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DUALISM IN ANITA BROOKNER'S "LATECOMERS"

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ABSTRACT

In her eighth novel, *Latecomers*, Anita Brookner, attempts to focus on dealing with the intricacies of past, present and future and deriving a meaning for existence. This novel portrays two aging emigres, Hartmann and Fibich, who bear the same first name and the past but possess the contrasting characteristics. A twelve-year-old Munich boy, Thomas Hartmann and a five-year-old Berliner, Fibich are sent to London on the kinder transport from Nazi Germany during the war. The self-assured and steady, Hartmann marries Yvette who is bold, beautiful as well as obsessed with her own self and the anxious, weak and docile, Fibich marries Christine who is meek, submissive and withdrawn. Each couple has a child that is extremely oxymoronic. The Hartmanns find their daughter to be incapable, somber and naïve. Married to an official from her father's business enterprise, she gradually loses her shape to pregnancy which is criticized by Hartmann occasionally. The Hartmanns could never feel proud of their daughter because she appears more like a daughter to the Fibichs. The same goes with Toto who can be very easily mistaken to be the Hartmanns' son. The Fibichs feel insulted as Toto considers them to be "inadequate." But the docile parents are rather proud to have produced him as they feel that their own powerlessness has empowered him. After immense estrangement, Toto's return to his mother is the signifying twist in the novel and to be more specific the most moving moment captured by the author. The dualism that has been perpetual throughout the novel makes it even more interesting as well as awe inspiring.

Keywords: Anita Brookner, *Latecomers*, Dualism, Existence, Survival, Past

In her fiction, the British novelist, Anita Brookner (1928-) reconstructs her own psychological, emotional, social and cultural experience, to convey the conflicts and yearnings of the characters she observes and portrays. As Julian Barnes put it, "There was no one remotely like her," as her novels "dramatize and mirror" her "evolving sense of selfhood." This is reflected through her characters and Brookner has described her own fiction as "a little exercise in self-analysis." Self, the result of man's awareness of himself as a separate

entity in the social environment enables him to regard himself and emotionally experience his own integrity and identity in relation to his past, present and future. In her eighth novel, *Latecomers*, Brookner, attempts to focus on dealing with the intricacies of past, present and future and deriving a meaning for existence. Unlike her stereotypical women-centric theme, she tries out men-centric theme with a greater importance to an expansive character development. In this regard, it is worthy to quote the comment of *The Times* that, "Like Virginia

Woolf, Brookner's aim is not to draw characters in the round, but to reveal psychological reality in the deep."

This novel portrays two aging emigres, Hartmann and Fibich, who bear the same first name and the past but possess the contrasting characteristics. A twelve-year-old Munich boy, Thomas Hartmann and a five-year-old Berliner, Fibich are sent to London on the kinder transport from Nazi Germany during the war. They are brought up by Hartmann's Aunt Marie and their lifelong friendship forms the crux of the novel. Their life as refugees in London can be paralleled with the sense of rootlessness clubbed with the sense of alienation, loneliness, exile and homelessness that Brookner admits having felt throughout her life. Brookner has called herself "a sort of Jewish exile." Brookner's parents were Polish Jews; her mother was born in England and her father in Poland. Brookner has acknowledged that her autobiographical 'self,' permeates her fiction. When asked in her interview with Haffenden about whether her novels speak of her condition, Brookner clarified "The particulars are all invented, but they speak of states of mind which forced me to do something about those states of mind."

In the novel, the "sunny and insouciant," Hartmann's "joy was apparent in his beautifully cut hair, his expensive suit, his manicured hands, the faint aura of cologne that heralded his approach; in his mind and habitually smiling face, too, his expressive walk..." He manages to suppress his past taking over his present pleasures and future endeavours though he treasures the memories of his parents going for a ride in a horse cart, well dressed and smiling. But, the "melancholy," Fibich tends to be possessed by his past that hinders him to live completely in the present and cherish about his future because at times he lets it, "almost to take him over." His predicament is expressed thus:

...those losses had coloured his entire life, like ink dropped in water. For him it was all different: a hunger for absent knowledge, a longing, a yearning, not for those losses to be made good - that, he knew, could not come about - but to be assuaged by fact, by circumstantial detail, by a history, a geography. He longed to know what his life

had been before he could remember it. He longed to walk a foreign street and be recognized.

This dualism is perpetual throughout the novel. Hartmann versus Fibich, Yvette Hartmann versus Christine Fibich and Marianne Hartmann versus Toto Fibich demand intense attention and the critical analysis of the characterization of these duals is essential for the better understanding of the novel. As San Francisco Chronicle puts it, "Brookner's illuminating depiction of her characters' inner lives makes *Latecomers* a brilliant, accomplished work."

The "voluptuary," Hartmann considers that his life's to be spent "in the perfecting of simple pleasures, mainly of a physical or domestic nature." He adores the petty, usual things around him and derives pleasure in being, "I am that I am." Despite being a stranger in the alien land throughout his life, he never wants to look back as he considers his past to be "consigned to the dust, or to the repository that can only be approached in dreams." Overcoming his "deliberately euphoric past," he is proud to have become what he is and considers himself to be an optimist. Hartmann and Fibich are friends from their childhood and they work as well as live together in the same building. Hartmann expresses, "Look! What we have come through!" encapsulates the trials and tribulations the lifelong friends have endured and leaves a promising spirit towards their future aspirations. Hartmann has been the active decision maker throughout the life as he has decided about their marriages, business venture of greeting cards and residences whereas Fibich simply follows him passively and blindly.

