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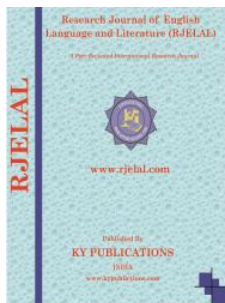
MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN ANITA BROOKNER'S EARLY NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

As N.K. Jemisin puts it, "In a child's eyes, a mother is a goddess. She can be glorious or terrible, benevolent or filled with wrath, but she commands love either way. I am convinced that this is the greatest power in the universe." Anita Brookner's novels portray mother characters of varied personalities that do not succumb to the stereotypical mother image as generally revealed in literature. As James Joyce puts it, "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world, a mother's love is not." Brookner vividly seemed to enjoy the experience of experimenting the varied shades of motherhood in her novels. This study spells out some of the mother characters of Brookner displayed in her early novels namely *A Start in Life*, *Providence* and *Look at Me* as well as their role in affecting the protagonists' personalities.

Keywords: Mother, Anita Brookner, Daughter, *A Start in Life*, *Providence* and *Look at Me*

As N.K. Jemisin puts it, "In a child's eyes, a mother is a goddess. She can be glorious or terrible, benevolent or filled with wrath, but she commands love either way. I am convinced that this is the greatest power in the universe." Anita Brookner's novels portray mother characters of varied personalities that do not succumb to the stereotypical mother image as generally revealed in literature. As James Joyce puts it, "Whatever else is unsure in this stinking dunghill of a world, a mother's love is not." Brookner vividly seemed to enjoy the experience of experimenting the varied shades of motherhood in her novels. This study spells out some of the mother characters of Brookner displayed in her early novels namely *A Start in Life*, *Providence* and *Look at Me* as well as their role in affecting the protagonists' personalities. Mother-daughter relationship is a complex one and Brookner's portrayal makes it

interesting and critical. Unlike the stereotypical representation, there is no encounter of mother-daughter hugging or crying together or the mother living for her daughter or taking care of her daughter thus conforming the observation of Adrienne Rich thus, "Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement."

The heroine, Ruth Weiss in *A Start in Life* is a middle-aged academician specialized on Balzac's novels. She proclaims that her life has been "ruined by literature," which explicitly throws light into drawing parallel between her and her mother, Helen. Helen was a quite successful actress and now she resigns to bed drenched in the thoughts of her

past success having no hope for the future. Sensing the nature of his attractive, self-absorbed and high-spirited wife, George devotes his time catering to the whims and fancies of her. The predicament of Helen is expressed thus:

The bones of her shoulders were sharply outlined. Her wedding ring was loose and sometimes she took it off. Her red hair was now a secret between herself and her hairdresser, and on the days when she was due to have it done she found the atmosphere in the streets threatening. Eventually, Mrs Cutler, the Hoover abandoned in the middle of the floor, would take her, leaving George to finish whatever work she had or had not been doing. On their return, both women would pronounce themselves exhausted, and Helen would retire to bed, where she knew she looked her best. George, harassed, would join her for a drink. Helen's blue eyes, more prominent now in their pronounced sockets, would gaze out of the window with a wistful and ardent expression, her thoughts winging to past triumphs, part travels, past love affairs. George, looking at her in these unguarded moments, would be shocked to see how quickly she had aged.

Born of such careless and unconventional parents, Ruth is left to the care of George's mother, Mrs Weiss who fears that the couple's self-infatuation and "facile love-play" may play havoc in Ruth's life. True to this, Ruth takes solace in academics and feels more at home in university rather than in Oakwood court, her family residence. Gradually, she develops a liking for Richard Hirst, the "Prince Charming," who is more interested in other people's problems. She moves out of her family residence and stays in a flat just to spend more time with Richard and encourage his advances. She invites him for dinner that turns out to be a fiasco in every way. Later she falls for a married professor in the university, Prof. Duplessis, and pines for him thus:

If only she could sit with him in a room, quietly, talking. If only she could wait for

him in some place of her own, hear his footsteps approaching. If she could cook for him, make him comfortable, make him laugh. More than that, she knew, she could not expect. Can anyone? She still measured her efforts and her experience against her disastrous failure with Richard, remembering her expectations and the reality that had destroyed them. That reality had made her wary. Disappointment was now built into any hope she might have had left. But so far Duplessis had not disappointed her.

