

A PROBE INTO THE POSTMODERN LACK OF LOVES
IN THE NOVELS OF ANITA BROOKNER

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A probe into the postmodern lack of loves in the novels of Anita Brookner

*Una indagación sobre la
posmoderna falta de amores en
las novelas de Anita Brookner*

Uma investigação sobre a falta
de amores pós-moderna nos
romances de Anita Brookner

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ABSTRACT

Anita Brookner is a contemporary British Jewish woman writer. Although she has passed away, nearly 30 novels are her valuable legacy for us and the present world. Her language is fresh, fluent with a typical Jane Austenian style. The very rich postmodern themes and techniques, however, are hidden by the deceptive surface. The article focuses on the postmodern lack of loves, one of her postmodern themes so as to reveal her brilliant charming novel art and further reflect on our common life.

Keywords: Anita Brookner, Postmodern lack, Postmodern love, British literature.

ABSTRACT

Anita Brookner es una escritora judía británica contemporánea. Aunque ya falleció, cerca de 30 novelas son su valioso legado para nosotros y el mundo actual. Su lenguaje es fresco, fluido con un estilo típico de Jane Austenian. Los riquísimos temas y técnicas posmodernos están ocultos por la engañosa superficie. El artículo se enfoca en la falta de amores posmodernos, uno de sus temas posmodernos para revelar su brillante y encantador arte de novela y reflexionar más sobre nuestra vida en común.

Keywords: Autobiography, narrative fiction, temporality, ontology, hermeneutics

RESUMO

Anita Brookner é uma escritora judia britânica contemporânea. Embora tenha falecido, cerca de 30 romances são seu valioso legado para nós e para o mundo de hoje. Sua linguagem é fresca, fluente no típico estilo Jane Austeniano. Os ricos temas e técnicas pós-modernas são ocultados pela superfície enganosa. O artigo enfoca a falta de amor pós-moderno, um de seus temas pós-modernos para revelar sua brilhante e charmosa obra de arte e refletir mais sobre nossa vida juntos.

Palavras-chave: Anita Brookner, Carencia posmoderna, Amor posmoderno, Literatura britânica.

Anita Brookner (1928–2016), was a famous British woman writer who published nearly 30 novels. Her novel "Lakeside Hotel" won the Booker Prize for British Fiction in 1984 and was hailed as "the most original and innovative novel" (Skinner 1992 66). Among her innovations, the post-modern fictional theme and techniques are outstanding. Examining most of the novels of the writer, we find that they are closely related to the Victorian England in the 19th century, but their protagonists live in the contemporary era. The questions they think about and observe are of contemporary society, history, culture, politics and so on, which shows with clarity the author's creative purpose: To juxtapose the 19th-century Britain and contemporary Britain in parallel, and to re-examine the varied problems of contemporary Britain in comparison. Given the limit of length of the article, here we only focus on one of her themes, the postmodern lack of loves, for which it is necessary to begin with a philosophical conceptual review of the postmodern lack.

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THE POSTMODERN LACK

One of the main contributions of Sigmund Freud is dividing human mind into three layers: id, ego, and superego. Id, he points out, is a hidden but dominant force. In his description the id is a "bubbling cauldron" of latent yet oppressed desires and instincts that prepare to run out of control at any time (Holland 1969). Ego and superego, however, play the role of double valves in regulating and restricting id's behavior so that it can run out in a reasonable and orderly way. Though a worshiper of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, a French post-modern psychoanalyst, argues much differently from him that it is not chaotic but structured: "the structure of unconscious is the structure of language" (Miel 1966). And the structure, he adds, is able to be analyzed. Following Freud's suit, he also divides a human mind into three layers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real order. The period from birth to six months or so, he calls the imaginary order, in which the baby has not learned any language and is dominated by its desires, hallucinations, and especially images. In the period, the baby cannot distinguish between itself and the "other", only living in changing images, in a oneness it feels with its mother from whom it acquires food, care and pleasure. The time from 6 months to around 18 months, Lacan calls "the mirror stage", in which the baby comes to know that it and its mother are different individual beings. Therefore, the oneness collapses. With the oneness collapsing, the baby enters in a stage called the symbolic order. In the new stage, the baby has become aware of its difference from its mother, father, and all other

