with a definable conclusion. It is more of a lifelong occupation, and I am surprised to acknowledge that it suits me perfectly (212)". Zoë realizes that life is a blend of sorrows and joys and has to be accepted as it is with all its shortcomings. She has learnt to pare down her expectations to fit reality as she says, "No fairy story would persuade me now... And I would reject any pilgrimage which was content merely to anticipate a happy ending (132)".

Zoë is able to accept that "There would be no happy ending (208)" and concludes on an almost optimistic note, "Life has brought me to this condition of acceptance, and at last I understand that acceptance is all... The sun is God... It is my hope that there will be a place in it for all of us, for Jeanne, for Antoine, and for myself (217)". Zoë happily accepts the present arrangement and

considers her relationship with her lover a precious one as “it has involved no change of character, no effort to meet the other’s requirements. We find each other acceptable as we are...(213)”.

Zoë’s idea of love shows her broad vision as she does not want the man she loves for herself alone but is generous enough to let him share his affections with his helpless sister. This attitude of not wanting to be loved for oneself alone, in the broader sense, serves as the foundation for a healthy and harmonious society. This reminds of W.H. Auden’s lines in “Lullaby” which express the notion of love:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;

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Moral, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful (Schmidt, 225). (1-2, 9-10)

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