

THE CRY TO BE NOTICED: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ANITA BROOKNER'S LOOK AT ME

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to examine the struggle of the protagonist to achieve the self-realization, as portrayed in the fictional world of Anita Brookner. Novelist and art historian, Dr. Anita Brookner was born in London on 16 July 1928. She studied at King's College and at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She became the first woman to be named as Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge University in 1967. Her novel *Hotel du Lac* (1984) won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1984. A Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge, Anita Brookner lives in London. Brookner's devotion to research is one of the reasons for her remaining unmarried. Despite her successful career, there remains an element of regret in the author's view of her own life. Brookner refers to herself in the Paris Review interview as having always been unhappy, having always stood outside and as "one of the loneliest women in London" (Wirth 41). Born of Polish-Jewish parents, raised in London, she has felt the pangs of isolation. Like Brookner, most of her heroines undergo frequent spells of isolation and loneliness.*

KWYWORDS: Anita Brookner, Look at me, Protagonist

INTRODUCTION

In all her novels, Brookner dissects the lives of solitary, emancipated women. Brookner's heroines are keen observers, highly intellectual, duty conscious, good-hearted and devoted. They suffer from not being loved or married, noticed or accepted, because they want to be taken for what they are, without camouflaging or having to mask their behaviour and attitude.

A yearning to belong or be accepted by others is characteristic of Brookner's protagonists and it is much pronounced in the portrayal of Frances Hinton in *Look at Me*.

Frances Hinton who desires to be noticed, wishes to be recognized is a reference librarian in a medical research institute. Well off financially and ensconced in a large flat, she works because she wants to and still cannot escape the "Public Holiday Syndrome." What she calls "Public Holiday Syndrome," extends to Sundays, evenings, Christmas Day and summer holidays, in other words, to all the moments when other people are at home with their families. Her dislike for the recreation time is revealed when she says, "I always hated this cessation of work and the empty streets and the desolation of Christmas" and preference for week days is expressed as, "I am always ready for Monday mornings, that time that other people dread."

In addition to her work, Frances indulges in writing, an art encouraged by her mother. Frances writes on lonely evenings after work and 'struggle(s) to keep a note of despondency out of what

gets put down.’ Frances has published a short story about the library in which she works, although, as she admits, “I was not on the whole as pleased with it as everyone else seemed to be.” Her fictional efforts are a substitute for the oral fantasies she once elaborated for her mother, she expresses, “Since my mother died, I have had no one to talk to about these things, no one who is so interested, who knows the characters, who wants to find out what happens next, who responds with such delight.”

Frances is helpless to acquire a hearty companion to listen to her and so she concludes that the only reason for her writing is her lack of luck to be born lucky. She believes that luck is the secret at the heart of the success of the golden people. In course of time, she happens to meet Alix whom she considers to be very happy and lucky. She describes her first encounter with Alix as follows:

Once I followed a girl in the street simply because she looked so lucky that I could not tear myself away from her. Apart from her youth and her beauty, she had the sort of assurance that promised well for her, as if her expectations were so high, that she had set a standard for herself that others would be encouraged to reach. She seemed to await the best for everything, and I remember staring at her as if she had descended from another planet.

Fed up of her monotonous lifestyle and loneliness, Frances yields to the charm of golder pair, Nick and Alix Fraser. She looks admiringly upon them and feels inferior saying:

So stunning was their physical presence, one might almost say their physical triumph, that I immediately felt weak and pale, not so much decadent as undernourished, unfed by life’s more potent forces, condemned to dark rooms, and tiny meals, and an obscure creeping existence which would be appropriate to my enfeebled status and which would allow me gently to decline into extinction.

Frances feels lucky to have been taken into the enchanted circle of the Frasers who appear to be made for each other. She comments on their intimacy thus, “What interested me far more, although I also found it repellent, was their intimacy as a married couple. I sensed that it was in this respect that they found my company necessary: They exhibited their marriage to me, while sharing it only with each other.” The more intimacy the Frasers exhibit, the more she feels lonely as well as excited. She explains her perceptions thus:

I soon learned to keep a pleasant non-committal smile on my face when they looked into each other’s eyes, or even caressed each other; I felt lonely and excited. I was there because some element in that perfect marriage was deficient, because ritual demonstrations were needed to maintain a level of arousal which they were too complacent, perhaps too spoiled, even too lazy, to supply for themselves, out of their own imagination. I was the beggar at their feast, reassuring them by my very presence that they were richer than I was.