A phone call demanding her attention comes from her family to disrupt the encounter of professor having a meal with her. Her return to the role of the self-effacing daughter puts an end to all those romantic longing and the liberated self. Just like Helen's loveless marriage ends up when she loses George to a widow named Sally Jacobs, Ruth compromises for a loveless marriage with Roddy which winds up shortly as he is killed in a road accident. After Helen's death, she is engaged in caring for her father which is the same with Brookner who "spent many years caring for her aging parents." As Anita Diamant puts it, "The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life, the stronger the daughter," the knowledge about her mother must have probably made Brookner a strong woman and played a vital role in Brookner's shaping the strong personality portrayal of Ruth.

The heroine, Kitty Maule in *Providence* specializes in the Romantic Tradition (French Literature) and wins an appointment as a teacher in a provincial university. Her "family history" is "perhaps a little colourful" as she has Russian, French and English background. Her grandfather Vadim is Russian, and, when he met her grandmother, Maman Louise, he was a member of an acrobat act. Maman Louise was a French seamstress, who moved to London to make her fortune and eventually had a salon on Grosvenor Street, which she ran with Vadim's help until she had a heart attack. Vadim-Louise's only daughter, Marie-Thérèse was married to an English army officer and almost immediately widowed.

So, Kitty Maule is caught between two cultures, two languages and even two names, Catherine Joséph Thérèse and Kitty Maule. She is Thérèse at home for her grandparents and 'Kitty' everywhere else. Describing the protagonist's virtual double life, Brookner says "She [Kitty] had two homes; one a small flat in Chelsea, where she kept her father's photograph,...the other, her grandparents' house in the suburbs, where, once inside the front door, one encountered the smells, the furnishings, the continual discussion that might take place in an apartment house in Paris or perhaps further east."

While Kitty would prefer to be accepted as thoroughly English, she is unable to wholly conceal her French background and she feels that she belongs to nowhere. This makes her rootless and this sense of rootlessness is related to the sense of alienation, loneliness, exile and homelessness that Brookner admits to have 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."

Kitty believes that she has received little from her mother, Marie-Thérèse, a quiet, ineffectual, frail figure with anemia and a heart murmur, who was turned into a kind of pampered guest by her parents. Marie-Thérèse married Captain John Maule who left for the front immediately after their honeymoon and was killed in action. Kitty's mother died quietly sitting at the table with walnut shells in her hand and the daughter still carries the "faintly sour scent" of discarded fruit peel in her nostrils. Kitty idolizes the image of the young soldier-father, kissing his bride good bye and dying bravely in action, but misses the romantic image of her physically and spiritually damaged mother, quietly waiting for the young soldier who is never to return. Kitty knows nothing about her father, who died before she was born, but

she keeps his picture in her flat as a virtual shrine and this shows her longing for Englishness.

At the end, well launched in her career as a staff in the University, Kitty receives an invitation for a dinner party by her lover, Maurice Bishop. She travels to the party, thinking "Soon I shall be where I have always wanted to be," but going there she discovers, not only that he has not told her of his plans to move to Oxford, but also that he has got another lover, the sensual Jane Fairchild, and that while she was unaware of this relationship, it has been well known to other people and so she thinks to herself "Quite simply, I lacked the information."