In this novel too, Brookner dissects the "most potent myth of all," promulgated by Aesop's story of the tortoise and the hare which provides the necessary consolatory gratification to her own tortoise readers. In her novel, *Hotel du Lac*, the protagonist, Edith says to her publisher:

People love this one, especially women. Now you will notice, Harrold, that in my books it is the mouse like unassuming girl who gets the hero, while the scornful temptress with whom he has had stormy affair retreats baffled from the fray, never to return. The tortoise wins every time. This is a lie, of course, 'In real life...it is the hare

who wins. Every time. Look around you...'
Hares have no time to read. They are busy winning the game. The propaganda goes all the other way, but only because it is the tortoise who is in need of consolation. Like the meek who are going to inherit the earth.

Through Edith, the author concludes that the hare is always convinced of its own superiority and does not recognize the tortoise as a worthy adversary and so the hare wins.

Edith's perception that it is the hare-like manipulative girls who win every time in the real life is, of course, based on Brookner's own perception that prevails in *Latecomers* as well. The self-assured and steady, Hartmann marries Yvette who is bold, beautiful as well as obsessed with her own self and the anxious, weak and docile, Fibich marries Christine who is meek, submissive and withdrawn. Ironically, Yvette and Christine are extreme opposites; the prior being the hare type who derives pleasure in material comforts being frivolous, coquettish and shallow and the latter being the tortoise-type who is deeply moralistic, profoundly intellectual, observant and lacking in expression. Like their husbands, both the women have suffered the loss of a parent in childhood.

Yvette is charming, attractive and almost null and void of an interior life, retaining her childhood nuances of the war, "the last lingering shadow of doubt, a doubt that was always experienced as dissatisfaction," loves her body and presentation so much. Frivolous, self-effacing and seemingly flirtatious, she has coolly devised ways to keep her employer, Hartmann happy just to make him fall for her and succeeds in getting married to him. Like her husband, she has utmost confidence and cavalier attitude to redesign the past events into a fairytale that fits to her purpose of existence. Yvette has successfully distracted herself and managed her life so well despite knowing the fact that her father was a Nazi supporter killed during his stay in France. She is born with such innate characteristic features that enable her to acquire high emotional intelligence and free spirit. Yvette embodies the idea of freedom that Simone de Beauvoir portrays thus, "for a woman, liberty begins in the womb."

Whereas Christine is the hired domestic assistant in Hartmann's aunt's house to help Aunt Marie during her final ailing days. Because of her seriousness in life and selflessly caring attitude, she becomes close with the soft and gentle, Fibich and eventually they get married and move into the flat in the same building where Hartmann resides with his family.

Christine Fibich, is discreet and diffident, "a modest girl, who did not even presume to be unhappy." Having undergone a sad and haunting past, she shares with her husband a sense of having "been so deprived of childhood that in a sense they were both still waiting in the wings, unaware that, happy or unhappy, this stage must be passed, that all beginnings are to a certain extent situated in limbo."

Each couple has a child that is extremely oxymoronic. David Hume's idea of parenting thus, "whoever considers the length and feebleness of human infancy, with the concern which both sexes must naturally have for their offspring, will easily perceive that there must be a union of the male and the female for the education of the young," is questioned in this novel. The energetic and fulfilled couple, the Hartmanns, have a naïve and shy child, Marianne whereas the explicitly dull and sober couple, the Fibichs, have Toto, the vulgar womanizer. This is yet another duo presented by the author who is praised by E.F. Benson for possessing a "gimlet eye," that has the capability to bring into light even the mildest vulgarity and the secretive gestures.

The Hartmanns find their daughter to be incapable, somber and naïve. Married to an official from her father's business enterprise, she gradually loses her shape to pregnancy which is criticized by Hartmann occasionally. The Hartmanns could never feel proud of their daughter because she appears more like a daughter to the Fibichs. The same goes with Toto who can be very easily mistaken to be the Hartmanns' son. The Fibichs feel insulted as Toto considers them to be "inadequate." But the docile parents are rather proud to have produced him as they feel that their own powerlessness has empowered him. After immense estrangement, Toto's return to his mother is the

signifying twist in the novel and to be more specific the most moving moment captured by the author as she expresses thus, "It was as if their own characters, their own mysterious and even dolorous inheritance, were receiving some strange and dignified form of recognition," about the Fibichs at the end and she further adds:

They did not know this new adult son who had emerged from his unruly boyhood like a legendary princeling attaining his majority. What they did recognize was a quality of inwardness bordering on enchantment, a quality not remote from melancholy but with a strength about it that they had never known. He was theirs, and yet not theirs. He was their apotheosis.

Though the two couples have problems in accepting their children owing to the differences in their predicaments, towards the end, they could see the brighter sides of their children and accept them.

At the end, Fibich goes on a journey to Berlin where he reaches the train station and recalls his mother's image parting with him many years back – he is completely moved and Brookner has successfully picturized the moment without idealizing it. This acknowledges the praise of *The Praise* that says, "Brookner's most touching novel... She has transcended the struggle between men and women to arrive at... truth; as if having solved the mysteries of love, she has moved on to the meaning of life." Fibich's victory here is not coming to terms with the past or achieving his seeking for self but the gesture to make a journey to Berlin itself is heroic, keeping in mind, his temperament and the prolonged suffering he has undergone owing to the haunting past. Hartmann applauds him saying, "You are not a survivor. You are a latecomer, like me... You had a bad start. Why go back to the beginning? One thing is certain: you can't start again." This gives an optimistic note on the collective survival. The two "diametrically opposed" men have taken the full responsibility of their lives rather late and succeeded in cultivating such intimacy that they "could no more think of living apart than they could of divorcing their wives."

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