objects. When the “others” cannot be felt, for example, its mother’s voice cannot be heard, a sense of lack surges up in the baby and such a sense of lack of external things, both spiritual and material, Lacan stresses, will accompany the baby all the rest of his/her life. And the baby has since been in the control of differences and lacks. More significantly, just in time comes language in the period. As Saussure declares, “In a language there are only differences, and no positive terms” (Saussure 1983 118). Therefore, language becomes a significant force in forming the baby’s ideology and thought, and in Lacan’s theory, it is a decisive force and an earmark of the symbolic order. In the period of the symbolic order, with the baby coming to know the difference between sexes, Oedipus complex or Electra complex develops as a result of lack. In addition, as language is generally father-dominated, Lacan believes since the beginning of the symbolic order the baby’s ideology has been controlled by father. In other words, male, not female, language is critical to the symbolic order. Lacan’s third order, the Real order, is similar to Freud’s superego, but much different in content: Freud’s puts emphasis on morals, close to “conscience”, while Lacan’s refers to all non-spirit, material world, namely, what human mind lacks and is different from, “or as Lacan would say, the Real Order contains countless objects that continually function for us as symbols of primordial lack” (Bressler 1999 159).

In summary, Jacques Lacan points out to us that all human beings have a strong sense of lack since their mirror stage, which is the very postmodern theme Brookner manages to illustrate in her novels. Among a variety of lacks the writer has depicted, the lack of love is especially highlighted, for which let us have a discussion.

THE POSTMODERN LACK OF LOVE IN HER NOVELS

Latecomers is a story about the friendship between Hartmann and Fibich, two orphans brought to England during their childhood. Their parents could not escape timely and died in the Nazi Holocaust, leaving them helpless in England, a foreign nation to them. To some extent, their friendship helps them overcome childhood sufferings and a sense of parental lack, which adds a sunlight to the novel and seems to be a change of the writer’s constant tragic style. A close reading of the end of the novel, however, subverts the speculation. The end is a situation in which Fibich determines to come back to Berlin in search of his past, his root and the wholeness he once felt when together with his mother: his past “would be returned to him as an illumination, and that illumination would render him whole” (Brookner

1983 199). Here “illumination” would remind readers of Lacan’s “the imaginary order”. His search is proved in vain, as nothing is found in Berlin and he feels his childhood is remote and his sense of lack will forever remain. Such being the case, he has a little different sentiment about Berlin (a symbol of his mother), where he and his mother once lived: “nobody grows up. Everyone carries around all the selves that they have ever been, intact, waiting to be reactivated in moments of pain, of fear, of danger. Everything is retrievable, every shock, every hurt. But perhaps it becomes a duty to abandon the stock of time that one carries within oneself, to discard it in favor of the present, so that one’s embrace may be turned outwards to the world in which one has made one’s home” (Brookner 1983 210). He even remembers his son: “His boy, his dearest boy” (Brookner 1983 210). On his return to England (England is a symbol of father as his ideology is molded by the father-dominated English), however, the mere “comfort” is crushed into pieces when he walks down from a passenger plane and sees a woman fainting to the ground. The scene reminds him of mother: when he was sent to the train leaving for England, he saw through a carriage window that his mother fainted to the ground because her child would leave her. Here the mother fainting to the ground is a symbol of the end of the imaginary order and also of the beginning of the symbolic order, or say, the very starting of his permanent lack.