This makes it very clear that the very naïve nature of Kitty's mother has influenced largely in shaping her own personality. Though Kitty claims to possess very little from her mother, subconsciously she has inherited this lack of information, patient waiting for the return of love, undemanding, explicitly forgiving and over-bearing nature. Like her mother was torn between Russian and French cultures, Kitty remains torn between these two cultures and longs to be English completely. This confirms the opinion of Oscar Wilde who says, "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy."

Frances Hinton in *Look at Meis* a reference librarian in a medical research institute. Enconced in a large flat, being economically independent, she continues to suffer from the "Public Holiday Syndrome," that extends to Sundays, evenings, Christmas Day and summer holidays. Her aversion for the family time or leisure hours is revealed when she says, "I always hated this cessation of work and the empty streets and the desolation of Christmas" and her preference to be at work is expressed as, "I am always ready for Monday mornings, that time that other people dread."

In her lonely life, Frances finds solace in writing which was initiated and encouraged by her mother. Frances writes during her free time and struggles "to keep a note of despondency out of what gets put down." Frances writes a short story about her workplace and proclaims, "I was not on the whole as pleased with it as everyone else seemed to be." Her passion for writing is a

substitute for the verbal caprices she expounded for her mother in the past as she says, "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." To escape from her monotonous lifestyle, Frances decides to live with the golden pair, Nick and Alix Fraser as she admires them thus:

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.

In their company, she feels excited and expresses, 'the thought of reverting to the role of observer rather than participant filled me with dread and sadness' and "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 feels attracted to James Anstey who is 'just conceivably a leader of men.' Frances's expression that "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" confirms her romantic longing. She further adds, "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..." Walking home with James, she points out, "That night I did not bother to write." Frances is contented in her relationship with James and she doesn't feel compelled to write. She observes:

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 ostensibly epitomizes the view of writing stipulated by Brookner. Responding to an interviewer's remark that, "In 'Look at Me' you say that writing is your penance for not being lucky," Brookner retorts, "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."

One evening in a restaurant, Frances witnesses Maria bending over James with food and saying, "More darling. I want you to be good and strong tonight. More." This reveals that the sexually fragrant Maria is James' lover and then Frances's feeling of misapprehension is confirmed. She feels deserted with the bitter insight that, 'for love, a rampant egoism serves one better than an unsophisticated hope,' blended with an inefaceable set of imageries 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 struggles home in darkness and rain, literally 'walking from memory' to sustenance. She decides to put an end to her camouflage thus:

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 different 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 is too timid to be, “able to bend others to [her] will” and not “particularly malleable,” to bend to the will of others. Frances’s return to “home to her mother” by moving into her mother’s bedroom and by remembering her words “My Darling Fan” symbolizes that she has come to terms with reality and is prepared to pursue as a writer. This recalls the response of the author to Shusha Guppy, in a interview in 1987, for why did she take up writing as a profession, she mentions, “I write out of a sense of powerlessness and injustice, because I felt invisible and passive” which is the same feeling as that of Cioran who observes, “Writing is the creature’s revenge, and his answer to a botched Creation.” Brookner further adds, “The truth I’m trying to convey is not a startling one, it is simply a peeling away of affectation. I use whatever gift I have to get behind the façade.”

Finally, Frances does not want to be identified as James Anstey’s wife or Frasers’ friend and firmly decides to become a writer. Frances views the art of writing as a way of ‘reminding people that I am here,’ another attempt to say, “Look at me.” In her opinion, 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.” Though Frances’s mother is invisible, her truly strong influence and impact could be felt throughout the novel which acknowledges the words of Lauryn Hill thus, “That strong mother doesn’t tell her cub, Son, stay weak so the wolves can get you. She says, Toughen up, this is reality we are living in.”

Mother- daughter relationship is a complex one. The mother characters portrayed by Brookner in her early novels are not stereotypical which makes the entire thing more interesting. There is no encounter of mother-daughter hugging or crying together or the mother living for her daughter or

taking care of her daughter thus conforming the observation of Adrienne Rich thus:

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.

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