

# The Writer in Exile: Anita Brookner's Cultural Identity

Rebecca Haque

Professor of English, University of Dhaka

**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to explore aspects of Anita Brookner's autobiography and personality which have been recreated in the female protagonists of many of her well-known early novels. Born into a family of European Jews displaced by the Second World War, Brookner projects the collective memory and the life experience -- the angst -- of the émigré and the refugee. Exile is a legacy of history, a painful inheritance of the Jewish "diaspora." In Brookner's fiction, exile is a psychological state of being not restricted by notions of national identity politics. Brookner recreates the difficult patterns of personal survival and provides a unique perspective on cultural dislocation. An acclaimed art historian and academic, the psychological truth of Anita Brookner's lived experience, of compromise and interrogation of the cultural rift between the European and the British sensibilities, endows her fiction with the attributes of the Künstlerroman. The argument of my paper will be based on ideas borrowed from Edward Said's famous essay "Reflection on Exile" (2000). I shall examine Anita Brookner's cultural identity within the tropes of critical discourse inextricably linked to the "community of refugees": loss, nostalgia, memory (the twin faculties of remembering and forgetting), and trauma.*

Born into a family of Polish Jews in Herne Hill, London, England in 1928, Anita Brookner celebrated her eighty-seventh birthday on 16 July 2015. In this paper I shall explore aspects of Brookner's autobiography, personality, and family history which have been artfully distilled into the portrayal of protagonists in a number of well-known early novels, written in the decade between 1980 and 1990. My focus is the study of an individual's psychology and behavior within a specified cultural location, a location which creates pain, anxiety, and social dysfunction manifested in acute feelings of "otherness," of "homelessness," with its concomitant expression of a sense of loss of a fixed cultural identity. Brookner's "exile" is not restricted to a sense of deracination from a singular political national identity, or confined within the framework of an oppositional ideological stance. It does not arise from physical separation from a clearly demarcated territory on the globe, or any country held within rigidly policed boundaries.

Anita Brookner's cultural identity is not easy to pinpoint and define without recourse to her own words in recorded interviews. Brookner was very frank and open with Sasha Guppy in the well-known interview in 1987, published in *The Paris Review* ("The Art of Fiction" 98). In this interview, she clarifies autobiographical correspondences between herself and the sensitive, young, unmarried, highly educated female protagonists in her first four novels. A disturbing sense of

cultural dislocation, of “foreignness” and “not-belonging” in English society ripples through Brookner’s life, as it does through the lives of Dr. Ruth Weiss in *A Start in Life* (1981), Kitty Maule in *Providences* (1982), Frances Hinton in *Look at Me* (1983), and Edith Hope in the Booker Prize-winning *Hotel du Lac* (1984). The female hero in each of these novels is clearly Brookner’s alter ego. Brookner, who studied art history in Paris and has achieved distinction as an academic with a brilliant career at the Courtauld Institute in London, with acclaimed books on the lives of the painters Watteau, Greuze, and Jacques-Louis David, is more attuned to the intellectual and cultural sensibility of European Romanticism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author finds the twentieth century especially inimical and confrontational.

In the lives of Ruth, Kitty, Frances, and Edith, Brookner traces a pattern of survival, a trajectory of struggle in an insidiously damaging existential situation. Somewhat similar to a character teetering on the edge of an abyss in a Sartre novel, each woman betrays signs of neurotic anxiety, symptoms often carefully masked by ritual performance of socially accepted normative behavior. Intelligent and acutely self-conscious, these women are endowed with perspicacious self-knowledge. Ironically, however, complete or partial ignorance of other people’s motives and selfish manipulations – in effect, their lack of knowledge of the codes of the English “game” of social intrigue – keeps them in perpetual emotional exile. When Sasha Guppy points out that “the foreignness of your heroines is emphasized by the contrast between them and the very English, Protestant men they are attracted to,” Brookner quickly retorts, “I think the contrast is between damaged people and those who are undamaged.” Guppy also mentions that in *Providence*, Brookner reveals that she writes to tell the truth, to expose life’s falsehoods; Brookner calls this trait her “Cassandra Complex.” In *Hotel du Lac*, Brookner exposes the falsehood of another myth in the story of “The Tortoise and the Hare.” She asserts that in real life the hare wins every time, never the slow, patient tortoise. She says, “It is my contention that Aesop was writing for the tortoise market. Anyway, hares have no time to read — they are too busy winning the game.”