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The above desire for a maternal love or for the imaginary order is actually illustrated in many of her novels. For instance, the mother of Edith Hope in *Hotel du Lac* is estranged from her children, the mother of Harriet Lytton has an adultery with her landlord Mr. Latif, and Blanche’s mother in *The Misalliance* loses her mother in childhood, all of which result in their strong desire for a true maternal love and a deep-felt sense of lack. Such a desire and sense sometimes appear not in childhood, but in the middle age of characters, with examples like Lewis in *Lewis Percy*, Mimi in *Family and Friends*, Fay in *Brief Lives* and Anna in *Fraud*. Their sense of a lack of a maternal love is deep-felt by the characters and the situation is just as Claire in *Undue Influence* depicts: “Now let me tell you what a woman wants (Brookner 1999 195). [...] A woman wants...ardour, an erotic eagerness that goes beyond the physical. The desire and pursuit of the whole. And also unmasking, so that it will become possible to meet on every level” (Brookner 1999 186) Here, the “want”, according to Julia Kristeva, “reveals the true nature of Being” (1989 7-8).

The above is a discussion of lack of a maternal love in Brookner’s novels. Now, let us come to another lack of love in the writer’s novels: a lack of a heterosexual love.

Dolly is a story of Jane Manning's recollection of her family. Henrietta, her mother, is an heiress of a large fortune, but in essence she is an ordinary person, kind and homely. Paul, her father, is also an ordinary person very hardworking and devoted to his wife and daughter. The happiness and harmony of their family life can be read from the following words: "When I got up to go, picking up some vague approximation of a briefcase, she got up with a smile on her face and kissed me, for all the world as if I were my father and she were seeing me off to work" (Brookner 1994 135). The drawback of her parents, however, resides in their inability to deal with others. They only attend to their own family and live a lonely life. The smart daughter, however, is conscious of her family's danger, that is, her parents' conduct is misleading to her and will make her too unprepared to meet the challenge of the external harsh reality, and meanwhile such an indulgence in interdependence is harmful. The later events prove her foreboding: the father dies of a cancer, with the result that her mother cannot suffer from his absence and passes away too. Thus, Jane Manning, their only daughter, has to be nursed by her aunt Dolly. In contrast with her parents, Dolly is extroverted, aggressive and charming. She always tells Jane that she should be integrated into her surrounding society, participate in all activities and keep energetic, and more importantly, "Always let them think of you as singing and dancing!" (Brookner 1994 127) For that, Jane likes Dolly somehow, but she also knows her aunt's deadly sins are selfishness and greed, aware that Dolly's good treatment of her is a result of her as an inheritor of a large fortune. When dealing with her aunt, Jane always thinks of some questions, of which the one she wants to ask her aunt most is "What do you lack?" And more Lacanianly, she is convinced "That was the most fundamental question of all" (Brookner 1994 127). At the end of the novel, Jane eventually comprehends her aunt's behavior as well as her character: "she has to find security in a world unfriendly to lonely women" (Eiland 1995 741). The answer to the above question is also made clear: "Dolly's one constant demand, even more than her thirst for money, has been for love" (Eiland 1995 742). Being refused by Harry Dean, Dolly is awake to her fate that she will not win a real love from any man and will forever remain in a state of lack of love. That is also applicable to Jane. Realizing her unavoidable "lack", Jane starts to brave the "lack", which is just the suggestion of Lacan for people to do. In an article of *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley gives a comment that Jane will take "real courage. But after all else is said and done, courage is what Dolly—the novel and the person alike—is all about" (Yardley 1994 17), which is indeed an insight into the

characters. The comment is a manifest reflection of Anita Brookner's understanding of Lacan. At the end of *A Closed Eye*, its heroine Harriet not only acknowledges such a lack of heterosexual love, but takes pains to keep it: she declines the courtship by Jack Peckham and devotes all her maternal love to her daughter Imogen, in a hope that Imogen can enjoy Lacan's so-called wholeness and a new birth. Just as Lacan points out, that is a mere wishful thinking, an unreachable ideal. Thus, the novel devises an ending of Imogen's death together with Harriet's solitary muse:

Turning, she surveyed the empty room. My life, she thought, an empty room. But she felt no pain, felt in fact the cautious onset of some kind of release. Vividly, she caught sight of Immy[Imogen]'s face. She drew in a deep breath, laughed. There it was again, Immy's face as it had always been. She laughed again, at the image of Immy's laughing face. Sinking on to the sofa she let the tears rain down. Never to lack for company again. All will be as before, she thought, as she wept in gratitude. When my little girl was young. (Brookner 1991 263).