In Fraser’s company, Frances is happy and animated as she expresses, ‘ the thought of reverting to the role of observer rather than participant filled me with dread and sadness’ and the participatory role that she craves with Frasers is quite explicit when she says, “I know that

euphoria, that mania, that love and carelessness breed. And because I longed to experience it again on my own account, and not just to watch it. I had to trust them.” Frances’ addiction to the lucky golden pair who are phenomena in their own right and from whom she seeks recognition and notice suggests her yearning to be noticed or longing for a glance.

Nick Fraser is ‘distinguished by that grace and confidence of manner that ensure success. He is tall and fair, an athlete, a socialite, well-connected, good-looking, charming: everything you could wish for in a man.’ ‘Everybody’s favourite’ Nick, with his ‘hectic charm’ and ‘generally golden quality’ together with his beautiful but more menacing wife seems – in the opinion of Frances – to vindicate nineteenth century theories of natural selection. The couple is also the cue for a familiar Brookner contrast between the beautiful and the homely, given fresh thematic impetus by a parallel division into ‘participants’ and ‘observers.’ In this regard, Frances observes, “I have noticed that extremely handsome men and extremely beautiful women exercise a power over others which they themselves have no need, or indeed no time, to analyse. People like Nick attract admirers, adherents, followers. They also attract people like me: observers.”

The female half of the golden pair, Alix takes the golden woman type further to become herself as a predator, enduring her own life by evoking complication and the lurid in those around her, making the *outré* a quest. In the context of the understanding between Alix Fraser and Frances, a critic says, “For all her need to be noticed [a reference to the title], [Frances] is not quite hungry enough, not like Alix Forbes(sic), who eats people. Those who continue to interest or amuse her are digested; the rest Alix spits out. Frances, or Little Orphan Fanny as Alix calls her, gives her a few months of good chewing.”

The sense of an ‘intolerable life’ makes Frances feel that the Frasers, in accordance with another familiar pattern, will be the agents of her rescue. As they lay the foundations for her ‘new life’ and ‘further education,’ she can even contemplate a symbolic move from her ossified apartment acquired by her parents in wartime London. The deep bond between such distinctly dissimilar persons like Frances and Frasers seeds a sense of hope in the mind of Frances, as revealed in her observation, “Some friends change your life, and although you know that they exist somewhere you do not always meet them at the right time. But now the road ahead seemed easier. I had been rescued from my solitude; I had been given another chance; and I had high hopes of a future that would cancel out the past.”

When Nick and Alix appear to befriend Frances, they are effectively choosing her as the likeliest for conversion. The desire to change her made apparent when Alix tells Nick, “We must do something about her.” She further tells to Frances, “but first of all we must do something about your appearance.” Although Frances is undisguisedly “delighted” with what she calls the start of her “new life” based on Frasers’ “further education” of her, she is in fact a poor student and unconvertible by the novel’s end. If the Frasers laugh at the glass birds and the ashtrays inherited with the Hinton’s apartment, Frances thinks little of the few pieces of furniture that Alix has salvaged from her former home. Indeed Alix is taken in by Frances, for she lacks the qualities she is assumed to have. Frances observes, “Yet I was in my way necessary. I was an audience and an admirer; I relieved some of her frustration: I shared her esteem for her own superiority; and I was loyal and well-behaved and totally uncritical. Yet she found me dull, intrinsically dull, simply because I was loyal and well-behaved and uncritical.”

As her relationship with the Frasers develops, Frances can analyse the Frasers' sexual exhibitionism which seems to be beyond the capacity of the chosen form of presentation and makes it hard for Frances to express herself so naively about 'those droll and piquant comic novels, enjoyed by dons at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges' or ingeniously comparing the likes of the Frasers to 'some natural phenomenon; a rainbow, a mountain, a sunset.' It is, however, for James Anstey – meticulous, military and 'just conceivably a leader of men' that Frances feels the greatest attraction. Frances' minutely recorded sensations in this respect – "I felt strong, I felt energetic, I felt young...life was opening up...I was only just beginning my life...he had given validity to my entire future" do indeed have the ring of the romantic longing. She further feels, "I sensed that Dr. Anstey and I had a good deal in common in the way of good behaviour, moral stuffiness, and general lack of experience in the wilder and more interesting areas of human conduct..."