Brookner’s feelings of dislocation occupy a mental landscape rather than a geographical space. This exilic space is more subtle and fluid than fixed spatial terrain; it is as infinitely complex and malleable as the human psyche itself. Like many major novelists of the twentieth century, for example, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf – to name a few from the tradition of the modern British novel who were deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud’s theories – Brookner too channels her own life experience, and the facts of her family and lineage, into the structure and meaning of her fictional works. She weaves personal content and the broader context of cultural confrontation with objectivity and control achieved through distance and hindsight. As a member of a family of European Jews displaced by the Second World War, Brookner projects the collective memory and the angst of the émigré and the refugee. Exile is thus also a legacy of a complicated history, a painful inheritance of Hitler’s Holocaust and the subsequent forced “diaspora.”

The history of the post-war world is one of migration and dispersion – or, in the jargon of recent cultural theory, of “mobility and hybridity.” It has been pointed out that it is difficult to define people as “located” or “displaced,” since today the term “diaspora” – originally applied to the scattering of the Jewish people driven from the Holy Land since the eighth century BC and setting up “home” in many other places – is applied to many “diasporas,” such as the Bangladeshi or Indian diaspora, and the Chinese or Irish diaspora. In *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, the British academic Avtar Brah has argued that

instead of making a distinction between those who have moved and those who have stayed put (‘diasporians’ and ‘natives’) we should recognize that the existence of diasporic populations in a society means that everyone inhabits ‘diasporic space’ and has to face the cultural issues that involves. (qtd. in Brian Longhurst 131)

Writers and poets try to explain the reality of human suffering and account for the pain of separation and exile. However, recent theoretical debate surrounding the dialectics of exile has stripped the human drama of its tragic edge. Therefore, it is important to look at Edward Said’s revelatory essay “Reflection on Exile” to understand the state of mind of the displaced people of the earth, whom he collectively calls “a community of refugees” in an earlier essay published in the periodical *The New Nation*. I shall quote the famous opening passage of “Reflections of Exile,” lines suffused with pathos and poignancy, with painful and empathetic knowledge of the plight of the refugee:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in the exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture? We have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement. Nietzsche taught us to feel uncomfortable with tradition, and Freud to regard domestic intimacy as the polite face painted on patricide and incestuous rage. Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. (173)

Said's long essay is a lyrical cry from the heart, a cry for sympathy and understanding. References to poets in exile paint a picture of the refugee's life as a harrowing shadow-play among the margins of memories stored in the mind, and knowledge of actual sight, scent, and touch of tangible objects lost forever. In this context, Said quotes lines from a poem by the Palestinian poet, Mahmud Darwish, a poet who sings of a life in the exodus: "But I am the exile./ Seal me with your eye./ Take me wherever you are –/Take me whatever you are./ Restore to me the colour of face/ And the warmth of body/ The light of heart and eye/ The salt of bread and rhythm,/Take me as a relic from the mansion of sorrow./ Take me as a verse from my tragedy" (178).

In her novel *Latecomers* (1988), Anita Brookner gives palpable form to the haunting tragedy and trauma of post-war exodus. She tells us of her own family situation in the interview with Sasha Guppy: "We all lived in my grandmother's house with aunts and uncles and cousins all around, and I thought everybody lived like that. They were a transplanted and fragile people, an unhappy brood, and I felt that I had to protect them." The plot of *Latecomers* revolves around the lives of two Jewish refugees, Fibich and Hartman, who have been close friends since their chance placement in the same boarding-school in England in the months preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. Small, specifically haunting incidents in the lives of the characters make us recall the full horror of the events in Nazi Germany. A recurring memory left intact in Fibich's adult consciousness is of his mother fainting in his father's arms as the train pulls away from the station in Berlin, carrying their little boy to safety and away from their lives forever.

Fibich suffers from severe post-traumatic disorder. His inability to escape from painful memories of the past results in a life-long eating disorder: he is never able to assuage his hunger because he is never able to eat a full meal. Indigestion is a physical symptom of a deep sense of insecurity compounded by an inexplicable sense of guilt at having abandoned his parents to their doom. Marriage and prolonged psychoanalysis provide no relief. Indeed, Brookner makes the fragmented, spiritually alienated Fibich into a modern Romantic hero, one who has no religious faith but finds strength in a belief in free will and the possibility of personal ethical choice. He is portrayed as the solitary Byronic wanderer, and allusion and figurative imagery combine to make us aware of correspondences between the desolate Fibich and Byron's melancholy pilgrim in the epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Fibich recites several lines from the epic to his infant son Toto night after night in a ritual bonding between two generations of displaced people. As Fibich's voice rises and falls with the rhythm of the sublime verse, the infant is mesmerized by the comforting melodic strain. At the end of the novel, in the grey twilight of his life, Fibich writes a memoir, a history of his journey in the form of a long letter to the adult Toto, now settled in America. He concludes,