From the ending, readers would see what Harriet finally owns is a permanent lack of love, both heterosexual and maternal, and that the wholeness can only exist in imagination.

The above is an example of lack of a heterosexual love. Now let us scrutinize a more intense lack of love in Brookner's works—a simultaneous lack of maternal, paternal, and heterosexual loves.

Oscar is an accountant in *A Friend from England*, who wins a handsome prize in a lottery game and thereby owns a company. Gradually, he turns wealthy and has a comfortable home for his wife Dorrie and 27-year-old daughter Heather. Rachel, the narrator of the novel, is a 32-year-old without parents alive in the world. Her father, before death, is a regular client of Oscar. For that reason Rachel becomes a constant visitor to the Oscars. In her childhood, Rachel was fond of swimming and went every day with her father to the seaside to play water. Now, however, with her father's death, she loses interest in the sport and fears it as it "is accompanied by a wave of sadness" (Brookner 1988 62). Watching simple and naïve Heather, a child in the novel, before her, she recalls her past: "I had that same sensation of time being endlessly capacious, and memory and melancholy being equally tyrannical, the sense of strong feeling and deep family commitment, the same insulation from the world, and above all the self-sufficiency. I had no doubt that in her old age Heather would look back on these afternoons with the same sense of loss" (Brookner 1988 24). With both parents dead, Rachel endeavors to promote her friendship with Heather. Every day she visits Heather's home and seems to have obtained what she desires: she enters in a "dreamy, vul-

nerable, childish state" embracing "their sleepwalking demeanour, the food that always appeared as if by magic, and the abundance of material goods that flowed through their lives" (Brookner 1988 63-64). She seems to be in an illusion of a pre-oedipal wholeness: the "deep peace and safety of their home" gives her, a "hapless swimmer", a sense of security (Brookner 1988 63-64). However, it is a mere illusion that quickly disappears and she is still encircled by ubiquitous lacks: in her dream, she sees Oscar standing outside Heather's door with roses to woo her, a symbol of her subconscious desire for a heterosexual love or for a paternal love. Though Heather is the person she most frequently deals with, "the image that comes most frequently to mind, is not that of Dorrie...not even of Heather...but of Oscar" (Brookner 1988 25). She recalls Oscar once said to her, "Well, dear. There you are. Seen your mother?" Yet in her ear the words changed into "where's your mother? *I would* (my italic) hear. And again, 'where's your mother'" (Brookner 1988 25). Here, an interweaving of lack of paternal and maternal loves appears in Rachel, which inflicts great pains on her. Accordingly, though she tries to be friendly to Heather, she still feels "we had nothing in common except Heather's parents" and she notices in Heather "not incapacity, but absence" (Brookner 1988 28) .

CONCLUSION

In brief, Brookner's novels are crowded with postmodern lacks, whose heroines are particularly in a state of lack of maternal, paternal and heterosexual loves. Under the siege of postmodern lacks, they have their passion and romanticism depleted and become a perfect annotation of Lacan's psychoanalysis. Hence, Fisher-Wirth's review: "Elegantly accoutered and impeccably made up, her [Anita Brookner's] novels, like her women, find their truth in limitation, their passion in despair" (Fisher-Wirth 1995 12). Besides, as the "lacks" ideologically subvert a pursuit of perfectness and wholeness embodied in the writer's realism, they are also a reflection of the conflicting side of her postmodern realist art.

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