In the 'new security' provided by the relationship with James, her role of observer is momentarily eclipsed by that of participant, and she remarks pointedly after walking home with James, "That night I did not bother to write." Frances is very happy in her relationship with James and she doesn't care to write as she expresses:

In my new security I began to see it all in a different light. I began to hate that inner chemical excitement that made me run the words through in my head while getting ready to set them down on the page; I felt a revulsion against the long isolation that writing imposes, the clausturation, the sense of exclusion; I experienced a thrill of distaste for the alternate life that writing is supposed to represent. It was then that I saw the business of writing for what it truly was and is to me.

Frances apparently represents the view of writing held by Brookner. In response to an interviewer's comment that, "In 'Look at Me' you say that writing is your penance for not being lucky," Brookner replies, "I meant that writing is a very lonely activity. You go for days without seeing or talking to anyone. And all the time out there people are living happy, fulfilled lives – or you think you are. If I were happy, married with six children, I wouldn't be writing."

Frances has a naïve disregard for any erotic feelings that James may have for her; and yet the failure of the couple's only attempt at sexual consummation ("Not with you, Frances. Not with you") seems rather to suggest James' inability to combine the physical and emotional dimensions in a single relationship and Frances' expectation to have physical and emotional dimensions in the same relationship. As a result, James Anstey rejects Frances for the fragrantly sexual Maria, Alix's friend. Towards the end of the novel, Frances' relationship with James effectively deteriorates. One evening, at Christmas dinner in a restaurant, Frances sees and hears Maria bend over James with food and say, "More darling. I want you to be good and strong tonight. More." This reveals that Maria is already James' lover and then Frances' sense of delusion is complete. She leaves the restaurant with the bitter insight that, 'for love, a rampant egoism serves one better than an unsophisticated hope,' together with an indelible set of images such as, "I remembered the noise and heat of that restaurant, the intent and flushed faces, the oozing custard, the suckling inhalations of cigarettes, the rancous but sly excitement, the watchers."

Frances now struggles home through Hyde Park in darkness and rain, literally ‘walking from memory’ to santuar and sustenance. She immediately feels the necessity to put an end to her disguise. She observes:

I wanted to put an end to shabbiness, to pretence, to anxiety, to dissembling. That last time, the time of which I never speak, had been so endurable and also so baffling I had found myself rising, somehow, to expectations which I did not fully understand: grossness, cruelty, deceit. I had been humiliated, and had been enjoyed precisely because I was humiliated. It was all so diferent from what others had believed of me. I had managed, somehow, to live two lives. But in the end it was the more respectable of those lives that I had inherited. I minded, of course. Oh yes, I minded. But at the sametime I knew that whatever people say and whatever they put up with and whatever they get away with, love should be simple. And it is. It is.

Frances sees herself as not manipulative and thus, “able to bend others to [her] will” and as not “particularly malleable, and therefore able to bend to the will of others. Frances, having strayed from the call to be a writer by succumbing to the charms of the Frasers and James, symbolically returns “home to her mother” by moving into her mother’s bedroom and by remembering her words “My Darling Fan” as she motivated Frances to become a writer.

Finally, Frances decides to compromise for not being successful in making the world notice or acknowledge her as James Anstey’s wife or Frasers’ friend and so decides to become a writer. She claims that she really “found out about writing,” that is, found that it could make others look at her. Frances now sees writing as a way of ‘reminding people that I am here.’ She has clarified that writing is for her, another attempt to say, “Look at me.” According to her, it is “...an attempt to reach others and make them love you. It is your instinctive protest when you find you have no voice at the world’s tribunals that no one will speak for you.” Eventually, Frances succeeds in her ability to relate writing and self-notice. After suffering a collapse of sorts, she recognizes that she will never be viable enough for those in Alix circle and retreats to recover, to write and to accept her diminished lot. She concludes that her only route to being a person of substance is through her writing; if the world will not recofnize her as an individual, it will look at her as an author.

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