Your grandfather's name was Manfred. Your grandmother was Rosa. She was very beautiful. You will read about them in the notebook. ... don't worry about us. We are still here, and will be here as long as you want us. Life has taught me that death is only a small interruption. This I know to be an unalterable truth. Do you remember that poem I used to read you ... in an attempt to get you to sleep? Do you remember 'battle's magnificently stern array'? I was never able to capture that spirit myself. Some battles, however, are fought in the mind, and sometimes won there. (*Latecomers* 237-8)

In contrast to Fibich, his friend Hartman suffers less mental trauma. With a more positive outlook and a sensual enjoyment of all that life in England has to offer, Hartman has a healthy appetite for food. His philosophy is essentially *carpe diem* – seize the day. Life is to be lived in the present, every experience must be savored, for it is only total immersion in the moment which keeps the darkness of the past at bay. Brookner makes him exclaim, “Look! We have come through!” in a quietly exultant tone, intermittently throughout the narrative. This rallying cry of the indomitable spirit, of the survivor is, of course, the title of D. H. Lawrence’s cycle of confessional poems published in 1917 – a record of his spiritual crisis and psychic dissolution. Joyce Carol Oates tells us in her book, *The Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence*, “Lawrence endured and suffered, worked his way through himself (sometimes only barely) and came through. [In the eight-part poem “New Heaven and Earth” in this volume], Lawrence shares the apocalyptic madness of the [First world] war, imagining himself as part of the era’s murderessness....”

It is necessary to look at some parts of Lawrence’s poem to understand the strategic narrative significance of Brookner’s allusion. Through Lawrence’s words, Brookner helps us comprehend the vicious barbarity of war. In Section IV, Lawrence’s graphic imagery makes us experience the ghastly gas-chamber executions carried out in the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War.

War came and every hand raised to murder, . . .  
I . . . see them fall, the mutilated, horror-struck youths,  
a multitude, one on another, and then, in clusters together  
smashed, all oozing with blood, and burned in heaps  
going up in a foetid smoke to get rid of them  
the murdered bodies of youths and men in heaps  
till it is almost enough, till I am reduced perhaps;  
thousands and thousands of gaping, hideous foul dead,  
that are youths and men and me being burned in oil,  
and consumed in corrupt thick smoke that rolls  
and taints and blackens the sky,  
till at last it is dark, dark as night, or death, or hell  
and I am dead, and trodden to nought  
in the smoke-sodden tomb.

(*Look! We Have Come Through!* 128)

Later, gradually, through stages of reconciliation and healing, Lawrence experiences a miraculous resurrection; he is the phoenix risen from smoldering ash. “New Heaven and Earth” ends with celebration of the ultimate mystery of human personality. A poet, novelist, and a prophetic mystic in the way he finds restoration in the symbiotic bond between man and the natural world, Lawrence offers salvation to others who have been damaged and have drifted far from native coastlines.

Lawrence long ago famously stated to a friend that, “it is the hidden emotional pattern that makes poetry, not the obvious form” (qtd. by Seamus Perry). Anita Brookner, too, probes the hidden depths of the human personality, and discovers the poetic pattern of individual psychic struggle. She identifies with the pain of the solitary voyager and traces the arc of a lonely quest. She carries the memory of family faces as she grows older. In her thirties, she chose to remain single and childless in order to take care of her aging parents. She began writing novels when she was in her fifties, and has frankly admitted to Sasha Guppy that she writes novels to ward off loneliness. Writing is immensely therapeutic, and we can find in a novel like *Look at Me* distinctive attributes of a *künstlerroman*.

Brookner’s face is elegant in repose, with large limpid eyes reflecting grace under pressure. A timeline of her present Facebook portraits bring to mind the following lines by Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish Nobel laureate: “We always feel younger than we are. I carry within myself my earlier faces as a tree contains its rings. The sum of them is ‘me.’ The mirror sees only my latest face, while I know all my previous ones” (249).

## Works Cited

- Brookner, Anita. *Latecomers*. London: Grafton Books, 1988. Print.
- Guppy, Sasha. "The Art of Fiction, No.98: Anita Brookner." *The Paris Review* 29.104 (Fall 1987): 146-69. Print.
- Lawrence, D. H. *Look, We Have Come Through!* NY: B.W. Huebesch, 1999. Print.
- Longhurst, Brian, et. al., eds. *Introducing Cultural Studies*. India: Dorling Kindersley, 2011. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol, and D. H. Lawrence. "The Hostile Sun: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence". *The Massachusetts Review* 13.4 (1972): 639–656. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 July 2015.
- Said, Edward. *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Seamus Perry, "D. H. Lawrence Possessed." *The Times Literary Supplement*. 6 Nov. 2013. Web. 4 July 2015.
- Tranströmer, Tomas. "Memories Look at Me." *The Great Enigma: New Collected Poems*. Trans. Robin Fulton. NY: New Directions Books, 2006. 233-258. *Google Books*. Web. 16 June 2015.